

# **Gospel and Culture**

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# 1. Learning the Alphabet

What has, Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the academy and the church?

This famous question raised by Tertullian, lawyer turned theologian in the Roman colony of Carthage in the third century, still rings in the ears of many Christians. Athens stands for culture and Jerusalem for Christian faith, and the twain shall never meet.

But Tertullian's rhetorical elegance did not touch the issue. More perceptive theologians and writers of the early Christian centuries would be deeply embarrassed by the suggestion of a radical dichotomy between Christian faith and human culture as made by Tertullian with such neat self-confidence. The issue of culture had to be tackled with seriousness and sensitivity, not brushed aside with a shallow complacency.

It is commonplace to say that Christian faith was not born into a vacuum. It issued out of a well-defined culture the deeply religious, monotheistic and highly organized Jewish culture. It soon entered mainly into a highly sophisticated Hellenistic culture within the vast frame of the imperial order. From its original west Asian home, apostolic Christianity spilled over into areas outside the Roman imperial borders as well. It flourished on the banks of the Euphrates and the Tigris in the Persian empire, in the Nile valley in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, along the southwestern coastal region of India. In these places Christian faith was introduced to contexts highly flavoured with the ways and values of ancient civilizations.

But the major encounter between Christian faith and secular culture during the first four centuries took place within the Graeco-Roman context. It was unique in that it left for posterity a vast literature and other records on the basis of which we reconstruct today the Christian experience of the early centuries. So sweeping and thorough going was this contextual experience of the early centuries that it later became difficult to recognize that it was only one of the many possible contexts. The Roman imperial order around the Mediterranean, the conversion of almost all the people of Europe to Christian

faith and the subsequent flourishing of European civilization *on* the Graeco-Roman ěcultural foundation,ı the colonial expansion Western European civilization ó all contributed to make that context look privileged, even exclusive. A particular context thus claimed universal significance.

The development of the Christian notion of *oikoumene* within the confines of the imperial-political *oikoumene*, that is, the Roman empire, certainly had its advantages for the vigorous growth and expansion of Christianity. However. It also led mainstream Christianity later to forget that the Christian faith had made a heroic and risky effort to . Grapple with the issue of culture and socio-political order within the particular context of the Roman\_ empire. Awareness of this in the pre-Constantinian church was blurred by the triumphalism and universalism of post-Constantinian Christianity. Western Christianity continued this spirit. It took for granted the continuation of *Romanitas* in the ideals of Christendom and later in the colonial and missionary cultural conquest of the world. The reaction against ĩclassical theologyı and absolutist dogmatic claims, which has set in today in various forms of ĩcontextual theologiesı in Asia, Africa and Latin America, is rooted in this historical situation.

The first three centuries of encounter between Christian faith and pagan culture were predominantly marked by a threefold spirit of defence, witness and proclamation,

The early theologians and church leaders had to defend the highly misunderstood and misrepresented Christian faith against the prejudices and abuses of their neighbours. A magnificent array of learned Christians, some of them practitioners of Hellenistic philosophy and rhetoric before their conversion to Christian faith, took up this task. It was an intellectual theological dialogue ó sometimes acrimonious, sometimes friendly and respectful ó between the ĩnewı faith and the long-established and complacent Hellenistic culture. The Christian church of later centuries reaped the harvest of this daring early dialogue with the ĩpaganıı with the secular, with the political-social builders of culture. The defenders of faith did not hesitate to use the powerful instruments of literary, logical and philosophical wealth of the world in the service of the gospel.

During this period the very fact of being a Christian implied the risk of witnessing *martyria*. to Christ with one's own life. Many Christians simply chose the way of martyrdom at a time when the Roman authorities resorted to coercion and torture to suppress a defiant faith that did not conform to the polytheistic, emperor-worshipping, morally negligent religion of the state. The martyrs affirmed with an unworldly poise and calm that they were Christians and would choose death rather than renounce Christ. The story of the great majority of these silent martyrs has gone unrecorded.

The task of interpreting the fact of Christ and that of the Christian community in the terms and style that appealed to people around was an urgent one; and the early pioneers of the Christian faith took it upon themselves with great care and seriousness. In the midst of persecution and adversity they proclaimed Christ the eternal Logos now incarnate, dwelling in the midst of believers through the Holy Spirit. They interpreted the formation of the faith community through baptism and its abiding in faith, hope and love through the regular celebration of the Eucharist. They hinted at the mystery and paradox of one God in three persons and three in one as underlying the unity and diversity of God's creation and of the church! Thus it was already during the long centuries of oppression and marginalization that the church elaborated- and systematized the essentials of faith in Christ to be proclaimed to the world. The sense of Christian identity was now being given concrete forms of expression.

By the -end of the Third century there was a rapidly developing institutional thrust in the internal life of the church, in its faith, order and discipline. The church had still to wait for the Edict of Milan in order to become a tolerated religion (*religio licita*), and for a few more decades after that to be established as the official religion of the empire. By that time the gathering of self-confidence and the growing worldliness of its ministers and institutions provoked a strong reaction which hastened the burgeoning ascetic-monastic movement. Zealous Christians fled the city and the urban church to seek refuge in the silence, and the arid emptiness of the desert. An opposition grew up between the civilized city, the symbol of the corrupting world, and the desert, the place for the *ascesis* of the inner person in view of

the true human destiny beyond the world.

Originally the ascetic movement marked a setback to the dialogue that had been well underway between Christian faith and human culture. Many well-meaning ascetics despised, ignored or relativized culture, even the simple art of letters. Some of the highly cultivated monks consciously rejected their learning in a romantic idealization of the simple and the rustic as better channels of divine wisdom. Representative of the spirit of early desert spirituality is a story told of an early Egyptian father:

Once Abba Arsenios revealed his thoughts to an Egyptian elder and asked him about them. But a certain other monk saw him and said to him: 'Abba Arsenios, you have had so much education in Greek and Latin, yet you ask this man, so unlettered in worldly knowledge, about your thoughts?'

Abba Arsenios said to him: 'Indeed, I know Roman and Greek letters well; but I have not yet learned even the alphabet of this simple man.'

The situation would change later with theologians like the Cappadocian fathers, who would find no essential dichotomy between secular learning and divine wisdom, and would use the former in the service of the latter.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Archmandrite Chrysostomos, *The Ancient Fathers of the Desert*, Brookline MA, Holy Cross, 1980, -. 19.

