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JUSTIN AND SEMINAL REASON A CHRISTIAN PATH TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE?

Justino y la razón seminal. ¿Un camino cristiano hacia el diálogo interreligioso?

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Abstract

The category of *Semina Verbi* or *Logos Spermatikos* is now commonly invoked to indicate God's providential action within non-Christian cultures and religions. However, this was not the original intent and meaning of this expression within the thought of Justin Martyr. This paper aims to clarify the explicitly confessional intentions, but also Justin's skillful strategy, in order to express in an original way his own faith in terms already used by others (Stoic, Medo-Platonic, Jewish, Gnostic). After clarifying the distinction between the seed of the Word and the seeds of the truth, it is shown that the first (the seed of the Word) is precisely human reason, sown by the Word in every human being. More than the slogan "Semina Verbi", it is Justin's attitude that could continue to be useful for interreligious dialogue today.

Keywords

Justin Martyr, Semina Verbi, Logos Spermatikòs, Interreligious Dialogue, Image and Likeness, Stoicism, Middle Platonism, Gnosticism, Apologetics.

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Resumen

La categoría de *Semina Verbi* o Logos Spermatikos se invoca ahora comúnmente para indicar la acción providencial de Dios en culturas y religiones no cristianas. Sin embargo, ésta no era la intención y el significado originales de esta expresión dentro del pensamiento de Justino Mártir. Este trabajo pretende aclarar las intenciones explícitamente confesionales, pero también la hábil estrategia de Justino, para expresar de forma original su propia fe en términos ya utilizados por otros (estoicos, medoplatónicos, judíos, gnósticos). Tras aclarar la distinción entre la semilla del Verbo y las semillas de la verdad, se muestra que la primera (la semilla del Verbo) es precisamente la razón humana, sembrada por el Verbo en todo ser humano. Más que el eslogan "Semina Verbi", es la actitud de Justino la que podría seguir siendo útil hoy para el diálogo interreligioso.

Palabras clave

Justino Mártir, *Semina Verbi*, Logos Spermatikós, Diálogo interreligioso, Imagen y semejanza, Estoicismo, Platonismo medio, Gnosticismo, Apologética.

1. The Contrasted Fortune of an Expression: *Semina Verbi*

The category of *Semina Verbi* is known to modern Western thought (G.W. Leibniz, G.W.F. Hegel), if not thanks to the apologetic work of Justin Martyr,² more so due to the late Greek neo-Platonism (Giamblicus, Proclus), mediated by Renaissance humanism (N. Cusanus, Pico, M. Ficino, Erasmus).³ In addition, the figure of Justin did not have much success in Catholic theology until the last century. For example, in the context of the Valladolid Controversy (1550-1551), there was no mention of the *Semina Verbi* or the λόγος σπερματικός. On that occasion, the Dominican B. De las Casas defended the universality of natural law and the value of indigenous cultures by appealing to Cicero and Augustine.⁴

The figure of Justin was rediscovered before the Second Vatican Council, following the movement which went back to the patristic sources (*Ressourcement*). Some theologians (L. Capéran, J. Daniélou, H. de Lubac) appealed to the seeds of the Word to recognize God's providential

2 Cf. *Première Apologie* 32,8 (p. 216): «τὸ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ σπέρμα, ὁ λόγος»; *Deuxième Apologie* 7(8),1 (p. 342): «σπέρμα τοῦ λόγου», but the expression only appears in *Ivi*, 7(8),3;13,3.5 (pp. 342;364): «κατὰ σπερματικοῦ λόγου μέρος. [...] τοῦ σπερματικοῦ θείου λόγου [...] διὰ τῆς ἐνούσης ἐμφύτου τοῦ λόγου σποράς».

3 Cf. Bastid, 1969, pp. 489-491; Celada Ballanti, 2009, pp. 107-168; Fields, 2016, pp. 212-225.

4 Cf. Milhou, 2001, pp. 688-694. See also De las Casas, *Apologética historia*, 1,3,48: «todas las naciones del mundo son hombres [...] y ésta es que son racionales; todos tienen su entendimiento y su voluntad y su libre albedrío como sean formados a la imagen y semejanza de Dios. [...] Todos tienen los principios naturales o simientes para entender y para aprender y saber las ciencias y cosas que no saben».

action that enlightens each person (cf. Jn 1:9), even among those who belong to other cultures.⁵ Despite these early indications, the name of Justin Martyr never appears in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. And, as I have shown elsewhere,⁶ even when the expression “seed of the Word” is mentioned, it is never used with a uniform meaning (e.g. *Lumen Gentium* 16, *Ad Gentes* 3, *Nostra Aetate* 2). But it was a start.

In the last sixty years, the Justinian expression has had considerable success in Catholic theology and Magisterium.⁷ J. Dupuis, for example, recognizes in the λόγος σπερματικός the Logos-sower who, even outside the Christian economy, offers each person his own participation.⁸ At the magisterial level, after *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1976),⁹ we recall John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), which, while referring to the texts of Justin, assigns not to the Logos but to the Spirit the task of «sowing the “seeds of the Word” present in rites and cultures.»¹⁰ Even in the recent document *Querida Amazonia* (2020), we speak of a proclamation of the Gospel that knows how to welcome and be enriched by what “el Espíritu ya había sembrado misteriosamente en esa cultura.”¹¹

The Justinian category has been reflexively interpreted by patrologists and historians of Christianity in a broad sense. It is understood, in fact, as the presence of sparks of goodness and truth sown by the Word in the heart in cultures and religions (H. Chadwick, E.F. Osborn)¹²; or as the existence of private revelations, through which the Word enlightens the consciousness of individuals (P. Haecker, M. Fédou)¹³; or as the scattered condition of the divine Λόγος among men until the Incarnation (J.M. Pfätsch, R. Holte, A. Orbe),¹⁴ if not also as the expression of a universal moral law (N. Pycke; H. Donneaud).¹⁵

5 Cf. Capéran, 1934, p. 68 n.1; Daniélou, 1962, pp. 12; 16-17; Id., 2009, p. 116; De Lubac, 2017, pp. 212; 223 n. 45; Id., 1979, p. 160.

