

The “External Philosophy”: The Fathers and Platonism

It is a commonplace of modern scholarship that the Fathers of the Church, Latin and Greek, were Platonist, with exceptions of Sts Leontios of Byzantium, John of Damascus and Gregory Palamas who were ostensibly Aristotelians. In the case of Platonism, it has a long tradition from ancient to modern times. There is more than one “Platonism.” The Platonism of Plato himself and Hellenic Platonism (before Alexander the Great), finally, there is Hellenistic Platonism (after Alexander’s conquest). The latter consists the schools of Plotinus (Neo-Platonism) or Antiochus of Ascalon (Middle Platonism) or some combination of the three above mentioned.

With special regard to the influence of Greek philosophy in general and Platonism in particular on Christianity, many academics tend to agree with the thesis of the liberal Protestant church historian, Adolph von Harnack (1851-1930), that beginning with the Fathers of the second century, the simple Gospel of Jesus Christ, was overwhelmed by Greek philosophy. He described this era in the life of the Church as “hellenization.” Not a few scholars believe that the Fathers were complicit with St Paul in the formation of a Christian metaphysic, or a Christian version of Greek philosophy. Roman Catholic theologians argue that in fact the Fathers, like the medieval Scholastics, created a synthesis of Plato or Aristotle and Christianity. Most Protestants like to think of these syntheses as a detriment to the Gospel and, therefore, justification for the Reformation and its adoption of the “original” ecclesiology.

In part, historians promote the Protestant point of view. They are cheered by the dispute between “the three branches of Christianity,” because it supports their historiosophy that religions and their doctrine developed with the society which spawned them. “Theological pluralism” is inevitable. Claims to a “*Faith once delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3) are indemonstrable, because history is a process which naturally generates diversity. Thus it is asserted that the fathers were pre-Scholastics, who like the Schoolmen exchanged tradition for speculation. If only for this reason, their teachings must be considered a stage in the evolution of the Christian religion, whether its doctrine and practices. “From the Western point of view,” the ‘Age of the Fathers’ has been succeeded by ‘the Age of the Schoolmen,’ explains Fr Florovsky. “Since the rise of Scholasticism ‘Patristic theology’ has been viewed as antiquated...”¹ And, of course, medieval thought has been superseded by modernity and it by post-modernity.

With this understanding of history, there is no place for supernatural Revelation, no divine

inspiration with the clear implication that the Fathers were no more than dedicated religious writers. In the preface to the first volume of his *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Harvard, 1956), Professor H. A. Wolfson introduced his understanding of history as something How then can the theology and philosophy of the Fathers be explained, save in wholly historical terms? The facts show that their thinking was drawn, in part, from Judaism, in part from Hellenism. The former, generally their favourite, gave the Fathers the tools for the construction of a Christian world-view. They took the religious philosophy of the Jew, Philo of Alexandria, as their guide. In other words, Wolfson subsumed patristic doctrine under “the categories of philosophy and myth.” 2

Rejecting Wolfson’s opinion (and bias), we let the Fathers speak for themselves. Listen to St Hilary of Poitiers. He quotes St Paul, “*Take heed lest any man spoil you through philosophy*” (Col.2:8). To which he adds: “Therefore we must be on our guard against philosophy, and the methods which rest upon the traditions of men which we must not so much avoid as refute. Any concessions we make implies not only that we have been out-argued, but that we are confused. It is right that we ---who declare that Christ is the Power and Wisdom of God ---should not flee from the doctrines of men, but rather should overthrow them. It behooves those who proclaim Christ to the world, to face the irreverent and faulty teachings of the men with the knowledge imparted by the Wise and Omnipotent God. As the blessed Apostle says (2 Cor. 10:4-5), ‘*For our weapons are not carnal but divine power for the casting down of strongholds, destroying the reasoning (logismos) and every high thing which exalts itself against the knowledge (gnoseos) of God*’” (*De Trin.* II, 20).

2.

Before taking St Hilary’s advice, we must answer a question implicit to the argument of this paper: *Who is a Church Father?* Too many historians presume to label every Christian writer a “father” (*pater*). In the early Church, there were many would-be theologians calling themselves “Christian.” They are better called “ecclesiastical writers,” such as Tatian, Origen and Clement of Alexandria,, Tertullian, Novatian, Didymus the Blind, Eusebius of Caesarea, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Lactantius, Augustine, Pelagius, etc. They have left us insightful discourses, sermons, biblical commentaries, but they have no place on the patristic roll. If they did not publicly apostatize, they were condemned by an ecumenical Council, or attacked by the Fathers. They,

indeed, were seduced by Hellenism. According to St Hippolytus' *Philosophoumena*, it was precisely Greek philosophy that lurks behind every heresy.

