HARNACK’S HELLENIZED CHRISTIANITY OR FLOROVSKY’S “SACRED HELLENISM”: QUESTIONING TWO METANARRATIVES OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH LATE ANTIQUE CULTURE

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The literature on the subject of the “Fathers and Hellenism,” the initially proposed topic of my lecture at this conference, is oceanic. I will not make a bold attempt at drinking this ocean in the present essay. Instead, I will limit my task to establishing the following three points. First, I note that the term “Hellenization” is insufficient as a descriptor of the cultural and intellectual transformation of the late antique Roman Empire. I propose to use the term “Hellenization+” to indicate that the spread of the Greek culture was accompanied by the processes of Romanization and Orientalization. Second, I argue that Adolf von Harnack’s Hellenized (read: “corrupted”) Christianity and Georges Florovsky’s Christian Hellenism (read: idealized Christian philosophia perennis) are two sides of one coin, two opposite extremes, which focus almost exclusively on the patristic encounters with Greek philosophy to the neglect of other cultural factors. Third, instead of offering a rival metanarrative, I propose a context-sensitive and domain-specific approach to the multifaceted question of early Christianity’s inculturation. More concretely, I make a brief excursus into the worlds of Apologists, confessors and martyrs, monks, catechumens, and Emperors, showing the range of Christian responses to the surrounding culture. I also discuss various modes of the adaptation of non-Christian elements in early Christian art and architecture. My conclusion is that early Christian responses to surrounding culture ranged from confused assimilation to profound transformation. Hence, Harnack’s and Florovsky’s metanarratives represent important, if profoundly flawed, limiting cases.
Several years ago, I asked my undergraduate students to define Hellenization on a test. One student confidently wrote: “Hellenization is the creation of hell as the resting place for morally evil souls. It was where Lucifer was sent after he challenged God’s all-mighty power.”

Another student opined: “Actual term ‘Hellenization’ comes from ‘Helen,’ a well-known Greek woman.”

My enterprising students at times surprise me with etymological gems that would make Alexander the Great turn in his grave.

Contrary to the view disseminated by most textbooks, the spreading of Greek culture beyond Greece began well before Alexander’s conquest of Asia. Already in the *Iliad* the Greek and Trojan heroes are portrayed as offering prayers to the same gods. Even if we allow for a measure of poetic anachronism in this picture of Mycenaean civilization, it is still the case that no Greek of Homer’s time (8th century BCE) was surprised to find that the Greek gods had been worshipped in Troy, the coastal city of Anatolia. In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, Dionysus, who is seen as a foreign Oriental deity by the Delphians, has this to say about his travels through Asia: “I travelled first to the sun-smitten Persian plains,/ The walled cities of Bactria, the harsh Median country,/ Wealthy Arabia and the whole tract of the Asian coast/ Where mingled swarms of Greeks and Orientals live/ In vast magnificent cities.”

Here again we have a poetic projection of the historical coexistence of Greeks and Orientals along the western coast of Asia onto the mythological past of Dionysian travels.

Hence, Alexander’s conquest has intensified rather than initiated a process that started centuries earlier. During Alexander’s time, Hellenization was mostly a Macedonian, not a pan-Hellenic venture. Unlike the Macedonian kings, the Athenians, who found themselves “teachers of the whole world,” as Isocrates modestly put

1 *Cretinathia Historica*, pearl 1 (Gavrilyuk’s collection of unpublished student wisdom)
2 *Cretinathia Historica*, pearl 3.
it a generation before Alexander, were themselves not interested in empire-building. The Greek paideia came to be appropriated in the cities of the Hellenistic world to the extent to which each local culture was capable of receiving it. The process was gradual; it affected the cities more than it did the rural areas.

The subsequent Roman conquest of Greece brought about a unique fusion of Hellenistic culture with the Roman legal system, engineering, city-planning, as well as military and political presence. Such cultural institutions as, for example, public baths or gladiatorial games, were distinctly Roman innovations. But the Latinization of the Hellenistic world went beyond good roads, high taxes, arched aqueducts, and marble-clad public latrines. By the time Christianity appeared on the historical scene, Latin literature had developed its own canon of classics, which included Virgil, Terence, and Cicero.

The Hellenistic and Roman components of a typical Roman city are vividly represented by the fact that a bath complex sometimes included a library consisting of two rooms, one for Greek and the other for Latin authors, as, for example, in the Baths of Caracalla in Rome. A significant number of the citizens of the Roman Empire were bilingual and bicultural. In his Confessions, Augustine recalled how, as a young boy in North Africa, he enjoyed reading Latin classics as much as he dreaded and detested the Greek ones. He was somewhat relieved when he had realized that the Greek boys received the same treatment at the hands of their Latin teachers. What could be called the “Romanization of Hellenism” had gone on since the time of the Roman conquest. Biculturalism, of the sort that one finds today in the fusion of English and French elements in Canada’s province of Quebec, is a better description of the situation of the early Roman Empire than Hellenism tout court.