6 Cf. Banna, 2021, pp. 68-102, esp. 95-96.

7 Cf. Donneaud, 2006, pp. 10-12.

8 Cf. Dupuis, 1989, p. 184. Some criticisms of this interpretation can be found in Donneaud, 2006, pp. 13-14; Banna 2021, pp. 128-138.

9 Cf. Paulus VI, 1976, pp. 41-42 (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 53). See also Moreno-Martínez, 1993, p. 136.

10 Joannes Paulus II, 1991, p. 274 (*Redemptoris Missio* 28).

11 Franciscus, 2020a, p. 257 (*Querida Amazonia* 68); see also Id., 2015, pp. 879;886; 887 (*Laudato si*, 80; 97; 99); Id., 2020b, pp. 987-988 (*Fratelli Tutti*, 54).

12 Cf. Chadwick, 1966, pp. 10-11; Id., 1993, 237-247. Osborn, 1973, p. 201; Id., 1993, pp. 153-155. See also, Saldanha, 1984, pp. 62;69; Parvis, 2007, p. 123; Leppin, 2018, p. 382.

13 Cf. Haecker, 1980, p. 39; Fédou, 1998, p. 66; Id., 1996, p. 38; Martzelos, 2020, p. 394.

14 Cf. Pfätsch, 1908, pp. 503-523; Holte, 1958, pp. 127-136; Orbe, 1961, pp. 83-96; Cristaudo, 2023. Also going in this direction is Fédou, 1992, pp. 177-178, followed by Dupuis, 2015, p. 101.

15 Cf. Pycke, 1961, p. 59; Donneaud, 2006, p. 18. This could be caused by the passage in *Deuxième Apologie* 10,8 (pp. 348-350): «λόγος γὰρ ἦν καὶ ἔστιν ὁ ἐν παντὶ ὄν». But this passage should be read as a reference to the Christ Logos, on the basis of *Ivi*, 7(8),1 (p. 340): «ἐμφυτον παντὶ γένει ἀνθρώπων σπέρμα τοῦ λόγου».

Certainly, the contemporary appeal to the *Semina Verbi* expresses an attempt to redeem Christianity from the positions of superiority and conquest that, in collusion with colonial expansion, have disfigured the reputation of Catholic missions in non-Western territories. Nevertheless, according to a certain critique, the mere mention of “traces” or “seeds of truth” (as opposed to an implicit claim to totality by those who pose such categories) would still represent the persistent expression of a supposed superiority that would ultimately aim at incorporating the other into its own ideological guidelines, without sincerely listening to the emic features of non-Christian and non-Western cultures.¹⁶

As I will show in the following pages, I believe that the interpretation most faithful to Justin’s text and intentions urges one to recognize in the seminal verb the creaturely condition, that is, the image and likeness of the divine Logos, in which all human reason (logos) is situated.¹⁷ Otherwise, one runs the risk of projecting onto Justin the category of the *Semina Verbi* that is proper to modern philosophical thought, mentioned at the beginning, or the categories (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism) that are characteristic of contemporary Catholic Theology of Religions.¹⁸ In any case, I believe that the Justinian expression, captured in its original meaning, can prove equally useful for today interreligious dialogue. In fact, the analysis I will propose allows us to discover an operation of mediation with non-Christian culture, which could point to a way of dialogue and encounter that is also valid for the contemporary world.¹⁹

2. The *semina veritatis* according to Justin

First, in order to properly understand the meaning of λόγος σπερματικός, it may be useful to make a terminological distinction within Justin’s work between the innate seed of the Logos (“ἔμφυτον σπέρμα τοῦ λόγου” 2Apol. 7(8),1) present in every human being, and the seeds of truth (“σπέρματα

16 Cf. Niehoff, 2019, 549-578.

17 Cf. Edwards, 1995, pp. 270-278, who makes a distinction between Christ, the seed of the Logos (or seminal Logos in every human being)—which in fact coincides with reason and natural law—and the seeds of truth, which would be partial expressions of truth by the men who cultivate this seed, opposing the demons and drawing on Judaic culture.

18 For example, someone finds in Justin the proper position of exclusivism in the catholic Theology of religion: Keith, 1992, p. 185. Someone else that one of inclusivism: Kahlos, 2007, p. 78. Instead, he identifies Justin’s position with an inclusivism that is open to the sharing of existence: Neuheuser, 1975, pp. 190-209. Joyce, 2006, p. 10, even hypothesizes to a comparison with the pluralistic view. For a comparison between seminal verbs and Rahnerian supernatural existential, see Van Dyke, 2017.