St Gregory the Theologian points out that the patristic *theologia* (contemplation of God, Trinity) and *philosophia* (reflections on the divine Economy, Incarnation) appropriated “principles of inquiry and contemplation from secular literature while repudiating its idolatry” (*Ora.* XLIII, 11 PG 36 508C). The language and concepts borrowed from “the external philosophy” had no other purpose save than to formulate Christian teachings as a sign against heresy and as a means of communicating the Gospel.

To cite St Hilary of Poitiers once more, “But the errors of heretics and blasphemers force us to deal with unlawful matters, to scale perilous heights, to speak unutterable words, to trespass on forbidden ground. Faith ought in silence to fulfil the commandments, worshipping the Father, reverencing with the Son, abounding in the Holy Spirit; and we must strain the poor resources of our language to express thoughts too great for words. The error of others compels us to err in daring to embody in human terms truths which ought to be hidden in the silent veneration of the heart” (*De Trin.* II, 2 PL 10 51). The words of St Hilary echo a flagrant distrust of Greek philosophy. Not only is it a source of mischief, but it is fundamentally different from Christianity both in spirit and inspiration.

According to St Gregory the Theologian, St Athanasius' attitude towards “the external philosophy” was also highly critical. He excoriated Origen and Arius for their infatuation with “Greek wisdom” (*Vita. Ant.*, 78 PG 26 925B). Not only was it the source of idolatry and heresy, he said, but it was impotent to produce holiness or happiness; it had no ability to cure and convert human nature (*ib.* 80 925B). Nevertheless, said Gregory, he acquainted himself with “the external philosophy” that “he might not be utterly unskilled in such subjects or ignorant of matters which he had determined to despise” (*Ora* XXI, 6). He wanted nothing from it. Athanasius declared that he was dedicated to “the study of the Apostles and the tradition of the Fathers, as confirmed both in the New and Old Testaments’ (*Ep. LX ad Adelph.*, 6).

By virtue of their holiness and wisdom, the Fathers are honoured by the Orthodox Church as having greater authority than an Ecumenical Council, “not to refute their decisions --- God forbid! --- but rather to show how much they were revered by the Councils...Indeed, the

Ecumenical Councils relied on the holy and wise Fathers” (Neophytus Kafsokalyvitis). They were the supreme exegetes of the Scriptures. In the words of St Cyril of Alexandria, “...the Fathers themselves have spoken, having set forth the standard of the blameless Faith, since the Holy Spirit taught them the truth; for, according to the words of the Saviour (Matt. 20:20), it was not they who spoke but the Spirit of God the Father Who speaks through them” (*Ep.* I, 10). No wonder St Leo the Great exclaimed that “any practice contrary to the tradition of the Fathers is reprehensible” (*Ep. Ad Episc.* III, V, 6). The Archbishop of Rome refers to them as “the divinely inspired Fathers” (*Ep. Ad Episc. Maur.* XII, 10).

This reverence for the Fathers is also reflected in the liturgical music of St Romanus the Melode. “Preserving the kerygma of the Church and the dogmas of the Fathers,” she chants, “the Church has sealed the one faith and wearing the tunic of truth, she shapes rightly the brocade of heavenly theology and praises the great mystery of piety.”³ On the Sunday of the Holy Fathers, she proclaims, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Who has established our holy Fathers as luminous stars upon the earth, and through them Thou didst guide us all to the truth Faith, O most Merciful One, glory to Thee” (*Kontakion*, Plagal of the Fourth Tone). The Church calls upon her children not to trespass the “landmarks” of the religious orthodoxy set by the Fathers.

The Fathers are members of the Church, baptized and nurtured by her. Their orthodoxy and sanctity is the orthodoxy and sanctity of the Church. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they do not contradict one another. Unlike Latin medieval theologians, they did not beseech Him to consecrate their private speculation. Their life and faith abolishes the accusation that they were imitators of Plato. But this is only the first reason to deny that they were Platonists. The rathers took no principles from Plato or the Platonists; they only took advantage of the craft of logic and communication. The Fathers had a radically different understanding of life, of religion, of destiny, of “wisdom” than the Greeks. .

3.

The attitude of the Fathers towards pagan literature is central to any conclusions reached about their attraction to Platonism. To not a few has it been confusing because, on the one hand,

they were utterly contemptuous of “Greek wisdom” while, on the other, they did not hesitate to cite the the Greeks, or to borrow its language and vocabulary, even modes of argument and method.