## 2. In Tune with Philosophy

The early Christian community arose from the Jewish <sup>of</sup> matrix and was profoundly marked by the religious culture of the Jews. The Christian church was understood for a long time by the Roman authorities and cultured elite as a rather curious sect of Judaism. They heaped all the displeasure and prejudice they had about Jewish religion and way of life on Christians as well. The Jewish exclusive religious beliefs and practices and their imageless and strict monotheistic worship aroused suspicion among the polytheistic Gentile neighbours. So the Christian communities too were looked down on with eyes of mistrust and contempt.

As the Christian church gradually emerged from the Jewish religious tradition as a distinct faith, rooted in the radically new recognition of Jesus of Nazareth as the crucified and risen-Messiah, the church then confronted hostility from the Jews on the one hand and from the so-called pagan World, with its reputed Hellenistic learning and forms of popular religions, on the other. From the former the church began a long weaning process, while admitting the Hebrew scripture as part of its own scripture. With the latter the church took up the double task of dialoguing with the high culture in a spirit of appreciation and respect while sharply criticizing the popular idolatrous pagan religion.

In Christianity's cultural encounter the dominant partner was Hellenistic culture, which had already established itself three centuries before Christ around the Eastern Mediterranean, and of which outposts were found as far away as the borders of India. The word *hellenismos* (from *hellenizo*, to speak Greek) originally denoted the correct use of the Greek language unadulterated by the corrupting influence of foreigners coming to Athens in the fourth century B.C.E. By the time of early Christianity, it evoked a whole complex of concepts, thought-patterns, categories, images and metaphors conveyed through the Greek language.

To the great advantage of the young Christian faith, which still bore its Jewish birthmarks, the Jews of the Roman empire were Hellenized both in the diaspora and to a great extent even in Palestine.

Philo of Alexandria, an elder contemporary of St. Paul, was a shining example of the Hellenized Jew who could interpret the Jewish tradition entirely in terms of Greek philosophical concepts and categories. Paul's ascent to the Areopagus of Athens, that ivenerable spot of Greek philosophy dramatically ě narrated in the Acts of the Apostles, is considered highly symbolic of the meeting of the Christian faith and the dominant culture. Paul, the hellenized and converted Jew, there speaks to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers about the unknown God and quotes a Greek poet. He chose the philosophical and literary heritage of the Greek culture as the springboard for dialogue and thus set the model for all later Christian theologians. If the early Christian theologians considered Greek culture (*paideia*, ieducation ě approximately the counterpart of our present-day intellectual and literary culture) as the quintessence of ^secular culture, they were convinced that Christianity, the *paideia* of Christ, was to be the continuation of the ancient Greek culture. The non-canonical author of the Acts of the Apostle Philip puts the words into Philip's mouth: ĩI have come to Athens in order to reveal to you the culture {*paideia*} of Christ. He meant that Christ, the source of the new Christian culture, replaced the classical culture of the Roman empire, and that Greek wisdom had become its instrument and handmaiden.

Striking an ultimate contrast with the arrogant flamboyance of Greek learning or the wisdom of this world, Paul pointed to the foolishness of the cross of Christ. Yet discerning Christians did not despise wisdom. In fact they sought a higher ĩwisdom. Very soon-Christian faith became understood as a new philosophy,, the true love of wisdom. -Christians are philosophers. The Christian monastic tradition further restricted the term to the domain of the ascetic vocation, the true philosopher is the monk.

In their early contacts with the Jews in Alexandria in; the third century B.C.E. learned Greeks called the Jews a ĩphilosophical raceĭ, signalling their appreciation that the Jews had developed the idea of the fundamental unity of the divine principle of the world. Philosophy also provided the link in the encounter of Greek culture with Asian cultures:-

Philosophers in Alexander's retinue on their way to India were



deeply impressed by the naked philosophers (*gym-, nosophoi*) of India. There are interesting stories of Alexander's encounter with the Indian ascetic philosophers, who were told of Plato. Pythagoras and Diogenes but apparently were not very impressed.<sup>4</sup>

It was the challenge of an alien culture that provoked the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. Werner Jaeger thinks that what prompted the creation of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, was the curiosity of the Greeks in Alexandria to discover what they called the philosophy of the barbarians. A theological dialogue simply opens up between two persons, as in the case of Trypho the Jew and the Greek philosopher in Justin Martyr's work, when one says to the other: 'I see you are a philosopher', and the other confirms it. Immediately, the two strangers are locked in a theological conversation. A philosopher is thus commonly assumed to be a person interested in God. Generally speaking, most of the second- and third-century Christian fathers took for granted the preparatory value of Greek philosophy for the gospel of Christ, and they would mention respectfully the 'barbarian' wisdom of the Chaldeans, Egyptians, -and Indians.

'Philosophy', said Justin 'Martyr, is a very great possession and very precious in the eyes of God... Those who have applied their mind to philosophy are truly saved.'<sup>5</sup> He goes on to say that philosophy is really 'one', single unified form of knowledge. It is the result of an intense search for truth, a way of union with God. However, the different schools of philosophy-Platonic, 'Stoic, Peripatetic, Pythagorean - came about because the disciples of the pioneers in philosophy were content to follow their names without 'themselves searching for the one truth.

Clement of Alexandria recognizes special divine inspiration and assistance to the great philosophers. 'These are the leaders and educators through whom the operation of providence is manifested with special clarity every time that God wishes to do more good by means of culture (*paideia*) or by some principle of thought or act of divine governance.'<sup>6</sup>

Two notable exceptions were Tertullien (as we saw in the previ-

ous chapter) and Tatian. Tertullian would not accept that Christianity is a philosophy. For him the distinction between the faith of the Christian church and the rationality of philosophy was clear-cut. He insisted on the superiority of faith over reason, thus anticipating the later Western dichotomy of reason and faith. Tatian, an intellectual from Assyria who was well versed in Greek language and culture, was vehemently opposed to the assimilation of Greek culture. In so doing he can probably be seen as the herald of the later opposition of several cultures in Asia and Africa to the domineering assumptions of Hellenistic culture at the time of great christological controversies.