19 Cf. Ulrich, 2005, pp. 3-15; Lyman, 2007, p. 166; Hayes 2017; Id., 2015, pp. 16;22.

ἀληθείας”).²⁰ The latter indicates the intellectual and moral breakthroughs of the “Christians before Jesus.” By this term, Justin refers to those who thought and acted in accordance with the seminal Logos, but who also owe their discoveries in some way to the historical connection with Judaic religiosity.

In reviewing Justin’s works, it is possible to make a concise list of these seeds of truth. In brief, these are the knowledge of God as Creator and His Word,²¹ and the existence of human freedom.²²

And whatever both philosophers and poets have said concerning the immortality of the soul, or punishments after death, or contemplation of things heavenly, or doctrines of the like kind, they have received such suggestions from the prophets as have enabled them to understand and interpret these things. And hence there seem to be seeds of truth among all men; but they are charged with not accurately understanding [the truth] when they assert contradictories.²³

In this sense, Justin leads the way among Christian apologists in taking up *Timaeus* 28C on the possibility of knowing God.²⁴ Related to these insights concerning devotion to God and

20 Cf. Pycke, 1961, p. 59; Donneaud, 2006, pp. 19-20. Instead Fédou, 2009, pp. 148-149; Id., 2019, p. 331, considers the two terms (λόγος σπέρματικός and σπέρματα ἀληθείας) synonymous. Otherwise, Holte (1958, pp. 127-136) and Cristaudo (2023, pp. 413;426) consider on the human side only the seed or seeds of the Word, production of the active and enlightening Λόγος σπέρματικός. This latter one would concern only the condition of the divine Word.

21 He refers to Plato, who would draw from Moses in *Première Apologie* 59,1-5 (pp. 282-284); but also in *Ivi*, 10,2 (p. 150), perhaps with the help of the quote from *Sap* 11,7 in combination with a *Timeo*’s interpretation widespread from Aristotle (through Posidonius to the time of the Apologist) in Plutarch and Philo, according to which the term “matter” appears instead of χῶρα.

22 Cf. *Première Apologie* 44,1-8 (pp. 242-244), where there is a decisive connection between *Dr* 30,15,19 and Plato, *Πολιτεία* 10,617E in order to give human freedom a divine foundation. The interpretation of the Platonic passage in favor of freedom has established the school among Christians, cf. Clément d’Alexandrie, *Stromate V* 14,136,4 (pp. 240); (Pseudo-) Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 1,19,19 (p. 80); and even in Ps.-Klemens, *Homilien* 15,8,4 (p. 216); later, then also in Eusèbe de Césarée, *La préparation évangélique* 6,6,50 (p. 150); Kyrill von Alexandrien, *Gegen Julian*, 3,4 (pp. 168-169). Similarly, Justin opposes those who deny the existence of human freedom (Stoic doctrine of fate, Sardanapalus, Epicurus), cf. Justin, *Deuxième Apologie* 6(7), 2-8;9,1 (p. 334-338;346), albeit with some acknowledgment of Stoic ethics and the doctrine of conflagration.

23 *Première Apologie*, 44,9-10 (p.244; transl. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson).

24 Cf. *Deuxième Apologie* 10,6 (p. 350), where the quote has been slightly modified to reflect the possibility (albeit difficult) of revelation: «Τὸν δὲ πατέρα καὶ δημιουργὸν πάντων οὐθ’ εὐρεῖν ῥάδιον, οὐθ’ εὐρόντα εἰς πάντας εἰπεῖν ἀσφαλές». The modification is also found in Eusebius Caesarensis, *Die Demonstratio Evangelica* 3,6,24-25 (pp. 135-136). On the diffusion of the Platonic passage, correctly attributed to Plato (and not to Socrates, as Justin says), proving creation by the ingenerate God, see Flavius Josèphe, *Contre Apion* 2,21,224 (p. 98); Athénagore, *Supplique au sujet des Chrétiens* 6,2 (pp. 88-90); Clément d’Alexandrie, *Stromate V* 14,92,3 (p. 176); Ps.-Klemens, *Rekognitionen* 8,20,4-8 (p. 229); Eusèbe de Césarée, *La préparation évangélique* 11,29,3 (p. 200). Otherwise, to show the impossibility for man to comprehend the totality of truth prior to divine revelation, see Philo Alexandrinus, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 16,115 (p. 56); Id., *On the Posterity of Cain and His Exile* 51,175 (p. 432); Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le protreptique* 6,68,1

human dignity²⁵ are the pursuit of virtues (as opposed to vices and irrational passions)²⁶ and moral action on this earth, in preparation for the final judgment of one's works after death.²⁷ Some of the passages from the Platonic works cited for this purpose were already partly present in Jewish apologetics, but from Justin onward they are constantly mentioned and reinterpreted in Christian apologetics.²⁸

A first attitude towards interreligious dialogue can already be discerned. The work of the Christian Justin, then, is that of a cultivator who, by cultivating the seed of reason planted by the Logos in every human being, seeks to gather the best shoots of truth present in every culture.²⁹ But why does Justin describe reason as a seed? What is behind this image?

3. The human logos, that is the seed of the Logos.

As anticipated, I believe that the three references in the Second Apology to “λόγος σπερματικός” or “σπέρμα/σπορά τοῦ λόγου” are to be understood as ways of expressing the reason with which every human being has been endowed by God.³⁰ This reason was sown, like a seed, by the Λόγος Only Begotten Christ at the moment of man's creation.

