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Author(s): Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach

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THE INTRODUCTION OF PHILOSOPHY INTO EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach

The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. . . . But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. (1 Corinthians 1:22–25, 27)

Paul, the best-educated and most worldly wise of the apostles, warned against the seductions of philosophy: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Colossians 2:8). Yet three centuries later, philosophy had entered into Christianity so completely that one could not be considered a Christian without espousing a philosophical position.¹ How did philosophy come to dominate the

1. By philosophy we mean two things: first, the systematic effort to make enquiries into and answer questions about the ultimate

Christian religion? In this paper we shall examine the complex interaction between philosophy and early Christian thought, identifying three stages of development, and the influence, for good and ill, that Greek philosophy had on early Christianity.

Philosophy as a Tool of Self-Defense

Although there may have been splinter groups of early Christianity who based their false doctrines on philosophical theories, there is little evidence that the early Christians as a whole concerned themselves with philosophy. Letters of the apostles, and the apostolic fathers who had known the apostles stay close to the teachings of the gospels and avoid philosophical theories. As Paul noted to the Corinthians, God had chosen the foolish things of the world, rather than the wise and learned, as his followers. If Paul's converts did not include many intellectuals, neither did those of Peter and John, unlearned fishermen from rural Galilee. The new faith spread rapidly, especially in the urban areas of the Roman Empire, but it spread largely among the common people, while the rich and powerful took no notice of it unless conflicts with the Jews caused riots or public disturbances.²

nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, the nature of the good, and like questions, *by reason alone*; second, the doctrines of the philosophical schools such as stoicism and platonism bequeathed to the intellectual tradition.

2. For a useful introduction into the cultural and social propagation of the gospel, as well as the nature of early Christian communities, see Wayne A. Meeks, Allen R. Hilton, and H. Gregory Snyder, *In Search of the Early Christians: Selected Essays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), and Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

Christianity was, however, regarded as an illegal association, with adherents to be punished if they were made known. Hence persecution hung over the heads of the faithful, and sometimes Christians were called to renounce their faith or die.³ In the early second century, martyrs such as Ignatius and Polycarp went to their deaths gladly.⁴ But by the mid-second century some Christians began to see it as their duty not to wait in silence for the sword of persecution to fall, but to stand up and defend the faith in public forums. Justin Martyr had studied in several philosophical schools before converting to Christianity. Recognizing similarities between the teachings of the philosophers and the doctrines of Christianity, he determined to use his education to defend the faith against false charges. For instance, Christians were commonly charged with atheism:

And we confess that we are atheists, [as we are accused of being,] so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity. But both Him, and the Son (who came forth from

3. For a collection of ancient texts and translations documenting persecutions of the Christians, see Herbert Musurillo, comp. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972). For a discussion of Christian persecutions, see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 572–604.

4. Ignatius discouraged the Roman Christians from using their influence to prevent his martyrdom. “Let me be given to the wild beasts, for by their means I can attain to God.” See Henry S. Betteson, ed., *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 45.

Him and taught us these things, and the host of the other good angels who follow and are made like to Him), and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore, knowing them in reason and truth, and declaring without grudging to every one who wishes to learn, as we have been taught.⁵

Justin spoke up for Christian beliefs in an effort to dispel misconceptions and slanders against the faith.

But he also takes the offensive against pagan worship:

And neither do we honour with many sacrifices and garlands of flowers such deities as men have formed and set in shrines and called gods; since we see that these are soulless and dead, and have not the form of God (for we do not consider that God has such a form as some say that they imitate to His honour), but have the names and forms of those wicked demons which have appeared. For why need we tell you who already know, into what forms the craftsmen, carving and cutting, casting and hammering, fashion the materials? And often out of vessels of dishonour, by merely changing the form, and making an image of the requisite shape, they make what they call a god; which we consider not only senseless, but to be even insulting to God, who, having ineffable glory and form, thus gets His name attached to things that are corruptible, and require constant service.⁶

The criticisms of idol worship are reminiscent of statements from both Old and New Testaments. But there is an additional

5. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 1.6 (ANF 1:164). For its easy accessibility, we have taken translations of the early church fathers from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994, hereafter ANF). All citations are to this work, save where otherwise noted.

6. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 1.9 (ANF 1:165).

dimension to his criticisms in that he knows that his educated readers would agree with him. For Greek philosophers had similar worries about popular worship and believed in a deity that could not be properly represented in images.⁷ Justin also shows how the coming of Christ fulfilled ancient Hebrew prophecies, using his defense as an opportunity to preach to the pagan world.

Tertullian, a lawyer from north Africa, uses his legal training to question the unfair way Christians were treated in the courts:

If . . . it is certain that we are the most wicked of men, why do you treat us so differently from our fellows, that is, from other criminals, it being only fair that the same crime should get the same treatment? When the charges made against us are made against others, they are permitted to make use both of their own lips and of hired pleaders to show their innocence. They have full opportunity of answer and debate; in fact, it is against the law to condemn anybody undefended and unheard. Christians alone are forbidden to say anything in exculpation of themselves, in defence of the truth, to help the judge to a righteous decision; all that is cared about is having what the public hatred demands—the confession of the name, not examination of the charge.⁸

Like Justin, Tertullian shows that Christians were not atheists but had a higher conception of God than the pagans, and had good reasons for rejecting the pagan's gods.

The same period that saw the rise of the Christian apologists also saw the appearance of leaders who sought to combat

7. As early as the sixth century BC, Xenophanes had attacked, from a philosophical point of view, corporeal representations of the gods. See Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 93–99.

