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Abstract The early church was unable to continue once the apostles had departed. Bishops were only local officials and could not speak for the entire church. Beginning with the later second century, philosophy plays an increasingly important role in the church—this appears to be an effect rather than a cause of the apostasy.

Philosophy and Early Christianity

Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach

Modern European culture, of which we are heirs, is a product of several ancient cultures, the most prominent of which are the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian. From the former we inherited the alphabet, most of our literary and dramatic forms, rhetoric and law, science and philosophy, and in short most of our intellectual traditions. From the latter we inherited our religious and moral traditions. As early as the first century A.D., these traditions began to grow together.

The first generations of Christians enjoyed the benefits of a unified empire. The Roman conquest had provided the Mediterranean basin with peace and order greater than it had ever known, good roads for overland travel and safe seas for maritime travel, and a system of good laws and a generous sense of citizenship in the mother city—all backed up by an invincible military organization. The Romans had also helped to disseminate Greek culture, following the lead of Alexander the Great, himself a non-Greek, who exported Greek culture to the Middle East as part of his program of government.

Early Christians looked on this world as both a field white and ready to harvest and a spiritual Babylon. In it they enjoyed the basic protection of an orderly society, relatively good means of travel and communication, a universal language (really two: Greek in the East, Latin in the West), and a reasonably tolerant atmosphere for new ideas. There were, however, drawbacks and dangers. The dominant Greek culture was idolatrous and corrupt. The Greeks shocked even the Romans with their sexual perversions and loose morals. The Roman rulers, for their part, were intermittently tolerant and severe, and could act with great harshness against movements they perceived as pernicious. In general, Christians found it easy to make converts from the first days of the apostles' ministry. The real challenges to the fledgling church were corruption, both moral and doctrinal, and persecution.

During the early centuries of the Christian era, the church emerged as the most viable institution in a moribund empire. Eventually it became the religion of the majority and in the process also altered classical civilization. At the same time, the church absorbed ideas and customs from secular culture. But on this point Latter-day Saints differ from their Christian colleagues in seeing the Christian church as having lost its special place as the kingdom of God on earth, while most other Christians believe that the church survived.

According to our understanding, the Christian church could not continue as it had, once the apostles had departed. They were the only ones authorized to receive revelation for the whole church and to organize and lead it. The only way for the church to have continued would have been for new apostles to be sent—which they were not. By the early second century, the apostles were gone and the era of divine leadership was over. The highest remaining officials were the bishops, who were—and knew they were—only local officials. It was not until the ecumenical councils of the fourth century and later that they met—initially at the behest of a still pagan emperor—to make pronouncements about general church doctrine. At this point, philosophical theology would replace immediate revelation, and political machinations, charismatic leadership.

What was the role of Greek philosophy in the transition period between the primitive church and the medieval church?

First, we wish to point out that whatever the role was, and whether its influence was good, bad, or indifferent, what ultimately caused the loss of church authority, in our opinion, was not the alteration of doctrine per se, but the disappearance of the apostles. Without God's appointed shepherds, the flock could not be God's chosen flock. Did corruption of doctrine by Greek philosophy cause this apostasy? We would say, for our own part, that we do not know. We know the apostles struggled with false doctrines from the beginning. But what exactly was driving those doctrines and how damaging they were, we do not know in detail, for we have few documents from the late first century to tell us precisely what the problems were. Our own suggestion is that beginning with the later second century, when we see philosophy playing an

increasingly important role in the church, the growing influence of philosophy is an effect rather than a cause of the apostasy.

The early church fathers themselves recognized secular learning as a challenge. This learning was predominantly Greek (for the Romans contributed only in a limited way, and some of them wrote in Greek, the premier language of learning). Greek learning included philosophy and science, music and mathematics, literary criticism, logic, and rhetoric. To reject this learning would entail rejecting important advances of science and mathematics, as well as techniques of learned debate in general. On the other hand, to accept them uncritically would entail the acceptance of beliefs incompatible with Christianity. What should the learned Christian do?