The sweeping impact of Greek education and culture (*paideia*) on Christian thinking and formulations is not always fully recognized by the present-day church. What we sometimes assume to be an originally and exclusively Christian notion may have its origin in another cultural matrix. Clement, bishop of Rome, writing to a Corinthian church that was torn by internecine conflicts, exhorted them to concord and obedience using the rhetorical methods and style of the pagan masters. Concord (*homonoia*) the high ideal of community proposed by Clement, had been the regular slogan of political leaders, educators, poets and peacemakers in the classical Greek city-state (*polis*).<sup>1</sup> Concordia had become a goddess in Rome, invoked by people and rulers alike. Philosophers had extolled concord as the principle that holds the universe together, the organizing instrument of world peace and cosmic order.

Clement was probably inspired by Paul's metaphor of the body and limbs in 1 Corinthians 12. The story of the strife between the members of the body until they finally realize that they are all members of one body and need each other goes back to Greek sources. Clement himself uses these sources in praise of *homonoia*, now evoked as the unity and concord of the body of Christ.

The church is preeminently the Body of Christ in Pauline and later patristic understanding: it represents the model of the ideal new humanity which the Christian faith proclaimed. However, the ideals of the Greek *polis* played a key role in the formation of this idea. The word (*ekklesia*) itself demonstrates it. Obviously the biblical Chris-

tian understanding of the church cannot be reduced simply on this basis. It does however show the result of the interaction between the gospel and the political-social culture of a given locality. There is deliberate reflection on the part of Clement to evoke the paradigm in Greek culture with which he is acquainted as a model for the human social behaviour within the church. The order of the community reflects the cosmic order. The discipline of the members in creating unity must be similar to the spirit of disciplined oneness displayed by members of highly organized societies like the Roman empire.

The *spiritual* unity of the church as conceived by Clement of Rome evokes the prominent Greek concept of *syinpnoia*, literally *ibreathing together*. The whole body breathes together the same spirit (*pneuma*). It is this common spirit that assumes the unity of the organism. This, was an accepted principle in Greek medicine and several philosophical schools from Stoicism to neo-Platonism. The advantage of this cultural Context for interpreting the specifically Christian idea of the work of the Holy Spirit is evident.

In spite of all the appreciation of Greek education and culture by most of the early Christian writers, they were keen to speak of the culture/education of the Lord (*paideia ton Kyriou*). Clement of Rome and several of his illustrious successors sincerely aspired to create a Christian culture around the person and work of Christ while they themselves made use of many of the literary, philosophical and political ideas and devices in fostering the life of the church. The concluding prayer of the Bishop of Rome's letter explicitly gives thanks to God for sending Christ through whom you have *educated* and sanctified us and honoured us.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1961, pp. 6ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Paulos Gregorios. *Enlightenment East and West*, Delhi, 1989, pp. 47f. <sup>5</sup> Justin Martyr. *Dialogue with Trypho*, II, 1

<sup>6</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, VI, 17:158, J., -2.

<sup>7</sup> W. Jaeger, *op. cit.*, pp. 13ff.

### 3. In Defence of Faith

Within the broad range of responses to pagan culture and religion, one occasionally finds violent denunciations; of popular religiosity by the Apologists. Paganism in general is considered to be a world of lies and deceit, vanity and illusion, sexual licentiousness and idolatry. The apologists attribute these vices to the pagan polytheistic understanding of God. They want to correct the erroneous beliefs.

Justin's apology, addressed to the Roman emperors and the senate, assumes that love of learning is integral to the political vocation. So, following the Platonic fashion, Justin thinks that rulers who are also philosophers and philosophers who are also rulers will readily understand the Christian position, which is based on reason (*logos*).

Reason dictates that those who are truly pious and truly philosophers love only the truth, and that they follow those who turn aside from traditional beliefs whenever they are wrong. Not only does sound reason demand that the lover of truth should not follow those who act unjustly or teach erroneous doctrines, but that he must choose, by all means, in the very face of death, even if it costs him his life, to say and to do what is right. You then take care to listen, since you are called pious and philosophers and guardians of justice and lovers of learning.

Justin identifies himself as a Christian and pleads for justice and fairness in the treatment of Christians, who are unjustly hated and shamefully treated.

The difficulty with the pagans, according to Justin, is that they do not follow the teachings of their own philosophers. The gods of popular religion are demons who need to be viewed with extreme caution if one truly follows the philosophical tradition. When Socrates tried to expose these demons he was put to death by those who delighted in the evil ways of the demons. But Socrates wanted to follow reason and virtue. It was the same reason which was later manifested as Jesus Christ among the non-Greeks.

Justin affirms that Christians today are following the same reason

and virtue, but still they are being accused and persecuted by those whose tradition extols reason as the fundamental intellectual, spiritual and ethical norm.

The Christian tradition was consistently opposed to the mythology created by the poets. But so were Plato and other pagan philosophers. The stories of gods and goddesses told by the poets were unedifying for human beings who wanted to adhere to the universal reason and a life of virtue. Gods who indulge in licentiousness, practise injustice, quarrel and burn with jealousy are really demons who pervert humanity. They cannot be models for any decent society. So the pagan life was closely associated with the life-style of the gods and goddesses as narrated by the poets. The practice of magic, wanton life, mutual hatred and violence, oppression and exploitation of the weak - all were signs of a debased life directly associated with popular religious practices.

The Christian life-style had to be conceived differently. Christian beliefs and practices should reflect holiness and justice, compassion and forgiveness, because it is reason itself which is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, their Lord and Saviour. As Justin saw it, true Christian life is completely in accordance with Christ. The Christians' poise and calm in face of suffering, their gentleness and patience, their obedience to the civil authorities are proofs of the quality of their teacher Jesus Christ, who taught them to live in the light of reason.

Justin draws a sharp contrast between the former ways of those people who became Christians and their present conduct. This radical change has been caused by their faith in the word (reason) of God. They have turned from fornication to self-control, from magic to trust in the

unbegotten and good God, from materialistic and possessive urges to the sharing of material resources with the needy, from hatred of people of foreign races and customs to table companionship with them, from the killing of others to praying for one's enemies and leading them to the good precepts of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Moving from Justin to Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215), another outstanding interpreter of Christian faith in the early centu-

ries, we encounter a true bridge-builder between Christian faith and secular culture. If Justin exercises his literary and intellectual culture in defence of Christianity, Clement uses another proven method to speak to the Greeks: the form of exhortation (*protrepticus*) skillfully used by Stoic philosophers and by Aristotle himself. On the Areopagus St. Paul had used the style of exhortation to try to persuade his listeners to faith in the incarnate manifestation of the unknown God.<sup>1</sup> Clement follows the Pauline model in content and yet adopts the form of the pagan intellectual didactic tradition.-

Like Justin and other theologians of the early centuries, Clement too fulminates against the pagan gods and their absurdities. The God of Christians is the true God spoken of by the prophets. He places three sets of pagan gods against the God of the prophets: the gods of the people, the gods of the philosophers and the gods of the poets.<sup>3</sup> Clement conceives a gradual movement from the darkness of ignorance to the enlightenment of knowledge, from indulgence to self-control, from unrighteousness to righteousness, from godlessness to God.