In his study of the Fathers, Georges Florovsky attempts to reduce Romanization to a species of Hellenization—a move that reflects

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4 Isocrates, Panegyrikos (ca. 380 BC), 50.
5 Augustine, Confessions, I. xiv (23): “I can well believe that Greek boys feel the same about Virgil when they are forced to learn him in the way that I learnt Homer,” trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17.
his anti-Latin bias as much as his attempt to fit the patristic project into one story of “Christian Hellenism.” Such a stretching of the concept of Hellenism is a case of wishful thinking, rather than the fruit of a careful analysis of the available evidence. With Arnaldo Momigliano I would emphasize that Hellenization had its limits, and that Romanization should not be ignored as a major culture-shaping factor of late antiquity.  

In addition, over time Hellenism—Romanized or not—has taken on various oriental features. Recall the passage from *The Bacchae*, quoted earlier, in which Dionysus finds “mingled swarms of Greeks and Orientals living in vast magnificent cities” of coastal Asia Minor. Euripides’ Dionysus, himself an Oriental deity, is determined to establish his cult in Greece. In addition, the mysteries of Persian Mithras came to provide the biggest and the most inclusive male club in the Roman Empire. In the Roman military town of Ostia Antica, which in the second century CE had a population of about fifty thousand, there survive the remains of some fifteen mithraea. This impressive number is one indication of Mithras’ popularity in the army. How precisely Christmas came to be celebrated on December the 25th is a subject of some debate. The fact that *Dies natalis solis invicti* (Mithras’ birthday) was also celebrated on this day throughout the Empire is unlikely to have been just a coincidence. When the pagan calendar was thus Christianized, Mithras’ popularity ranking had suffered irreparable damage.

The examples of the orientalization of Hellenism could easily be multiplied. For instance, the worship of Serapis was an Egyptian export. In the second century massive Serapeia stood not only in Alexandria, but also in other major cities of the Empire. Since the 4th c. BCE the cult of Cybele spread from Phrygia to other parts of Anatolia, Greece, and beyond. The Severan Empresses were fond of depicting themselves in persona Cybeli on the coins.  

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7 Illustration on the opposite page. Julia Domna AR denarius, Augusta AD 193–217,
stressed that the indigenous cultures of the Roman provinces did not respond to the advancement of Hellenism passively. Each culture created a unique symbiosis of local and universal elements. The flowering of Hellenism in the Roman Empire depended much upon the fertility of the local "soil," so to speak. The Hellenism of Egypt was different from the Hellenism of Palestine, as well that of Anatolia and Italy. The grouping of these variegated phenomena under the general heading of "syncretism" explains very little. Perhaps one should speak of the local varieties of Hellenism, or even of Hellenisms (plural). To sum up, the advancement of Hellenism upon the indigenous cultures of the North Africa and Anatolia was not a one-directional movement. The process went in two directions: as the Orient was first Hellenized and then Romanized, the Greco-Roman world was, in turn, Orientalized.

Take, for example, the cult of the Roman Emperor. This form of civil Roman religion is believed to have started at the dawn of the imperial period. We are told that after the murder of Julius Caesar, Octavian Augustus began to dedicate temples to Caesar's Genius. To be sure, the apotheosis of the ruler itself was not Octavian's invention. Centuries before, the divine honors had been bestowed upon the Egyptian pharaohs and Oriental kings. One may recall

2 98gm, minted AD 198 in Rome, 19 6mm Obv IVLIA AVGVSTA, draped bust right Rev MATER DEVM, Kybele seated left between two lions, holding a branch and resting arm on a drum RIC IV P1 564 Author's collection
that when Alexander the Great began to accept divine honors in the East, the Greeks did not receive the news well at first. They saw this gesture as another confirmation of his Macedonian hubris. Similarly, when Augustus promoted Caesar to the divine status, not all senatorial families of Rome were on board with the idea, too Oriental for their republican tastes.

