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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ibs-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php)

## CHRISTIANITY AND CLASSICAL CULTURE

*Rev. Prof. R. Buick Knox*

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Jesus Christ was born into the Jewish race and was reared in the faith and traditions of the Jewish people. He saw his own mission as the fulfilment of the hopes and promises set forth in the Old Testament. He spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew. There is a Jewish background in all his teaching.

His first disciples were Jews. However, if they were to obey the command to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, they would have to express it in a way capable of being grasped by people speaking different languages and having their own customs and culture.

Many Jews had left their homeland and settled abroad. Wherever they were, they were looked upon as a distinct people with their own customs and beliefs. Yet, even they were not immune from outside influences. Their Scriptures were translated into Greek, the version now known as the Septuagint. Witness also the work of Philo, a devout Alexandrian Jew who held that the teaching of Moses anticipated that of the Greek philosophers.

When Christians sought to plant their message in distant places, they were usually treated with suspicion by both native and Jewish people.

Strangely enough, in spite of their Jewish background, their main record of the life and teaching of Jesus in the New Testament was not written in Hebrew or Aramaic but in Greek, in the common form of that language spoken across the Roman Empire. Paul was the most notable figure in the move of the Faith out of its Jewish environment into the world of Hellenism. He spoke Hebrew and was trained in the most exclusive Hebrew schools, but, being brought up in Tarsus, he knew Greek, spoke it and used it for his letters. He used that language to express the Old Testament ideas of Covenant, Sacrifice and Blood. When he moved to Athens, he encountered many who were steeped in the ideas of the philosophical schools and he spoke so as to challenge them to see that what was of value in their thought found its corrective and completion in Christ; that involved a transformation in their idea of God, repentance from sin and a new obedience. The Gospel shed a new and incomparable light

upon the reality of God, Creator and Saviour, and upon the meaning of human life. (Acts, 17)

The Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Hebrews also show how ideas from Greek thought were early used to bring home the meaning of the Gospel. The use of the word 'Logos' - the Word - and the contrast between the temporal and the eternal had echoes from Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato.

As time went on and Christianity took root in the Gentile world, more and more ideas from Greek and Latin thought were used to express the Gospel. This raised problems within the Christian community. Was the use of these ideas likely to distort the original message of Jesus and the early teaching of the Church as seen in the New Testament? Early apologists for the Faith were ready to admit the dangers. There were groups who stressed the idea of attaining the knowledge of God, 'Gnosis'; they held this was attainable by only a few souls. They also wove around this idea a web of ideas from cults with no Christian connection. These Gnostics had to be resisted.

Nevertheless, the Apologists who challenged this deadly heresy also claimed that the Greek ideas were of use in making the Christian message intelligible in its new environment. It helped to clarify the Church's basic teaching on God, Creation and human life and destiny.<sup>1</sup>

Justin Martyr held that the heritage of Mediterranean thought included much which pointed to the knowledge of God who was not limited to work through the Jewish story, but, though it was an anticipation of much of Christ's teaching, it was not a substitute for it. That teaching was based upon the Scripture which was the measure by which all else was judged.<sup>2</sup>

Irenaeus, a doughty warrior against the Gnostics, was also well aware how much the Greek thought was influencing the Church, especially in the use of the 'Logos' theme, but he held that the test of

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<sup>1</sup> For a study of the Apologists and their attitude to Greek Theology, see Norris, R.A. *God and the World in Early Christian Theology*, (London, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Norris, *op. cit.*, 44.

all teaching must be faithfulness to Scripture and to the Church's public Rule of Faith.<sup>3</sup>

Tertullian who was a pioneer in the use of Latin to defend the Faith and in the use of the word 'Trinity' to expound the nature of God, was also strongly critical of Greek philosophy which he held was far too attuned to polytheistic practices and produced 'patriarchs of heresy'. Yet he was not against giving some credit to Greek philosophy. It had true but inadequate knowledge of God derived from the order and beauty of the cosmos and also from the natural readiness of the soul to acknowledge the existence of a controlling deity. All ideas must be tested by reference to the Scriptures and the Church's Rule of Faith; in these, there is clear teaching on who God is, what he has done, is doing and will do in the world. The world is the sphere of human action and has a flow of events leading to the final judgement. Each person is responsible for his or her life in this world. In Tertullian's teaching, the central issue is the will of God and human obedience to it. With this practical emphasis, he was somewhat removed from the Greek idea of a quest for the knowledge of God. For him, God had revealed what was needful for us to know of him and his will. In his view, Greek theology, in so far as it is true, says what Scripture says.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek method of a quest for the knowledge of God had its most notable Christian advocate in Origen of Alexandria. He held that there was a natural knowledge of God and of moral principles in every person. Paul also taught this but he held it was so clouded and distorted by human limitations and sins that only a divine revelation could make it known; human attempts to discover God produced an intellectual pride and practical disobedience to God's will (Rom. 1).