E. Amand de Medietta took St Basil the Great as an example of the hostility displayed by the Fathers towards Hellenism. He required Christians to refrain from useless research and curiosity about pagan literature, especially the works of the philosophers. “Basil did not shrink from repeating almost *ad nauseam* the traditional but not very fair arguments of the early Christian theologians against Greek philosophy,” writes de Medietta. “The arguments of the mutual contradiction between philosophers and their systems and opinions.” St Basil personally admired Greek culture while at the same time castigating it.⁴

The author’s consternation might have disappeared if he had approached St Basil and “the other early Christian theologians” without his post-patristic Western mind-set; and if he had not imposed upon them the same intellectual problems that have for so long burdened Western philosophy and historiography. He also failed to distinguish between Greek culture as such and Greek culture as “preparation for the Gospel” --- *preparatio evangelica*. The Fathers took from the latter “elements” which had been planted in its culture by the pre-Incarnate Word. They, of course, rejected those aspects of the Greek philosophy which promised idolatry, meaning its principles and perspective. For example, the fathers refuted the Greek teachings of dualism of body and soul and its concept of Fate, yet rescued from the works of Aristotle such words as *homoousios*, and used it to explicate the commonality in the Persons (*hypostases*) of the Trinity: three Persons (*hypostases*) with the same Essence.

De Medietta also should have read St Basil’s famous *Address to the Young Concerning Worldly Study* more carefully in which he expressed his views on the “external” or “the foreign philosophy” (*he exothen philosophia, externa sapientia*) and its value to Christian Faith. The holy Scriptures, he said, are central to the Christian life, “teaching us mystical things,” “sacred and mystical culture” (*di’aporretown hemas apokoumetha paideumaton*), proclaiming Christian’s truths unknown to the world (*Ad Adol. de Leg. Gentil. II, 6-8*). Yet, rightly understood “worldly study” contributes to our “knowledge” of God. Thus, Moses, that illustrious man whose name for wisdom is greatest among all men, first trained his mind in the learning (*mathema*) of the

Egyptians and then proceeded to the contemplation of Him Who is; and, like him, although later, the wise Daniel in Babylonia initially acquired the wisdom of the Chaldeans and then applied himself to the divine teachings.”

“Yet, my children we do not conceive this human life to be the object of our ultimate concern nor do we consider it to be of value if it contributes only to the present life,” Basil concludes. He advised his students that they must imitate the bee, taking only the honey and leaving the rest of the flower as “snares by the devil.” It follows that not everyone should read of Plato, etc., but only those with the power of discernment. His faith must be strong and, in most cases, he should be sufficiently schooled in Christian doctrine to resist those “snares” while extracting from secular literature ideas and values supportive of our spiritual aims. In most cases, however, the profit is not worth the risk, and, in fact, “the external philosophy” has been rendered superfluous by “the truth of the Gospel which has been enfranchised in the *oikoumene...*” (*Hom. In Ps. XXXIII, 7 PG 29 341A*; cf. St Paulinus of Nola, *Ep. XVI ad Jov. PL 61 227C-234B*).

St John Chrysostom has more to say about the futility of “Greek wisdom.” St Paul, he says, held their wisdom up to ridicule when he discoursed on Romans 1:2 “*they became vain in their reasoning and their foolish hearts were darkened.*”

“They wanted more than the true God, but they could not agree on who He is; and therefore Aristotle rose up against Plato and the Stoics against the rest. We should not marvel so much about their wisdom as turn away from them indignantly and ruefully, because through this very thing they became fools. For had they not trusted in their reasoning and syllogisms, and sophistries, they would not have suffered as the reward for their deviance. They have continued in their idolatry and have not found the truth.”

“Instead of recognizing Him as their Creator and Providence,” he added, “they attributed what is His glory ‘to images made in the likeness of corruptible men...’ What has this to do with philosophers? It is they who opened the mind of men to the machinations of the devil, who turned them to dishonour, godlessness and perversion; that is, God let the devil have his way with them...He had given them reason to understand what was needful, but none of those abilities did they use to find salvation, but having perverted it turned what they had received into the

opposite” (*Comm. On Romans* III, 1, 2).

