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THE HOLY FATHERS ON THE ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY IN
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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Abstract

One of the greatest merits of the Holy Fathers is that of keeping and transmitting to the modern world the literature and the spiritual conquests of the ancient world. Having saved what was most precious and useful of its content, rejecting fallen, human wisdom, they commenced the long, tiring experience of a total recivilization without superfluous immolation; this is the task of Christianity, and mostly that of the Fathers. The patristic culture, appearing and developing at the springs of antique culture, is not a restrictive culture, but a signally selective one (Plato, Aristotle, Porfirio and Cicero are used in moderation), guiding itself after this principle: take from others just as the bee takes nectar from flowers, following the memorable words of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Theologian. The problems of the patristic culture were numerous and complex: theology, anthropology, education, sociology, cult, history, varied mission, sacred oratory, *philokalia*, literary art in prose and verse etc., but the controversial and dialogic works are among the most interesting and attractive. Even though they proved to be fierce adversaries of paganism, the Fathers have still recognized some congruence between Christian and Hellenic doctrines - primarily because the analogies were sometimes strikingly similar and secondly, for missionary purposes, *i.e.*, as a common ground for dialogue. In the convergence of the two cultures, the future of Christianity was clear. If, in its conflict with pagan culture, Christian culture was to thrive, it is first and foremost due to its divine origins.

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1. Introduction

One of the significant merits of the Fathers of the Church is that they preserved and conveyed to the modern world the ancient literature and spiritual achievements of the ancient world. Christianity and particularly the Fathers of the Church have the distinction of having prevented the loss of what was most worthy and needed for future generations of philosophical assets of their time. Our patristic culture continues the ancient one, assimilating and transmitting from it ideas, topics of discussion, texts and even complete works in Greek and Latin.

We particularly bring to the fore the fact that, in general, the Fathers of the Church do not decry the ancient philosophy *en masse*, but only that part that contradicts Christian dogma and morals. Still, they were moderate in appreciating the ancient culture and philosophy; they did not extol them exaggeratedly, as they considered that the true philosophy that directs to the eternal life is the Gospel, as this comprehends absolute truth, revealed supernaturally by Christ the Lord Himself.

2. Problem Statement

The Fathers of the Church, by and large, do not deny the interconnection between their thinking and that of classical philosophy. The philosophical views and categories of the day had become widespread during the times of the Holy Fathers and were extensively accepted by both Christian and non-Christian thinkers. Yet, the most important standpoint that should be underlined here, is that the use of philosophical language by the Fathers of the Church is not evidence of scarcity and improvisation in their own thinking, but, on the contrary, it testifies to a profound sense of *historicity*, a profound respect for the history in which *Magnalia Dei* are intrinsically connected and united in the great arrangement for the salvation of humanity. The utilisation of Greek philosophy in the domain of Christianity and Christian devotion should be interpreted from the perspective of the historical continuity of Christianity and as an imperative testimony to the Christian dimension as connected with the past. This is the reason why the Church Father of Nyssa speaks about secular education as *πλοῦτος* (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1964, pp. 68-69; Bebis, 1967, p. 374), by this meaning wealth and abundance, that, at the right moment was offered as a gift and adornment to the Church of God. Ethics, Physics, Geometry, Astronomy, Logic – all should adorn the divine temple of mysteries.

Apart from St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395 A.D.) no other Father of the 4th century would exploit philosophy so extensively in their efforts to unravel and bring the mysteries of faith closer to human understanding. He analogizes philosophy to the bride in the Canticle of Canticles in the Old Testament as this reveals to us how we should approach the Divine (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1863a, col. 885B). He considers that we ought to apply discretely, pagan wisdom. Definitely, the Bishop of Nyssa knows only too well that philosophy cannot be independent and plenary. He mentions that Christians are not permitted to utter whatever comes to their minds, as we assume the Holy Scripture as a rule and measure for all theories. We acknowledge only ideas that can be correlated with the intentions of the holy texts in Scripture. Thus, the Bible is from his point of view the guide of reason, the criterion of truth and an advantage over pagan wisdom (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1863b, col. 46B and 49B). As a result, he learned every positive teaching of pagan philosophy and all that was unfruitful he removed.

As they perfectly knew the pagan culture, the Fathers of the Church quote from Hellenic literature. Moreover, thanks to the evolution of Christian literature during the previous centuries and to the imitation and emulation as compared to profane literature, but especially thanks to their own genius, the Holy Fathers of the 4th century developed a classic literature that could defy the passing of millennia and satisfy the standards of the most elevated spirits. From the alliance of the two literatures emerged a most beautiful flower, that of Christian humanism (Coman, 1995, p. 17).