It is in this context that Clement expresses his displeasure of art, which he associated primarily with the making of statues, which invariably became idols and objects of worship. So when art flourished, error increased.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of philosophers and poets there were saving elements, though the ambiguity remains. Yet they are not far from the Truth, they bear witness to the power of truth, yet in a veiled and indirect manner. They are sparks of truth and not yet the fire.

So Clement would place Holy Scripture far above the creative imagination of artists, poets and philosophers in terms of its truth, and inspiration and the mode of life it recommends. About the Scriptures he writes: 'Stripped of all stylistic adornment, without, either suave fluency for seductive flattery, they nevertheless raise-up a man bound, down by evil.... and heal many sicknesses.'<sup>4</sup>

Clement provides a critique of the prevailing, notion of culture as embellishment of vain words and sterile concepts. The liberating, healing and reconciling quality of the gospel is more important than

the decorations of the spoken or written word.

Clement has much respect for the barbarian wisdom, that is, the ancient cultures outside the Greek world. The Egyptian prophets, the Druids of the Gauls, the Celtic philosophers, the wise Persians, the Brahmins and Buddhists of India are all inspired by the quest for truth. Their claims of knowing the truth cannot be easily dismissed. Clement, however, attributes a special role to Moses and the Jewish prophets, who are of all the peoples the oldest by far. The insights of the ancient sages may not be crystal clear, yet they are reflections and approximations of truth given to them through angelic powers or by the direct activity of the Logos. It is like the Logos sowing the seeds of truth in all these ancient and diverse cultures.<sup>5</sup>

Clement gives no credence to the idea of the self-existence of Greek wisdom. The Greek sages and philosophers have borrowed or stolen a great deal from such ancient cultures as India and Persia, and especially from the Jews. Some philosophers like Plato and Pythagoras must have received wisdom as a gift of divine providence, recognizing within Greek philosophy, a movement away from the original perceptions of Plato and Aristotle, Zeno and Pythagoras. Clement tries to see the compatibility of the Christian message with the foundational vision of Greek wisdom. He does not believe that St. Paul was condemning all Greek philosophy when, he considered the wisdom of this world as folly in God's eyes. He rejects only those presumptuous schools of philosophy which deny the providence of God the creator and have an inadequate view of the spiritual dimension. The Word does not want, says Clement, the person of faith to be indifferent to truth, and in fact lazy. For he says, I seek and you shall find. Searching and reaching out to other traditions and thought-forms is only encouraged by Christ the Word.

Kathleen McVey identifies five criteria in Clement considered necessary for a philosophy to be acceptable to Christians:

1. The material creation is seen, as neither accidental nor evil, and God must be recognized as its Creator.
2. The providential nature of the life of the universe is seen even

in matters of detail. God's care is manifested often in natural laws and in God's dealings with larger human communities. God is this ultimate arbiter even in details of individual life.

3. One should acknowledge that the forces of nature are subject to the power of the Creator and that there is no co-eternity between the constitutive elements of the universe and the Creator.

4. Christ's teaching envisages gradual but steady ethical and spiritual growth for individuals and humanity as a whole. Through the moderation of the passions and then by the achievement of *apatheia* or detachment, one gradually rises to the level of participation in the life of God and conformity to the image of God in Christ.

5.-Recognizing the divine plan (*oikonomia*) in Christ, Clement highlights the Christocentric angle of interpreting all reality. So for Christians, Christ the Logos becomes the hermeneutical key for understanding all cultures.

Clement looks at the Logos as the organizing power of the universe, 'the all-harmonious, melodious, holy instrument of God' who opened the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf and healed all kinds of infirmities. 'The instrument of God loves humankind.' Christ is the new Orpheus who liberates us from the yoke of idolatry and makes us beautiful instruments of music, formed after God's own image and tuned by the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> This liberates the Logos from any rationalistic exclusivism and establishes a common ground for all the best aspirations of humanity across the cultures.

The wisdom figure of the Old Testament and the Logos of Middle Platonism are combined in the concept of Christ the Saviour as Sophia incarnate. Here Clement -and later fathers like the Cappadocians- stand in a long tradition of Alexandrian Jewish wisdom exemplified in such personalities as Philo. The feminine and maternal associations of Sophia/Wisdom/Hokmah have been especially noted by recent theologians. As McVey says, 'the images of God as the nursing mother and mother bird communicate with unique poignancy the depth of the divine *philanthropidē*.'<sup>1</sup>

Clement's image of Christ as Teacher marks his understanding of



philosophers and cultures. Christ is both *paedagogos*, the child's instructor in the basics, and *dida-skalos*, the teacher at an advanced level of knowledge and practice. The literary and philosophical and spiritual traditions of all cultures are considered part of the gradual guiding and teaching activity of Christ the Teacher. Nothing is therefore excluded as alien to the work of the Word. Clement recognizes the varieties of ways in which Christ the Teacher operates and his many tones of voice and many methods of human salvation. The instruction of humanity towards perfection and participation in God's life benefit from all sources of knowledge, insight and spiritual experiences. However, one must grow from mere artistry and vain luxury to the appreciation of true beauty, in which one discerns art not by the criteria of bodily adornment or the external trappings of beauty but rather by the qualities of the soul - self-control, self-sufficiency, self-reliance, thrift and temperance.

Tatian's *Discourse to the Greeks* (c. 170) represents an extreme position in attacking Greek philosophy as nonsensical:

Your nonsense originates with your elementary school teachers, and while you divide out your own wisdom you have been separated from the true wisdom. Your schools of wisdom are named after men. You do not know God. but destroy one another fighting among yourselves. Therefore you are nothing at all... When we recognized that you were people of this kind we left you. We are no longer interested in your literature, but we follow the Word of God.