Of course, the problem of secular learning did not disappear in the early Christian era. Every generation of Christians faces such a problem, and it is for this reason that the earliest period is so relevant to us.

The church fathers themselves felt the challenge keenly and proposed different ways of responding to it. In the late second century Tertullian argued that we should have nothing to do with secular learning:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from the "porch of Solomon," who had himself taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart." Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.¹

¹ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter ANF), ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1951), 3:246.

According to Tertullian the scriptures provide all the knowledge necessary both for salvation and for ordinary understanding. Anything the world can offer is either better said in the scriptures, or not worth saying at all.

In contrast, Tertullian's contemporary Clement of Alexandria holds that wisdom is to be found in secular sources as well as in the scriptures.

"Now," says Solomon, "defend wisdom, and it will exalt thee, and it will shield thee with a crown of pleasure" [Proverbs 4:8-9]. For when thou hast strengthened wisdom with a cope by philosophy, and with right expenditure, thou wilt preserve it unassailable by sophists. The way of truth is therefore one. But into it, as into a perennial river, streams flow from all sides.²

God blessed the Greeks with wisdom as a preparation for the gospel:

Before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration. . . . For this was a schoolmaster to bring "the Hellenic mind," as the law, the Hebrews, "to Christ" [Galatians 3:24]. Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ.³

No one group had a monopoly on wisdom, but some wisdom is to be found in all, or at least in many, of the philosophical schools:

And philosophy—I do not mean the Stoic, or the Platonic, or the Epicurean, or the Aristotelian, but whatever has been well said by each of these sects, which

2 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.5, in *ANF*, 2:305.

3 Ibid.

teach righteousness along with a science pervaded by piety—this eclectic whole I call philosophy.⁴

Thus Clement proposes that there is no harm in studying secular philosophy, and indeed we can find profit in it both for its own sake and as a common ground for communicating with the Greeks. We are not to ally ourselves with any one school or movement, but we are free to pick and choose truths that will harmonize with our faith, in full confidence that such truths come from God.

A third path is found in Origen of Alexandria in the third century. Going beyond Clement, he identifies a single school as having arrived by reason at the truths of the gospel: the Platonists have understood the nature of God and his relation to man and the world. A student of Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus, Origen founded his theology on Platonic conceptions.

The approaches of Tertullian, Clement, and Origen provide a range of possible responses to secular learning. We may reject it outright; we may pick and choose portions of it that agree with our beliefs; or we may attempt to synthesize our beliefs with some attractive theory. Ultimately, it was Origen's path of synthesis that won out in the Christian tradition. And it was Platonism—that is, Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism—that became the fundamental theory on which Christian theology was grounded.

Platonic metaphysics was not taken over uncritically by Christian theologians. In the debates of the fourth century it became clear that a theory that subordinated the Son to the Father as a lower emanation from a higher level of reality ("hypostasis") would not be acceptable. Nor could the Christian be content with saying the world was eternally generated from a higher hypostasis, for the scriptures say that the world was created in time (which is, after all what Plato said too, but not how his later followers interpreted him). Accordingly, Christian thinkers modified the Platonism of the time—but they did employ Platonic theory as a foundation for understanding God, man, and the world.

In the end, though, Christianity was thoroughly Platonized. According to Augustine, the great theorist who harmonized philosophy and religion for the early Middle Ages in the West, the

⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.7, in *ANF*, 2:308.

Platonic Forms were located in the mind of God. Evil was the absence of good—a properly Neoplatonic conception not found in the scriptures. And the fall of man was a turning away from the eternal to created good—something recognizably like the *tolma* or “audacity” of Plotinus. God was outside time, the world was created *ex nihilo*, and all knowledge came through the operation of the Platonic Forms. God’s nature was to be known primarily through negative theology—through denying predicates of him, since none applied properly to a being beyond all Being, one who was simple, indivisible, and ineffable. It should be pointed out that Augustine is, in these doctrinal respects, typical of the period. Indeed, he cites his teachers—i.e., Ambrose and Simplicianus—as guides in these sorts of Neoplatonic appropriations.