8. Tertullian, *Apology* 1.2 (ANF 3:18).

heresies. Many of these heresies grew out of an application to Christian doctrine of Greek philosophical theories. According to Hippolytus, “their [the heretics] doctrines have derived their origin from the wisdom of the Greeks, from the conclusions of those who have formed systems of philosophy.”⁹ As bishops anxious to refute heresies that troubled some Christians, Irenaeus and Hippolytus wrote long expositions of heretical views, tracing them to Greek philosophical positions. “It does not follow,” argues Irenaeus, “because men are endowed with greater and less degrees of intelligence, that they should therefore change the subject-matter (of the faith) itself, and should conceive of some other God besides Him who is the Framer, Maker, and Preserver of this universe (as if He were not sufficient for them), or of another Christ, or another Only-begotten.”¹⁰ Some skill in philosophy was required to expose the false doctrines of philosophical heresies, but philosophy was not required to understand the doctrines of the Christian church, nor to appreciate the nuances of Christian theology.

Indeed, the church fathers of the late second century felt the challenge of Greek philosophy keenly. If it were introduced carelessly into Christian doctrine, it could produce confusions and heresies; it also offered an understanding of the world that conflicted with the Christian understanding. In the second century no single school had emerged as the chief philosophy, so at least there was not a single, pervasive contrary position. But everywhere there was a temptation to accept foreign points of view into Christianity. Realizing the threat philosophy posed, Tertullian argued that Christians should have nothing to do with Greek philosophy:

9. Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, proemium (ANF 5:10).

10. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.3 (ANF 1:331).

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.¹¹

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.

Although Justin recognized some good in Greek thought and culture, he also saw Greek thought and practice as being corrupted by demons who were wrongly worshipped as gods.¹² And he argued that whatever valuable doctrines the Greeks possessed did not originate with them. For Moses was earlier than all the Greek sages and philosophers, and similarities between their teachings and those of Moses show that they borrowed whatever truth they have from him. Thus Greek philosophy amounts to plagiarism from the Hebrews. Why not, then, come to the source of all wisdom, and accept the Christian revelation from God?¹³ Here Justin’s complaint is not new, but comes from the Jewish thinker Aristobulus, continued by Philo of Alexandria. If the argument is right, the greater antiquity and

11. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics* 1.7 (ANF 3:246).

12. Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.14 (ANF 1:167).

13. Justin Martyr, *Hortatory Address to the Greeks* 9–15 (ANF 1:277–79).

authority of Judeo-Christian belief allows the Christian to assert its superiority. The one area in which the classical Greeks feel inferior is in the relative tardiness of their own culture; here the Christians can score a point for their own tradition. Justin also points out that the Greek philosophers contradict each other, and even Plato contradicts himself, whereas the Christian teachers are consistent with each other.¹⁴ Thus Greek philosophy does not present a united front or a unified position, but merely a set of conflicting opinions.

Tertullian's attack on philosophy is quite right from one point of view: Greek philosophy has nothing to add to Christian doctrine by way of new content. Yet his position presents a practical problem: the science of the Roman Empire was built on a foundation of Greek philosophy, and science had made important advances, including the recognition that the earth is spherical; it correctly explained the moon's light, the cause of eclipses, some meteorological phenomena, etc. If the Christian renounced Greek philosophy, he would have to renounce all secular learning as well. Was that practical, or beneficial? In any case, one does not have to read far into Tertullian to find that, despite his public scorn for Greek learning, he has already imbibed a great deal of it and incorporated it into his own thought. He is not himself in a position to show us how to adhere to a Christianity pure of Greek intrusions.

Justin's argument for Greek plagiarism is untenable in light of our present historical knowledge, though perhaps it was not far-fetched given the crude state of world history and the history of ideas in antiquity. He was on the right track in pointing out the plurality and mutual incompatibility of Greek theories, though that point was destined to be obscured as Middle and Neoplatonism rose to prominence in the first through the third

14. Justin Martyr, *Hortatory Address* 5–8 (ANF 1:275–76).

centuries, claiming to be able to harmonize the theories of Plato and Aristotle, as well as those of Pythagoras and others. In any case, the apologists of the early second century were interested in philosophy only as a starting point for a conversation in which they could defend the faith and exhort pagans to repent and accept the Christian revelation; or as a background against which they could expose the fallacies of false doctrine. If apologists were more indebted to philosophy than they realized, they were at least not consciously advocating an important role for philosophy in the Christian church. For them the Greek intellectual tradition provided only a medium for communication with the wider world and for criticism of failings endemic to the intellectual tradition.

Philosophy as the Handmaid of Theology

From the end of the second century to the middle of the third century, a new attitude toward Greek learning arose in Alexandria, Egypt. At the Catechetical School, the first Christian university, Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) and Origen (d. 254) saw in Greek philosophy an opportunity for an expanded Christian understanding. In the eight books of his *Miscellanies*, Clement began by defending his use of philosophy. He pointed out the positive function philosophy had for Greek culture:

Accordingly, 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 (*propaideia*) to those who attain to faith through demonstration. . . . For God is the cause of all good things; but of some primarily, as of the Old and the New Testament; and of others by consequence, as philosophy. Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring “the Hellenic mind,” as the law, the

Hebrews, “to Christ.” Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ.¹⁵

This may seem to a modern reader unwarranted enthusiasm for an alien intellectual tradition. But we should note here that Greek philosophy, especially the Socratic tradition, had made ethics the central feature of the intellectual life and had anticipated many of the most advanced teachings of Christian revelation: it was never right to do wrong; we should do no harm to anyone, not even our enemies; God is not jealous, but desires all to be as much like him as possible; the soul is damaged by doing evil and benefited by doing good.¹⁶ Indeed, it was Greek philosophy that criticized and corrected the stories of Greek mythology, according to which the gods did wrongs to each other and to mortals.¹⁷ Furthermore, at least from the time of Socrates, philosophers looked on philosophy, the love of wisdom, as not simply a pastime or even an occupation, but as a way of life to be practiced at all times, in the way a devout Christian saw his religion. Thus Greek philosophy, not Greek religion, offered the closest parallel in classical antiquity to the Judeo-Christian conception of religion as an all-inclusive way of life informed by ethical doctrines and an exalted conception of deity.

