Justin the Martyr and the Development of Doctrine

Justin’s *First Apology* contains ideas that have since been further developed. Justin, in talking about Greek philosophy, observes that “so it seems that there were indeed seeds of truth in all men.”1 This concept – which itself has been taken beyond Greek philosophy to recognize that there are rays of truth that can be found in many religions and philosophies, such as the monotheism espoused by Islam – can also be applied to Justin’s own ideas, in that many of them have gone from the seeds planted in his *First Apology* and blossomed in our modern day Church.

Justin’s “we did not bring ourselves into being – but as to following after the things that are dear to God, choosing them by the rational powers which he has given us . . .” sounds to me like a seed for the later teaching that our purpose in life is to “know, love, and serve God” as taught by the Baltimore Catechism.2 I also noticed what seemed like a reference to original sin and the fallen nature of man when Justin stated “the help of the evil desire that is in every man by nature.”3

Justin also wrote

But God did not make man like other [beings], such as trees and animals, which have no power of choice. For he would not be worthy of rewards or praise if he did not choose the good of himself, but was so made, nor if he were evil would he justly deserve punishment, if he were not such of himself, but was unable to be anything different from that for which he was formed.4

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This appears to contain within it Irenaeus’s idea that “the glory of God is man fully alive” — in that what God desires for man is in man’s best interest, and God’s commandments are designed to help man fulfill his full potential.

There are three other ideas of Justin that seem to contain the seeds of later-developed teachings and arguments. First, Justin states that those who lived before the time of Jesus Christ may still be saved: “Those who lived in accordance with Reason are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates...” This seems to foreshadow the Church’s teaching that those who die without being baptized with water may still be saved through God’s grace, such as those who live in obedience to their conscience and seek the Truth but who never hear of Jesus Christ. Secondly, Justin mentions that

So that none may infer from what we have said that the events we speak of, because they were foreknown and predicted, took place according to inevitable destiny – I can explain this too... penalties and punishments and good rewards are given according to the quality of each man’s actions. If this were not so, but all things happened in accordance with destiny, nothing at all would be left up to us. 

This seems to be an early argument against John Calvin’s double predestination theory. Thirdly, Justin is critical of the idea that “virtue and vice are not realities, but that men consider things good or bad by opinion alone” — which is an early critique of moral relativism.

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7 Justin, in Early Christian Fathers, ed. Cyril C. Richardson, 260, 269.
8 D’Ambrosio, When the Church Was Young, 51.
Bibliography