In a similar vein, Theophilus of Antioch also attacks the arrogance of the Greeks. In his work *To Autolycus* he engages in a discussion with a pagan interlocutor. Theophilus creates a chronology in order to prove that the Christian position is based on a more ancient authority than the Greek. The Greek culture has no basis for any superiority since the Greeks themselves acknowledge that they received the alphabet from the Chaldeans or Egyptians or Phoenicians. They commit many blunders and engage in vain talk whenever they speak about God. Although they speak respectfully of Homer, Hesiod and other poets, they were unable to discover the truth of the incorruptible God of glory and instead persecute those who worship the true God. They bestow honours and prizes on those who mock God

in elegant language and in ornamental styles, but oppress, torture and kill those who strive for virtue and practise holy living.

Theophilus's critique of Greek cultural and literary elegance is based on moral grounds. He attacks the Greek pride in learning on the ground that it is mostly perverted and does not perceive its own hidden signs pointing to truth.

Origen (185-253), the distinguished Christian intellectual, exegete and theologian who taught at Alexandria around the middle of the third century, took up the task of explaining and defending Christian faith against its cultured despisers. Celsus, the pagan philosopher who had written against Christianity some seventy years before Origen, was still provoking the best minds of the church. The major criticism levelled by Celsus against Christians was that they were simple-minded in their understanding of reality. He tried to prove the naivete of the Christian Scripture by placing, biblical texts side by side with passages from Plato and arguing that the Greek learning was more sophisticated and expressed with refinement and style some of the crude ideas in the Christian Scripture. Celsus attempted to prove the cultural backwardness of the Christian tradition on the basis of its origins in the rustic culture of the Hebrews.

Robert Sider observes that the heart of Origen's answer to Celsus's criticism lies in the distinction he makes between faith and knowledge, between two classes of hearers to whom the message is directed, the multitude in whom the message is intended simply to inspire faith, and those advanced in Christian knowledge who know the deep things of God. Origen defends the plain style of the Scriptures in comparison with the splendour of artful diction on the ground that Jesus and his disciples kept in view the character of the message, which not only embraced truth but also had the power to win over the multitude:

Once persuaded and instructed each, according to his ability, ascends to the ineffable mysteries contained in the apparent simplicity of the language. Indeed, if I may speak boldly, the beautiful and studied diction of Plato and others like him has benefited very few if indeed one can speak of benefit at all while many have received

help from the speech of those who have taught or written simply but at the same time with sure aim and effective force.<sup>1</sup> Thus you will find Plato in the hands of those who regard themselves as philologists, but Epictetus is admired by anyone who comes upon him looking for help, sensing in his words the source of their own improvement. I do not say this to slander Plato, for most of the world has found him helpful, but rather to point to the intent of those who say, 'My speech and my message came not in the plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power; of God' (1 Cor. 2:4,5).

In a rather elitist way, Origen sets forth several levels of perceiving the meaning of scriptural passages. While pagan wisdom catches a glimpse of the superficial aspect of divine knowledge, it is only the initiated in the church who receive the deeper layers of truth. The Holy Spirit inspires Christian knowledge, which kindles a fire in the soul and transforms character. So it cannot be compared to the propositions of Greek philosophy. Divine wisdom, at the highest level, belongs to the *charismata* of God. Close to this, at the second level, is what we call knowledge (*gnosis*), given to those who possess clear understanding. At the third level is faith (*pistis*), which helps the simple-minded-for they too must be saved (cf. 1 Cor. 12:8-9). It is not to the lowly or uninstructed that one expounds the 'deep things of God.'

Origen is confident that the word of God urges us to use dialectical method. Celsus cites Plato's saying that 'illumination comes to those who use his method of question and answer.' Origen cites Scripture as emphasizing the scientific method of discursive reason and the method of cross-examination to arrive at true knowledge (Prov. 10:17; Wisdom 21:18). If some Christians are sluggish and lazy and do not 'search them out' nor seek to understand or ask God about them 'as Jesus himself commanded' - nor knock on the door of the hidden mysteries of Scripture, then it is not the Scriptures which are to be faulted as naive and devoid of wisdom.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*. II.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV.

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Sider, *The Gospel and Its Proclamation*, Wilmington. Del.. Michael Glazier. 1983. p.75. -í

<sup>4</sup> Clement of Alexandria. *Protrepticus*. VIII.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen McVey, 'Christianity and Culture: Dead White European Males and the Study of Patristics', *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*. Vol. 14, no. 2. 1994. p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alexandria. *Stromateis*. I. 2.51.4.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp.119ff.

<sup>9</sup> *Protrepticus*. I. 5.3-4.

<sup>10</sup> McVey, *op. cit.*, pp.123f.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> *Protrepticus*. I. 7.6-8.

<sup>13</sup> Tatian. *Discourse to the Greeks*. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Sider. *op. cit.*, p.96.

<sup>15</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*. VI.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, VI.7.

## 4. Pilgrims' Progress

One of the decisive elements for the Christian attitude to culture was the self-understanding of the church as a pilgrim community. The overwhelming aspiration of the apostolic community towards the heavenly Jerusalem characterized its relationship with the surrounding society. Earlier we cited the famous, first-century letter written by Clement, the bishop of the young church in Rome, to the Christian community in Corinth. That letter began with memorable words of greeting: 'The pilgrim church of Rome writing to the church of God in Corinth which is in pilgrimage.' The early church, which consisted mainly of the marginalized and the poor, of slaves and the socially depressed, was powerfully moved by the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in which justice would reign and the tears of the poor and the oppressed would be wiped away. The community which became the object of ridicule among both Jews and Gentiles found nothing of abiding value in the culture and art of contemporary society. On their understanding, the fleeting values of this world were deceptive. For them the end of history was imminent.

The death and resurrection of Christ inaugurated a new age. The present world is still a reality, but it will soon be eclipsed by the coming age. The apocalypticism of the earlier Christian community ('the day is at hand') is moderated in the pilgrimage motif. The latter allows for some span of time. The duration of this time is that of the pilgrims' progress. Since culture belongs to the form of this world which is transitory and is already passing away, it has no real relevance in the life of Christians. If culture has any value at all for the pilgrim community, it is only as a sign of the fleeting nature of the earthly existence. 'Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come' (Heb. 13:14). Culture in its civilizational aspect has always been associated with the refinements of urban life. The heavenly city which is yet to come relativizes all the achievements of the earthly city to the point of total indifference.