Philosophy aims at wisdom; “Wisdom is therefore queen of philosophy, as philosophy is of preparatory culture.”¹⁸ Using Abraham’s life as an allegory, Clement interprets Sarah as wisdom, which without secular culture, represented by Hagar, is barren.¹⁹ Thus philosophy is understood as the handmaid of

15. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.5 (ANF 2:305).

16. See Plato’s *Republic* 613 B–C; *Theaetetus* 176 B, *Laws* 716 C–D.

17. Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 95.

18. Clement, *Miscellanies* 1.5 (ANF 2:306).

19. Clement, *Miscellanies* 1.5 (ANF 2:306).

theology. If this interpretation seems forced to modern readers, we can still appreciate Clement's general insight: as the law of Moses was a schoolmaster to bring the Hebrews to Christ, so philosophy was a schoolmaster to bring the Greeks to Christ. For philosophy taught a higher appreciation of God and an ethical attitude toward man, opening the door to an appreciation of the gospel.

But what precisely is the true philosophy?

The way of truth is . . . one. But into it, as into a perennial river, streams flow from all sides."²⁰ There is no one school of philosophy that has a monopoly of truth, for God has distributed his wisdom randomly: "The Greek preparatory culture, therefore, with philosophy itself, is shown to have come down from God to men, not with a definite direction, but in the way in which showers fall down on the good land, and on the dunghill, and on the houses. . . . 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 those sects, which teach righteousness along with a science pervaded by piety,—this eclectic whole I call philosophy."²¹

Thus Clement sees what he calls philosophy not as a monolithic whole with a single doctrine to teach and a single unified theory but as the sum total of all the insights achieved by the Greek thinkers. No single school has attained to a full knowledge of the truth, and consequently the learned Christian must use an understanding of revelation as a touchstone for evaluating Greek learning. There is, to be sure, much wisdom in Greek culture, but it is mixed with errors and confusions. The Christian must be an eclectic, picking and choosing what is valuable in the garden of ideas offered by secular culture.

20. Clement, *Miscellanies* 1.5 (ANF 2:305).

21. Clement, *Miscellanies* 1.7 (ANF 2:308).

Indeed, Clement's whole approach is to survey secular learning in search of insights which can be assimilated to a Christian view of the world. The Christian view is the standard of understanding; Greek theories are to be examined and individual points selected, but not taken over as a whole, certainly not uncritically absorbed.

Clement's student and successor in the Catechetical School, Origen, continued in the path of combining Christian faith with a study of secular knowledge. But unlike Clement, Origen sought to make a systematic study of Christian beliefs. "Since many . . . of those who profess to believe in Christ differ from each other, not only in small and trifling matters, but also on subjects of the highest importance, as, e.g., regarding God, or the Lord Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit; and not only regarding these, but also regarding others which are created existences, viz., the powers and the holy virtues; it seems on that account necessary first of all to fix a definite limit and to lay down an unmistakable rule regarding each one of these, and then to pass to the investigation of other points."²² This might seem an obvious thing to do: in a time when there were disputations about doctrine, to use our understanding of scriptures to explain and lay out the doctrines clearly so as to avoid false doctrines and misunderstandings. In fact, no one had yet attempted to make a systematic exposition of Christian doctrines. At most learned Christians had assembled collections of heresies and refuted them. But this is a negative enterprise, and, moreover, inherently frustrating, since there would be no end of new heresies as long as there was no clear statement of doctrine to start from. If one could define clearly the doctrines of the Christian church, one might forestall confusions and false teachings.

22. Origen, *First Principles*, proemium 2 (ANF 4:239).

Origen undertakes this project, producing a treatise on Christian principles in four books. The work is a systematic theological study, the first of its kind in the Judeo-Christian world. For no one before Origen had set out the beliefs of the Jews or Christians in the form of a treatise covering the major doctrines systematically. The genre is evidently Greek in origin: to set out the principles of a body of knowledge in a systematic way is the goal of scientific exposition. It was invented by Aristotle as part of his program of organizing knowledge into departmental studies, each founded on the principles peculiar to it. Before Aristotle the Pre-Socratics mostly expounded their theories in the form of a cosmology and cosmogony in which the present order of the world was seen to arise from a primeval chaos by the action of physical principles. Plato wrote dialogues in which theories were presented dramatically as discussions on theoretical topics. Aristotle first articulated a strict scientific conception of knowledge as a deductive system of propositions deriving from first principles. Although the ideal of presenting all knowledge as a series of deductions eluded him, he did expound his theories subject by subject, science by science, in each case giving an informal justification of his theories. The theological treatise of Origen is a kind of scientific discussion of the nature of God, following the pattern set by Aristotle.