Origen nevertheless esteemed the methods of Greek teaching as a tool to unravel the revelation of God given in the Bible. He himself was a fine, probably the finest, biblical scholar in his time. Witness his edition of various editions of the Old Testament, a resource still used by biblical scholars. He also received the inherited teaching of the Church as a reliable guide to the basic principles of the Faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 83-102

He was much absorbed in the Greek contrast between the temporal and the eternal; this led him to believe that in the New Testament it was necessary to discover the Eternal Word hidden within the written words. This gave scope for the discovery of hidden allegorical meanings. Origen's fertile mind threw out suggestions which stimulated and disturbed the Church. From his Greek background he absorbed the idea of God as transcending all our thought but we know enough to see him as reality, truth and goodness, a goodness which expresses itself in what he creates: the creation is not evil and therefore evil comes from people's will.<sup>5</sup>

Some of his ideas were influential in the fourth-century debates on the Person of Christ. It is probable that he influenced Arius who held that Jesus Christ was a created being, neither fully divine nor truly human, and was subordinate to the Father. This novel teaching was challenged by Athanasius; he championed the teaching that Jesus was the eternal Son of God, fully human and fully divine. It was only because he was both divine and human that he was able to redeem lost mankind. The issue was debated at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. The Emperor Constantine exerted heavy pressure to urge the assembled bishops to reach an agreement. The teaching of Arius was condemned and a definition was worked out stating that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was 'of the substance of the Father, God of God' and for 'our salvation came down and was made flesh and was made man'.

Though this definition owed much to Greek terminology, it is important to note, as Prof. Richard Hanson often pointed out, that all the controversialists were eager to support their cases by reference to the Scriptures which were the accepted regulative standard in the Church's life.<sup>6</sup>

Linguistic and political issues put a strain upon the definition of Nicea, but after more debates in many councils a further resolution of the issue was agreed at the Council of Constantinople in

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 107-139.

<sup>6</sup> Hanson, R.P.C. *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (1954); *Allegory and Event* (1959); *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. (1990). For a review of this work, see my article in , *Irish Biblical Studies* Vol 12, April 1990, 86-94.

381 A.D. A revised form of the definition of Nicea was accepted and has come to be called the Nicene Creed. It became the accepted statement of the Faith throughout most of Christendom and has retained its position as the sound basis for a proper understanding of the teaching of the Bible. It proclaims that Jesus Christ is the only-begotten Son of God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, and for our salvation was made man. It also makes clear the Trinitarian position.

The main influences leading to this resolution were the great Cappadocian school of teachers. Their work has recently been analysed by the notable American church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan. His work, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, comprises his Gifford Lectures, 1992-93. The Cappadocians were steeped in their study of the Bible and the Faith, and also in the refinements of Greek language and thought. They were Gregory of Nyssa, a subtle, profound and clear thinker; his brother, Basil of Caesarea, a clear exponent of the place of the Holy Spirit in Christian teaching and also a devout and diligent organiser of the Church and its charitable outreach; their sister, Macrina, a competent and pioneering woman theologian and an organiser of educational and communal life on the family estates; there was also Gregory of Nazianzus, called to be bishop of Constantinople after a period when the churches in the city had been weakened by quarrels and who by his teaching and example did much to renew the vitality of the Church.<sup>7</sup>

The Cappadocians had a decisive influence in giving the Creed of Nicea its final form at Constantinople in 381. They had all been brought up within the Church and had accepted its Faith as their own. They held that the formulae of the Creed were necessary to give that Faith full definition, to keep it faithful to its teaching of the Bible and to preserve it from distortion by teachers prone to heresy.