As the cult of the Emperor was spreading through the Roman Empire, the Anatolian cities of Ephesus, Miletus, and Pergamum found themselves engaged in a competition for the title of Neokoros, which carried the privilege of building and dedicating a temple to the Emperor.\(^8\) The prominent position which the temple dedicated to the trinity of Zeus, Trajan, and Hadrian had occupied in the acropolis of Pergamum bore eloquent testimony to the religious zeal of the local population. This attitude may be compared to that of the second-generation immigrants to the United States, who carry the American flag during religious processions and keep the flag in the church, close to the sanctuary. They intend to demonstrate thereby that they are “proud” or “loyal” Americans, to the surprise of those less inclined to invest their patriotism with religious significance. Similarly, in contrast to the Orientals, the Romans of Italy viewed the zeal of the Anatolian cities as a departure from the Republican ideal, which continued to haunt the ruling elites during the imperial period, long after the Republic was gone. The historical irony here is that the cult of the Roman Emperor had precious little that was distinctly “Roman” about it. In fact, the cult of the Emperor was not even peculiarly “Hellenistic,” but rather was more in tune with ancient Oriental sensibilities.

This brings me to my first general observation: Hellenism is only one major component, but by no means the only building block, of late antique culture. Depending upon the locale, late antique culture was always Hellenism plus something else. That is, Hellenism plus Latin literature and philosophy; Hellenism plus Oriental mystery

cults and religions; Hellenism plus various forms of “barbarism,” that is, the cultural forms that the Greeks saw as non-Hellenic. In the world of the Church Fathers, Hellenism was the dominant, but hardly a homogenous or exclusive, cultural option. To extend the term “Hellenism” so that it absorbs all non-Hellenistic cultural phenomena is to muddle its definition. Obviously Latin, Syriac, or Armenian patristic authors cannot be squeezed into the cultural framework of Hellenism alone. Equating late antique culture with Hellenism would be as erroneous as identifying contemporary western civilization with Americanism. I must stress that the unquestionable cultural dominance of Hellenism did not amount to a monopoly.

My second general observation has to do with how one defines “Hellenism” and related terms. Here we need to distinguish between Hellenism as a cultural descriptor, Hellenism as a tag identifying a group of people, and Hellenism as a scholarly construct. As a cultural descriptor, Hellenism stands for Greek language, literature, rhetoric, poetry, philosophies, religious practices, social customs, manners, dress codes, family structure, burial customs, hospitality laws, political thinking, moral convictions, and a variety of widely shared unspoken assumptions. In this regard, the Fathers’ interaction with Hellenism is a bit like our interaction with American multiculturalism. Where does one start such an analysis? What sub-cultures does one identify as the most significant? Which dimension should serve as a starting point of our inquiry: political, social, economic, religious, or, perhaps, artistic? I suspect that the starting point would influence the general character and the results of one’s findings. For example, historians who focus on intellectual culture may come to different conclusions from those who focus on popular piety or art forms. At times they might also find themselves talking past each other.

If “Hellenism” as a cultural descriptor is difficult enough to pin down, the situation is no better with “Hellenism” as a marker of group identity. In the time of Alexander, a “Hellene” referred to a “Greek” in contrast to a “barbarian,” that is, someone who spoke
a language that the Greeks could not understand. This dichotomy was somewhat fudged by the addition of the designation “Roman” after the Roman conquest. “Roman,” in contrast to “barbarian” came to connote citizenship rights and power, whereas “Greek,” in contrast to “barbarian,” came to be more associated with culture and upbringing. In the New Testament, the Jew/Gentile distinction is superimposed upon the cultural dichotomy barbarian/Greek (Roman). The result is that in the patristic literature, in the context of controversy between Christians and non-Christians, “Hellenic” came to be closely associated with “pagan,” although the term also continued to be used neutrally, to denote things Greek. The citizens of the Byzantine Empire, if we were to poll them, would have self-identified politically as Romans. The inscription on one of the surviving mosaics of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople proclaims the eleventh-century Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos as “a faithful autocrat, ruler of the Romans” (autocrator pistos basileus romaiōn). To this day, the Turks and other non-Christian peoples in Anatolia and Africa refer to the Greek Orthodox Christians living among them as “Rum,” that is, as the citizens of the (former) Roman Empire. However, in theological disputes with the Latin West, the Byzantines would have self-identified as theologically and culturally “Greek.” Interestingly, geographically the inhabitants of Greece identified themselves as “Easterners” vis-à-vis the Italians and as “Westerners” vis-à-vis the peoples dwelling in Asia. Depending upon where one travelled in the Eastern Empire, one would also find the persistence of such self-designations as Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, and Greek, among others.

My third and final general observation is that I am not speaking about my general topic, “Hellenism and the Church Fathers,” as a detached observer. Whether such a stance is desirable or even achievable is a contentious matter into which I will not enter here.