It is important to note that Origen does not look to Greek philosophical theories to understand Christian doctrines. He wishes only to use the format of the scientific treatise as the vehicle for expounding Christian doctrine. If he sometimes is influenced by philosophical theories, such as Plato's view that souls exist prior to their birth into mortality, he also has scriptural reasons for accepting that view. In particular his view of the Godhead does not draw on Greek models of deity. Origen

holds that the Son makes “the willing in himself just what it was in the Father, so that . . . the will of the Son is inseparable from the will of the Father, so that there are no longer two wills but one. And this unity of will is the reason for the saying of the Son ‘I and my Father are one [John 10:30].’”²³ Thus “they are two separate persons, but one in unity and concord of mind and in identity of will.”²⁴ And Origen expressly resists the Greek tendency to make God impassible or incapable of emotion:

[Jesus] came down to earth in pity for human kind, he endured our passions and sufferings before he suffered the cross, and he deigned to assume our flesh. . . . What is that passion which he suffered for us? It is the passion of love. The Father himself and the God of the whole universe is “long-suffering, full of mercy and pity” [Psalm 86:15]. Must he not then, in some sense, be exposed to suffering? . . . The Father himself is not impassible. If he is besought he shows pity and compassion; he feels, in some sort, the passion of love.²⁵

Origen is not trying to make the Father and the Son sound like the ineffable One and the eternal Logos of the Platonists. He is trying to put into the language of philosophy the traits of God he finds in the Bible.

Clement and Origen see Greek learning as providing genuine insights but not as constituting a body of truth independent of the scriptures and revelation. We should learn what the world has to teach us of worldly knowledge but depend on revelation for our understanding of God and his ways. We may use

23. Origen, *Commentary on John* 13.13, in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*.

24. Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.12.

25. Origen, *Sermon on Ezekiel*, in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 186–87.

rational methods to organize the teachings of the scriptures, and we may profitably evaluate them by the use of reason. But we do not need to adhere to any school of Greek philosophy to understand Christian doctrine; on the contrary, we should use Christian doctrine to evaluate philosophical theories.

Philosophy as a Foundation for Doctrine

What, after all, is Plato but Moses in Attic Greek?

Numenius of Apamea²⁶

For reasons enumerated above, many early Christian thinkers (though not all) were suspicious of Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, subsequent thinkers recognized it was incumbent upon them to respond to philosophical criticism and confrontation. A failure to reply surrendered the field to those who would quickly destroy a young Christian community and certainly thwart fledgling evangelism. When Christianity began to enjoy greater tolerance and growth, many theological questions and problems arose, problems which New Testament texts appeared unable or unconcerned to resolve. Fourth- and fifth-century Christian attitudes toward philosophical enquiry varied from those earlier centuries—*pace* Justin Martyr, who taught philosophy in Rome in the second century. Those who considered human reason and its activity, i.e. philosophical thought, one of God's gifts, quickly used that gift to clarify and formulate doctrine, in spite of historical disapproval. Indeed, it is remarkable that after four centuries, Christian doctrine, which began nearly exclusive of philosophical thought, should become so completely infused with it. By the end of the fourth century, "Compared with other religions of its time and place [Christianity] was far more successful in organizing its beliefs

26. Quoted in Clement, *Stromata*, 1.150.4.

into a coherent system. In doing this it borrowed largely from philosophy, and especially from Platonism.”²⁷

How was philosophical thought baptized? Biblical texts are not philosophical documents in the usual sense. The New Testament grows, culturally, from Judaism, not Greek philosophy, though traces of philosophical thinking appear to have influenced certain passages. The New Testament does not seek to resolve metaphysical issues. It does not provide the reader with a new physics which would explain the cosmos and its operations. It does not give a systematic defense of a new ethics nor discuss new forms of logic.

The New Testament is, among other things, a narrative which sets forth basic historical events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. It sets forth a new covenant between God and all who would be saved. As such, it is not a systematic theological document. It does not seek even to set forth all the dogma nor to settle all the possible theological or ecclesiological problems which appear in a well-established church. The texts cannot, of themselves, bear such demands. It is not even generally the purpose of the New Testament to accomplish these narrow theological purposes, although Paul is anxious to assert certain essential theological dogmas, for example the nature of faith and justification. One consequence is that Christian thinkers, if they wished to address such problems, turned to other authorities, particularly rational thought and the Greek philosophical tradition, to formulate and ground doctrine. They discovered that, ultimately, Christianity could be itself a kind of philosophy, and with other philosophies could be synthesized.

27. Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 79.

From the third century onward, many Christian thinkers believed the question of God's nature to be one such theological enquiry which the New Testament did not elucidate sufficiently. The gospels and epistles, read simply and straightforwardly, did not thoroughly expound the relationship between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and so could not satisfactorily be used by Christians to defend themselves from philosophical critics who wondered whether Christians were not a throwback to earlier polytheisms. Indeed, the New Testament's depiction of God's nature was not sufficiently precise or thorough to resolve conflicts even among Christian sects themselves. Early Christian authorities expended much effort attempting to eradicate heretics from the church who conceived of and worshipped God in unorthodox ways. Indeed, it was not until the fourth century that the church even attempted to formulate a "universal"—i.e., binding upon all members of the church—doctrine of God's nature, at Nicea in 325. And that Nicean formulation itself came about as a result of a conference called by Constantine, who, as emperor of the new Byzantine Empire, worried that theological strife, bordering on open warfare among Christians, was about to tear apart the empire itself. This first ecumenical, worldwide council brought together nearly all the known bishops of fourth century Christianity to Nicea. They gathered and debated two proposals concerning the nature of God. They resolved the issue by vote. The substance of the debate was philosophical argument designed to resolve questions such as: What does reason tell us about God's nature? How can we interpret scripture in such a manner that it coheres with what reason tells us God must be like? The bishops concluded that while Jesus is the Son of God, and is himself God, as John says, the concept *Son* cannot imply a subordinate or a second distinct nature from God the Father, in this case. Subordination and essential individuation imply

polytheism, a charge Christian thinkers were anxious to refute. The resolution, the doctrine of the Trinity, was the result of importing and applying to God concepts from the Greek philosophical tradition, terms such as *hypostasis* and *ousia*, terms and concepts completely foreign to scripture.

