

Introduction

THE DESIRE TO COMPILE a collection of writings on the early Greek Fathers and their attitudes towards classical learning has been germinating in my mind for almost five decades. This book, therefore, is conceptually the product of my composite intellectual and academic interests and activities over many years. The seed from which it springs was first planted when I was at the University of California, where as an undergraduate I studied church history under Professor Jeffrey Burton Russell, the distinguished medievalist, and where, as a graduate student with him and other mentors at two separate campuses of the university, I studied the history of the Byzantine ecclesiastical tradition. Later, as a doctoral student in psychology at Princeton University, my intense interest in concept formation and cognitive processes again turned my attention towards church history and patristic studies. It was at Princeton that I became an academic disciple of sorts of the Russian Orthodox theologian and patristic scholar, Father Georges Florovsky, who was teaching there after retiring from his professorial post at Harvard University. Florovsky, whose initial work in physiological psychology was published through the efforts of no less a figure than Ivan Pavlov in the last issue of the pre-revolutionary journal of the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences, was no stranger to the world of psychology and learning theory. It would be perhaps cliché, yet inarguably true, to say that my friendship with him, therefore, was not just fortuitous, but serendipitous; indeed, with enthusiasm and vigor he helped me to refocus my psychological interests in learning and cognition on the Greek patristic tradition and arranged for me to publish some of the original research that grew out of my efforts.

A decade later, when I had resigned my first academic post (at the University of California) to become an Orthodox clergyman myself, it was one of Father Florovsky's colleagues at Harvard, the church historian

George Huntston Williams, who kindly helped me to secure the status of Visiting Scholar at the Harvard Divinity School in the Spring of 1983. My arrival at Harvard coincided with that of the late Henri Nouwen, the Dutch psychologist and Roman Catholic priest, who had just accepted a teaching post at the Divinity School. Father Nouwen's fascination with the nexus between psychology and religion, and especially as it was manifested in the lives of the desert Fathers, coincided with my own research interests: the derivation of a "patristic psychology" from a systematic examination of the writings, teachings, and spiritual experiences of the desert dwellers. Because of our common engrossment with the early Christian monastics, Nouwen and I continued to correspond after my departure from Harvard, and in addition to providing me with new insights into the psychology of religious experience, he made invaluable contributions to my thought about the classical Greek roots of the spirituality and theology of the desert Fathers and of the Greek patristic tradition in general.

It is not gratuitously or simply to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Professor Russell and Fathers Nouwen and Florovsky that I have written the foregoing, even if I assuredly owe them such. Each one of these scholars, in his own way, broadened my perspective on classical learning and the epistemology of the early Christian Fathers. It was through interests spurred by Jeffrey Russell's writings on the early Christian world and its reception of classical Greek philosophy that I first encountered Werner Jaeger's three-volume work on classical *paideia* and his last published book, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, which appeared in 1961.¹ The latter made Jaeger my *mentor bound in leather* by way of the written word. Father Florovsky, on his part, repeatedly urged me to study and to write about what he called the inseparability of classical Hellenism from Christianity, calling the former a cornerstone of the life and thought of the early Church and of the teachings of the Greek Fathers and affirming that Byzantine theology was an organic continuation of the patristic age.² Henri Nouwen, with whom I spoke and corresponded at length about the continuity of experience between the philosophical wisdom of the ancient Greeks and the spiritual or noetic enlightenment sought by the desert mystics and the Greek Fathers, helped me to look with ever greater perspicuity at this commonality of ethos between these two Greek traditions—one classical and one Christian—as part of a complementary but distinct view of the goal of

1. Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*.

2. Florovsky, *Collected Works*, 4:20.

human knowledge and learning. Consequently, to these individuals I owe the evolution of the present collection.

The nexus between ancient Greek philosophy and the Christian religion has been a matter of study and debate since the earliest Christian centuries, when these two foundational forces in Western civilization first encountered one another. Surprisingly, scholars and historians in the West have parsed the influence of Hellenism on Christian apologetics and the synthesis of the two traditions by the Greek Fathers according to a paradigm that has changed little—allowing, of course, for various refinements and minor thematic variations—up to modern times. It has been assumed, according to this model, that the fledgling Christian religion simply borrowed much of its form and content from the Greek mystery cults and other religious traditions, forming its anthropology and cosmology around the thinking of the ancients—Platonism and Aristotelianism in particular—and adroitly blending Hellenic philosophy and Christian doctrine into an intelligible simulacrum, through the “Christ narrative,” of Jewish messianic visions, drawing from Old Testamental myths and epopees and from the language and imagery of the ancient world. This synthesis of Greek wisdom and Christian dogma, those who adhere to this thinking would argue, led to a hostility on the part of Christian apologists towards their philosophical progenitors, Christian theological writers having prepensely attributed to their synthesis of the Christian narrative and Greek wisdom a unique, universal quality. With the ascendancy of Holy Writ, or the canon of Christian Scripture, as the source of doctrine and authority in the new Christian religion, it was natural that the link between the ancients and the new people of the Christian realm should become increasingly blurred. Apologists for the nonpareil truth of Christianity increasingly dismissed what they came to dub “classical paganism.” The Juggernaut of Christianity, with its inexorable dominance in the political and social life of the Western world, further created a tension between the waning dominance of Hellenistic thought and Christianity at a popular level, even if the philosophical methodology of the ancients has survived as the object of immense interest in Christian academic theology to this day.

