

Dependence and Divorce in Patristic Theology

The relationship with hellenistic philosophy and scholastic methodology

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Throughout the ages, Patristic thought may be said to have experienced two major encounters with a philosophical methodology which it either needed to approximate or else which it was obliged to avoid. Aware of the dangers of generalisation, this chapter seeks to examine briefly the importance and influence of two powerful currents of thought which the Church Fathers confronted: one in the earlier years of Christian theological formation and formulation (although the relationship with Hellenism was never definitively maintained); the other in later times when Christian theology was more articulate (although the differences here should not be considered »black and white«).

Hellenism

The meeting of Christianity with Hellenism is a subject on which many and varied views have been expressed but to which no final conclusion has been given in the history of theological thought. It is a meeting of two differing and powerfully creative world-views.

In the past, scholars have particularly underlined the contrast between these two world-theories, and although many such theories may be questioned, Hellenism and Christianity must be conceived as two distinct, though not necessarily exclusive, realities: »What is there to be found in common between Athens and Jerusalem? Or what is there to be found in common between the Academy and the Church? ... It is not right to be curious and inquisitive, having known Jesus Christ and the Gospel. When one believes, one does not desire anything beyond this belief«.¹

Yet other scholars make reference to a reconciliation, almost compromise between the two civilisations, resulting in the harmony of a hellenistic Christianity. Once again, such statements are vague generalisations, easily perhaps counter-argued. The fundamental claim is that Hellenism and Christianity are mutually opposed, and it is incorrect to speak of one as »borrowing« from the other. There are, at most, according to such rigid viewpoints, only »analogies« in the language of the two; »seeds«, as Justin Martyr would articulate, of the Word of God in classical authors.² There is, here, in various degrees, a sweeping rejection of all mutual influence between these two autonomous realities.

It is not altogether justified to speak of a borrowing, an assumption or even adaptation of certain ideas and values. Both the Hellenisation of Christendom and the Christianisa-

¹ *Tertullian*, Praescriptionibus adversus haereticos 7: PL 2, 20B—21A.

² *Justin*, Apologia II, 13: PG 6, 465 C.

tion of Hellenism are, strictly speaking, misconceptions. It is, furthermore, wrong to describe Hellenism as the intellect and Christianity as the heart, as if the two were mutually exclusive. The simplicity of Patristic theology cannot be identified with any un- or anti-intellectualistic popular form of literature, but must be related to the universal application of Christianity, as compared with the more elitist direction of philosophy.

The intellectual struggle between the Christian and the classical world began in Athens with Paul's speech on the Areus Pagus. The struggle was not an expression of hostility but represented a positive endeavour to present Christianity to the pagan world. The outcome was the rise of Christian theology.

The early Apologists were addressing themselves to a Greek world and needed to convey the Apostolic *kerygma* in terms understood by their intellectual contemporaries. This attempt to bridge philosophy and faith earned respect for both; thus later medieval iconography would represent the philosophers with the saints, though not necessarily *as* saints.

Later, these two great forces confronted each other at the crossroads of such cities as Alexandria, where the two outstanding personalities of Clement (+ 215) and Origen (+ 254) showed that faith and rational knowledge were not incompatible, that Christianity was no obscurantism.

The Cappadocians were in general more reserved towards classical »paideia«, but they successfully attempted to translate — or more precisely, to transform — Greek categories of thought into a language of the Christian faith.³

Gregory the Theologian (+ 390) was a lyrical poet; Basil of Caesarea (+ 379) was a universal teacher; Gregory of Nyssa (+ 385) was a mystical philosopher. Their influence on the Church was lasting, differing radically from writings that opposed »secular philosophy«: »Have nothing to do with pagan books ... What connections can any christian have with all the errors they contain? ... The Bible not only provides for the supernatural life but also for all cultural needs ... All these outlandish books must be hurled away«.⁴

The Cappadocians imbibed the literary culture of the ancient world, even while regarding Christianity as the »true philosophy«, the fulfilment of all previous philosophical groping. The Fathers, above all, are and remain theologians, and it is as such that they should be read and interpreted, otherwise one is entangled in a maze of inappropriate questions and theories.

Throughout the centuries, but perhaps most intensely in the early centuries, the Church Fathers experienced — indeed confronted — a particular civilisation within which they then inevitably breathed and spoke. This civilisation, furthermore, was fearfully unstable and forever changing. This is the situation within which the Church constantly lives, and it must at all times be relevant to the world. Yet, in a certain sense, the times of the Cappadocians were ripe for »conversion«, and Christian thinkers were fully aware of this. To

³ Cf. E. Matsagouras, *The Early Church Fathers as Educators*, Light and Life, Minneapolis, 1977.