The details of the Nicean disputation are less important than the manner in which the participants resolved their problems. Theologians had no reluctance to analyze rationally a theological problem about which the scriptures were insufficiently informative. They turned for help to a philosophical tradition which their predecessors had suspected and shunned, in large measure, and they used these concepts as the ground of their doctrine. By the fifth century, theologians had few qualms at all about employing not only reason but the Greek philosophical tradition to resolve theological difficulties and to establish doctrine.

Augustine says, in *The City of God*, that philosophical schools are to be distinguished primarily by their different conceptions of the supreme or highest good.²⁸ Among these schools, the conception nearest to Christianity was Platonism, he believed. Indeed, Augustine thought that Plato's conception of the Good as absolute reality, and the descriptions given of this Good provided by Plato's later followers, for example Plotinus, was simply a description of God as Christians understood him, and Christians should understand God in Platonic terms, even if they did not employ Platonic vocabulary. Behind the biblical vocabulary is a Platonic meaning. Augustine reaffirmed the lofty status of Platonists in *True Religion* 7, when he says "If these men

28. Augustine, *City of God* 19.1, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2:397–99. According to this criterion, Augustine says that Varro, a near contemporary, identified 288 different philosophical schools.

[Platonists] could have had this life over again with us. . . . They would have become Christians, with the change of a few words and statements.”²⁹

No Christian thinker exemplifies more clearly the new attitude toward philosophy, and no philosopher synthesizes his own theology with Platonism, more deftly than Augustine. While recounting his search for spiritual direction, shortly before his conversion, he sought out the advice of Simplicianus, a mature believer. “I went to Simplicianus, the spiritual father of Ambrose who was now a bishop. . . . I told him how I had drifted from error to error, and when I mentioned that I had read some of the books of the Platonists . . . Simplicianus said that he was glad. . . . *In the Platonists, he said, God and his Word are constantly implied.*”³⁰ While one cannot be certain if Augustine and Simplicianus were referring to Plato’s dialogues themselves, or to Plotinus and other Neoplatonist writings, nevertheless, what is remarkable is Simplicianus’s readiness to reread Platonic texts so harmoniously with Christian doctrine. Simplicianus referred, when making the claim that the Platonic texts constantly imply God and his Word, to Plotinus’s distinction among the three hypostases, or ultimately realities: the One, the Logos, or offspring of the One, and the World Soul. Simplicianus also refers to Plato’s doctrine of the Good, the greatest reality, and to the forms or essences of things, the presentation of which is found particularly in *The Republic*. Plato’s traditional metaphysics centered on an ultimate reality, goodness itself, whose features Simplicianus takes to be those of God. Thus, as noted above, the Christian God is thought of and described in terms of Plato’s

29. See note 10 in Augustine, *City of God* 8.5, ed. David Knowles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 304.

30. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.2, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 159, emphasis added.

metaphysics. Christian doctrine, then, can be roughly synthesized with Platonism and vice versa since both are committed foremost to the same ultimately real principle.

Not only do readers such as Augustine and Simplicianus find Christian doctrine in Platonism, they find Platonism in Christian doctrine. Shortly before his conversion, Augustine describes the experience of discovering, in Platonic books, the central doctrines of John's prologue, as well as teachings found in Paul's epistles to the Romans and Philippians. Augustine summarizes the content of the books by weaving them with scriptural quotations, illustrating the identity of their content. This passage, though lengthy, shows how compatible—"the sense was the same"—Augustine understood the two philosophies to be.

So you, [Lord], made use of a man . . . to procure me some of the books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin. In them I read—not, of course, word for word, *though the sense was the same* and it was supported by all kinds of different arguments—that at the beginning of time when the Word already was; and God had the Word abiding with him, and the Word was God. He abode, at the beginning of time, with God. . . . In him there was life, and that life was the light of men. And the light shines in darkness, a darkness which was not able to master it. I read too that the soul of man, although it bears witness of the light, is not the Light. But the Word, who is himself God, is the true Light, which enlightens every soul born into the world. He, through whom the world was made, was in the world, and the world treated him as a stranger. . . .

In the same books I also read of the Word, God, that his birth came not from human stock, not from nature's will or man's but from God. . . .

Though the words were different and the meaning was expressed in various ways, I also learned from these books

that God the Son, being himself, like the Father, of divine nature, did not see, in the rank of Godhead, a prize to be coveted. . . .

The books also tell us that your only-begotten Son abides for ever in eternity with you; that before all time began, he was; that he is above all time and suffers no change; that of his plenty our souls receive their part and hence derive their blessings; and that by partaking of the Wisdom which abides in them they are renewed, and this is the source of their wisdom.³¹

It appears that all the truths of John's prologue Augustine had already discovered in Platonism. To be sure, he does not find the Platonist writings sufficient for salvation. Crucially, they omit the doctrine and necessity of the incarnation and atonement. But what Augustine does find is that the Platonist books elucidate the nature of God, the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, and God's relationship to the human soul.