Quite another perspective on the relationship between Christianity and the wisdom of the ancients, and especially the classical Greek philosophical tradition, has held sway in the Christian East since apostolic times, and it is reflected in a certain limited but symbiotic convergence of Hellenistic philosophical ideas with the theological precepts of the Greek

Fathers. According to this alternative model, the Greek philosophers, the Greek mystery cults, and other pre-Christian religions, though imperfect, of purely human and mundane provenance and thus spiritually barren and infecund, were nonetheless notional forerunners of Christian theology and religious practice. When conflated with the visionary insights of the Jewish prophets and of Jewish messianism, reckoned, by contrast, to be of divine origin and yielding foundational principles of revealed truth integral to Christian belief and experience, the imperfect and unfulfilled wisdom of the ancients served to pave the way for the unfolding of the *pleroma* of Christian teaching and its spiritually enlightening revelation. In their epistemological hierarchy, the Greek Fathers place great value on ancient wisdom as an access-point in approaching the mystery of spiritual cognitions (revealed or noetic truths); through sagacious insights and perceptions of an intellectual or dianoetic kind, one stands, as it were, in the antechamber of knowledge of a higher and mystical kind. One can effectively illustrate this relationship between the ancient Greek sage and the Christian adept in a passage from Homer's *Odyssey*, the second oldest extant piece of writing in the Western world (composed at the end of the eighth century BC), which, as we shall see, the Greek Fathers often cited, and in a similar pericope from the famous Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Christians of Corinth (written shortly after the middle of the first century of the Christian era). Homer attributes to Telemachos, the son of Odysseus, the following statement about childish thought and the acquisition of intellectual ripeness: “ἤδη . . . νοέω καὶ οἶδα ἕκαστα . . . πάρος δ’ ἔτι νήπιος ἦα” (now I perceive and know each thing; whereas before I was childish).³ In surprisingly similar language, St. Paul describes this same maturation, but with reference to spiritual discernment, in the following acclamation: “ὅτε ἤμην νήπιος, ὡς νήπιος ἐλάλουν . . . , ὅτε δὲ γέγονα ἀνὴρ, κατήργηκα τὰ τοῦ νηπίου” (when I was a child, I spoke as a child . . . , but when I became a man, I did away with childish things).⁴

If the oft cited views of Tertullian (d. 225), who is frequently called the first Latin Father of the Christian Church and who rejected Greek philosophy and considered Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek thinkers nothing more than pre-Christian heretics, and indeed the *patriarchs* of heretics (“*patriarchae haereticorum*”),⁵ lend force to the argument that Christianity

3. Homer, *Odyssey*, 20.309–10.

4. 1 Cor 13:11.

5. “De Anima,” in *Patrologia Latina*, 2:651B.

was disdainful of the Greek ancients, this is not true of the Greek Fathers. Though in certain Greek Fathers one may find at times even strident disapprobation of classical wisdom, the *consensus Patrum* in the East eschews any such notion, except as it is expressed in the affirmation of the lesser, yet complementary, status of the faculty of human learning in facilitating noetic enlightenment and the mystical knowledge of God to which it gives rise. The goal of Christian thought and life, as the Greek Fathers envision them, is the divinization of the human being (*theosis*) and the integration of his or her intellectual or dianoetic faculty with the νοῦς, or the spiritual faculty by which one experiences and understands revealed or higher truth. In the attainment of this latter primary goal, the secondary achievement of refining and expanding the mind to advance the reception of higher spiritual knowledge presupposes a synergy between the mental and the noetic, the worldly and the transcendent, and mundane learning and mystical (divine) knowledge. It is for this reason *par excellence* that the Greek Fathers often cite classical Greek writers, from Homer to thinkers of the so-called late Hellenistic period. Homer was, incidentally, hands down first and chief among the literary luminaries whom the Greek Fathers studied, praised, and cited, quoting him as they did the great Jewish patriarchs and prophets. Some of the more significant Saints of the Christian East—Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca. 395), Isidore of Pelusium (d. ca. 436), Basil the Great (d. 379), and John Chrysostomos (d. 407), to mention but a few—adorned their writings and homilies with Homeric citations. Even well into Byzantine times, the Greek Fathers reveled in the works of Greece's greatest epic poet. Thus a well-known maxim in Greek patristic studies: if one has not read and understood Homer, one cannot know and understand the Church Fathers. Correspondingly, if one cannot philosophize along with Plato and Aristotle, one cannot ascend to the heights of the clerisy of the Church. Hence, if the secular wisdom of the ancient Greeks was received by the latter with certain restraints, its natural incorporation into the enlightened doctrines of Christianity was a virtual canon of their theological discourse and rumination.