Further evidence of the extent to which Neoplatonic thinking had infused Augustine’s own understanding of Christianity is found throughout the *Confessions* but especially in Book 7 (chapters 13–14), where he discusses the stage immediately prior to his full conversion to Christianity. Augustine notes that in the books of the Platonists he “read, not of course in the same words, but with entirely the same sense” the central message of John’s gospel, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” The Platonists also said that “the Son being in the form of the Father did not think it theft to be equal with God because by nature he is that very thing.” So thoroughly is Augustine’s thought infused with Platonism that he finds its metaphysics clearly in the New Testament. This interested and predisposed exegesis was taught him by Ambrose, who was following the model of Philo the Jew, and it was not an isolated exegetical practice by any means.

Henceforth, the God of Christianity—of theology at least, if not of popular worship—was more like the God of the philosophers—of Xenophanes, Aristotle, and Plotinus—than the one preached by the fishermen of Galilee. To take a single case in point, the God of the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, is a God of love, who is jealous, indignant at wickedness, long-suffering, forgiving, and kind to the repentant. And Jesus, “the express image of [God’s] person,” wept at the death of Lazarus and cast the money changers out of the temple in righteous anger. But the God of the philosophers is “impassible”—incapable of

emotions. And the God of Christian theology is also impassible. As Augustine says,

let us think of God . . . in the following way: . . . as making mutable things without any change in Himself, and as a Being without passion.⁵

To clinch the point he argues that God is a substance without any changeable properties whatsoever:

But there can be no accidents of this kind in God. . . . [For] only that which is not only not changed, but cannot undergo any change at all, can be called [a] being in the truest sense without any scruple.⁶

How can a being that “cannot undergo any change at all” interact with us? How can he empathize, be angry, take pity on us, rejoice at our triumphs and commiserate with us on our failures? Would not praying to an unchangeable being be like praying to an idol of stone or wood? In a revelation to Joseph Smith we are told that “every man walketh . . . after the image of his own God, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol” (D&C 1:16). In the case of Augustine and his contemporaries, the image in the likeness of the world is that of the Neoplatonic One, which is transcendent, ontologically simple, and impassible.

How can we reconcile the new philosophical theology with the scriptures? By providing symbolic or allegorical interpretations of the scriptures—a Greek method used since the sixth century B.C. to explain away embarrassing stories from Greek mythology. In the hands of Christian intellectuals it could be used to explain away any embarrassingly human qualities exhibited by God in the scriptures. The Bible could be demythologized and sanitized to meet the requirements of Greek theory.

Whereas the Jews had identified faithful adherents by their scrupulous observance of the law, Christians in the Greek culture identified their true members by their acceptance of increasingly

⁵ St. Augustine, *The Trinity* 5.1, in *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 176.

⁶ St. Augustine, *The Trinity* 5.2, in *ibid.*, 177.

precise creeds. When the Council of Nicea introduced unscriptural Greek terminology as a test of faith (the Son was *homoousios* with the Father—of the same substance or essence), an important precedent was set. One could not be an orthodox Christian without accepting tenets of philosophical theology—even if one did not understand them. Until the Council of Nicea it was open to Christians simply to refuse to take sides on arcane questions of theology; after the council they had to accept philosophical definitions of faith. If Christian leaders hoped to put an end to controversy with definitions, they were sadly mistaken. Ever more minute questions were raised, more meticulous distinctions sanctioned. When Gregory of Nyssa, himself an expert philosopher and theologian, traveled to Constantinople in the late fourth century, he was astounded by the enthusiasm for controversy he found there:

If when in Constantinople you ask someone for change, he will discuss with you whether the Son is begotten or un-begotten. If you ask the quality of bread, you will receive the answer that “the Father is greater, the Son less.” If you suggest that a bath is desirable, you will be told that there was nothing before the Son was created.⁷