In his *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (IV, 3-4), John continues his attack upon Greek philosophers, “the pride of Hellas.” “Christ,” he said, “changed the world while the savants of the Academy and Lyceum have failed to keep their pledge to bring virtue and happiness. Where now is the pride of Hellas,” he mocks. “Where the glory of Athens? Where the inept drivel of the philosophers... Their souls (Plato and Pythagoras) were much less ‘philosophical’ than the soul of St Peter...” To the Antiochians, he declares, “Let the Greeks be ashamed and let them hide their heads and creep away on account of their lamentable philosophers and the wretched folly they parade as wisdom.” “Greek philosophers move among men able to teach their doctrine to only a few...while the Disciples of Christ, fisherman, publicans, tent-makers have spread the Truth throughout the *oikoumene*..” (*Hom. De Stat.* XIX, 2 PG 49 190).

Furthermore, there is something in the fidelity of the fathers to the Christian faith and their opposition to Hellenism that are rarely highlighted by patrologies. I refer to the fact that Fathers were generally monks, that is, practitioners of “the highest philosophy,” to borrow St John Chrysostom’s expression. “Purity of heart” and “dispassion” (*apatheia*) are more easily achieved in the monastery and desert; and these things are essential to the contemplation and knowledge of God and things spiritual. Theology is not an intellectual, but an existential pursuit. There is no transcendence without prayer and fasting.

Finally, they were commonly bishops, who are the teachers or doctors of the Faith and, of course, presidents of the Eucharist. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Mysteries or Sacraments are necessary for the acquisition of their goal: “eternal life,” or, in the words of the Apostle Peter, “*according as His divine power has He given unto us all things that pertain to life and piety according to the knowledge of Him who has called to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us the exceedingly great and precious promises: that by these you might become partakers of the divine Nature...*” (2 Pet. I: 4).

4.

In the Greek language the word for “culture” or “education” is *paideia*. It was intrinsically associated with the Greek city-state, the *polis*. From its inception the *polis* was a religious institution. Thus, Aristophanes refers to Athens as *berai* or “sacred.” The Greek ideal of the city was a “just society” which is possible only when men are just — or virtuous (*arête*) — which is the *raison d’être* of the *paideia*. Plato’s vision rested on the conviction that wisdom is divine and education is primarily a ‘training” of “the divinest thing, truly our own,” the soul, which is most like Him, God, Who gives wisdom and, in the end, whose being the soul will imitate and whose life it will share” (*Laws* IV, 716c). Not a few historians, such as Werner Jaeger, have said that for Plato “all attempts to form a nobler type of man merged ultimately with the divine.”⁵ --- not, however, a personal Divinity, such as the Christian Trinity.

In other words, the chief business of the *polis* is to mold the character of its citizens, rather than merely extending the range of their knowledge. Plato, whatever his literary period, never allowed its purpose to be anything else. After the death of Socrates in 399 BC, he abandoned all hope that the earthly *polis* could ever achieve this end. He began to speak of “the *polis* above.” Plato called his students to adopt a *paideia* assisted by meditation, self-control and prayer, along with obedience to law, charitable to all who aspire to wisdom. Wise or just men (philosophers) alone show us the way to virtue and fellowship. Indeed, for Plato to ask “What is a “good *polis*”? is nothing more than asking “what is a good man”? And, of course, the formation of the “good *polis*” (just society) and the “good man” (just man) is dependent upon a fruitful *paideia*.

The Greek *polis* and *paideia* were the antithesis of the Christian *polis* (Church) and *paideia* (Scriptures). That Tertullian asked his famous question, *quid Athenae Hierosolymis?* (What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?) is highly noteworthy, observes Professor Downey. “The significant point is that he chose two cities to serve as representatives of two cultures; he did not choose, for example, for his question Socrates and Christ, as he might have done.”⁶ There are two cities, the city of God and the city of man, each with its own *paideia*. At the centre of Greek education is Homer; at the heart of Christian education is the Bible. In his works, Plato quotes Homer more than any other personality in the history of his people.

The *polis* and *paideia* of both Athens and Jerusalem presuppose different concepts of history. For the Greeks, the highest symbol of reality is the recurrent circle. Time endlessly circles, reaching an apex, and then returning to make another circle. There is birth, growth, apex, decay followed by a cosmic restoration, the whole process beginning again *ad infinitum*; hence, the expression, *he apokatastasis ton panton* (of which Origen and his school were guilty). The world is eternal and eternal recurrence is unending. Therefore, there is no escape from this cyclicism. so long as man is in his body. With Plato and others, he can take flight into the spiritual world by a virtuous life which is the product of *paideia*. In a few words, the ancient Greeks had no conception of history as the Fathers knew it.