Even so, the pilgrims had to find a *modus vivendi* with society at large. The model for the Christian style of life is provided by a late second century or early third century document known as *Letter to*

*Diognetus*. Both the author and the addressee are unknown. What is known for sure is that the writer of this letter is a firm Christian believer who is nevertheless quite at home in Platonic notions and resorts to them for the interpretation of a smooth Christian existence in the world. After deploring the idolatrous practices of the Gentiles and the legalistic-ritualistic religion of the Jews, as; was usual among Christian writers of that time, the author goes on to point out that Christians have no, separately visible social or political group identity:

For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity-or deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they put forward a merely human teaching, as some people do. Yet although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land.

To put it simply: what the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, but does not belong to the body, and Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world... The soul, when faring tiddly as to food and drink, grows better; so too Christians, when punished, day by day increase more and more: It is no less a post than this that God has ordered them, and they must not try to evade it.

The author does claim a uniqueness for Christians, yet without making any claim on other people's territory - geographically, culturally or ideologically. Christians are present everywhere, yet they never impose themselves on others. They have no cultural identity

which is different from their surroundings, yet their unique culture as Christians easily shows itself. Their faith as Christians helps them to achieve the remarkable feat of being at the same time aliens in their own land and natives in alien lands. The author uses the model of the soul-body relationship as the key for conceiving the modality of Christian presence. This is somewhat similar to the isalt of the earthî metaphor in the Christis teaching (Matt. 5:13).

For a rather marginalized Christian community under an oppressive regime, without any large material possessions or institutional structures, this is a clear way to avoid unnecessary conflicts with the non-Christian world and yet maintain the quality of Christian faith and silent witness in society. There is neither a direct defence of Christian faith in face of hostile forces nor a total detachment from the world by virtue of the pilgrim character of the Christian community. Interaction with culture is neither rejected nor considered as of any particular value except that of discreet Christian witness.

The *Letter to Diognetus* seems to represent a fairly acceptable Christian attitude to the world for many in those days as well as today in certain minority situations of Christianity.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Letter to Diognetus*, 5, 6.

## 5. In the Service of the Gospel

The end of the persecution of the church in the Roman empire early in the fourth century heralded a new self-understanding of the church. The situation in which the pagan culture was the dominant power in the face of which the Christian church as a minority community had to defend itself was reversed. Christianity was now accepted as the major partner in shaping culture, weaving the threads of unity in the vast empire.

The Christian community gradually gathered enough self-confidence to say that the Roman empire flourished with the advent of Christianity. Eusebius of Caesarea, church historian and great admirer of the emperor Constantine, believed that the kingdom of God had arrived on earth with the conversion of Constantine and the beginning of the imperial support for the church as a legitimate religion of the empire. The borders of the Roman empire (the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited world) corresponded with the borders of the earthly church. Graeco-Roman culture gradually declined, although there were isolated efforts, such as those of Emperor Julian (the Apostate), to revive the glories of paganism and to prohibit the spread of Christian education and moral ideals.

The outstanding Christian theologians to deal explicitly with the question of culture in this period were the three great Cappadocian fathers - Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory of Nyssa was a younger brother of Basil and the other Gregory was a friend of both. All came from rich landowning families in Cappadocia.

Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus were sent to the academic circles in Athens for classical education. There they developed a close friendship and were co-workers in the church for many years to come.

Basil (330-379) became the well-known archbishop of Caesarea and a defender of Christian faith against pagan and Christian heretical attacks. One of the many writings of his mature years was a short treatise on education and the use of classical Greek literature, addressed to young people.<sup>1</sup>



Basil encouraged all kinds of learning as a useful too for the battles of life. Moses himself was educated in Egyptian learning at the court of the pharaohs, and it certainly aided him in his contemplation of the One Who Is. Daniel also received wisdom from the Babylonians and was led to the knowledge of divine mysteries. Basil cites copiously from Greek poets, philosophers and rhetoricians. He advocates discernment in the reading and use of literary works. The characters in mythology, poetry and plays could be ambiguous moral figures. When they represent virtue and goodness, they should be considered as models and pioneers of culture; when they stand for the dark aspects of life such as licentiousness, gluttony and other evil ways the student should close his or her eyes on them. Students should shun all hypocrisy by which people speak elegantly of virtue and praise great men and women, yet show no sign of it in their personal lives.

According to Basil, the literary and intellectual heritage is certainly to be respected and studied earnestly. For a Christian, however, it is like the luxuriant foliage of a fruit tree. Producing the fruit is the essential thing. Yet it is desirable if the tree is richly decorated with an abundance of leaves as well.

Basil himself made a distinction between the sermons intended for church services and this treatise for young people. In the former he would use mostly scriptural references and examples, while in the latter he draws from a wide range of literary sources for his illustrations. Here he sticks to the norm of discernment. The Christian Scripture and spiritual-moral ideals are the measuring rods for a Christianis approach to culture.

Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390), educated at Athens for about ten years under well-known pagan masters of the time, dedicated all his rhetorical, literary and intellectual gifts to promoting Christian faith. As he himself put it in an autobiographical poem, he understood his own vocation as iturning the bastard letters to the: service of those that are true.<sup>1</sup>

As a rhetorician, philosopher, poet and theologian, Gregory of Nazianzus was supremely conscious of the power of the word (*logos*). Like other eminent classical thinkers and theologians of the early

church, he considered that the illogical (rational) nature of human beings is one of the most important characteristics that distinguishes them from other creatures.

Gregory found the connecting link between human culture and Christian faith precisely in this divine gift of *logos* to humanity. He knew that reducing *logos* to mere rationality, as has happened in our times, would not help. So he broadens the notion to transcendent dimensions and connects the human *logos*, or all that stands for the complex human culture, to the divine Logos, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. This is the vital and saving connection. Left to itself human culture is not capable of producing fruits that are abiding. Further more, it may counter the forces of good by becoming the instrument of base instincts. So culture (*logos*) becomes meaningful only in its vital connection with the Word of God incarnate. Humanity and its culture are raised to a new level of self-understanding through this linkage.

Gregory is profoundly convinced that God's creation is essentially good. Culture, therefore, as product of human creative activity, is capable of participating in and manifesting the goodness of the Creator.