Everyone, it seems, had become an expert in theology. Henceforth great intellectual wars would be fought over theological definitions drawn in metaphysical terms that would not have been comprehensible to the fishermen of Galilee. Those who ran afoul of the definitions would be exiled by emperors, anathematized by bishops, branded as heretics by the church, and vigorously persecuted by church and state. In later times crusades would be organized and inquisitions convened, and tortures, deaths, and dismemberments enjoined for the welfare of heretics’ souls. In an unholy alliance of the church with the powers that be, the persecuted became the persecutor and creeds became the litmus test of political correctness.

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, in *Patrologiae Graeca*, 46:557, quoted in R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1993), 806.

Now it was not the Greek language that corrupted Christianity; after all, the New Testament was written in Greek and the gospel was preached by the apostles in Greek. Nor was the use of learned Greek or even of the methods of debate and argumentation from logic and rhetoric a bad thing; one could use the methods of argumentation to defend the faith against attacks. Furthermore, one could use philosophical concepts to make distinctions and clarify one's beliefs without necessarily compromising those beliefs. But once one begins trying to assimilate one's beliefs to an alien system of ideas, there is a danger of changing the content of one's own beliefs. As Adolf Harnack, one of the greatest church historians and himself a Protestant, noted of the Christian apologists of the second and third centuries:

We have already seen how certain influential teachers—teachers, in fact, who founded the whole theology of the Christian Church—felt a strong impulse, and made it their definite aim, to get some *rational* conception of the Christian religion and to present it as the reasonable religion of mankind. This feature proved of great importance to the mission and extension of Christianity. . . . Still, as these discussions were carried on in a purely rational spirit, and as there was a frankly avowed partiality for the idea that Christianity was a transparently rational system, vital Christian truths were either abandoned or at any rate neglected. This meant a certain impoverishment, and serious dilution, of the Christian faith.

Such a type of knowledge was certainly different from Paul's idea of knowledge, nor did it answer to the depths of the Christian religion.⁸

At the end of a classic study, Edwin Hatch, a notable Protestant theologian and Oxford scholar, concludes:

I venture to claim to have shown that a large part of what are sometimes called Christian doctrines, and

⁸ Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. James Moffatt (1908; reprint, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 234–35.

many usages which have prevailed and continue to prevail in the Christian Church, are in reality Greek theories and Greek usages changed in form and colour by the influence of primitive Christianity, but in their essence Greek still. Greece lives; not only [in] its dying life in the lecture-rooms of Universities, but also with a more vigorous growth in the Christian Churches. It lives there, not by virtue of the survival within them of this or that fragment of ancient teaching, and this or that fragment of an ancient usage, but by the continuance in them of great modes and phases of thought, of great drifts and tendencies, of large assumptions. Its ethics of right and duty, rather than of love and self-sacrifice; its theology, whose God is more metaphysical than spiritual—whose essence it is important to define . . . —in all these, and the ideas that underlie them, Greece lives.⁹

In Hatch's view the Greek elements have contaminated the simple faith of the Gospels.

Now it is open to interpreters of the tradition to see in the synthesis of Christian religion and Greek thought a higher embodiment of religious truth; but it is also open to them to see corruption of Christian teachings and the beginning of a syncretistic church in which it may be said of its members that "their fear toward [God] is taught by the precept of men" (Isaiah 29:13). In fact the model which informed early Christian theology, namely Neoplatonism, and the one which informed later medieval theology, Aristotelianism, are both long gone from the intellectual landscape, everywhere but in (some schools of) theology. And theological theories come and go in conjunction with almost all intellectual fads. But from the perspective of history, it seems strange to want to hitch one's wagon to the dead horse of Platonism. And the failure of that experience should offer the judicious observer fair warning about the prospects of throwing in with any human theory, however sophisticated and fashionable. For, as Isaiah cautions, "the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and

⁹ Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (1890; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 350.

the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid” (Isaiah 29:14).