The Greeks were not looking for salvation as the continuation of a personal existence in communion with the one true God. Only in “eternal repose” can the soul find beatitude, or “the vision of the Good,” of the truth, exclaimed Plotinus (*Enneads* III, 1, 7; Mackenna). As we said, the Greeks wanted to be rational, to be virtuous in order to find truth which leads to the good which, as Plato said, alone brings happiness (*Symposium* 204e). In other words, the good life is achieved by education (*paideia*), none higher than philosophy, the intellectual quest for truth. To assign education such a task presupposed a faith in human reason ---“reason” (*logos*) or “dialectic” (*dialektos*). For Plato, reason was best served by “speculation” or “contemplation” (*theoria*).¹ Thus, in their treatises of theology, they were not looking for the solution of abstract problems, not in attaining God. Of course, such an idea would have no meaning for the Greeks, because they had no personal deity with whom to unite. If they chose to honour the gods, it was to win their favour. If they believe in the gods of Homer, and his grim picture of the after-life, they, like Plato, looked for a bodiless eternity in which mind contemplated the Good.

Contrary to the teachings of the Christian religion, Greek philosophy is concerned with “first principles,” a metaphysic in which the world is run by inherent powers. Some Greeks called it “fate” (*he eimarmene*) Christianity views history or time as linear with a definite end (*telos*); or, to be more precise, a divinely ordained event, the Resurrection, the Judgment, and the realization of the Kingdom of God adumbrated in the Church (*eschatos*). Thus, the Greek *polis* was the

¹The holy fathers also use the word *theoria*, but for them it encompasses the concept of "vision" and "revelation" as well as contemplation.

offspring of one metaphysic of time; Christianity was begotten of the divine Economy. The Greek *paideia* was the servant of the city, the *paideia* of the Fathers was servant of the Church. Two cultures prepared their citizens for different destinies

5.

There is something else that fundamentally distinguishes Hellenism, in this case Plato, from Christianity: the concept of time. The Greeks rarely spoke of history, rather *histories*. There are many nations; therefore, many histories. Plato and his countrymen had no idea of history. There is a simple reason for it: time has no beginning and no end. According to Aristotle, time exhibits a constant recurrent and unending cycle of coming-to-be (*De Generatione et Corruptione*, II, xi, 338a). Life is a series of adjustments, something to be endured. There is no cosmic purpose. The word “end” (*telos*) meant not terminated, but simply accomplished. The Christian (hence, patristic) idea of the *eschaton* and Final Judgment was alien to them. They were concerned with “first principles,” not “last things.” History had no consummation, for it was eternally recurring (*anakyklosis*), forever returning upon itself. The Fathers viewed history as a straight line, Plato and the Greeks, “history” as a circle.

According to the Greeks, temporal cyclicism determined the character of human life, especially the issues of fate and freedom. Homer and other ancient writers were never certain human choices were free choices, considering that fate (*fatum, eimarmene*) mysteriously lurked behind all human existence. Even the gods were subject to it. Later, when questioned about the similarity between fate and predestination, Augustine was not so sure that they were not the same. The crucial difference between them was clearly the idea of an eternal kingdom after the resurrection of the body. In his *De fide Orthodoxia*, St John of Damascus denies both the idea of fate and predestination (ch. II, 30 PG 94 964A-980A).

St Basil the Great (among others) divided history into seven ages or intervals of time moving towards the last and everlasting Age, the last Day, the Eighth Day or the endless period that follows the bodily resurrection and the Judgment (*Hexa*. II, PG 31 20A-21B). Thus, the 6th age is the age of Christ, the 7th age is the ages of the Church. When each age begins and ends we do not

know. How long they will be, we do not know. Historical time is a great paradox: the beginning and end of time is determined by God, but the actions of men explain the manner in which history unfolds --- an idea which no pagan Greek would approve. In the words of St Dionysius the Areopagite, providence will allow no violence to the integrity of His work which He made in all Wisdom.

As Plato and his fellow Hellenes would not understand historical ages, they would believe the resurrection to be nonsense, which is precisely the way they viewed the Incarnation. A bodily resurrection would signify a new life in this world. The body, they held, is a prison-house, escape from it, salvation, and freedom in another world. Plotinus wants a “resurrection” *from* the body not *in* the body (*Enn.* III, 6, 6). He had such contempt for the body, it is said he never bathed. St John Chrysostom put the Christian difference with Hellenism in these words. “Who are they who deny the resurrection? Pray tell me, for I am an ignorant man --- wait, I know. Are they Gentiles or Christians who disbelieve the work of creation? The two denials go together: the denial that God created the world *ex nihilo* and the denial that He raises from the dead” (*Acta Apost.* II, 4 PG 60 31).