At times it was recommended and practiced, for example in the school of catechesis of Alexandria, that before receiving and accepting the Holy Scriptures and Baptism, it was necessary to learn about the profane culture, a requirement that was accomplished by almost all the Fathers. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus advises the young Seleukos to acquire knowledge of the profane sciences and then of the Holy Scriptures (Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, 1858, col. 1577) In the writings of many of the Fathers of the Church, the quotes from the classic writers are numerous, but they are understood and interpreted from a Christian perspective. Also, it is commonly known that St. John the Divine “borrowed” from the Platonic concept of “the Logos” to describe Christ as God in Jn. 1:1.

Culture and systematic effort facilitating better teaching, as well as wisdom, far from being an obstacle to knowing God, are of help. Origen relates that in ancient times God-loving wise men had been taught profane teachings. Moses, for example, grew up ‘and was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians’ (Ac. 7:22) and Daniel, Ananias, Azarias and Misael were learned in the Assyrian literature (Dan. 1:17) so that they were considered ten times wiser than the local wise men. Origen adds that during his time, the Churches had some wise men among them, in low numbers, indeed, as compared to the multitude of the faithful but skilful in what the Christians at that time called ‘wise men after the flesh’ (1 Cor. 1:26). The Churches also had members who eventually turned from this wisdom after the flesh to the spiritual wisdom (Origen, 1984, pp. 205 and 382).

For Blessed Hieronymus (ca. 340-420 A.D.) the paradigmatic gesture of Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynic (ca. 412-322 B.C.) was a memorable one as he had strived to become accepted as a student of Antisthenes (ca. 445 - ca. 365 B.C.), who had been the disciple of the sophists Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus and eventually of Socrates, proving himself to be one of the most gifted disciples of the latter. Hieronymus tells the following account: ‘As Antisthenes did not consent to accepting anyone as his disciple and, seeing that Diogenes was seeking his acceptance and could not coerce him to part with his intention, eventually Antisthenes seized a club and threatened he would smite him unless he left. Diogenes lowered his head and said “You have not so strong a bat as to make me leave.”’ (Blessed Hieronymus, 2000, p. 117)

Though they had professed the dismissal of paganism, the Fathers attempted to establish consensus in some matters between Christian and Hellenic doctrine – primarily because of their occasional and striking analogies and, secondly for missionary purposes, *i.e.*, as a common ground for dialogue. The contact between the two cultures was of obvious importance for the future of Christianity. Yet, the triumph of the Christian culture is due to its divine origin.

Putting the strictly negative aspects of philosophy aside, this would come with positive attributes: asserting the existence of one God, the emergence of the world under the auspices of a Demiurge, the desire for comprehending the truth, the good and the beautiful, etc. The apologists pointed up the fact that

what philosophy had achieved are not absolute truths, but rather beginnings and perspectives for comprehending it. 'This is why philosophy needs the superiority of Christianity. Consequently, the apologists undertook to relate rational truths to revelation.' (Popescu, 1932, pp. 154-155) Saint John the Golden-Mouth (ca. 354-407 A.D.) emphasizes at times appreciatively the achievements of natural philosophy: 'avoiding the surplus, gratitude for what is needed, self-control, patience, peace of mind, rationally approaching every situation; but he criticizes the natural or pagan philosophers for the passion of chasing vain glory and for the general failure to reach a balance and agreement between their theories and their lives. The Christian philosopher who conjoins in him the natural wisdom with the wisdom of faith and grace, pursues to attain the state of angelic purity, to retrieve completely the resemblance to God.' (Meyer, 1933, p. 185)

Enriched and adorned with what had been most valuable and beautiful in the ancient culture, with the love for science, philosophy, literary art, critical spirit, they tried to live to the best of their capacities on the level of Revelation, namely of the Apostles, martyrs, and those who aim at perfection. In case some of the background elements originated in the pagan or Hebrew culture, their categorization and reorganization were performed on new bases and with a new orientation. The main novelty in the background of apologies was faith, the teachings and the Christians' new life (Criterio, 1936, pp. 53-55).