Augustine can read Platonists in this synthetic way, because he already inhabits a theological community which reads scripture through a Platonic lens, and reads Platonic texts through a scriptural lens. The two texts are read in light of each other with the effect that the metaphysics of the Neoplatonists fills a theological void left by scripture, which is not itself concerned to resolve such theological/ontological questions as the nature of God satisfactorily to philosopher/theologians. (Remarkably, the scriptural terms *Father* and *Son*, which biblical writers thought adequate, appear not to be so to Augustine nor to his contemporaries.)

The same generous sentiment appears in *The City of God* where Augustine points out that there are no other philosophers

31. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.9, trans. Pine-Coffin, 144–45, emphasis added.

that come nearer to Christianity than the Platonists, because “Plato says that the wise man is the man who imitates, knows, and loves God, and that participation in this God brings man happiness.”³²

Behind this praise is a specific view of the soul’s aspirations and purpose: the Christian seeks to live a virtuous life understood as imitating God, followed by enlightenment, that is, a mystical vision, followed by union with God. This project Plotinus calls an “ecstatic” union with the One. Descriptions of this achievement appear in Plotinus’s *Enneads* 1.6–7, and, in its Christian incarnation, twice in Augustine’s *Confessions*. Augustine recounts his theological conversion—his coming to know the truth of Christianity, as opposed to living according to its stringent ethical requirements—in thoroughly Plotinian terms. What is crucial to the account is the trajectory. Illumination begins with virtuous living. Virtuous living separates, detaches one from the transience of the world and its vices, the world of becoming. Virtue’s freedom moves the intellect to understand itself, toward self-knowledge, to turn inward and see its own unchanging virtue. The intellect moves from self-knowledge to the forms, essences of things, and beyond those to the ultimate reality itself: pure being, the Good, or God.

By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself. With you as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper (Ps. 29:11). I entered and with my soul’s eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind—not the light of every day, obvious to anyone, nor a larger version of the same kind which would, as it were, have given out a much brighter light and filled everything with its magnitude. It

32. Augustine, *City of God* 8.5, 304.

was not that light, but a different thing, utterly different from all our kinds of light. It transcended my mind, not in the way that oil floats on water, nor as heaven is above earth. It was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it. The person who knows the truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. . . . When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is Being, and that I who saw am not yet Being. And you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe. And I found myself far from you “in the region of dissimilarity”. . . .

And you cried from far away: “Now, I am who I am” (Exod 3:14). . . . I would have found it easier to doubt whether I was myself alive than that there is no truth. . . .

I was caught up to you by your beauty. . . .

I found the unchangeable and authentic eternity of truth to transcend my mutable mind. And so step by step I ascended from bodies to the soul which perceives through the body, and from there to its inward force. . . . From there again I ascended to the power of reasoning to which is to be attributed the power of judging the deliverances of the bodily senses. This power . . . withdrew itself . . . so as to discover the light by which it was flooded. . . . So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to that which is. At that moment I was your “invisible nature understood through the things which are made” (Rom. 1:20).³³

33. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10–12, 17, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 123–24, 27. Later in the *Confessions* 9.10, Augustine describes a second vision received during a conversation with his mother. The description employs the same vocabulary and the vision has the same trajectory: from created becoming to final being.

Of interest in these passages is the fact that Augustine's vision begins with reading Platonic texts and ends with a description of the Good, derived from St. Paul's Romans. Paul and Plato have in mind the same being, in Augustine's view, and so one may easily employ either description. The source of this conversational structure is Plotinus's *On Beauty*, *Ennead* 1.6.7–9.

So we must ascend again to the good, which every soul desires. Anyone who has seen it knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful. It is desired as good, and the desire for it is directed to good, and the attainment of it is for those who go up to the higher world and are converted . . . until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one's self alone That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being. . . . He who has seen it glories in its beauty and is full of wonder and delight. . . .

How can one see the "inconceivable beauty" which stays within in the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it? Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. . . . "Let us fly to our dear country." . . . Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there. . . . And what does this inner sight see? . . . Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then . . . you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop "working on your statue" till the divine glory of virtue shines out of you, till you see "self-mastery enthroned upon its holy seat." If you have become this, and see it . . . [you are] yourself, nothing but true light . . . then you have become sight. . . . No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become

first all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty. First the soul will come in its ascent to intellect and there will know the Forms, all beautiful, and will affirm that these, the Ideas, are beauty. . . . That which is beyond this we call the nature of the Good, which holds beauty as a screen before it. . . . That which is beyond, the “spring and origin” of beauty; or one will place the Good and the primal beauty on the same level.³⁴

The depth of Augustine’s commitment to Plato’s theory of forms appears clearly in his work entitled *Eighty-Three Different Questions*.³⁵ There he points out that though Plato first used the term *ideas*, certainly others before Plato knew the forms, labeling them with different terms. Others must have known the forms, Augustine says since there were wise men before Plato, and to be wise is to understand the forms.³⁶ Augustine continues to discuss the nature of the forms, or ideas, modifying Plato’s metaphysics by locating the ideas in the mind of God. Augustine defines the forms as “certain original and principal forms of things, i.e., reasons, fixed and unchangeable, which are not themselves formed and, being thus eternal and existing always in the same state, are contained in the Divine Intelligence. And though they themselves neither come into being nor pass away, nevertheless, everything which

34. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.6–7, trans. A. H. Armstrong, Paul Henry, Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 253–63.