The relationship of participation between the two “λόγοι”, the human and the divine, is frequently described by Justin as one that exists between the whole and the part, thanks to an

(p. 133); Id., *Stromate* 5,11,77,1; 5,12,78,1 (pp. 150;152); Tertullianus, *Apologeticum* 46,9 (p. 161); Origène, *Contre Celse* 7,42 (p. 112). Both interpretations are found in the above passage from the Eusebian *Demonstratio*. Also unique is the reprise of Minucio Felice, *Ottavio* 19,14 (pp. 152-160), who sees a similarity with the commitment of Christians not to spread the revealed mystery.

25 Righteousness and mercy («δικαιοσύνην και εὐσέβειαν») are summed up in love of God, His “angel” (revealed in Christ), and love of neighbor, cf. *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 93,2 (p. 231).

26 Cf. *Première Apologie* 58,2;57,2 (pp. 282;280); *Deuxième Apologie* 11,8 (p. 354).

27 Cf. *Première Apologie* 8,4;57,1 (pp. 146;278), he remembers what Plato said about Minos and Radamantius. After Justin, Tatianos, *Oratio ad Graecos* 3,3;6,2;25,4 (pp. 90;98;152), appreciates Socrates on judgment (not Minos and Radamantius) in opposition to Stoic conflagration. The critique is also found in Tertullianus, *Ad Nationes* 1,19,5-7 (pp. 38-39); Id., *Apologeticum* 20,13 (p. 132). Athénagore, *Supplique au sujet des Chrétiens* 12,2 (p. 108) and Eusèbe de Césarée, *La préparation évangélique* 12,6,1-22 (pp. 46-56) are positive toward Socrates, referring to Plato, Γοργίας 523E-524A. The wisest pagans, then, do not fear death, cf. *Première Apologie* 57,2 (p. 280). Therefore, the moral sphere goes beyond the realm of philosophical monotheism, to which the study of Lugaresi (2003, pp. 159-160) is limited.

28 Cf. Morlet, 2019, pp. 17-32.

29 The image of Christians as cultivators of the seed comes from Justin himself, cf. *Première Apologie* 44,13 (p. 246).

30 Cf. Edwards, 1991, p. 26; Id., 1995, pp. 270-278; Id., 2018, pp. 60-66, on the distinction between created seed and the divine Word.

equivalence placed between the terms seed (σπέρμα) and part (μέρος).³¹ However, this relationship is not comparable to that of two items of the same substance, since it concerns a divine agent (creator and recapitulator) and a created subject. In fact, in the Apology, Justin invokes three models that allow the relationship between the part and the whole to be interpreted in this way, that is, the correlation between seed and man, copy and imitation, and potency and grace. Let us look at them in detail.

1) *The seed and the man*. Justin, speaking of the resurrection in the nineteenth chapter of the First Apology, compares the relationship between the corpse and the resurrected body with that between the human seed (σπέρμα) and the image (“εἰκών”) of the formed man: in the former there is something at first sight incredible (“ἀπιστότερον”) compared to the latter, which is nevertheless, in an exceptional way, the realization of it by the power of God.³² In a similarly incredible way, we could perhaps imagine the relationship of undirected likeness between the seed of the human Logos and the “body” of the divine Logos. 2) *Copy and imitation*. In chapter XIII of the Second Apology, in order to show the different participation in the truth of the “Christians before Jesus” and the “total” Christians, Justin establishes the analogy between the partial and approximate copy (μίμημα) of a created object and the imitation (μίμησις) due to the divine revelation of the original, taking up a contrast between the two concepts attested in the philosophical tradition.³³ 3) *Potency and grace*. In the same chapter XIII of the Second Apology,

31 Comparison is continuous in *Deuxième Apologie* 7(8),3 (p. 340); *Ivi* 10,1 (p. 348); *Ivi* 10,2-3 (p. 348); *Ivi* 10,4 (p. 350); *Ivi* 10,6-7 (p. 350); *Ivi* 10,8 (p. 350); *Ivi* 10,8 (p. 352); *Ivi* 13,3-4 (p. 362); *Ivi* 13,5 (p. 364); *Ivi* 13,6 (p. 364); *Ivi* 13,6 (p. 364). Cf. Helleman, 2002, p. 140: «both terms ‘seed’ and ‘part’ (sperma and meros), even with a Stoic background, should be understood in terms of de-emphasizing the value of the part with respect to the whole, or the origin and source». The «whole» includes both the pre-existent and the historically revealed in Christ.

32 Cf. *Première Apologie* 19,1-2.6 (pp. 180-182). Same example with the same purpose in Athénagore, *Sur la résurrection des morts* 17,2-4:4 (pp. 282-284:284). For a possible idea of conception, where the body is derived from the male, while the soul would be infused into the matrix by an angel prompting the woman to copulate, see also Clemente Alessandrino, *Ecloghe profetique* 50,1-3 (p. 82); Id., *Les Stromates* 6,16,135,1 (p. 328). Cf. Spanneut, 1957, pp. 179-195; Dölger, 1934, pp. 28-32.