Nevertheless, the Cappadocian Fathers and those mentioned above are not the only ones who have a positive attitude towards the ancient culture. By philosophy, the Fathers of the Church do not imply the Stoic, the Epicurean or Aristotelian philosophies, but, as Clement of Alexandria states, everything that was positive and good in these philosophical schools when they taught concerning righteousness and science merged with piety. Thus, as the general sciences, rhetoric, dialectic, grammar, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music was grounded in philosophy – their master – in a similar way philosophy itself was grounded in wisdom. Philosophy pursues to attain wisdom and wisdom is the science of the divine and human realities and of their causes. 'Whether philosophy commands taming the tongue, refraining from excessively eating and abstaining from lust, then it is the more honorable and valued if it practices worshiping and knowing God.' (Clement of Alexandria, 1982, pp. 26-27 and 31)

Saint Justin the Martyr and Philosopher (ca. 100-110 – ca. 165-166) had approached philosophy before the Cappadocians, revealing one of its objects: 'I was hoping to see God in front of my eyes as this is the ideal of Plato's philosophy.' (Saint Justin Martyr and Philosopher, 1997, pp. 119-121) Clement of Alexandria also mentions the goal of philosophy from a Platonic perspective: 'Plato stated that the ideal of philosophy is resemblance with God.' (Clement of Alexandria, 1982, p. 364) The same author acknowledges philosophy the merit of, from his standpoint, having shown the Greeks the path to Christ, as the Old Testament Law did for the Jews (Clement of Alexandria, 1982, p. 25).

Saint John Chrysostom who, in his homilies had written severe lines against lack of morals and the unreasonable ideas of some philosophers, when he defined philosophy revealed one of its objects, beside love for wisdom: 'This is the definition of philosophy: being savvily pure hearted.' (Saint John the Golden-Mouth, 1994, p. 597)

On this wise, the Fathers and the writers of the Church validated positively the culture and the science of their time for the benefit of theology and succeeded in making a 'vivid synthesis' between the Christian faith and the culture of their time.

3. Research Questions

The strict tradition of the ecclesiastical writers Tertullian (160-240 A.D.) and Tatianus (born ca. 120 A.D.), who, in the name of faith, rejected the profane culture, had important exponents in the 4th century as well. To demonstrate to us the intensity of Tertullian's vehemence against philosophy we quote the text below: 'Is there any resemblance between a philosopher and a Christian? The former is a disciple of Greece, the latter of heaven. Philosophers aim at glory, Christians aim at salvation, the former manipulate words, the latter good deeds. The former build up, the latter demolish, the former dote on error, the latter are its adversaries, the former alter the truth, the latter explain it, the former spirit truth away while the latter keeps it safe.' (Tertullian, 1981, p. 102)

On the other side, the emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363 A.D.) had decreed that Christians were prohibited from attending the profane culture and the secular schools.

This strict attitude of some Christians 'was aroused, doubtlessly, by the fear of contamination and even by confusion that could be caused in the unknowing souls by the knowledge of the ancient culture.' (Pavel, 1980, p. 316) In this respect, St. Gregory of Nyssa writes about his mother's reluctance and fear: 'My mother was preoccupied not to instruct her daughter (Macrina – author's note) in the common teachings, the mundane ones, that are acquired at this early age and consist mainly of poetry. She considered that it is indecent and inappropriate that the womanly passions depicted in tragedies, that provided themes and sources of inspiration to poets or the indecencies in comedies or the reasons of the misadventures in Troy could be of any use in educating a fragile and easy to shape girl that would be corrupted by these indecent accounts about women. The girl was to be taught everything that seemed more comprehensible at this age when reading the Scripture inspired by God and especially from the "Wisdom of Solomon", as these show the way to a moral life.' (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 1998, pp. 25-26)

Thus, Saint Macrina the Younger shared this alienation from the profane culture in the life of youth.

Nevertheless, St. Basil, Macrina's brother and Emilia's son, now in Athens, realized that 'her faith does not corrupt her classical culture that steered her during her childhood.' (Cayré, 1927, p. 399)

4. Purpose of the Study

In this article, we intend to give prominence to the fact that, in their works, the Fathers of the Church advised their youth and those who read works of ancient philosophers not to be restrictive, but selective, to assimilate exclusively what is subservient to and edifies the soul and forewarned them that 'Greek philosophy is like a walnut; not all of it is entirely edible.' (Clement of Alexandria, 1982, p. 14)

5. Research Methods

In terms of the validity of the culture and science of the time as an instrument to devise and express theological thinking, St. Basil the Great advises those who theologize to gather the nectar of all the flowers. He himself, as did his other two confreres in the theological triad (Sts. Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa), utilised all the philosophical principles of their time that provided them elements that favour theological thinking. By this, they teach the youth they should be open to all philosophies,

validating selectively elements that could facilitate the understanding of Christian Truth in the context of their times. In my approach, I used theological and scientific method.