⁴ See the first century document entitled *Didache*, ed. F. Funk, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, Tübingen, 1878—81, p. 51.

criticise and even condemn a culture is an ever-present temptation, but it is not the vocation of the Christian writer who always proclaims the kingdom of Heaven from and in this world. Origen, for instance, who must surely be considered the Helleniser *par excellence* of Christianity is aware of the incompatibility of certain features and values of Hellenism with the faith of the Church, and he is profoundly suspicious of vain speculation.⁵ Nevertheless, he is also aware of the creative nature of such tension and accepted the challenge of attempting to unite the two. The result has been heavily criticised and censured in recent times⁶, but it must be admitted that there has been an inner transfiguration of Hellenism by the sword of the Spirit and by the Word of God. This genuine and essential transfiguration was initiated by the Fathers and creatively continued through the centuries to our time.

The Fathers translated Revelation from the Hebrew into Greek, appropriating and transforming the hellenistic culture with a view to conveying to the contemporary world the Gospel of Christ. The Church is »the discipling of all nations« (Matt. 28:19), and there is as little »accidence« in the Christianisation of Hellenism as there is in God's selection of the Jews (cf. John 4:22). There is no way around this; there are no »ifs« but only given facts in history and in the economy of salvation.

⌈ This implies no eternalisation of a certain system, nor any eclecticism in Christianity. To the Greek culture as such, inasmuch as it was not transformed, the Gospel remained a foolish scandal (I Cor. 1:23). It is only to the degree that it is pervaded by the new experience in Christianity, immersed in the fire of baptism in the Holy Trinity, that it acquires a new perspective in Patristic thought. It is only to the degree that Hellenism is »spiritualised« by the glory of the Crucifixion and Resurrection that the classical *prosopeion* (mask) becomes the Patristic *prosopon* (person). Such are the presuppositions of the new Christian philosophy which is an exposition and explanation in thought of the divinely revealed truth.

Patristic theology, then, is not merely an oscillation between Aristotle and Plato, nor simply »an aberrant branch of . . . philosophy«.⁷ Patristic theology is above all Christian, and in this lies its immovable strength and admirable flexibility, its incomparable beauty. Elements borrowed from fields outside of Christianity strictly speaking, are organically incorporated into a new synthesis with renewed strength for the recapitulation of all in Christ (Eph. 1:10). The Fathers did not present a message of abstract truths, just as the Apostles too preached »Jesus and the resurrection« (Acts 17:18). Patristic theology never developed what the human mind could in concepts express of God, but stated in manifold ways what God had in deeds expressed for man in Christ. The Church Fathers employ philosophical terms and notions in the formulation of doctrine, but their work belongs more to the history of theology — or to history and theology — than to the history of philosophy.

⁵ Origenes, Hom. in Psalmo 36:3,6, ed. P. Koetschau, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Jahrhunderte, Leipzig 1899.

⁶ See L. Dewart, The Future of Belief, London 1967, and The Foundations of Belief, London 1969, where the dehellenisation of patristic thought is defended.

⁷ B. Tatakis, La Philosophie Byzantine, Paris 1949, pp. v and 72.

Scholasticism

The Greek Fathers created a new synthesis, a new methodology, a new philosophy that differed essentially from that of Plato and that of Aristotle. This synthesis is paralleled by a later estrangement between two frameworks of thought during the Middle Ages — a change in direction between the patristic mentality and scholasticism. The differences between the two trains of religious thought are evident in questions relating to grace and nature, salvation and divine sacrifice, sin and death, baptism and original sin, faith and works. Indeed, in order to speak of theological disagreements, it is equally valid and helpful to analyse anthropological issues.⁸ Theology flows into anthropology and is reflected in soteriology.

When in the latter part of the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury (+ 1109) was writing his treatise on the incarnation of God, entitled *Cur Deus Homo*, he was almost totally ignorant of Greek Patristic theology⁹ and accepted the teachings of Augustine alone as the Patristic tradition. Anselm's theology was to have profound implications for the West, becoming the basis of scholasticism after a refined systematisation by Thomas Aquinas (+ 1274). Augustine was thus acclaimed as »the Father of the Roman Church and the Reformation, of the Biblical theologians and the Mystics«.¹⁰ The Greek Patristic tradition, furthermore, was largely ignorant of the legalistic concepts characteristic of Latin theology. How, then, did this estrangement develop?

In the early days of Christendom, at the time of Basil the Great and Augustine of Hippo, there was a single civilisation in east and west, preserving a uniformity of ethos despite cultural modifications. Only four centuries later, at the time of Photius the Great and Charlemagne, this unity of life and thought had already been critically impaired: the Carolingian revival of letters in the West was marked by an anti-Byzantine bias, and with the rise of Scholasticism the process of division and disintegration became still more evident. By analogy Latin Fathers, even of the calibre and influence of Augustine, were almost entirely unknown in the East. Thus, although translations of philosophical and theological works became widespread in the later Middle Ages, educated Christians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries no longer shared a single civilisation or a common world of discourse and intercourse. The schism of the eleventh century between East and West (1054) may rightly be said to constitute a definite, though not sudden, break in the theological universe of the time. This, however, was no surprising event, for the estrangement between East and West was a gradual and complicated process conditioned by theological, cultural, political and economic factors.