33 Cf. *Deuxième Apologie* 13,6 (p. 364). Both terms can also be found in Tertullianus, *Apologeticum* 47,11 (p. 164): the philosophers make a copy (“aemulatio”) of similarity (“similitudo”), a quality proper to Christian truth. Also close is the reference to *Première Apologie* 21,4;60,10 (pp. 188;286): «ἀλλ’ οἱ πάντες τὰ ἡμέτερα μιμούμενοι λέγουσι». The topic rightly brought to mind of the scholars the Platonic tradition, probably through the mediation of Alcinous, in particular Plato, *Ἐπιστολαί* 7,533BC;10,597B;10,888E, on art as a copy of ideas; *Ivi*, 7,341C;344B, on the contrast between repetition and intuition; Plato, *Θεαίτητος* 176BC, well-known passage (especially among Christians) on assimilation to the divine. Andresen (1955, p. 338) refers to the first two Platonic passages; while Osborn, (1973, p. 142) and Holte, (1958, p. 144), refer back to the *Θεαίτητος*. Cristaudo, (2023, pp. 410-411) stays within the Platonic framework. I agree with Ulrich (2019, p. 645), who also adds, to accentuate the contrast, the negative value that Justin ascribes to the mimetic action of demons. We can integrate this contrast between the same terms with an Aristotelian fragment reported by Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 10, on the difference of the philosopher’s work (μίμησις) from the other professions (μίμημα), as also argued in Aristoteles, *Physica* 2,2 (194A), also taken up by Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 18 (pp. 34-36). Even more significant is a passage from *Corpus Hermeticum* frag. 2A,3-7 (p. 5), which echoes the

Justin modifies the Aristotelian relationship between δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, substituting χάρις for the second element, again indicating the gratuitousness of the revelation of which the “Christians after Jesus” are the addressees.³⁴ These last two types of relationship also lead us to think that the totality for Justin involves a development that is neither deductive nor evolutionary, but a gratuitous leap, that is, delegated to the divine initiative, located both at the moment of creation (insemination) and at the moment of revelation in Jesus (incarnation).

To recapitulate, in the context of the work of the Apologist, in order to understand adequately the concept of λόγος σπερματικός, it is possible to identify a sower (the Creator Word), a (singular) seed, human reason, created in the image of the Word for each man, a first cultivator (rational men), the first sprouts of piety (the seeds of truth, plural), the ravagers of the field (the demons), a maturing work (thanks to the Word made flesh), and the reapers (Christians and the Second Coming of the Word). In this way, reason (“λόγος σπερματικός”) could be understood as the created gift with which each person is endowed to discover the truth and to adhere to it, even if partially and confusedly,³⁵ if he is able to resist the attacks of the demons.

4. The origin of an image and its potential

As we have seen, Justin takes up names and notions of pagan authors, concepts drawn from the world of nature, art and, of course, philosophy. This is a cultural operation with truly confessional and apologetic aims.³⁶ It is intended to bear witness to one’s conversion and to give reasons for the universality of the Christian faith. We can confirm this intention if we look for at least three possible cultural roots from which Justin drew. From these roots, the apologist reworked an entirely unique and original meaning to arrive at the formulation of the concept of λόγος σπερματικός.

Platonic contrast in the Republic between elements that are copies of truth and others that become imitations of truth through illumination from above.

34 Cf. *Deuxième Apologie* 13,6 (p. 364). Justin himself reiterates these categories, especially that of grace, in *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 92,1;100,2;110,6;119,1;78,10 (pp. 230;241;260;274;206), recognizing the need for the intervention of grace (granted to Christians as opposed to Jews) for a greater understanding of truth. In *Deuxième Apologie* 6(7),9 (p. 338), Justin is critical of the immanence of the divine whole in the parts, characteristic of the Stoic conception. For this reason, it can be assumed that he modifies the relationship between potency and grace (not act) in order to avoid in any way favoring an interpretation of the seminal logos as a partial condition of the whole truth.

35 Even the adverb «ἀμυδρῶς», (*Deuxième Apologie* 13,5 [p. 364]), as argued by C. Andresen (1955, p. 338), and others after him, has a Platonic derivation, indicating the confused understanding one can have of the idea from the copy, cf. Plato, Φαίδρος 250B; Id., Πολιτεία 8,533D, filtered through the mediation of Alcinous or Plutarch. I recall that Clement Alexandrinus also uses this adjective to refer to the discoveries of the Greeks in Clément d’Alexandrie, *Stromate* 1,16,80,5 (p. 108).

36 Cf. Osborn, 1973, p. 14.

These are Greek philosophy (Stoicism and Middle Platonism),³⁷ the Judeo-Christian religious dimension, and the “middle ground” that was Gnosticism.

1) *The philosophical root.* For the Stoics, the *rationes seminales* (or λόγοι σπερματικοί) were the living principles immanent in every earthly reality, which made it possible to establish a close relationship between the individual and the cosmos.³⁸ Justin, in speaking of the seed of the Word, takes up this category and at the same time distorts it,³⁹ also thanks to the reworking of some Middle Platonist authors (Antiochus of Ascalon, Atticus, Alcinous and Numenius).⁴⁰ In fact, they limited the existence of seminal reasons to the human intellect, thanks to the mediation of the Demiurge, who therefore, contrary to the Stoics, presupposed a transcendent dimension of divinity.⁴¹

2) *The Judeo-Christian root.* Philo, from whom Justin may not directly depend, already knew both the Stoic categories⁴² and the seminal verb (singular) as the guiding principle of each soul.⁴³ In the Jewish apocrypha and the Enochian writings known to Justin, God is described as the

37 Cf. Morales, 1984, pp. 892-894.

38 Cf. Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2,10,26-2,14,37;2,22,58;2,30,75;2,33,83;2,34,86 (pp. 59-63;71;79;82;83). This is a plural term, but it is found in a singular form, as it is present in fire, which has to do with the destruction of souls, also in Marc-Aurèle, *Pensées* 4,21 (p. 32); Arius Didymus, *fragments* 36 = Eusèbe de Césarée, *La préparation évangélique* 15,18,3 (p. 320). In the early 20th century, it was mainly French scholars such as M.J. Lagrange, J. Lebreton, and A. Puech who defended the Stoic origin of the seminal verb in Justin. An account of these positions can be found in Nyström, 2018, p. 84.