6. Findings

6.1. Kalokagathía, philokalia kai theosis

The Holy Fathers strived for certitude, moral strength and spiritual fairness and never repudiated explicitly the pre-Christian ideal of *kalokagathia*,¹ they only changed it for the better to befit the new perspective, gradually replacing it with what was called [*Philokalia*], comprehended as love for the eternal and not withering beauty, thus ensuring the transitions from [*kalokagathía*] to the ensuing phase, that of a son of God, and, from there, to the phase of deification, [*theosis*], this last one representing the fulfillment of a human-divine synergism or the perpetual alliance between grace and man's will. It is known that St. Gregory of Nazianzus compiled together with St. Basil the Great the first *philokalia* using texts they had found in Origen's writings. The patristic literature equally appreciates the *aesthetic beauty* every time it contributes to the enhancement of the moral fairness or to give glory to God. The Fathers often describe in clear narratives or bright poems the beauties of nature, harmony and the fairness of the human body, the splendours of buildings and gardens, the order established by law and the natural phenomena, the handsomeness of a leader's posture and outfits, the outrageous misery of the poor and the sick of the time, the joys of the kindness reflected on people, children and parents' faces, the delight when meeting someone unexpectedly, the bliss of Heaven before the fall, etc. The literary achievement though sometimes criticized as one that originated in idolatry is, generally, appreciated and cultivated by writers such as St. Cyprian of Carthage, Lactantius, Blessed Hieronymus and Augustine, the Letter to Diognetus, Sts. Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom.

Arising specifically from the Gospel, the patristic literature develops an excellent and comprehensive *humanism* based on the Logos' love for people, but it also retains fundamental elements of the Greek-Latin humanism as: validity of reason, the harmony of the human being, and the prominence of virtue. Patristic humanism aims at chiseling the Christian to the resemblance of Christ (Coman, 1972, p. 7).

By adopting all the elements that had been permeated by the good and fairness in the ancient world, as it is a well-known fact that this cult of the beautiful was too deeply rooted in their world, the Fathers of the Church amplified effectively these elements and they made them available to everyone, not omitting to amend, to correct some elements and provide further clarifications when the situation required it. The thinking of these *morning stars of science*, addressed from different perspectives and their word as a means of communication 'attend to progress, *epectasis*, for the complete comprehension of the divine power and the receiving of grace.' (Coman, 1974, p. 666)

¹ 'Man was considered the master of the world, its king, and the ideal was an apposition of the physical beauty and the moral good [*kalokagathía*]' (Pouderon and Dore, 1998, p. 92).

6.2. The Academic Studies in Athens of Two Friends Who Stand Out Paradigmatically for Young Christians Worldwide: Basil and Gregory

In Athens, St. Basil presumably studied for at least five years, until 356 or 357, receiving education from two masters of the time: one of them was Christian and his name was Proheresius – expelled from the teaching staff in 362 under the legislation passed by the emperor Julian the Apostate concerning education –, and the other was pagan and his name was Himerius (Meredith, 2008, p. 51). The great Cappadocian was equally familiar with poetry, rhetoric and philosophy. The two friends enjoyed great appreciation among the professors and their confreres in the entirety of Greece and even beyond its boundaries.

The subject of their zeal (of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus) was *philosophy* and they became entirely dedicated to one another, sharing the same roof, the same table, the same sentiments, building on the strength of these golden colonnades an edifice with strong walls, as Pindar says, pursuing science with similar expectations, without envying each other and attributing their glory to one another. They were ‘a single soul in two bodies, one within the other and one beside the other.’ (Coman, 1980, p. 27)

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus provides abundant details about their studentship in Athens and the study programs they attended. The two effectively availed themselves of the teachings of their professors and orators, acquiring from each of them what they considered to be relevant and important. They were assimilating the meaning of their words, yet not without discernment. They were not Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus’ disciples, they only obtained from their masters the technical apparatus of philosophy when this matched the content of their theological pursuit. Their main interest was not in pleasant studies, but in fruitful and helpful ones, that could imprint the seal of virtue.

Saint Gregory the Theologian was said to be ‘the most effective spiritual refiner of his time. Every word that would come to him, would promptly permeate his judgment. Gregory was an unequalled critical spirit. He would not merely stock knowledge. He would study, appreciate and judge everything. For this reason philosophical thinking did not attenuate his faith, but, indirectly, strengthened and confirmed it.’ (Papadopoulos, 2002, p. 38) In Athens, the four major philosophical systems of Antiquity – Plato’s, Aristotle’s, the one of the Stoa Academy and Epicurus’ – each had a chair. The age of original works had long since gone and it was now the time for digests, lexicons and textbooks.

From the Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy they adapted terms and phrases that they Christianized and set in accordance with the doctrine of the Church.

