

## ARTICLES

### I. History

# Young Christians in Ancient Pagan Societies. The Benefits of Reading Pre-Christian Writings

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Pech, F. (2016). Young Christians in Ancient Pagan Societies. The Benefits of Reading Pre-Christian Writings. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 8/2, 3–12.

*The article discusses Christian education in the ancient times, in particular the problematic question of whether it was appropriate to use the literary legacy of pagans, often distant from the ideals of the Church, as a tool for education. Based on a treatise by Basil the Great the author strives to prove that reading pre-Christian writings can not only be good, but even necessary for Christians and their intellectual development. Without becoming rooted in the ancient pagan culture, the Christians would have never become rightful members of the society of that time.*

Key words: *Christian education; ancient pagan culture; Basil the Great; Church history; pre-Christian writings; young Christians; pagan societies; legacy of pagans*

It would be difficult to discuss the benefits that young Christians could draw from reading pagan writings, without considering the crash of two great social, political, philosophical and historical systems, one being the pre-Christian pagan world and the other – rising Christianity. Had not the old collided with the new, we would not be able to reflect upon those advantages. Whatever opinion one might have about the figure of Jesus Christ, his coming changed the course of history. That change, quick as it was, did not take place instantly, but gradually. The teachings, spread among people after people by Christ's dedicated disciples, met with enthusiastic reactions – at first, among the Roman Empire's lowest class, and, afterwards, also among the aristocracy of that time.<sup>1</sup> Still, before

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<sup>1</sup> Danielou, J., Marrou, H. I. (1984). *Historia Kościoła. Od początków do roku 600*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, pp. 182–190.

Christianity earned prominence in the Hellenic world, it had been becoming surrounded by the kindred – at least in terms of origins – religion of Judaism.<sup>2</sup> Although currently the difference between Jews and Christians seems fundamental and rather obvious, the societies of both Palestine, as well as of the Roman Empire's more distant territories, considered Christ's worshippers to be no more than a Jewish sect. This view was especially common among Romans. Without doubt, the common feature of both religions is faith in only one God – a thing rather unusual in ancient times. From the perspective of the polytheistic model of religion (be it the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods or the systems of beliefs characteristic for Mesopotamia or Egypt), which was the most common one at that time, monotheism was a distinct characteristic of Christianity and Judaism. The outside observers might – and probably have – been misled by the fact that the first Christian commune, the Jerusalem church, was rooted in the Jewish environment: it developed among Jews, its leaders were Jewish and worshipped God, who – in the person of Jesus Christ – had been calling himself the king of Jews. Still, it is not the dogmatic differences between the two religions, but rather certain “personal” traits of the new system of beliefs that are of interest here. In contrast to Judaism with its traditional tendency to exclude those who were not members of the chosen people, Christianity, with time, became an inclusive religion. This, to a large extent, was a merit of St. Paul. Contrary to certain exclusivistic tendencies among the members of the early Church (which, for instance, were manifested in obligating newly converted pagans to obey the Jewish law), he took the Gospel outside Jewish society. Not only did St. Paul cross the physical borders of Palestine, but also the limits that existed in the minds of his fellow believers – limits that emerged in the course of hundreds of years of the Jewish tradition, culture and history. This was a decisive step for the new faith. It took Christianity away from its roots to the pagan world – the world of Greeks (which, in fact, was not a term used for ethnical Greeks only, but all non-Jews). Not long afterwards began the confrontation between the new religion and the ancient legacy. During one of his missionary travels described in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul managed to reach the cultural and mental capital of the Hellenic world – the great Athens.<sup>3</sup> What it proves, is that early Christians were not afraid of contact with

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<sup>2</sup> Chadwick, H. (2004). *Kościół w epoce wczesnego chrześcijaństwa*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, pp. 5–8.

<sup>3</sup> DzUMWRiOP 17, pp. 16–34.

ancient Greece. This might have been a result of the missionary enthusiasm of Christ's worshippers, as well as the fact that missionaries were authentically a part of that world. Even St. Paul, although in the past he had been a devout Pharisee, a scribe, and a pious Jew, was a Roman citizen.