39 With the category of the “seminal verb”, the apologist also approaches the concept of the innate idea of God in every human being, cf. *Deuxième Apologie* 5(6),3 (p. 334), very similar to Poseidonios, *Die Fragmente* 368,4 (p. 291). According to Back, Justin uses stoic terminology, but «filled it with a new content [...] enlightened by the Christian doctrines» (2021, p. 77). On the other hand, even earlier Plato, Τίμαιος 41E;90A had described man as a heavenly plant that had received its soul from the Demiurge.

40 Cf. Alcinous, *Enseignement* 10,164-166;27,179-180 (pp. 22-25;53); Numenius., *fragments* 13 = Eusèbe de Césarée, *La préparation évangélique* 11,18,13-14 (pp. 138-140). Moreschini, 2008, p. 103, moderates the emphasis of those who establish a close relationship between Justin and the Middle Platonists by emphasizing the difference in the timing of the creation of the cosmos.

41 An overview of scholars who support Numenius dependence (C. Andresen, É. Des Places, E.A. Livingston, M. Edwards, J. Pépin) can be found in Jurasz (2020, p. 715 n. 39). See also Thorsteinsson, (2012, pp. 533-571) and Fédou (2009, p. 329). In any case, it is more than a “christification” of the Platonic Logos, as argued by Girgenti (1995, pp. 25;105-107) and Gatti, (2011, p. 112). Ulrich (2005, pp. 3-15) downplays the contribution of the medioplatoic tradition: Justin would reformulate the Stoic concept with Christian categories.

42 Cf. Philo Alexandrinus, *On the Account of the World's Creation given by Moses* 5,20 (p. 16-18); Id., *On the Eternity of the World* 17,85 (p. 244). Unlike the Stoics, however, these ideas are not immanent in reality, but in the mind of the Creator Logos himself.

43 Cf. Philo Alexandrinus, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis* 3,150 (p. 402); Id., *On the Unchangeableness of God* 29,137-139 (p. 78-80). Justin's dependence on Philo was already supported by Cramer (1901, pp. 311-313). For a review of possible forms of dependence on Philo (A. Aal, M. Pellegrino, D.T. Runia, R. Holte, W. Kelber, P. Hofrichter) versus a more cautious position (E. Prinzivalli, C. Moreschini, J.M. Lieu), cf. Cristaudo, 2023, pp. 310-311, n. 756.

sower in creation and the reaper at the end of time of the good present in the hearts of men.⁴⁴ At the same time, man is portrayed as a cultivator of the divine seed.⁴⁵ Among the many possible references in the New Testament corpus⁴⁶ (perhaps even more than the Johannine Prologue),⁴⁷ we should not forget the parable of the Sower (Mt 13:1-23; Mk 4:1-20; Lk 8:4-15), where the distinction between God (the Creator, sower, and the Recapitulator, reaper) and the seed created in the soil of each person is implicitly emphasized.⁴⁸

3) *The Gnostic root.* Finally, it may be interesting to recall some Gnostic interpretations, even of the parable of the sower itself. The latter is identified with the Logos of the Spirituals or the Sophia of the Psychics (Theodotus).⁴⁹ The Logos, moreover, is presented as a sower (Nassenes)⁵⁰ who produces the eons seminally (Valentinians)⁵¹ and sows his seed only in some men (Heracleon).⁵² Unlike Justin, this seed is not created, but is of the same divine nature (Basilian).⁵³ Finally, as in the parable, it will be reaped at the end of time (Gospel of Philip).⁵⁴

44 Cf. 4 Es 4,30-32;8,40.

45 Cf. 2 En. 17, text certainly known to Justin for demonology.

46 Cf. Holte, *Logos spermatikos*, 128, remembers also Mt 13;21; Mc 12; Lc 20,9-16; Jn 15; Ro 15,27; 1Cor 3,6-9;9,11; 2Tim 2,6; Sant 5,7. Price (1988, p. 21) refers to a Christian context, citing as an example Ps.-Klemens, *Homilien* 17,18,2-3 (p. 239), where revelation germinates the truth that is seminally “σπερματικῶς” contained in the heart.

47 Cf. Holte, 1958, p. 125, followed by Thils 1972, pp. 101-105 and Fédou, 2009, p. 154. For the long debate on the presence of the Fourth Gospel in Justin, I refer to Ulrich, 2019, pp. 108.469 and Cristaudo, 2023, pp. 182-193: «Giustino invece ritrovò nel λόγος del prologo giovanneo la personificazione di quell’intermediario cosmologico, che il medioplatonismo aveva identificato con la sede impersonale delle Idee archetipe» (*ivi*, p. 193).

48 For Waszink, 1964, pp. 380-390, the Gospel parable would justify Justin’s “Christian” modifications of the Stoic framework without presupposing the presence of medioplatonic elements.