35. Augustine kept track of various philosophical and theological questions which arose shortly after his conversion. He recorded the questions and his responses and published them as a book. Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1982) [Question 46], 79–81.

36. Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 80.

can come into being and pass away and everything which does come into being and pass away is said to be formed in accord with these ideas.”³⁷

God has made these forms accessible and contemplable only to rational souls, and indeed, this contemplation is the very purpose of the soul, that is its excellence, and it does so because God has given the soul an inner countenance or intelligible capacity. But a soul does not know these forms simply by its rationality. Rather, the soul must cultivate virtue, particularly the Christian virtues of holiness and purity. It follows then, that the wisest of people are Christians, since they are made holy and pure by God’s grace.

Furthermore, Augustine says, no Christian trained and devout in true religion would ever dare to deny that all things which are “fixed in their own order by a certain particular nature so as to exist, are produced by God as their cause? And that by that cause all things which live do live? And that the universal soundness of things and the very order whereby those things which change do repeat with a certain regularity their journeys through time are fixed and governed by the laws of the most high God?”³⁸

In other words, no Christian would deny that God has created the world and everything in it by use of a rational plan, and that creation is, by means of the individual forms, unique to each thing. Thus, there is a form for a horse separate from that form for man. These forms, Augustine says, exist in no other place “but in the very mind of the Creator. For it would be sacrilegious to suppose that he was looking at something placed outside himself when he created” anything.³⁹ And since

37. Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 80.

38. Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 80.

39. Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 81.

the forms are in the mind of God, they must be eternal and unchangeable, since the divine mind can contain nothing except what is so. Because these ideas are eternal and unchangeable, Plato can call them true. And “it is by participation in these that whatever is exists in whatever manner it does exist.”⁴⁰

Here Augustine has appropriated Plato’s theory of forms, but amplified it further to cohere with the biblical description of God as creator. Thus, the creation story of Genesis covers a Platonic explanation of the world’s being. He also employs Plato’s familiar doctrine of participation, so prominent in *Republic*, and criticized in the *Parmenides*. Echoing *Republic* 613, *Laws* 716, and *Theaetetus* 176, Augustine concludes his discussion by pointing out that the rational soul is the most excellent thing created by God, because it is most godlike when it is pure. This godlike transformation of the soul by purity takes place among those who cling to God in love, because God imbues that soul with light, intelligible light. The soul is illumined by intelligible light, perceived by its highest part, in which lies its virtue, that is, with its intelligence. And this illumination, Augustine says, is full blessedness, that is, true happiness.⁴¹

Of related significance to the passage above is Augustine’s Platonic gloss of John 18:34, where Jesus says “My kingdom is not of this world.” At issue in Augustine’s discussion in *De Ordine* (*On Order*), is whether or not anyone should ever strive to become a philosopher. Augustine’s reply begins by employing Plato’s distinction between the visible and intelligible

40. Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 81.

41. Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 81. Augustine here alludes to Plato’s *Alcibiades I*, in which Socrates says that the portion of the soul which understands, the seat of knowledge and thought, most resembles God, and by gazing on the divine, at the content of one’s knowledge, one comes to know the divine.

worlds (*Republic* 510–511). Augustine says that the true philosophers are those who seek to know the intelligible world (the world of mathematical objects, forms, and the good), since that is the realm of God. That the intelligible world is God's world is demonstrated by the fact that God says his world is not of this (i.e., visible, material) world. "But there is another world," says Augustine, "utterly remote from these eyes of ours, a world which the intellect of a few sound men beholds. This, Christ Himself indicates clearly enough. He does not say: 'My kingdom is not of the world'; He says: 'My kingdom is not of *this* world.'" The conclusion is that the true philosopher is, by definition, a lover of wisdom, that is, a lover of the intelligible realm which is God's kingdom.⁴² Of particular interest in the passages above is the manner in which Augustine employs Platonic metaphysics, not only to interpret scripture, but to understand "things as they are," to which things scripture points us. Thus, what Jesus says is to be understood in light of Plato's account of reality. Jesus's description of his kingdom as otherworldly, points us toward Plato's description of the intelligible realm and the manner in which it is known.

The purpose of this discussion has been to show how Greek philosophy, particularly Platonism, though suspect among earlier church fathers, becomes, by the time of Augustine, perfectly compatible in its essential elements with much of Christian understanding of the world, God, and human life. Indeed, by the time of Augustine and as a result of Augustinian thinking, Greek philosophy and rational analysis has become the foundation of Christian doctrine.

42. Augustine, *Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil* [translator's title; original *De Ordine*], in *Writings of Saint Augustine*, trans. Robert P. Russell (New York: Cima, 1948), 271.

While we have, for constraints of space, limited our discussion to Latin, Western Christianity, there is an extremely important account yet to be given of Christianity and philosophy in the Eastern, Greek church. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, his brother, Macrina, their sister, and Gregory Nazianzus, among others, engaged in a very important discussion on the status and importance of classical learning, as well as Christian attitudes toward reason. They all, at times and places, argued about the dangers posed to Christianity by classical learning and “worldly philosophy.” These Cappadocians finally agreed that true philosophy could lead to a knowledge of God, and that reason properly employed was a legitimate instrument both in defending and establishing Christian doctrine. In this respect it is fair to say that the fusion of philosophy and Christian theology in the East not only paralleled, but, in important ways, served as a model and impetus for the theological practices in the Latin West.⁴³