9 Cf. Procopius of Caesarea, *Anecdota*, xi. 31, has this to say about Justinian: “He [the Emperor] then carried the persecution to the ‘Greeks,’ as they are called (*Hellenas kaloumenous*), maltreating their bodies and plundering their properties,” tr H B Dewing, *Procopius: The Anecdota or Secret History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 139.
I am not writing as a non-committed historian, but as an Orthodox theologian to Orthodox theologians who are trying to clarify the role of Hellenism in Orthodox life and thought today. The background music to my historical inquiry is the present-day geopolitical squabbles of different Orthodox jurisdictions. In my judgment, the attempts at restoring a miniature version of Hellenism in America are flawed theologically and have no future sociologically. The "Hellenocentric" orientation—an agenda presently entertained by some leaders of the ancient patriarchates—is a utopian vision that suffocates missionary work and keeps us, Orthodox, imprisoned in the past. The anti-nationalist disclaimers notwithstanding, the course of Hellenocentricity provides a fertile ground for nationalism that displaces the centrality of Christ and, as such, verges on idolatry.¹⁰

When it comes to our past, as Orthodox theologians we are in a constant dialogue with the patristic tradition. At times we are tempted to idealize the patristic past, because we are looking for guidance from the Fathers. This is understandable, since in a reconstructed patristic past we seek a source of renewal for contemporary theology. At other times, we are tempted to read into the Fathers our favorite theological views, and then claim patristic authority in support of our views. I think everybody in this learned audience would have no trouble identifying certain contemporary examples of such self-serving eisegesis. In this regard I would like to call for a more disciplined and clear differentiation between historical and systematic theology.

¹⁰ I also discern analogous tendencies in the recent statements of the Moscow Patriarchate. We are told that the Russian Orthodox Church is building the "Russian world" (ruskii mir) on the "spiritual space" (na dukhovnom prostranstve) of the former Soviet Republics comprising Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia. As someone born in Kiev (central Ukraine), baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church, and conversant with Russian culture, I am concerned with how geopolitical questions, the questions of powers and privileges of different Orthodox jurisdictions, tend to dominate and poison our ecclesial mind. The main task of the ROC-MP in Ukraine and everywhere else should be missionary work and catechesis, the bringing of more souls to God, nourishing them in the Orthodox faith, not the building of "the Russian world," whatever lofty cultural aspirations and geopolitical motivations this concept is meant to convey.
Such an attitude of self-criticism is required for three additional reasons. First, the arguments from *consensus patrum*, even in such cases when such a consensus exists, typically ignore the voices of dissent as well as different theological standpoints of those recognized as orthodox. Second, patristic views are typically presented hagiographically and apologetically. Third, Orthodox theologians customarily refer to patristic authorities without properly explaining what status patristic opinions might have this side of modernity. For example, when discussing patristic theological anthropology, neopatristic theologians rarely ask how patristic claims square, say, with evolutionary theory, or with the physicalist assumptions of much of contemporary philosophy. In their time the Fathers could largely assume the existence of the soul, and proceed to discuss its powers or properties. But since the existence of the soul is universally questioned today, modern Orthodox theologians no longer have the luxury of simply assuming that some version of pre-modern dualism is valid. It should be apparent that an appeal to patristic authorities is not going to be enough in this and numerous other cases. There is a tendency among the Orthodox to simply ignore the problem of a hermeneutical, metaphysical, and epistemological gap between pre- and post-modernity.

Anyone approaching a topic as vast as patristic interactions with Hellenism finds himself in the vulnerable position of having to offer a grand narrative. I submit to you that the era when historians could do so with confidence is gone. We are deeply suspicious of metanarratives, and for good reasons. When it comes to grand narratives of Hellenization, the two elephants in the room are the views of Adolf von Harnack and Georges Florovsky. Once you enter the room, you cannot pretend that the beasts are not there. You have to deal with them. Anything else would be intellectually dishonest.

Harnack demonized Hellenization. For Harnack, Hellenization stood for everything that was wrong with theology in general. Jesus
proclaimed the simple message of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men. The encounter with Hellenism led to a distortion of this simple message. Hellenization, which for Harnack already sapped even into the New Testament period, infected the Gospel with Greek metaphysics. The result was the especially pernicious doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity, as well as crudely materialistic views of salvation (he meant deification) and magical forms of worship (he had in mind sacramental realism). Harnack's grand narrative was a version of theories of the fall of the Church, popular since the time of the Reformation. Luther associated the fall of the church primarily with the abuses of papal authority that had crept into the Church during the medieval period. Luther was also deeply suspicious of philosophy in general, and Greek philosophy in particular, when it came to the interpretation of scripture. Calvin was more concerned to purge the Church from idolatry, especially the veneration of images. Pietist theologians saw the fall of the Church as a moral problem, which became more acute when the Roman State adopted Christianity as its official religion.

For Harnack, in contrast, the fundamental problem was neither moral nor political. The fundamental problem was intellectual: the church should never have adopted the categories of Greek philosophy to express the timeless message of the Gospel. For him, Hellenization symbolized an intellectual capitulation of the Church before the pagan culture. A way forward was to liberate the gospel from the shackles of Greek philosophy, in other words, to de-Hellenize it.  