Justin mentions the parable in *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 125,1-2 (pp. 285-286), but to justify freedom in the proclamation of his faith, in the hope of finding a good earth to receive it. In this case, then, the seed of the Word is the seed of proclamation. Among the various mentions of the parable after Justin (Clemente Romano, *Ai Corinzi* 24,5 [p. 216]; Origène, *Contre Celse*. 4,9 [p. 208]), Origen (*On first principles* 3,1,14 [pp. 328-332:330]) interprets it as describing the activity of the Creator Word in sowing His seed in all people.

49 Cf. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 2,1-2;53,1-2 (pp. 105-106;124); Id., *Stromate* 2,8,36,2-4 (p. 62). Further references in Cristaudo, 2023, p. 452.

50 According to the author of *Elenchos*, they represent the Logos as Hermes Cillenus, demiurge and sower of the world and rational seeds, identified with Christ in his sown form, cf. (Pseudo-)Hippolytus *Refutatio* 5,7,29-34:33;5,8,28-33 (pp. 150-152:151;160-161).

51 Cf. Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies* 1,8,5 (pp. 128-130): «ὁ δὴ καὶ Υἱὸν Μονογενῆ καὶ Θεὸν κέκληκεν, ἐν ᾧ τὰ πάντα ὁ Πατὴρ προέβαλε σπερματικῶς». Cristaudo (2023, pp. 314; 451) emphasizes the similarity between the Justinian Logos and the emanation of the Logos of the consubstantial aeons.

52 Cf. Origène, *Commentaire sur S. Jean* 2,21,137 (SCh 120,298), very similarly to what Theodotus argued.

53 Cf. (Pseudo-)Hippolytus *Refutatio* 7,21,1-22,6;7,22,9 (pp. 287-290). For the Basilidians, according to the author of the *Elenchos*, the generation of the cosmos originates from an egg, a potential cosmic seed, container of all forms and substances.

54 Cf. *EvPhil* 55,15-21: The Spirit, despite the action of the Arcontes, continues to spread the truth.

This is certainly not the place to dwell on any of the three roots mentioned, but we would like to point out the remarkable potential of their operation regarding interreligious dialogue. Justin sought to attract the attention of his interlocutors by using a well-known and highly evocative image, drawn from different spheres of the cultural milieu of his time. At the same time, the apologist revisits the same image, reformulates philosophical categories, and even recalls the interpretations of those who preceded him among Christians, but without slavishly repeating them. Perhaps with some audacity, he shares images and visions of the Gnostics. In the wake of Jewish apologetics, Justin paves the way for the revival of figures, passages, and concepts from Greek philosophy, sometimes even more boldly than some Christians of later decades.⁵⁵ These are just a few of the many potentialities contained in the elaboration of the seminal word sown in each person by the divine Word.

5. The limits and misfortunes of an image

Justin's theoretical elaboration did not have much success within early Christianity.⁵⁶ It can be assumed that this was due to a combination of several factors. Let us try to list just four of them. First, the singular “λόγος σπερματικός” was perceived as an overly materialistic conception of the “λόγοι σπερματικοὶ” of the Stoic matrix.⁵⁷ This doctrine was also opposed by post-Justinian apologists for two other reasons: first, because it supported the allegorical interpretation of the myths, which was strongly contested by Christians⁵⁸; second, because it presupposed an identification of substance between God and the human seed, which was also supported by some Gnostic interpretations.⁵⁹ The Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation was thus called into question. Finally, the abandonment by Christians of the doctrine of “λόγος σπερματικός” was perhaps fostered by Porphyry's use of the term. The Neoplatonic philosopher, considered the archenemy of the Christians, appreciated Plotinus' criticism of the lack of freedom implied by

55 Cf. Lettieri, 2018, p. 45 n. 28, defines Justin's religious and cultural identity as that of a hybrid due to a process of constant confrontation with the other. Albano, 2022, pp. 257-258, highlights Justin's ability to be able to use, interact with, and mirror through the Christological filter the different positions with which he enters into dialogue.

56 Cf. Fédou, 2019, pp. 337-338.

57 Athénagore, *Supplique au sujet des Chrétiens* 6,4;19,2-4;22,5 (pp. 90;132-134;148), criticizes the Stoic doctrine because it leads to the worship of the elements and does not admit the transcendence of the Creator Cause. The criticism was already found in Aristocles Messenius, *Reliquiae* 3 (p. 45) in Eusebius Caesarensis, *La préparation évangélique* 15,14,1-2 (p. 308). Against Stoic materialism see *Ivi*, 15,22,68 (p. 362); Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 40 (pp. 78-79).

58 The Stoics interpreted allegorically with verb seeds the myth of the fertilization of the world by Cronus through the emasculation of his father Uranus, as we know from Tertullianus, *Ad Nationes* 2,12,18 (p. 62). Origène, *Contre Celse* 4,48 (p. 310); Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* 7,18;7,23 (pp. 200-201;203-204).

59 Cf. Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 40 (pp. 78-79); Theodoret, *De Graecarum affectionum curatione* 5,25 (p. 368).

the Stoic “λόγοι σπερματικοὶ.”⁶⁰ He offered an allegorical interpretation of the cult of the statue of Zeus, an image of the divine intellect that possesses in its head the seminal reasons.⁶¹ Again, based on the seminal reasons, Porphyry allegorically interpreted the erotic myths of Priapus and Kore, of Hermes and Aphrodite.⁶²

Eusebius of Caesarea, well acquainted with the Porphyrian interpretations, offered a “tamer” version of the seminal verb, preferring the also Stoic term “natural notions” (“φυσικὰ ἔννοιαι”).⁶³ These, for Eusebius, were ontologically different in nature from the divinity sown by the Son, the “cultivator” of creation.⁶⁴ Incidentally, Eusebius reserves only to the case of the apparitions to the Hebrew patriarchs the presence of “religious seeds” (not seeds of truth, as in Justin) scattered by the Logos himself on behalf of the Father.⁶⁵ What will later be understood in Christian theological circles by the expression “seed of the Word” or “seed of truth” will have little to do with the theological meaning of Justin’s powerful expression “seed of the Word.”