The high regard in which the Greek Fathers held the Greek ancients should not lead us to think, of course, that the restraints placed on the reception of Greek wisdom were simple window-dressing; in fact, they were essential and comprised certain ideational boundaries. Beholden and addicted as these Fathers were to the language, symbols, metaphors, similes, tropes, and magnificent rhetorical devices of the ancients, they did not use these

indiscriminately. The Fathers were always eclectic in their appropriation of the ethos of Hellenism and drank through certain doctrinal filters from the wells of the ancients. It is often said, in this respect, that they “baptized” the richness of the classical tradition to adorn the spiritual splendor of the Christian message. Moreover, as the essays contained in this small volume will attest, the Greek Fathers did not share with the classical Greek world a common anthropology or cosmology; nor, to be sure, are the soteriological and eschatological ideas of the Eastern Church, on close examination, compatible with, let alone derived from, the teleological thinking of the Greek ancients. One must be sedulous to grasp this point, lest one slip back into the Western vision of a Christianity somehow grafted onto the trunk of philosophies from the Hellenic and Hellenistic periods. Likewise, it should not be assumed that, in the fervor with which they incorporated much from the ancients into the corpus of Christian apologetic works and theological expositions, the Greek Fathers somehow elevated the Greek philosophers and sages to the status of the Jewish prophets, to whom Eastern Christian writers attribute genuine spiritual enlightenment. At all times, despite their great admiration for its luminaries, the Greek Fathers saw the ancient Greek world as imperfect, in need of spiritual restoration, and, though wise, still bereft of spiritual perfection. That their *apparent* tergiversation with regard to classical wisdom rises *in reality* from within the core of Christian *oeconomia* is evidenced by an anecdote from the seventh century, recounted by St. Anastasios of Sinai. According to Anastasios, “ancient tradition” tells us that “a certain lawyer uttered many imprecations against Plato the philosopher. Plato, therefore, appeared to him when he was asleep, saying: ‘O man, desist from cursing me, for you are harming yourself.’ Plato,” Anastasios continues, “went on to tell the lawyer that, ‘when Christ descended into Hades, in truth no one believed in Him before I did.’”⁶ In short, the Greek Fathers, while poignantly responsive to the wisdom of the ancients, at all times saw them through the prism of their Christian worldview—in this case, with something akin to theological paternalism.

I would like to conclude these introductory remarks by returning to the scholarship of Werner Jaeger, the dean, as it were, of the limited number of classical scholars who have moved beyond classical learning, or Greek *paideia*, to study what St. Clement of Rome, in the first century of the Christian era, called “*παιδεία ἐν Χριστῷ*,” or Christian learning. The significance of Professor Jaeger’s contributions to our understanding of Christian education is inestimable. His pivotal work on Christian learning and erudition

6. “Questions and Answers,” Question 111, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 89:764BD.

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preoccupied him towards the end of his career, when he dedicated himself especially to the works of St. Gregory of Nyssa. These interests led him, despite his Protestant background and the fact that he received his secondary education in a Roman Catholic school (at the Gymnasium Thomaeum in Kempen, Germany), away from a Western paradigm in assessing the nature and theological ethos of the Greek Fathers, the consensus of whom he so perfectly expresses in many ways. He came to understand that they had as much Christianized the Hellenic witness, with their novel anthropology and radically different cosmology, as Greek *paideia* had Hellenized their Christianity with its richness of philosophical diversity, magnificence of expression, and what the Greek Fathers would call their “intuitions” about Christian revelation. In his perspicacity, Jaeger helped to pave the way for a meeting of the Classics and the Greek Fathers that moves beyond doctrinal and sectarian concerns, drawing us into a realm of common striving for the truth that neither overestimates the contributions of the ancients to Christian learning and culture nor imputes to Greek *paideia* an insignificant place in the expression and development of Clement’s *παιδεία ἐν Χριστῷ*. Perhaps without full cognizance of the fruitfulness of looking at early Christianity through the eyes of the Greek patristic witness—and by no means, in so doing, denigrating or ignoring the Latin Fathers and their Western scions—Jaeger struck on that fulcrum on which one can so perfectly balance the search of the Hellenic sages for lofty philosophical wisdom against the *nisus* of the Greek Fathers to reach transcendent enlightenment.

The balance that emerges from Jaeger’s last published work is the *deliberate aim* of the essays contained in this short book, which center on the classical Greek wisdom tradition as the Greek Fathers approached, understood, and selectively incorporated it into their search for *theosis* and the harmony of learning and spiritual knowledge. I believe, from a heuristic standpoint, that these essays collectively constitute a fruitful strategy, in the spirit of Professor Jaeger, for looking anew at the Greek classical world and Christianity through the eyes of the Greek Fathers, who were, as we must remember, the *direct inheritors* of the ancient Greek worldview.

*Metropolitan Chrysostomos
Etna, California*