The persecutions began quite soon, even in the apostles' lifetime. The fact that they took place denotes a sharp increase in the significance of Christianity, for no one would have fought against a formation that was not influential. It is an important point from the angle of this paper's topic, because it determined the relationship between the rising Christianity and the old pagan world. On one hand, the persecutions resulted in antipathy towards the oppressors and their culture, but, on the other, they also triggered the need of polemics, thus contributing to the emergence of Christian apologia. As Werner Jaeger rightly pointed out, even though early dogmatic texts were aimed at the members of the Christian community and people intending to join it, the outbreak of persecutions made it necessary to refute false accusations that the pagan majority was spreading.<sup>4</sup> The early Church was neither willing nor capable of standing against the persecutors in an armed conflict. Still, it did not hesitate to start an intellectual polemic with them. The other issue that held the early Christians back from accepting the ancient pagan culture was the sense of morality of its philosophers. Christian thinkers deemed it too "worldly" – in the sense of being too attached to the earthly life with its pleasures and sensuality. Tertullian, a notable representative of early Christian thought, was said to have crossed out the following sentence from one of his numerous texts: "What does Athens have in common with Jerusalem?".<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Suetonius, a famous Roman historian describes Christianity as "a new, felonious superstition".<sup>6</sup> Those two statements demonstrate the mutual antipathy quite well. The question that the rising Christianity had to answer was whether one could be a good Christian and a good Greek at the same time.

In some aspects, the crash of the great and intellectually rich Ancient world with the simple message of the Gospel was troublesome for Christianity. The Gospel's unsophisticated language was its forte in

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<sup>4</sup> Jaeger, W. (2002). *Wczesne chrześcijaństwo i grecka paideia*. Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Homini, pp. 48–55.

<sup>5</sup> "Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?" Tertulian. *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 7. Retrieved January 10, 2016. From [http://www.tertullian.org/latin/de\\_praescriptione\\_haereticorum.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/latin/de_praescriptione_haereticorum.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Gajus Swetoniusz Trankwillus (1987). *Żywoty Cezarów*. Wrocław: Ossolineum, p. 243.

interaction with the masses, but it was difficult for the intellectual elites to accept something written in as simple a manner. This was referred to by St. Augustine in “Confessions”, in which he openly admitted that, as a rhetorician captivated by the works of Cicero, he found the literary simplicity of New Testament repelling.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as time passed, the Church – through its representatives’ writings – began to stand for the wisdom of the old world.

From all of the Church Fathers’ texts that discussed the necessity for Christians to be familiar with the ancient legacy, the one that will be the most useful in illustrating the point of this paper is a short, yet historically significant writing by Basil the Great, the bishop of Caesarea Mazaca. Among his works there is one called *Ad Adolescentes* (“For the Youth”)<sup>8</sup> – a treatise concerning the benefits that can be drawn by young Christians from reading pagan writings. Basil gives a clear, coherent and convincing disquisition on why one cannot reject the intellectual legacy of previous generations. Although the text was written after the Edict of Milan – and, thus, at the time when the Church had already become tolerated on the territory of the Roman Empire – Basil still had to convince both Christians and pagans that Christianity should be, and, in fact, is an equal shareholder of the ancient pagan legacy. It was during Basil’s lifetime when the emperor Julian, whom St. Augustine later called *the Apostate*,<sup>9</sup> decreed that Christians could not teach in pagan schools. Nota bene, both Basil and Julian received their education at the Platonic Academy. When Basil later became a bishop, he disputed with his former colleague – by that time, already a Caesar.<sup>10</sup>

Back to St. Basil’s text, it is already in the introduction that he refers to one of Hesiod’s works. This proves that the bishop of Kayseri was perfectly acquainted with the ancient literature. In his message to youth he agrees with the famous Greek epicist that there are three kinds of people in the world: noble people, who by themselves know how they should act; good people, who eagerly follow the advice of the wiser ones; and finally, useless people who do neither. Basil notes that, although the young, at whom his words are aimed, surely attend schools and are familiar with famous ancient authors, they should not let themselves be

<sup>7</sup> Św. Augustyn. (2006). *Wyznania*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Bazyl, Wielki (2014). *Do młodzieńców*. Retrieved January 10. From <http://patres.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Bazyl-Wielki-Do-młodzieńców.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Św. Augustyn. (2002). *Państwo Boże*. Kęty: Wydawnictwo Antyk, p. 214.