Florovsky's "Christian Hellenism" is an antipode of Harnack's position. In fact, Florovsky formulated his understanding of Christian Hellenism in direct and conscious opposition to Harnack.  


Florovsky idealizes the Christianization of Hellenism. Harnack's theological purpose was to de-Hellenize contemporary Christian theology; Florovsky's purpose was, in contrast, to re-Hellenize Russian Orthodox theology. Just as Harnack, Florovsky is no friend of the pagan forms of Hellenism. However, according to Florovsky, the Fathers succeeded in “dissecting” pagan Hellenism by the sword of the gospel, separating the elements that agree with the divine revelation received by the mind of the Church from the elements that were antithetical to it. For Florovsky, Christian Hellenism was an ideal and permanent instantiation of Christianity in the intellectual culture. Christian Hellenism was *philosophia perennis*. Once you accepted it, new philosophical categories became superfluous. To cast Orthodox theology in the categories other than those of “sacred Hellenism” was to distort it. All forms of philosophical appropriation of Christianity that had emerged in the medieval West and during later times were, in Florovsky's reading, nothing but misguided aberrations, pseudomorphoses of the “sacred Hellenism.” For Florovsky, Christian Hellenism was the norm and the “standing category” by which any theology was to be judged.

To summarize, Harnack's and Florovsky's interpretations of the role of Hellenism represent two limiting cases. Harnack construed the Hellenization of Christianity as a massive capitulation before the pagan culture. Florovsky saw the Christianization of Hellenism as a paradigmatic case of pagan culture's transformation by the Gospel. Harnack represents one end of the spectrum; Florovsky represents the other end of the spectrum. Both give us valuable points of reference, but limited analytical tools for approaching our topic.

Both projects were theologically motivated. As a Liberal Protestant, Harnack opposed the Lutheran confessional orthodoxy of his time. The best way to fight dogma, reasoned Harnack, was to expose its roots in pagan Greek philosophy. Florovsky was a staunch opponent of Russian sophiology, a trend continued at the Institut St Serge in Paris by Bulgakov and others. Florovsky
opposed sophiology by among other things exposing its western influences, a strategy that proved to be quite effective rhetorically (although quite flawed philosophically). We can see that whereas in content Harnack’s and Florovsky’s projects were at odds with each other, methodologically they were twin brothers. Harnack thought that detecting a pagan philosophical influence was enough to prove a particular theological stance unsound. For Florovsky, similarly, to detect a western philosophical influence in a given Russian Orthodox author was paramount to proving him wrong. Both Harnack and Florovsky have perpetuated their own versions of genetic fallacy. The focus of criticism is largely the objectionable origin of ideas, not their content. Harnack would ban Christian theologians from drinking from the poisoned wells of Hellenistic philosophy. Florovsky issued a similar prohibition with regard to modern philosophy, especially German Idealism, which he was determined to stamp out of Russian Orthodox theology.

The positions of Harnack and Florovsky are mutually exclusive, especially when applied to the same historical evidence. Both Harnack and Florovsky limit their scope of vision by focusing primarily on the intellectual dimension of Hellenistic culture, namely, on Greek philosophy. For them, *Dogmengeschichte* is a history of ideas *par excellence*. But most contemporary historians recognize to a greater extent that ideas do not come to fruition in a vacuum. All human reasoning is to some extent conditioned by social, cultural, economic, and political factors. The analysis of theological reasoning must also take into account the realities of religious life and practice. Florovsky tends to over-intellectualize patristic tradition. He focuses on patristic doctrine to such an extent as to almost ignore piety and practice (a criticism voiced by Berdyaev in 1937). The fact that the majority of his compatriots in emigration remained lukewarm about academic theology irritated him beyond measure. He publically decried doctrinal apathy among the Orthodox, and, as was his habit, he succeeded in thoroughly alienating many people.13

13 See Florovsky’s brief note, “A Criticism of the Lack of Concern for Doctrine among
I think it is quite misleading to limit the discussion of the patristic encounters with Hellenism solely to the interaction of patristic theology with Hellenistic philosophies. It is undeniable that what happened at the highest levels of intellectual culture had a "trickle down" effect, so to speak, upon the culture at large. Still, "there are more things in heaven and earth than I dreamt of in your philosophy," we could tell Florovsky (with some help from Shakespeare). Christianity did not just spread from the philosophical heads of a few Christian teachers and bishops to others. Thus, if we broaden the scope of our vision, we get a kaleidoscopic matrix of encounters, all quite different in character.