They began from the common Faith that there was one God only, holy, righteous and merciful; he was the great Creator and had made himself known in creation and in Jesus Christ. So great and wonderful is God, there are no words adequate to describe him and to express the fullness of his being. Indeed, in attempts to describe him,

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<sup>7</sup> Pelikan, J., *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Yale, 1993)

negative adjectives have to be used; he is immortal (not subject to death), invisible (not able to be seen), immutable (not subject to change). There are twenty-two letters in the Greek alphabet; the letter 'α' is often used as a negative when placed before an adjective to express that meaning. In Lampe's vast dictionary of the Greek words used by the Early Fathers one eighth of the work is devoted to the letter 'α' and many of these words are negative adjectives, many of them applicable to God. This usage has continued in English; for example, one of the most common hymns begins 'Immortal, invisible, God only wise' and in later verses describes God as 'unresting, unhasting'. Paul claimed to have been lifted up to heaven in a vision and he saw 'things which cannot be told' (2 Cor., 12:4). The Creeds state that God is the Father who has gone to great lengths for our salvation but he is also the Father Almighty to be approached with awe and humility.<sup>8</sup>

The knowledge of God is beyond all understanding, but not beyond a degree of understanding. Reason, said the Cappadocians, points us to see the greatness of his being, but the higher we lift our thoughts to the greatness of his being there is still a higher height to scale. There is no doubt that the heavens declare the glory of God, but not all the glory, for God is high above the heavens. (2 Chron. 6:18). It is possible to have some knowledge of the transcendent wisdom through the harmony of the cosmos. Gregory of Nyssa said there was a harmony which maintained the world in being; it was not the result of randomness. There was an inescapable contingency and unpredictability in the natural world and in human affairs. This was due to our partial knowledge. It was therefore proper to seek for further knowledge as far as it could be ascertained. Plato had already held that there was order in life and it was vain to think that order could flow from the capricious, amoral and inconsistent host of ancient gods. Plato's rather impersonal but important Idea of the Good points to the source from which all order flows. Moreover, the soul of man is akin to the world-order. This idea was also echoed in the teaching of Aristotle. It is also at the basis of all modern research, scientific, medical, historical and other varieties. There is the faith that the world will respond and reveal its

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Pelikan, *op. cit.*

order to the searching mind. Gregory of Nyssa confidently declared, ‘ Investigate the work of nature’. He added that in this life we could never reach the full transcendent knowledge of God and his ways, but there was room for all efforts to trace those ways as far as our capacity allowed.<sup>9</sup>

Christians believe there is one God, one God only. He is the Father Almighty. There is therefore no ground for polytheism or atheism. Moreover, since he is the Creator and existed before creation, there is no ground for pantheism which identifies God with the creation. Further, since he is good, his creation is good. There is therefore no basis for dualism, the doctrine that there is a second, probably inferior God, who had a hand in the work of creation and injected into it features contrary to the intention of the sovereign God. This view has had a persisting plausibility throughout the centuries as an explanation of the evil, diseases and deformities which seem so contrary from what would be expected from the work of the one good Father. The New Testament has ample references to the Devil who goes about seeking whom he may devour. Christ spoke of ‘the reign of darkness’ (Luke 12:53); Paul referred to ‘the God of this passing age’ (2 Cor. 4:4); John referred to the prince of this world (John 14:30; 16:11). Yet, these evil powers have no place within God’s ultimate plan. They are not sharers of his power. Paul says God must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet; he will destroy every rule, authority and power; God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:24-28). It was therefore urgent that we do not remain entangled in the evils of this world and then be trampled underfoot in the judgement. God would not override human freewill and so there remained the possibility that some would persist in choosing evil and thus go into the fire of hell. However, both Gregory of Nyssa and Macrina stressed the hope that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil.2:10-11).<sup>10</sup>

Another favourite word used to describe God is that he is Light. Here again, we note the use of the negative adjectives to show how limited is our power to behold the divine light; God is

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 60-68.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*. 80-96. 322-326.



unapproachable, ineffable light. We can only approach with reverence. Yet, such light as we have, the light of nature and of reason, point to the eternal light. Even more important is the fact that God had broken into our darkness in the gift of Jesus Christ. he is, as the Creed says, Light from Light, he is Light from God himself, the Light of the world; those who follow will know they are not walking in darkness but have the light of life; their own natural light will be given a new radiance and purity drawn from God himself (John 8:12).<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, our space is limited, yet points to boundless space. Our time is limited, yet points to eternity. Time, though limited, is important for it was our time which was capable of receiving the Saviour who within his thirty-three years and within our flesh achieved the work of our salvation. Because it was for us that he, the eternal Word, assumed our flesh amid passing time, we live, as Gregory of Nyssa said, on the boundary between two worlds. Because he came to save us, this implies there is something in us worth saving, namely the image of God. Alas, that image is distorted by wrath, cowardice and greed. These could go along with intellectual pride and confidence in the power of our reason to restore the image and attain the knowledge of God. However, recognition of this dangerous pride and confidence is not an excuse for denouncing intelligence as affording no help on the way to God. Reason can help to turn wrath, cowardice and greed into courage, caution and love. Like the woman in the parable, we have to light a candle to find our lost inheritance. The light of reason can throw light on concealed things and help us to 'aspire to the realm above' (Col.3:1). As Gregory of Nyssa expressed it, 'we human beings have here within ourselves the cause of both light and darkness'. He held that the marks of the divine image are reason and freewill. Without the use of our freewill and free choice there could be no authentic salvation.<sup>12</sup>