Although Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) did not have the opportunity of receiving formal university education at Athens, he learned from his brother Basil and older friend Nazianzen, as well as other teachers available to him. But he was largely Self-taught. His father was a rhetorician himself and probably gave his sons a sound basis in classical education.- Gregory's work thus shows a thorough knowledge of the Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and neo-Platonic schools of thought. There are also indications in his sermons and writings of more than a superficial interest in science, art, medicine and music.

Indeed, so passionately was Gregory of Nyssa interested in the arts and philosophy of the secular world that he left the service of the church as a reader and became a professional teacher of pagan learning. His friend and guide Nazianzen became rather worried about his orientation and rebuked him for overturning the priority of Scripture over Greek classics set by Basil and himself. Gregory of Nyssa did

later come to a stricter Christian attitude to culture, but early in his career he seemed to be rather fascinated by the splendour of Greek learning. Comparing him with the other two Cappadocians, one Nyssa scholar observes: Basil and Nazianzen believed that bishops should keep away from too much contamination through pagan contacts. Nyssa on the other hand seemed to have believed, at least in this early period, in the necessity of direct contact with unbelieving intellectuals.

Gregory too takes Moses as an example to illustrate the proper relation between Christian faith and culture. Moses was brought up in the wisdom of the Egyptians before he was called to be the liberator of Israel. Pharaoh's daughter acted as his foster mother, drawing him out of the water and rearing him like an Egyptian prince. Pharaoh's daughter was barren herself; and Gregory of Nyssa saw in this the symbol of the ultimate sterility of Egyptian wisdom or secular culture. Yet Moses, the one chosen by God to be the leader of God's people, was brought up in the lap of that culture, and it stood him in good stead.

All three of the Cappadocians had to fight a common enemy, namely Eunomius, a fellow Cappadocian who became bishop of Cyzicus around 360. Eunomius was an astute student of sophisticated techniques of reasoning. He was a radical Arian who, with the help of Aristotelian dialectic, argued for a form of the Arianism which had been condemned at the council of Nicea in 325. Eunomius and his friends were at home in the philosophical categories which were popular at the time and made an effort to adapt the content of the Christian faith to pagan philosophy. It was an attempt at inculturation or indigenization; but according to the Cappadocians Eunomius, got it in the wrong order.

In the understanding of the Cappadocian fathers, the key to culture lies in God's creative activity. For Basil, there is no gift in the created order which is not inspired by the Holy Spirit. For Nazianzen, creation is the overflow of God's goodness. For Nyssa, all creation is called to be deified and can participate in God's very being. 'Christianity is the imitation of God's nature,' says Gregory of Nyssa. So Christian faith by its very character is open to God's creation.

Creation, in other words, is the continuing *energeia* or activity of God. Human creativity and culture fall within the all-pervasive divine operation. However, human freedom has to cooperate continually with the Spirit of God in guiding creation from the power of darkness to the realm of light and transfiguration. Human creativity is an act of freedom, one of the supreme gifts of God to humanity. Since evil is present in the world it can be the source of ambiguity and corruption in any human culture, though ultimately it has no substance or kingdom, as Nazianzen puts it. Here is the need for human culture (*logos*) to refer to the critical principles of a transcendent norm.

For the early Christians, the Russian Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky has pointed out, culture was not an abstract entity but a concrete reality, represented to them in the Graeco-Roman culture of their day. Christians were critical of it because that culture was badly in need of some scathing criticism which purged it of its shadiness and shadowiness. If they were critical of culture, they meant precisely the culture of their time; and this culture was both alien and inimical to the gospel.

The Cappadocians attributed all creative activity in the universe to the divine operation (*energeia*) of God in creation. As far as intellectual knowledge is concerned our own intellects and conceptual-linguistic faculties are confined to the created order. Therefore, they can never hope to perceive anything of the essential mystery (*ousia*) of God's nature. But God in his compassionate love and tender mercy for humanity has granted us the possibility to participate in his nature in view of our own transfiguration. As bearers of the image of God and endowed with freedom of choice we are called to take the initiative for leading the whole creation to this participatory experience of divinization.

The Christian concern for culture is rooted in this understanding of the vocation of all humanity and the whole created order for transformation and eventual participation in God's nature. The important thing to remember here is that culture is not considered as a static reality. On the contrary, it is constantly open to challenges and changes, precisely because it is the product of *human* individual and

collective creativity. Cultural activity by its very nature shares in the dynamic quality of humanity as it is called to co-activity (*synergia*) with the Spirit of God. As in the case of human nature endowed with the freedom of choice, the human cultural sphere is also constantly facing the threat of evil and non-being. Hence the necessity for the unceasing movement of culture to the source of light and life.

The Cappadocian critique of the secular was directed against its sense of self-sufficiency and arrogance and its general tendency to confine the human search within the techniques and forms of established cultural categories. This petrifies culture as the static product of a particular civilization. That is at the root of their sharp critique of theologians like Eunomius, who tried to adapt Christian faith to the laws of rhetoric and dialectic and thus shut out the possibilities for transcendence.

The incarnation, with its union of the spiritual and the material in Christ, constitutes the very ground of dialogue between Christian faith and culture. The Cappadocians, like other outstanding representatives of the great tradition of the church, would thus highlight the role of humanity in reconciling these conventionally dichotomous spheres of matter and spirit. Any authentic cultural achievement will harmonize the spiritual and the material, with the latter entering new levels of meaning and insight. The model is nothing other than the union of humanity and divinity in Christ. Human nature, which is ordinarily subject to death, corruption and dissolution, was elevated to life by its union with the eternal Logos of God. The ambiguities of human culture are obvious to us. But in the Christian view as understood by the Cappadocian culture, in its dynamic aspiration to reach the Good and the Beautiful, transcends its own limitations and participates in that which is True.

The Cappadocians were supremely positive about the nature and calling of creation. To the extent that they took a critical stance vis-à-vis the culture of their day it was because they could easily detect the signs of deterioration in Graeco-Roman civilization, which had pretended to include all culture and in the process mixed up the false-values of a decaying civilization with the products of human creativity.

The Cappadocian fathersí, highly optimistic view of human nature had Platonic as well as Semitic roots. But essentially it sprang from the Christian understanding of the union of God and humanity in Christ. For these; theologians, who were keenly devoted to -ascetic and monastic tradition, union between the sensible world and the spiritual world kept the order and orientation of creation. Matter or body is a ífellow servantî of the soul or spirit, and is destined to be divinized along with it. The visible and the sensible merge with the transcendent and acquire a new meaning.