Creation and re-creation are inseparable, even as the absence of a creation and the absence of an end to it. The Greek theory of time implies different concepts of God or “the Good,” as Plato called Him. The universe is an eternal companion; and, likewise, the world to which Plato and Plotinus wanted to escape. The God or the gods of the Greeks are impersonal; and, it goes without saying, he is not the holy Trinity. The Divine of Plato certainly did not send his Logos into the world to save mankind. The Logos is only the instrument of his creativity. Whatever “God” makes, he makes through the Ideas of the Logos, the models or prototypes of everything formed in time.

6.

The Fathers and the Greeks (including Plato) disagreed on the nature and range of reason. The latter held that reason (*nous, logos*) was the soul’s instrument for the discovery of truth. They began their thinking with “first principles” (metaphysics) with which knowledge (which they

distinguished from “opinion” or *doxa*) was impossible. Moreover, they described rationality as the basic character of the educated and virtuous man --- none more so than the philosopher. He is the one who within him has “turned the eye,” as Plato said (*Rep.* 5, 518b6 – d7). The Fathers spoke of “the eye of the soul” (heart) which has an essential role to play in the acquisition in virtue and truth.

Plato required the cleansing of the passions in the quest for divine knowledge, for the sake of the reason, a dialectic by which reason is unencumbered by the demands of the body and its emotions. According to Gilson, Plotinus described dialectics as an effort of the human soul to rid itself of all material images, so as to have the capacity to contemplate the intelligible Ideas in the light of the first Intellect who is the supreme god. To put in other words, Plato and Plotinus understood “dialectics” as merely a method of reason to achieve “a sort of philosophical salvation, by progressively raising the soul to the full awareness of his own divinity.” For Platonists each man was naturally entitled to the knowledge of divine things by virtue of the divine “spark” (*spynthir*) within him. Moreover, the light from above leads him to the realm of the unchangeable Ideas. Necessarily, then, by this ontology the divine truth is communicated to human reason.⁷

The Fathers, on the other hand, deny the divinity and omniscience of reason. They delineate three levels of knowledge. First, there is no opposition between “faith” and “knowledge,” because the Christian Faith is the fundamental assumption of any exercise of reason. The Greeks followed the desire of the flesh, the Fathers maintained. In any case, the first level of knowledge applies to the senses. The second degree of knowledge “makes the pathways in the heart which leads to faith, wherewith we gather supplies for the journey to the true Age,” declares St Isaac the Syrian. “The third level of knowledge (*gnosis*) raises us above earthly things and to the experience of realities hidden from the eyes,” he continued. He refers to suprarational perception --- of the “unknowing” and “knowledge transcendent” --- whose purpose is realized not by analysis and argument,” but “suddenly and unexpectedly and is revealed within.”

The first level demands “study and diligence in learning” the second, commands “a good manner of life and intellectual faith”; and the third kind of knowledge is the gift of true faith and grace. In addition, it cannot be denied or validated by reason or the senses. It is the progeny of piety; hence, the greater the piety, the greater the knowledge (*gnosis*) of God. In other words, the

pious soul receives divine light by which the soul alone may partake of the truth. A “vision of God” (*theoria*) is the privilege of the Saints.

Not unlike Plato, the Fathers believed that it was more than intelligence that wrought the “vision” of truth. He employed the word “desire” (*eros*), the Fathers preferred “love” (*agape*). Plato did not want to be misunderstood. He did not want his listeners to think that “desire” as an emotion of the body that man is an empirical being; nor does the fact that truth is not always expressed in the language of reason mean that philosophy is not a rational enterprise. Truth is sometimes hidden (*enigma*) in “myth,” the stories of the gods and heroes, about which Homer and other poets related. Myth is an educational tool for the shaping virtue; hence, Plato’s use of allegory, delving into images and symbols to mine the truth. In any case, the Greek philosopher placed his faith in reason to attain his goals. The Fathers had a different purpose for reason. It certainly was not to allegorize the Scripture to the prejudice of its historical and/or typological sense.

One cannot doubt that the Fathers learned much from the Greeks --- especially from Plato’s exercise of reason --- but they were guided by supernatural faith and grace --- as opposed to the natural “faith” and silent assumptions of Greek thought; hence, they differed with Plato, etc. in their understanding of reason’s role in the acquisition of truth; and, to be sure, its role in the development of the virtuous man. For Plato “faith” was “opinion” (*doxa*), or unsubstantiated by knowledge. The Fathers describe “faith” not only as the content of our beliefs, but confidence in them by virtue of our awareness of the divine Presence. Thus, reason is not the only source of knowledge, but is that faculty of the soul which, to be sure, provides us with sensible and intellectual knowledge (agriculture, botany, mathematics, physics, etc.). Lest we forget, reason is not our guide in the quest for virtue (“the new man”) and truth (eternal verity), but is the sentinel or watchman of the “heart”. It warns the soul about the invasion of the passions. Reason is the power of discernment.