Conclusions for Interreligious Dialogue

In conclusion, even the lack of success of the expression “λόγος σπερματικός” in Christian literature after Justin is a further confirmation that it is not the expression in itself that is the great contribution of the Greek apologist to the dialogue between cultures and religions.⁶⁶ As we have shown, the expression *Semina Verbi* has undergone a continuous process of semantic evolution

60 Cf. Plotinus, *Enneades* 3,1,7;4,4,39 (pp. 242-243; 105-106). For Plotinus, seminal reasons are not immanent in things, but are possessed by the Intellect and received by matter in order to preserve human freedom, cf. *Ivi*, 5,9,6-9 (pp. 294-298).

61 Cf. Porphyrius, *fragmenta (simulacr.)* 354f (p. 413) = Eusèbe de Césarée, *La préparation évangélique* 3,9,5 (pp. 192).

62 Cf. Porphyrius, *fragmenta (simulacr.)* 358f;359f (pp. 417-420;428) = Eusèbe de Césarée, *La préparation évangélique* 3,11,15.41-43 (pp. 216.226): these would only be allegories of the insemination of rational seeds within matter.

63 Cf. Eusèbe de Césarée, *La préparation évangélique* 2,6,11;3,10,3-5;3,10,13-18 (pp. 112;200;204-206); Id., *Die Demonstratio Evangelica* 8,pro.,6-9:7 (p. 350). One also finds a kind of distance from Justin as a philosopher in Id., *Histoire Ecclésiastique* 4,8,3;4,11,8 (pp. 170;175).

64 Cf. Id., *Die Demonstratio Evangelica* 4,5,13 (pp. 157-158:158); Id., *Über das Leben Constantins* 12,7 (GCS 1,231).

65 Cf. Id., *Die Demonstratio Evangelica* 5,9,8 (p. 232). In Id., Θεοφάνεια. 1,73.76-77;4,16 (pp. 74-75.78-79;189-190), the soul is described as a seed cast into a bark (the body) that, if it can break through, can take root in heaven. In the Syriac version, which goes even further than Justin and approaches the Theophanic collections as well as the Porphyrian position, the Logos acts as a sower in history (not only in creation) and is not limited to the Patriarchs, but also inspires the love of truth among the peoples, awakening laws and arts that contain the spread of immorality and polytheism, cf. *Ivi*, 2,93.96;5,19 (pp. 123-124.125;230-231). This extension of the work of the Logos, even to legislation, is not found in the “parallel” work Id., *Über das Leben Constantins* 13,15 (240-241). The Syriac passage could therefore be considered an interpolation.

66 Cf. Moreno-Martínez, 1993, pp. 137-139.

depending on the times, authors, interlocutors and purposes of use. In any case, it remains to acknowledge the good fortune of this expression within the Catholic Magisterium and Theology of recent decades (especially after the Second Vatican Council). The reference, at least ideally, to Justin and the *Semina Verbi* has made it possible to support a vision of mission and interreligious dialogue open to all that is true and good in the hearts, cultures and religions of non-Christians.⁶⁷ Moreover, there remains the suspicion towards a culture that somehow wants to incorporate into its total truth another culture that presents only seeds and traces of that truth.

It is therefore necessary to return to the origin of the intentions and modes of the Greek apologist. Within this intention, mode and plan of work, the syntagma “λόγος σπερματικός” continues to be a powerful witness of interreligious dialogue. The expression is, in fact, part of the confessional and apologetic purpose of the ancient author, who felt the duty to proclaim his own conversion, giving reasons for the philosophical absurdity of a Logos who creates man and incarnates himself in history, even to the point of dying and rising again.

For this confessional and apologetic purpose, the Christian author appropriated themes, languages, expressions, customs and images, even from outside Christian culture, but where his own human sensibility was most affected by the Christian message (creation, God’s judgment, charity, fear of death). In such a way, several elements of his cultural environment (philosophical and religious schools, the world of art, science and popular tradition) converge, without these elements being definable from a single perspective. It is precisely in the shadow cone created by the convergence of these multiple perspectives –as was the case with the description of the relationship between God and man in the order of the sower and the seed– that the Christian chooses to enter, reformulating assumptions and overturning conceptions. Of course, the precondition for this convergence of perspectives is the existence of a humanity universally created in the image and likeness of God. Though reason may have different or conflicting manifestations, faith in a common Creator inspires all efforts to seek ever new levels of universal encounter and understanding.

It is not a matter of finding slogans that change their meaning over time. Rather, Justin teaches us that it is a matter of finding a way to listen, to learn, to intercept the language of the other, and while making it one’s own, trying to say in new words, one’s own words, one’s own witness of faith. This way of confessing in the words of the other, I believe, allows true listening and confessing, as opposed to the way of an imposition which claims to contain in itself the other’s reasons.

67 Cf. Donneaud, 2006, pp. 24-25.

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