How Jesus achieved our salvation is a part of the secrets of God which we cannot fully grasp but we can accept what he has done for us. As Paul said, Jesus and his gift of salvation are God's

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 103, 218, 236.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 130-131.

‘inexpressible gift’ (2 Cor. 9:15). We note again the negative adjective; so wonderful is the gift that no words are adequate to describe it fully, but, wonderfully, it can be accepted and become the source of new life, a new moral obedience in this life and a hope for the life immortal hereafter.<sup>13</sup>

Macrina went so far as to say that without this hope there could be no morality beyond seeking the fleeting pleasure of the passing moment. She had to admit that many who did not share this hope lived lives of high moral integrity, but she held that a life lived in response to God’s gift had a special quality. All the Cappadocians held the Sermon on the Mount to be a moral imperative of the gospel in this life which was the stage on which we progressed to perfection’s sacred height and also on which we learned to live with and care for others, even ‘the myriads of Lazaruses at our door’. We, including rulers, are all of one blood and have mutual responsibilities and civic duties.<sup>14</sup>

The Cappadocians had a rather glamorised idea of the way these duties were carried out in Constantinople. Gregory of Nazianzus, who had to survive amid much unrest in the city, could still depict it as a city never polluted by Grecian temples and where Christian theology had triumphed over classical culture. However, as Pelikan says, the mystique of Athens remained, even in Constantinople. Christian theology, of which the Cappadocians were masters, was now clothed in Greek forms and terms. Basil said Christians needed all the travel supplies available for the heavenward journey, including classical authors. Gregory of Nazianzus said it was poor judgement to abhor a classical education.<sup>15</sup> The Cappadocians were convinced that in using the resources of the Greek cultural heritage they were doing so in the service of the gospel set forth in the Scriptures. They believed they were illuminating its inner message and preserving it from error. As John Armstrong, the eighteenth-century Scottish poet, put it, ‘they taught truths as refined as ever Athens heard’.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 282-288.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 144-149.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 175-177.

Finally, the prime interest of the Cappadocians was not theological debate or linguistic precision, important as these were. Their central concern was the worship of God and the regular life of praise, preaching and pastoral care. Basil and the two Gregorys all became bishops and were involved in the care of their people and in ensuring the regular round of worship in the churches. Basil often preached on the duty and privilege of individual and corporate prayer; he was also noted as an influential guide in shaping forms of worship. One of the orders of service still used in the Eastern Church is known as the Liturgy of St. Basil. Though this form has been much revised across the years, it is likely it still bears the imprint of the work of Basil.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the Cappadocians made no apology for their deep concern for precision of language; in their view, it was worth the pain and the struggle to have words capable of expressing the glory and mercy of God and worthy to be used in his worship. Their words are still used to express the basic doctrines of the gospel, God the holy trinity and Jesus Christ, the revelation of God and the source of our salvation through his one perfect and sufficient sacrifice. Their sense of awe before Jesus Christ, the gift of God beyond all telling, has echoed through the ages. A fine example comes from Isaac Watts:

Join all the glorious names  
of wisdom, love and power,  
That ever mortals knew,  
That angels ever bore,  
All are too mean to speak his worth,  
Too mean to set my Saviour forth.

It is a privilege to submit these pages as a tribute to Professor Russell with whom I enjoyed a fine friendship in the Banbridge Presbytery over forty years ago and whose friendship I have renewed in recent years. He has been a fine witness to the Faith transmitted to us through the New Testament and through the

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<sup>1616</sup> Toal, M.F. ed., *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, Vol. 2, 377-386.

**Knox, Christianity and Classical Culture, *IBS* 18 October 1996**

disciples of all times and places, not least the great group of Cappadocians.

**R. Buick Knox**