One picture obtains when we look at the writings of early Christian Apologists addressing public letters to the Emperors. Here the goal was to attack polytheism, to condemn idolatry, to dispel any rumors about Christians, to offer a reasoned account of Christian teaching, and to build bridges with intellectual culture. The Apologists’ responses to Hellenistic philosophies were mixed. The anonymous author of *The Epistle to Diognetus* believed that prior to Christ’s coming humanity had no knowledge of God at all, and that the philosophers simply talked "idle nonsense" (*Diogn.* 8.2). Tertullian, when caught in his polemical mood, proclaimed philosophy to be the "mother of heresies." Hippolytus also shared the assumption that most theological problems among the heretics came from an overdose of philosophy. Often quoted out of context, Tertullian has been presented as a precursor of Kierkegaardian fideism verging on irrationalism. But on closer examination, for Tertullian, if not the philosophy of classical Athens, then certainly Roman Stoicism had a lot to do with the Jerusalem of Christian theology. I think it would be safe to say that the Carthaginian rigorist was deeply conflicted on the matter of reconciling faith and reason. Unfortunately, I cannot linger on this complex matter here.

man who did not wear his Hellenism lightly—viewed philosophy as a divine gift to the Greeks, as a *preparatio Evangelica* afforded by God to the Gentiles, just as the OT was given to the Jews. There was a short step from Clement’s program to reading Plato’s dialogues during worship services side by side with the OT prophets—a move that was sensibly resisted by the Church. While ordinary Christians commonly shared the Pauline suspicion of “the wisdom of the world,” Clement’s view that philosophy was theology’s handmaid, in other words, that philosophy could be a valuable analytical and apologetic tool, has quietly prevailed in the Church. I say “quietly,” because no particular version of Greek metaphysics or epistemology has ever been endorsed as authoritative by the Fathers. Admittedly, there was a preferential option for later Platonism, but even Plato entered Christian theology variously baptized, and at times even anathematized, as, for example, in the sixth-century synodal condemnations of Origenism.

The suspicion that engaging pagan wisdom was like playing with fire ran deep in monastic circles. Thus we find some monks rejecting philosophy with as much vigor as others were expanding in mining it. For instance, Athanasius’ Antony reduces pagan philosophers who visit him in his seclusion to silence by the display of his exorcisms and healing miracles. On display is the divine power of the Cross triumphing over the worldly wisdom of the Greeks, an enactment of 1 Cor 1:18-25. But the Antony of the surviving *Letters* (if authentic), in contrast to Athanasius’ unschooled miracle-worker, shows no aversion to philosophy. Not surprisingly, it was not the philosophically-inclined Antony of the *Letters*, but Athanasius’ “divine man” that made an impact upon the Church’s collective memory.

To turn to another familiar example, while Evagrius of Pontus was posthumously charged with Origenism by certain heresy-hunting obscurantists, his writings continued to be copied (with his name diplomatically omitted) by more discerning minds and even made it into Nicodemus’ *Philokalia*. That the church’s attitude toward

philosophy should be ambivalent is perfectly understandable. Unfortunately, this ambivalence has often given an opportunity for the obscurantist side to triumph. The deep suspicion that some Orthodox leaders harbor vis-à-vis secular learning has inhibited us from doing more to change contemporary culture, indeed from building more Orthodox universities! Thankfully, there are some encouraging signs of positive changing, including the recently announced opening of St. Katherine Orthodox College in San Diego, California.

A different, third picture obtains, when we focus on the early Christian responses to conflict situations, such as persecutions and pressure from the government. Such responses serve as indicators of the extent to which converts to Christianity were willing to alter their core beliefs, modes of behavior, and cultural habits. During the periods of persecutions, one could be assured that most people joined the Church out of conviction and remained in it, despite the danger to themselves and their families. The eschatological worldview of the martyrs and confessors was black and white: it involved no compromise with the pagan state.