The Hellenization of Christianity

What began as a Jewish religion founded on revelation and faith became an appendage of classical civilization. It became hellenized and was transformed in the process. It was inevitable that Christianity, as it entered the Hellenic culture of the Roman Empire, should be hellenized in some measure. Religious terms and concepts from Hebrew and Aramaic were rendered into Greek, and then Latin. Missionaries would have

43. See the very important and valuable discussion in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press). Pages 169–87 are of particular relevance.

to reach Greeks through their language, culture, and values. The apostle Paul, who was equally trained in Greek and Hebrew learning, knew how to be “all things to all men” (1 Corinthians 9:20–22). Though he deeply distrusted the wisdom of the Greeks, he used his knowledge of Greek culture to communicate with Gentiles. He used classical rhetoric in his defense before Agrippa (Acts 26:1–29). He quoted a Greek poet in his speech to the council of the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:28). Paul’s sometime traveling companion and fellow missionary Luke used Greek literary conventions in his Gospel to appeal to a Greek audience.⁴⁴ In the earliest days of Christian expansion outside of Judea, Christian missionaries were communicating in terms the Greeks could understand.

Despite the ability of some Christian leaders to communicate in Greek using the resources of Greek culture, the content of early Christian writings remained close in character to that of Hebrew writings. It is only in the mid-second century that Christians began to use Greek forums and genres to communicate publicly with the pagan world. They did so at first only to make their case to the secular world and to refute heresies which had some philosophical inspiration. Although in retrospect we can see some philosophical ideas creeping into Christian thought, the authors of apologies did not consciously embrace the theories of Greek philosophy and typically understood any wisdom found among the Greeks to be a borrowing from the Hebrews.

At the end of the second century and in the third century, leaders of the Catechetical School in Alexandria took a more positive view of philosophy. According to Clement, God had inspired the pagans with wisdom, which was to be found randomly in all

44. See, John A. Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Louisville, KY: Knox, 1992).

the philosophical schools. He sent philosophy to the Greeks as a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ, as he had provided the Hebrews with the law of Moses. Advanced concepts of deity and of ethical responsibility had prepared the Greeks for the good news of the gospel. Thus philosophy was a way into Christianity. There was no need to borrow or advocate the theories of philosophers, but their insights could be appreciated, and a common ground for conversation could be established. Origen employed the model of scientific exposition to develop a systematic Christian theology. Avoiding Greek philosophical theories, he expounded Christian doctrines held by faith in the form of a scientific exposition.

Christian intellectuals of the fourth century, pressed by ever more aggressive and philosophically sophisticated heresies, finally accepted a philosophical definition of faith at the Council of Nicea. By the fifth century, it is clear that philosophical thinking, as well as the content of the Greek philosophical tradition, particularly Platonism, had not only become accepted but widely employed as a means for understanding scripture and establishing Christian doctrine. So compatible are the two “philosophies” that Augustine can state the purpose of philosophy as the knowledge of God and the soul, God’s creation. He can also say that Platonists, with the change of a few words and statements, would be Christians. Not only Augustine, but Ambrose, Simplicianus, and others could summarize Platonism by quoting the prologue of John’s Gospel, so completely infused had the two worldviews become.

What effect did Greek philosophy have on the development of Christianity? The disappearance of the apostles by the early second century made it inevitable that the authority of the priesthood could not continue. When the few bishops and priesthood leaders appointed by John, the last apostle, died out, there was no more authority on the earth. Although some false doctrines

inspired by philosophy seem to have appeared in the first century, most Christians and their leaders seem to have been innocent of philosophical training and interests, and it is doubtful that the false doctrines were a sufficient cause of the apostasy. Philosophy came into Christianity gradually, first as offering a forum for discussion of Christian beliefs and a venue to defend the faith against slanders and misrepresentations. Later, it offered a common ground for discussion of shared beliefs, and a method for systematically organizing Christian beliefs. Finally it offered to fill the gap left by the loss of continuing revelation. When debates broke out about church doctrine, based on sophisticated philosophical conceptions that went far beyond the simple message of the scriptures, the church needed an authoritative method of adjudicating the issues. Originally the apostles could go to God in prayer and receive revelation to resolve the difficulty. Now that they were gone, and the immediate connection to God was cut; the church needed a reliable procedure for resolving conflicts. The Council of Nicea set a precedent: a worldwide council of bishops—local leaders—could provide the authority, and philosophy could provide the method. Doctrines would be defined ever-more narrowly in ever-more sophisticated terms. Faith would be determined by philosophical theology. Church leaders would henceforth have to be conversant in philosophical theology, which presupposed a knowledge of Greek philosophy. When disputes about doctrines arose, they would be settled by philosophical debates and political machinations, not by revelations to inspired leaders.

In the end, the church founded by the son of a carpenter and spread throughout the world by fishermen, a tax-collector, and a well-educated tent-maker, became a vast bureaucracy patronized by the imperial government and staffed by trained theologians and rhetoricians who saw themselves as heirs of both

the apostles and the Roman pontifices. The adoption of Greek philosophy in Christianity was more an effect than a cause of the apostasy. But it did in the end irresistibly change the character of Christianity. Grafted onto the trunk of Greek philosophy, the Christian faith became a branch of Hellenism, while Hellenism became Christianized. The result was medieval or Byzantine Christianity, which would survive the barbarian invasions to emerge victorious as the cultural foundation of medieval Europe. It was of utmost importance for the future of the world that some form of Christianity should survive the desperate times that marked the fall of the Roman Empire; but the form that did survive was not identical to primitive Christianity in faith, ordinances, authority, or doctrine.