The “knowledge” of God and spiritual things belongs to *gnosis* --- *tertium genus cognitionis* --- a word found everywhere in the Scriptures and the Fathers. It is a kind of knowing that is produced by grace. Grace is an uncreated Energy of God. Thus, St Basil the Great asserts, “We know (*gnorizein*) our God through His Energies (*energeion*)” (*Ep.* 234). Later he writes,

“Therefore from the Energies comes the knowledge (*gnosin*) and from knowledge (*gnoseos*) follows fellowship...” (*ib.*). St Gregory of Nyssa confirms his brother’s words, saying, “The Essence of God is beyond every name and thought; therefore, we know (*gnosomen*) Him through His Energies” (*Cant. C. XI PG 44 1012C*). If nothing else, these comments offer a picture of God and cognition foreign to Plato’s theology.

7.

Anyone with the slightest knowledge of Greek culture is aware that Plato and the other philosophers have no awareness of “sin” and “grace;” and surely nothing about God’s Love. The closest thing to it was “fault” or “crime.” It could be remitted by restitution and imploring the gods, but the breaking of the divine Commandments was not part of their morality. Interestingly, both Christians and pagan Greeks used the word *hamartia* (“miss the mark”). For both, moreover, it was understood as something more than a “mistake.” In a more profound sense, Greeks who believed the mythology of Homer, they could expect punishment for insolence (*hybris*) towards the gods. In this respect, Plato as an “atheist” took *hamartia* to mean the willful defiance of the laws of the cosmos.⁸

For the Bible and the Fathers, “sin” was a word, thought or deed that identified moral wrongdoing or transgression, even iniquity. Human nature was “*dead in trespasses and sin,*” as having become mortal and corrupt by virtue of disobedience to a personal and moral Divinity (“the ancestral sin”). The implication here is that the thinking of the holy Fathers and Plato on this matter broadcast different anthropologies. Plato drew a sharp distinction between “body” (*soma*) and “soul” (*psyche*). The body is naturally mortal, the soul naturally immortal. This doctrine of man accommodates Plato’s theory of “reincarnation” (*metempsychosis*) by which the soul may pass from body to body if it fails to escape the eternal recurrence of the ages.

The Church teaches the reunion of body and soul in the resurrection at which time it will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ. Body and soul together form the human personality. Each man was created by God in His Image; hence, man’s nature is rational, capable of free choice. Plato held the soul in great esteem because of its rational power, and was contemptuous of the body, the source irrational emotions. He wanted to escape time and the body, whereas for

Christianity time and the body is the crucible of salvation (deification, *theosis*). None of the Greeks had the slightest conception that human nature could be transformed by true faith and grace.

The “grace” of which the fathers spoke is an uncreated energy or operation of God. By grace are we saved, that is, by this energy. Plato believed that man possessed a divine element (*spyntber*) by virtue of which his soul could find its way to the spiritual realm. The Fathers believed that the body and the soul will, after the Resurrection, be deified by uncreated grace. This grace comes by Christ; or, to use St Athanasius’ celebrated phrase, “God became man that man might become a god.”

8.

Finally, let us consider the *coup de grace*: the radical difference between the “revealed theology” of the Fathers and the so-called “natural theology” of the Greeks. I say “so-called” for several reasons: first, there can be no theology drawn wholly from nature, because there is no similarity (*analogia entis*²) between Creator and creation; and, therefore, “unaided” reason has no conception of God; and next, the cosmos fell with the disobedient Adam, and his “darkened mind” harassed by the deceptions of the devil — who has driven such knowledge from his heart (as St John of Damascus said) — cannot find in corrupted nature the knowledge of Him, that is, not without help from which enables man to read “*the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world...even His eternal power and Godhead*” (Rom. 1:20).

Finally, whatever “knowledge” has been given to the Gentiles by the given by the divine Logos “who enlightens every man that comes into the world” (Jn. 1:9), it was for the purpose of preparing the world for His Coming visibly and bodily among men. The Greeks if they were not polytheistic *a la Homer*, rejected any notion of a personal God, *a fortiori* the philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato, who reconceived the Divine into “the Unmoved Mover” or “the Good.” When St Gregory of Nyssa referred to God as “the Good,” he had no intention of

²*Analogia entis* is one of Augustine of Hippo's many heresies.

substituting Plato's god for the true God; but adapting and purifying the current philosophical idiom in his explication of the Christian Faith.