On his return to Athens, St. Basil compares the profane writings to the first layer of paint that painters apply and with the habit of looking first at the sun as reflected on water, then one can look directly at its true light (Saint Basil the Great, 1857, col. 568B). This might be the reason why, at the sunset of his life, St. Basil regretted ‘the time he had spent for vanity, his youth that he wasted in useless labour, striving to acquire the teachings of a science that God declared ineffectual,’ (Pavel, 1980, p. 315) as he had seen the true light (the Christian teachings and life), his eyes feasted plenarily and his soul rejoiced through living and experiencing the true faith and teaching.

6.3. Saint Basil the Great and His Exhortations Regarding the Validity of the Profane Culture in Educating Youth

As eparch, St. Basil the Great, a scholar who was one of the most educated men of his time, concerned himself with another specific matter: education and the Christian attitude toward pagan literature and teachings. The Metropolitan of Caesarea, educated both in the school of the ancient culture and that of the Christian Church and endowed with an exceptional intellectual capacity, wanted young Christians to achieve completeness through virtue and knowing the truth. Education should shape the youth so that they accomplish the sense of life. For this reason, the most important thing is that the young became aware that life has purpose. The Holy Father ascribes to the Greek classic literature a lower status than what he attributes to Holy Scripture, but he does not forbid using it for educational purposes.

Studying the ancient writers can be worth while if a well-advised selection from the works of poets, historians and rhetoricians is conducted and if the youth dismiss all ideas that might represent a threat to their souls. It is this literature where the young should look for honey and avoid poison, as bees gather nectar from flowers (Saint Basil the Great, 1986, pp. 568-569).

The metropolitan of Caesarea considered music as a means of education as well. Yet, he did not recommend the music that gave rise to passions, but the music that the soul could benefit from, the one that David had played to soothe Saul. To illustrate the influence that music has on the soul, the youth are reminded of Pythagoras' situation who once met on a road a group of intoxicated young men. The philosopher called the flutist who was presiding the revel and requested him to change the music and play the way he wanted. The outcome was that the drunken men sobered up, tore the garlands on their heads and ran ashamed. This is the difference between being influenced by an edifying song and an obnoxious one. A young man's wisdom becomes obvious as he knows how to seek the beneficial things. It would be shameful for someone to pick for the body the food that is nourishing and pick from science that which is the nurture of the soul, ideas and knowledge disregarding their utility and righteousness. The one who studies or reads should not limit himself to being delighted with good advice or examples, but to put into practical effect science, that means to fulfill virtue (Magheț-Văliug, 1957, pp. 56-57); a man should peruse only those writings of ancient writers who praised virtue and scourged vices.

For his part, Saint Basil's faith did not interfere with his *classical* culture that had been instilled into him even since childhood. He behaves as a true *philosopher* when he talks over an heresy and refutes it, when he explains the consequences of a statement, when he describes a truth, yet this philosophy will not alienate him: he is always and everywhere the *orator* who stands by the people, who can talk to them and guide them (Cayré, 1927, p. 404).

Of the great philosophers, St. Basil is mostly interested in Plato. He frequently quotes from *Republica*, *Phaidon* and *Phaedrus*. Origen, the great writer of the Church, also mentions Plato of whom he says: 'we hardly ever see those other than scholars reading Plato's works, and on the contrary, Epictetus is regarded highly even by people in the crowd who are eager to discover him as a source of beneficent influence. Far be it from me to criticize Plato as most of the people have found many fruitful teachings in his works.' (Origen, 1984, p. 371)

7. Conclusion

At the end of this study, we conclude that Christianity does more than merely supplement philosophy; it is in itself a real philosophy, a practical wisdom, a consonance of morals and deeds. Consequently, those monks to whom the Holy Fathers would address their epistles constitute a ‘choir of philosophy;’ the objective of the Christian life is the same as that of philosophy, and the option for the Christian ascesis is the path of ‘the true philosophy.’ Concisely, living a Christian life means ‘philosophizing properly.’

From the patristic standpoint, through the Incarnation of the Son of God, man achieves knowledge about the purpose of life and the means to fulfill it – this knowledge would have been impossible through philosophical rationalization without the agency of the Holy Spirit. The knowledge a Christian possesses is primarily based on the Revelation from heaven discovered in and by the Hypostatically Incarnated Word. Through the intermediary of the Christian religion, man receives from God the divine grace that he needs to accomplish the pursuits established by philosophy.

The Orthodox Church has shown its appreciation for certain ancient philosophers by painting their images on the exterior walls of certain churches such as: St. Nicholas Church (Royal Church).

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