As a result of invasions and crusades, the Church in the West came to occupy a markedly different position in the framework of society from that of the East. The papacy rapidly acquired the privilege of guaranteeing stability and continuity in a world where disorder prevailed. It was, then, natural for an immense authority, political as well as spiritual, to

⁸ Cf. *Athanasios*, De Incarnatione Verbi 4: PG 25, 104 AC.

⁹ G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, London 1952, p. 239.

¹⁰ A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, London 1894, vol. I. p. 299.

be concentrated on the person of the Pope. In the East, by contrast, only rarely was the Patriarch obliged to assume political power; the civilised order was upheld and the law enforced by the powerful secular leadership of the emperor supported by an influential lay civil service. Although the Church in the East was capable of defying the State, yet under normal conditions it enjoyed an ecclesiastical and spiritual leadership such as few western rulers ever acquired.

In the West the only effective education developed during the so-called Dark Ages was ecclesiastical, given by the clergy and intended likewise for the clergy. Nevertheless, in Byzantium there always seemed to exist a tradition of lay scholarship. Many laymen, from the lowest ranks of the civil service to the emperor, took an active and influential interest in all aspects of ecclesiastical life — from monasticism (which itself began as a »lay« movement) to doctrinal theology — (in support of orthodoxy during times of controversy) and even the hierarchical establishment: several celebrated Patriarchs (such as Tarasius, Nicephorus I and Photius) were drawn from the civil servants, and were in fact still laymen at the time of their election. This is a phenomenon virtually unthinkable in the West. Byzantine Christianity was in general less clericalist, less centralized and less rigidly institutionalized than that of the West. Though such comparisons cannot be drawn too far, it must be confessed that in Byzantium, the laity was always a considerable influence.

Such differences in the social and political situations inevitably affected popular understanding of doctrine, as well as the particular approach to theology and ecclesiology. Even, for example, the problem of Papal authority could not be reduced to a matter of canon law or ecclesiastical organisation, but involved fundamental questions about the nature of the Church, even if few on either side realized this from the outset. The very nature of theology and of its methodology was variously conceived: East and West taught differently about the way in which religious thought and life should be carried on, and in particular about the place of (i) juridical categories and (ii) logical inference in an exposition of faith.

(i) Eastern Christians have often expressed the view that Latin theology is too juridical in its approach, too influenced by Roman concepts of law. »One of the features which distinguishes Orthodox theology from that of the Roman Catholics is this — it does not look at things legalistically, but in terms of God's grace.«¹¹ Again, it would be incorrect to draw sharp contrasts between the notions of law and grace, but it is such a legalistic mentality that caused a misinterpretation in the West of Papal primacy, converting the »presidency of love« (the phrase belongs to Ignatius of Antioch) into a juridical and jurisdictional supremacy of authority. It was the same legalistic outlook which led to such notions as purgatory, indulgences and even atonement. In all these issues, it is not to the specific teaching that Patristic thought reacts and protests, but it is the very manner of thinking that is found to be unacceptable. These questions are addressed quite differently by the Fathers who are reluctant to define the nature of the Church and salvation in a primarily juridical terminology, preferring to speak in terms of God's burning love and transforming light.

¹¹ A. Elchaninov, *The Diary of a Russian Priest*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1982, p. 54.

(ii) The Greek Fathers also felt that Latin, particularly Scholastic, theology was too dependent on altogether rationalistic and philosophical methods of argument. Despite a certain dependence and debt to Greek philosophy, Patristic theology was never unreservedly subjected to philosophical forms of thought. There is, in fact, a general tendency for the East to be reserved towards »western syllogism«, and the appeal is rather towards sacred tradition. The criterion in the East was always Tradition — the Fathers and the Councils — and there was an underlying suspicion of the intellectual reasoning in which Scholastics delighted and surely also excelled.

Even the humanist Bessarion, who was heavily influenced by and sought union with the West, could write: »The words of the Fathers alone are in themselves sufficient to solve every doubt and to persuade every person. It was neither syllogisms nor probabilities or arguments which convinced me, but the bare words of the Fathers.«¹² Latin theology was considered as altogether too self-sufficient, grounded on human and reason, divorced from or at least insensitive to the divine mystery. The West, so the East believed, had attempted to make theology a reflection upon rather than a revelation of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. The sense of wonder and mystery was sacrificed for a scientific system of thought.

For the Eastern Fathers, »theologia« was inseparably linked with »theoria«. They presupposed a concept of Revelation that could not be reduced to any intellectual deductive process but which, rather, offered the privilege of personally experiencing the transcendent God. Not that rational deduction was absent in the East, but there theology was conceived as an experience of the entire human person — intellect, emotions and even senses.

What is here involved is a difference in methodology, a difference in the approach to theology which left a deep impression on an entire range of aspects in thought and culture. The two traditions of East and West were no longer complementary — as they once had been — but contradictory.

¹² Bessarion, *Ad Alexium Lascarin. De Processione Spiritus Sancti*: PG 161, 360 BC.