In addition, in their conception of the Logos, the Greeks engaged an antitype of the Christian *Word* of Biblical and patristic writers. They were not, as scholars so often say, borrowing the pagan idea of the Logos in their reconstruction of the Christian world-view. Also, Plato's Ideas (*kosmos noetos*) have no place in patristic theology. They are not the eternal prototypes in the mind (Plato, Plotinus, Augustine) or something along side the deity (Philo), nor do they teach that created beings (form or image) find their essence in this eternal companion of "the Good" or "God." We do not discover in the writings of the fathers this kind of dualism, for, if nothing else, there is nothing about the creature that is naturally divine. If man is "divine," it is by Grace, not by nature.

In addition, for the fathers, God is a presence apprehended by faith, not an object of conceptualization. They encountered Him through the *gnosis* of religious contemplation, not the reason of philosophical speculation.

9.

Let us conclude with one more observation. Plato and the Greeks hoped to achieve salvation (freedom from the body) through the acquisition of virtue or excellence (intellectual and moral) by means of education (knowledge and *moralism*). They were autosoteric, that is, the individual saves himself by himself. He is alone in this quest or, as Plotinus said, "the alone to the Alone." There is nothing supernatural in this. For the Fathers, salvation comes by man's cooperation (*synergism*) with divine Grace, the uncreated Energy. "*By grace are you saved through the Faith,*" wrote St Paul. The Faith is the Faith of Christ, our supernatural Benefactor Who redeemed us from the devil, death and sin. Furthermore, the individual is not saved alone. He is deified in the community of believers, the Church. We may be damned alone, but we are saved together, as Khomiakov said. To the Greeks Christian soteriology was "folly," to the Jews a "stumbling-block."

CONCLUSION

I think the case has been made against the common scholarly theory that the Church Fathers were Platonists. There was no one against whom this accusation was more often made than St Dionysius the Areopagite (“pseudo-Dionysius”). But nothing of what essentially characterizes Platonism is found in the Saint’s “mystical theology” --- its language, concepts and literary images notwithstanding. Platonism (Neo-Platonism) gave his theology form not substance; and so it was with all the Fathers who, in seeking to communicate the Gospel, chose to cast their message sometimes in the way of the way of Plato and his school or and sometimes in the way of Aristotle and his followers.

In other words, the Church Fathers and Platonism maintained radically opposed world-views. The supreme point of difference was not only the concept of time, but the very idea of God, and the mystery of the Incarnation --- something the Greeks thought unthinkable --- a “folly” to them as it was a “scandal” to the Jews. Christians worshipped the Holy Trinity, the Creator God Who became Man that man might become a god. The “first principles” (*archai*) of the Greeks were antithetical. They had different conceptions of the city, time and history, of man’s nature, of knowledge (*gnosis*) and the role of reason (*nous*) in human life. The sin and grace upon which the Fathers regularly discourse are no where found in pagan Greek literature. Consequently, salvation for the Church differed radically from salvation according to Plato and the Greeks.

There is much more that could be said to refute the ostensible “Platonism of the fathers,” but what we have presented above is sufficient to dispel this falsehood. .

ENDNOTES

1. “Saint Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* V, 2 (1959-1960), 123.
2. Romanides, J., “H.A. Wolfson’s Philosophy of the Church Fathers,”

The Greek Orthodox Theological Review V, 1 (1959), 55.

3. Mass, P. ed., *Fruehbyzantinische Kirchenpoeseie* [bd. 1]. Bonn, 1910, s. 24).
4. “The Official Attitude of Basil of Caesarea As a Christian Bishop Towards Greek Philosophy and Science,” in the *Orthodox Churches and the West*. Ed. By D. Baker. Oxford, 1976, 25-49.
5. The Greeks had other political philosophies which included their own versions of the successful *paideia*. We are only concerned here with Plato (see my “The Greek Fathers: *Polis* and *Paideia*,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* vol. 23, no.1&2 (1979), pp. 3-21.
6. Downey, G., “From Pagan City to the Christian City,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* X, 1 (1064), 125.
7. Gilson, E., *A Gilson Reader: Selections from the Writings of Etienne Gilson*. Ed. By A. C. Pegis. N.Y., 1957, pp. 201 – 203.
- 8.. Kitto, H. D. F., *The Greeks*. Baltimore, 1951, pp.171f.