<sup>10</sup> Jaczynowska M., Musiał D., Stępień M. (2006). *Historia starożytna*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo “TRIO”, pp. 620–621.

directed in a manner resembling a ship that is being steered in the sea. Instead, they should take what is good for them and useful for their Christian development, while rejecting the rest. This was the point of Basil's text: to teach youngsters to distinguish between the good and evil content in pre-Christian literature.

Although not explicitly, Basil refers to the Platonic understanding of the soul.<sup>11</sup> He tells his young readers that it is much more important than the body. Based on this statement, he shows the differences between Christianity and other ways of life. While pagans view earthly life as the greatest gift from the gods, for Christians the earthly existence is barely of any importance. Because of his readers' young age, he does not attempt to expound the dogmatics of the afterlife. Nevertheless, he emphasises quite strongly that what happens after death is more important than all of the earthly goods.

After this introduction he states that, in order to live an ideal Christian life, it is crucial to follow the Holy Bible's message. Still, the Scriptures do not make easy reading – especially for a young and inexperienced mind. According to Basil, pagan writings can be a perfect introduction to later studies of the Word of God. To illustrate that, Basil makes a fine and vivid comparison to a dyer. Before dyeing cloth, he has to prepare the right dye stuff. Accordingly, before young people “dye” their souls to the colour and pattern of Christian thought, they should first make themselves prepared using good and wise pagan teachings. With such training, the education they will receive will prove indelible. Noticing what is good in pre-Christian writings is similar to looking to the sun reflected in water. After one's eyes become used to the reflection, one can look upwards to enjoy the sight of the original.<sup>12</sup> Such beautiful allegories are characteristic not only of Basil's writings, but of the Church Fathers' in general.

What the Bishop of Kayseri also notices is that if certain teachings are similar to pagan and Christian writings, it will be useful for Christ's young worshippers to read the earlier ones. If they differ to a significant extent, then recognising, exploring and naming them will help to show the truth of Christian teachings and beliefs better. Again, using a vivid comparison, Basil teaches his young readers that when comparing Christian and pagan education, one can think of a tree. The purpose of a tree's existence is to grow fruit, but apart from that, it also grows leaves and

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<sup>11</sup> Bazyli Wielki. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Bazyli Wielki. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

flowers that adorn it. A young man's soul is similar. For it, fruit – which signifies the truth – is the most important, while leaves and flowers stand for external wisdom. Just as a tree is deficient without its leaves and flowers, so is a man, who is not good and wise.<sup>13</sup> What is interesting is that writing about leaves as representing wisdom, he uses the word “external” and not “pagan”. It is likely that Basil, a wise bishop conscious of the negative connotations carried by the expression, did this on purpose. Standing up for the ancients' wisdom and the benefits that one may draw from it, he tries to make readers realise that even though these teachings do not derive from the Church, they are not evil by nature. Quite the contrary – they are worth studying and, so to say, “baptising”. To justify his views, Basil uses the Holy Bible as a source of argument. As he writes, it was after Moses had learned the wisdom of the Egyptians, among whom he lived, that he became the lawmaker of the Jews. Similar was the case of Daniel, the Old Testament's prophet, who had been taught the wisdom of the Babylonians as a young man.<sup>14</sup>

When young Christians decide to read pagan writings, they should do it according to clearly specified criteria. Reading pagan descriptions of good people's words and deeds, one should recognise them and follow their example. Descriptions of evil people and their doings, on the other hand, should be omitted. The Bishop of Kayseri advises youngsters not to listen to evil literature similarly to Odysseus, who rode a ship among sirens. Although to forbid reading certain texts may seem quite radical these days, it has a strong justification in Basil's words. He warns his readers that if a young one allows himself to become accustomed to false and inappropriate content of such writings, it can have a pernicious influence on his mind. Fascinated with the beauty of language and the perfection of narration, they can absorb malicious teachings without even being aware of it. Quite obviously, the bishop of Kayseri pays attention particularly to the content that is evil from the Christian point of view: descriptions of feasts which often culminated in orgies, as well as those of relationships between humans, gods and humans, or between gods themselves. It is also important for the young worshippers of Christ to be aware that pagan religious thought – an inseparable part of the ancient legacy, after all – is a false teaching. Basil's fear that the young ones who are exposed to the pagan tradition might lose themselves on the path of faith seems justified especially when bearing in mind the case of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