Human beings are the exemplary locus of this union of matter and spirit. So Gregory of Nyssa would call - the human being a border creature, a mediator between the realm of matter and the realm of spirit. By nature and vocation humanity is a reconciling power in the cosmic order. So human culture too participates in this process of reconciliation of disparate elements in human nature as well as in all of Godís creation. This is where culture, which includes all achievements of human mind and spirit - from techniques of meditation to state-of-the-art technology - acquires its right orientation and meaning.

The critique of culture provided by the Cappadocian trio is the result of their deep awareness of the identity of the gospel. They can freely make use of Hellenistic education and culture while pointing to the particularity of the Christian message. For example, the idea of the human being as a microcosm containing all the elements that constitute the universe of the macrocosm was a widely accepted anthropological notion in learned circles of the time. The Cappadocians were very respectful of this idea; yet they went beyond it. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, said that it is ultimately no honour for human beings to be in the likeness of the material creation, but that true human dignity is derived from the fact that humanity is created in the image of God.

This divine resemblance becomes a common ground for all human beings irrespective of their race, language or religion. The cultural aspiration of a people or an individual is rooted in the constant effort to conform to the true image of God in humanity.

The patristic synthesis of cultural elements with specifically Christian understanding fostered a cross-cultural dissemination of ideas in new ways. Werner Jaeger observes that Gregory of Nyssa was instrumental in transferring the ideas of Greek culture in their Platonic form into the life of the ascetic-monastic movement that arose in Asia Minor and the Middle East. From Pontus and Cappadocia, elements of this new synthesis travelled to Syria and Mesopotamia and were later picked up by Islamic mystics, through whom they reached the Latin West.

One can follow the itinerary of these ideas in the mediaeval West and from there to the Renaissance and the rise of humanist ideals in Europe. The Christian humanism of the fourth-century fathers, their emphasis on human dignity and the human capacity to participate in God's nature were at the - root of the humanism of Erasmus.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Homily*, XXII.

<sup>2</sup> Paulos Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence*. Kottayam, Sophia Publications. 1980, p.xvi.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Christianity- and Culture*, Nordland Publ. Co., 1974? p.23.

<sup>4</sup> W. Jaeger. *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, pp.99ff.

## 6. Gospel, Cultures and Transfiguration

The patristic tradition did not have a uniform approach to the issue of gospel and culture. As we have seen, some of the fathers of the church were more open-minded and adopted a more subtle attitude to culture than others. While some completely condemned everything that was outside the church, others demonstrated a sustained interest in what was happening beyond the Christian fold. Some of the most outstanding fathers recognized the positive significance of the cultural-spiritual heritage of humanity for the understanding of Christian faith. Their contributions have been deeply engraved in the collective memory of the church and have decisively shaped the Christian tradition. This is what we refer to as the patristic heritage today.

In the preceding pages we have focussed on the case of the undivided church within the Roman and Byzantine empires and its encounter with the Greek culture until the end of the fourth century. This is perhaps the most widely known and certainly the most profusely documented example from that period. We should not however lose sight of the fact that there were several other cases of early encounter between the Christian gospel and different cultural contexts in Asia and Africa.

The one church within the Roman and Byzantine empires later emerged clearly as two predominantly distinct traditions - Greek and Latin - expressing different sensitivities in theological, liturgical and spiritual perceptions. They were two different local traditions in the best sense of the term. As the Roman empire became officially Christian, the Greek tradition especially manifested a prodigious creativity which resulted in the shaping of a Christian culture. Other equally significant liturgical and cultural traditions such as Syrian, Coptic and Armenian were ignored. All the so-called pagan elements were progressively eliminated by the expansion of the Christian culture. For a long time to come there was no issue of gospel and culture in the Roman and Byzantine churches since church and society were no longer easily distinguished from each other. This led to an



absolutization of the local which claimed universal validity over less powerful cultural contexts.

In the transition period during which the Christian church slowly emerged from the social and political margins to become the powerful state religion of the Roman empire, the fathers of the church still retained the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel in relation to the society outside. The prophetic and missionary character of their work arose from their awareness of this distinctive quality of the gospel. They did not identify the values of the kingdom of God with the values of contemporary society, from which they maintained a critical, distance. Their prophetic criticism of society and some of its cultural patterns pointed to the way for the missionary outreach of the good news of Jesus Christ. In situations where the church is too well integrated into society, structurally or ideologically, the prophetic-missionary edge of the gospel can be blunted. Some of the Church Fathers might even have considered marginality as constitutive of the witnessing role of the Christian church - *the little sheepfold*.<sup>1</sup>

Students of the history of Christianity know how significant a role the cultural factor played in the major divisions of the church during the early centuries. The christological controversy around the Council of Chalcedon in 451 alienated the famous Oriental church traditions such as the Syrian and Coptic (Egyptian) from the Greek and Latin traditions, which were supported by Roman imperial power. Although the nature of the union of divinity and humanity in the incarnate Christ was the central bone of contention, there was a decisive cultural factor - the opposition of Egyptian and Syro-Palestinian cultures on the margins of the empire to the overarching Hellenistic culture and the unilateral exercise of authority by Roman ecclesiastical powers. By this time the, *golden age* of the fathers was already on the decline, and prominent church traditions had become more and more insensitive to the less powerful cultures.

A recovery of the best in the patristic approach to culture can be of help in the world of today, when Christianity is increasingly being marginalized in a secular culture. Christian communities need great power of discernment and a prophetically critical distance in their approach to some forms of contemporary secular culture. However,

the Christian churches which maintain the gospel tradition should also exhibit enough confidence and openness to dialogue with the best products of human intellect, imagination and creativity as expressed in secular culture. We need constantly to be reminded of what Basil of Caesarea said in the fourth century: 'Not a single gift reaches creation without the Holy Spirit.'

All that is true, good and beautiful in human cultures is inspired by the Spirit of God. Yet as the fathers insisted, the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God is the sole criterion for discerning these qualities in any culture. The discernment is done not in any narrow moralistic and legalistic way, but in the vast framework of created reality which is sustained by the will and love of the Triune God. Humanity and all its cultural expressions are constantly being called to transcend themselves in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. The issue of gospel and cultures, in the patristic perspective, is nothing other than the issue of the transfiguration of all reality into the infinite possibilities of the kingdom of God.