Not all early Christians became martyrs and confessors, however. There were those who during the time of persecutions behaved cautiously, went into hiding, or even lapsed. According to Cyprian of Carthage, the problem of the lapsed caused a major crisis in the church of his day. Among the lapsed, people differed widely as to the compromises that they were prepared to make with their Christian conscience. When faced with a state-mandated order to sacrifice to the gods, some bribed the Roman officials to obtain the letters stating that they had performed the obligatory rites; others made their slaves sacrifice for them; still others sacrificed under duress or when threatened by torture and death; finally, there were those who sacrificed readily. The attitudes of the lapsed illustrate different levels of adherence to Christianity during this period. My larger point is that actual patterns of practicing Christianity need to be taken into consideration as seriously as the variations of belief. The resultant picture is a kaleidoscope of responses to the Gospel, all to some extent anticipated in the Parable of the Sower.
A still different picture obtains if we focus on the Church meeting Hellenistic culture when engaged in initiation and catechesis. Judging from such documents as *The Apostolic Tradition*, pagan converts to Christianity were in many cases required to undergo a rigorous and lengthy catechumenate, which as a rule lasted several years. For the candidates, the process included a change of lifestyle and morals. Before the candidates submitted their names for baptism, their sponsors had to vouch for them. If they did not pass an interview with the local church authorities, their baptism was postponed. Some candidates were even required to change their occupation, if their job demanded involvement in practices incompatible with Christian teaching, such as idolatry, the taking of human life, and sexual immorality. The catechumens were expected to participate in the charitable, penitential, and ascetic practices of the local church. Their preparation especially intensified during the weeks before baptism. They were exorcised repeatedly, to insure that no demonic influences of their pagan past were left lingering in their souls and bodies. They heard the exposition of scriptures in the church. The baptismal creed was imparted and explained to them. They washed and fasted before baptism. They renounced Satan, confessed their faith, were baptized, and anointed. After baptism the meaning of the sacramental rites was explained to them in a special, mystagogical catechesis that could last up to one week. The point of this process was to enact a gradual and lasting change in the life of new believers.\(^\text{15}\)

Whether the Church had the ability to make obligatory the rules described in *The Apostolic Tradition* and similar church manuals is difficult to ascertain. Some rules for accepting candidates for baptism were strikingly rigorist. *The Apostolic Tradition*, for example, advises the teachers of young children to change their occupation. According to this document, a baptized Christian may remain a teacher only if he has no other means of supporting his family. The reasoning behind this prohibition was evidently that the teachers of Greek grammar

\(^{15}\) For a comprehensive study of initiation and catechumenate in the early church, see my *Histoire du catéchuménat dans l’Église ancienne* (Paris: Cerf, 2008).
and literature would have to impart to their students the stories of the gods—something that the editor of *The Apostolic Tradition* deemed incompatible with the Christian vocation. A century later, Emperor Julian issued a law prohibiting Christian children from attending public schools, on the grounds that would have resonated with a stance taken by *The Apostolic Tradition*. However, there is little indication that this new imperial policy was ever successfully implemented. Church leaders protested vigorously. Gregory of Nazianzus was among those literati who found Julian’s law offensive. Surely Christians could discriminate between pagan mythology and proper theology, argued Gregory in his public reply to the Emperor. At about the same time, Basil of Caesarea counseled Christian youth to study Greek literature, as long as they were guided by Christian teaching in matters of morality.\(^{16}\)

In response to Julian, Apollinaris of Laodicea and his father in a short period of time created a canon of Christian literature that imitated the literary forms of Greek classics. Sozomen reports that Apollinaris produced an epic from the material of the historical books of the OT.

He also wrote comedies in imitation of Menander, tragedies resembling those of Euripides, and odes on the model of Pindar. In short, taking themes of the entire circle of knowledge from the Scriptures, he produced within a very brief space of time, a set of works which in manner, expression, character and arrangement are well approved as similar to the Greek literatures.\(^{17}\)

Another church historian, Socrates adds that Apollinaris composed Platonic dialogues out of the gospel material.\(^{18}\) Unfortunately, most of Apollinaris’ works have been lost, due to their author’s heretical damnatio memoriae.

Yet Apollinaris was clearly not alone. For example, Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and the Resurrection* echoes Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

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16 See Basil, *Ad adolescents*.
17 Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiae*, 5. 18.
18 Socrates, *Historia ecclesiae*, 3. 16.
Aristotle’s *De anima*, as well as the works of Epicurus and Lucretius. To be sure, Gregory was no blind imitator: he navigated among the philosophical anthropologies on offer with a sure hand. Drawing upon the current philosophical terminology, Gregory’s Macrina carves out a distinctly Christian anthropology and eschatology, guided by scripture and tradition. Gregory’s approach was shared by other theologians of this period.

If we focus instead on the modes of folk piety and the phenomenon of mass conversion in the post-Constantinian period, our account of the extent to which culture at large was Christianized would require an additional correction. The gradual, multi-stage catechumenate, which required individual pastoral care, would not have been universally sustainable in the period when people began to convert *en masse*. Mass conversions, which became an Empire-wide reality in the second half of the fourth century, presented new social and pastoral challenges. Ramsay MacMullen, a classicist to whom we owe a number of penetrating studies of mass conversions in late antiquity, stresses that pagan beliefs and modes of piety persisted for many centuries, covered as they were with a thin veneer of nominal Christianity. Against Arthur Darby Nock, MacMullen cautions that one should be careful not to generalize from the examples of conversion found on the pages of Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* and Augustine’s *Confessions* to the patterns of conversion among the general population. MacMullen argues that deep conversion, construed as a gradual, life-orienting process, affected relatively few intellectuals in late antique society.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of double faith, of engaging in Christian and pagan practices at the same time, was not uncommon. Emperor Alexander Severus reportedly had a family chapel in which he kept the statues of Apollonius of Tiana, Orpheus, Moses, and Jesus. If pagans could collect statues of Christian saints and dream