already mentioned Caesar Julian. Like Basil, he grew up in a Christian family and studied in Athens. Unlike the saint from Cappadocia, though, as soon as he became enchanted with the legacy of past generations, he abandoned his faith and returned to pagan beliefs. The concept of how a human being works is, at times, so distant from Christian ideals, that in Basil's opinion, Christians should be ashamed to speak in such a way even about animals.<sup>15</sup> This clearly shows that, although love of wisdom can be common, or even identical in different systems of beliefs and ideas, the issue of morality can be a factor that distinctly divides one from another. Such was the case of Christianity and paganism.

How, then, should people read pagan writings without harming their soul? Once again, Basil uses allegories to illustrate it. In one of those, Christians are bees and the wisdom of pagans is like flowers that give honey. One can enjoy flowers because of their colour and smell, but only hardworking bees can truly benefit from them. Like those bees, young believers should seek all that is good and chaste in the writings of past masters, while overlooking everything that is not – similarly to a bee that finds interest only in good flowers and ignores the useless ones. Obviously, in order to earn the skill to distinguish good from evil, one has to become familiar with many ancient writers. After that, one can simply reject all that does not lead to the final goal – the afterlife.

Above all, Basil – as befits a Christian bishop – emphasises virtuousness. He considers it to be a key to the afterlife and reckons that if a man becomes accustomed to it from a young age, it will prove fruitful for his Christian development. He even states that if virtuousness grows deep into a young man's soul, it will stay there for the rest of his life irrespective of the potential dangers and difficulties. Basil considers the writings of philosophers, historians, poets and writers especially helpful in developing this trait. To exemplify that, he quotes Hesiod, who, seven centuries before the birth of Christ, wrote about the difficult and challenging path to virtue. These teachings correspond quite well with the Gospel's message about each man carrying their own cross. Both Christians and Hesiod alike consider the path to virtue to be arduous and the one leading to evil to be simple, pleasant and easy. Basil also refers to Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus, cast away on an island after his ship wrecked, with all his possessions lost, manages to earn the respect of its inhabitants, the affluent Phaeacians, only because of his virtuous nature. Although it might seem that he has

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<sup>15</sup> Bazyli Wielki. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

nothing to offer them, the attributes of his soul prove more valuable than the wealth of his hosts.<sup>16</sup>

Pointing to the authority of Solon and Theognis, the diocesan of Caesarea Mazaca attempts to make the young aware that virtuousness is something constant, inalienable and contributes both to the earthly life and the afterlife of a human – contrary to earthly goods. It is worth noting that Basil, recalling pre-Christian authors by name, not only shows his erudition, but also, in passing, encourages young Christians to become familiar with those figures. There are plenty of such references in his text. Whenever he describes what is noteworthy in the ancients' teachings, he mentions the authors by their names. Thus, he made it much easier a task for the less conversant readers to find those ancient writings that can be considered beneficial from the Christian point of view.

Basil even refers to Greek mythology. He reminds his readers about Heracles, who, as a young man, was given the choice between the path of virtue and that of pleasure. He chose the path of virtue, which, even though inarguably more difficult, led him towards godly dignity. Quoting Plato, Basil emphasises that all of the authors that took up the subject of wisdom, wrote about the value of virtuousness. It is as if acquiring one was inseparable from the other, for a truly wise man is also virtuous.

Basil also points to a number of examples from the lives of noble men from ancient times', who, in his opinion, acted in a good and virtuous way. He tells these stories in order to create a positive image in his young readers' souls and minds – to encourage them to act alike. As he points out, there are plenty of such examples and it would be a shame not to make good use of them. He starts with Pericles – a famous Athenian. Once, on the market square, he had been insulted by one of his fellow countrymen all day long. Nevertheless, when dusk came, he took a torch and walked his adversary home to make sure he could get there safely. Basil also tells an anecdote from the life of Socrates. One day he was attacked and beaten up, but he did not resist, letting the attackers injure him instead. After that, he wrote the perpetrator's name on the swelling that appeared on his body.<sup>17</sup>