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Christian dreams, one should not be surprised to find Christians who continued to practice paganism. The already-mentioned Emperor Julian, in his *Letters on Religion*, describes how Bishop Pegasios of Ilios both paid homage to the shrines of Christian martyrs and found nothing objectionable in the local worship of Hector and Achilles. According to Julian, the bishop even willingly agreed to accompany the emperor to the temple of Athena of Ilios without “hissing at demons” or “making the sign of the cross on his forehead” when they entered the shrine.  

Julian, who himself had abandoned the Christianity of his youth, found the views of Bishop Pegasios commendable and enlightened, if a bit confused. One would expect that such mixed feelings about combining the new faith with the ancestral religion were relatively common in the period of transition from the predominantly pagan society to the predominantly Christian one. Pockets of strong intellectual resistance to Christianity survived well into the time of Justinian, despite the repeated imperial legislations prohibiting pagan beliefs and practice, which intensified under Theodosius I.

Finally, a different set of paradigms emerges, if we look at the adoption of cultural motifs in church art and architecture. For example, in the case of the statue of a shepherd representing Christ (commonly referred to as “the Good Shepherd”), we have a direct adoption of an ancient pastoral image into Christian catacomb art and sculpture without any marked modification. Depending upon its context, the image of a shepherd could be biblical or Hellenic (or both), pagan or religiously neutral, culture-specific or trans-cultural.

The catacomb image of the *orans*—usually a female figure praying with the outstretched hands—was most immediately inspired by the typically Roman (not Greek) *pietas*. The main difference is that the Roman *pietas* is often depicted bringing an offering before a sacrificial altar, whereas in the Christian catacomb paintings the implements of pagan animal sacrifice are removed. This kind of


22 See Procopius, *Anecdota*, xi 14
Christianization could be called “adaptation by removing select elements” or “adaptation with subtraction.”

Some more overtly pagan motifs have been stubbornly copied throughout history and reinterpreted in a new context. To give one well-known example, in the scene of Jesus’ baptism, Jordan is depicted both as a river and as a male figure. The presence of the figure that most pagan onlookers would have associated with a river-god at baptism, that is, at a point when all the gods in the believer’s life were meant to be renounced, is fraught with ambiguity. Later Byzantine hymns of the feast of Epiphany speak of Jordan as seeing the manifestation of God in Christ and “turning back” in awe (alluding to Ps 114:5). The image of personified Jordan has persisted in the Byzantine art and was copied by the Slavic iconographers with diligence, if without any recorded theological reflection.

A wide variety of strategies was followed to Christianize pagan architecture. One could destroy a pagan temple together with its foundation (this was the fate of the Temple of Venus, which Constantine ordered to be removed from Golgotha); one could demolish a temple, but keep its foundation (this more sensible approach was more commonly followed, as is evidenced, for instance, by San Clemente in Rome); alternatively, one could considerably redesign the existing structure (e.g., San Nicola in Carcere, Rome); finally, leaving the structure of the building essentially intact, one could simply replace the pagan dedicatory inscriptions with Christian ones, and add the items necessary for Christian worship.

Conclusion

A complex historical panorama that emerges from my overview of Christian engagements with late antique culture—as exemplified

23 There is a relatively late image of the Theotokos of Never-Ending Cup, which depicts the Virgin Mary with her hands outstretched in front of the (Byzantine) altar with the Eucharistic chalice on it.

24 The hymnography in question comes from the Service of the Great Blessing of Waters. I am grateful to Elizabeth Theokritos for reminding me of this material, and to Fr. Jonathan Proctor for helping me locate it and commenting on a draft of this essay.
by Apologists, catechists, martyrs, monks, emperors, architects, and church artists—supports neither Harnack's corruption thesis, nor Florovsky's exaltation of "sacred Hellenism." What we have instead is a wide spectrum of cultural responses to Christianity, ranging from a confused assimilation of pagan elements to a profound transformation of objects and persons in light of the Gospel. To idealize Hellenism (a peculiarly Orthodox temptation) would be as misleading as to demonize it. What we need to take from the Fathers is their spiritual and intellectual courage; their refusal to domesticate the gospel by confusing it with a narrow nationalist agenda; their sense, especially during the time of persecutions, of a strong dissociation from the existing political and cultural establishment. To conceive of the Christian message as being permanently petrified in one cultural form, be it Hellenism, Slavism, or Americanism, would be a serious failure of theological imagination.