Basil points to the analogies between such demeanour and the descriptions that can be found in the Gospel. The attitude shown by Socrates reminds us of Christ's command to turn the other cheek, while the case of Pericles can be seen as encouraging us to pray for our tormentors. As the bishop of Kayseri sensibly concludes, if someone accepts these

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<sup>16</sup> Bazyli Wielki. *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Bazyli Wielki. *Op. cit.*, pp. 7–8.



pagan stories as educational, they will not reject the message of the Gospel later. He even encourages youngsters to remember those anecdotes that are close to Christian teachings. Besides, he provides his readers with even more examples. Literary legacy aside, he writes about athletes who had been winning Olympic laurels (which proves that the bishop was perfectly familiar with the history of past ages), great musicians and other historical figures. Once again, he wishes to make the young readers aware that no important goal can be achieved without toil. It is not suitable for a Christian to be lazy and lethargic. A worshipper of Christ should be well-acquainted with the most crucial of pre-Christian writings, but without believing in everything that they contain. According to Basil, despite all of the potential dangers that they pose, pagan teachings are worth studying.

How to be well prepared not only to study the ancient legacy, but generally for a good Christian life, is discussed in the last chapters of Basil's work. Above all, he considers it crucial to reject the primacy of body over spirit. Bodily concerns should be reduced to the essential minimum, so that a man does not become a slave of his own whims. Again, pagan teachings prove useful to demonstrate that. Basil refers to Diogenes, who reckons that it is only miserable or unjust people who worry about their looks. Similarly, the bishop of Kayseri teaches his readers that a human is not – at least not only – what is visible to the eye, but also what cannot be seen. He can only find his self through the search for wisdom – not by striving for the most pleasing appearance. For that reason, it is not suitable for Christians to take part in nefarious performances, to expose themselves to temptation, or even to listen to the wrong type of music. This is also illustrated by an example, this time from the life of Pythagoras, an ancient thinker. One day he stumbled upon drunk feasters and told the musician to play sad melodies, which put the so far joyful men into a rather depressed state.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the point of this story is to illustrate the pernicious influence that the wrong type of entertainment can have on an individual. It is interesting and distinct how, after that, Basil compares Plato to St. Paul. Showing how their opinions converge in the sphere of an unnecessary focus on bodily needs, the bishop himself is an example of a tendency that was quite common among the Church Fathers. Many of them strove to show such similarities, thus justifying the incorporation of the philosophy of pagans into the area of Christian education.

According to Basil, ancient teachers are right in assuming that whoever is set free from the excessive desire to fulfil their earthly needs

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<sup>18</sup> Bazyli Wielki. *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

will not hold this world's wealth in high regard. Such a person will be able to focus on the search for wisdom, which, in Christian thinking, is equal to striving for salvation. Quoting the ancient authors such as Solon, Theognis, Diogenes or Pythios, Basil states that those who dedicate their lives to satisfying material needs will never find peace, for no one is truly able to put a limit to collecting earthly goods; they will always want more. Ideally, those who are not wealthy should not desire to be rich, while those who – thanks to their resourcefulness or due to a turn of events – entered into possession of wealth, should not pride themselves on it. The ability to manage goods is more important than the consciousness of being rich. To illustrate that, Basil uses examples from the life of the famous ancient figures: the philosopher Socrates, who treasured wisdom more than wealth, and sculptors Phidias and Polykleitos, for whom the talent to turn gold and marble into a work of art was more important than those expensive materials themselves. Just as precarious as wealth is the desire to be praised. A man possessed by it will fear being judged and, thus, change his views under the pressure of others – and it would not be an exaggeration to say that this tendency is still present nowadays. According to Basil, indifference to flattery is a most appropriate trait. With such an attitude one can improve their virtuousness, even at the price of social rejection. Although the author of *Ad adolescents* refers to Plato's authority here, he also emphasises quite strongly that it is Christians who are the best teachers of such a way of life.

At the end of his text, Basil uses an allegory once again. He compares a man to a river, whose power comes from a number of different sources. His life should be a strive towards virtuousness; it is his supply for old age. While for a pagan it is death that puts an end to the path of self-perfection, for a Christian the perspective stretches to a further goal. That makes it even more worthwhile a task to reach out for wisdom, whatever source it may be. If wisdom turns out to be real, it will surely lead to good; but the use that we make of our talents, the way we utilise what can become our share, the path that we choose – it is all up to us.