

UNIT ONE: The World of the Fathers

Every time a Christian renewal has blossomed in our West, whether in thought or life (and the two are always linked), it has blossomed under the sign of the Fathers.

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The World of the Fathers

Introductory reading:

Chadwick, chapters 2,4,5; Kelly, Part I

'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you': This baptism in the name of the triune God is presented as the will of Jesus Christ and the mission of the disciples at the close of the Gospel according to Matthew (Mt 28:19). The sixth chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans, one of the oldest documents in the New Testament, treats baptism as a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. The experience of salvation through baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was, from the very beginning, bound up with faith in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The making of orthodoxy is the story of this mission and this faith. To understand this story we must understand something of the world to which the first generations of Christians were sent.

1. The strangeness of the past

In the past, surveys of early Christian doctrine have tended to make it sound as if it all took place on the moon. The thinking of the Fathers of the Church is presumed to have been concerned with essentially timeless questions and for that reason it is approached as process detached from history and society. But the historical context of their ideas is not mere trivia. Doctrinal assertions are made using language and within societies: they are cultural and ignorance of the relevant cultures impairs our understanding of them. In their living context these ideas are deeply involved in contests for power between different groups, and in an unfamiliar and alien culture. The making of orthodoxy is a story of inculturation. It cannot be understood without some comprehension of the culture that received the Gospel.

The strangeness of this culture is evoked in Keith Hopkins' *A World Full of Gods*. He imagines two intrepid young time-travelers wandering into the Forum of a Roman city

trying to look unselfconscious, buying slaves, visiting the baths, witnessing the brutality of gladiatorial games, and the pervasive public eroticism of a pagan city. Something of the distinctive world of the Fathers has survived into our lifetimes in the churches of the Middle East. We witness the setting sun of Christianity in the Levant, which was for a thousand years the heartland of a Christian empire. Muslim intolerance and Jewish settlement have forced two million Christians to emigrate in the last twenty years. Monasteries that have been houses of prayer since the time of the Fathers are today either derelict or inhabited only by the last elderly survivors of their communities.

1.1 Geography

But difficult as it now is, we must imagine Mediterranean Christendom as the world of the Fathers. After centuries of persecution their faith came to dominate the Roman Empire. North Africa belongs to this Christendom that knows as yet no division between eastern and western Christians. The Romans called the Mediterranean *mare nostrum*, 'our sea.' It did not merely join all the parts of the empire but also united them with direct lines for communication and trade between its different shores. But political unity around these shores was imposed by force, as the Jews discovered in AD 70 when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and it was maintained by force. The Jews scattered to new settlements around the Mediterranean. Alexandria in Egypt was already largely a Jewish colony, cultured and hellenised, Greek speaking and conforming to Greek ways, a typical city of the eastern Mediterranean. It had its own Patriarch or Pope, as did Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem. The high culture of antiquity was confined to a small minority, a diffuse governing class in an 'archipelago of cities.' But the commercial unity of the Mediterranean under Roman rule allowed a great volume of cultural exchange. Chief among the cultural artifacts and ideas that penetrated to all parts of the Mediterranean world were religious beliefs. The cults of the gods of Egypt and Chaldea and those of Greece were instituted in the West. But it was the God of the Christians who made the most converts, as Christianity became the imperial religion even as the political structures of the West decayed. In the words of Peter Brown (1982: 52), 'The hard bones of metaphysical cerebration and clerical ambition press ineluctably through the wasting flesh of the Empire.'

1.2 Sensibility

Yet, as so often happens, a world on the edge of dissolution settled down to believe that it would last forever. Rome had 'learnt by living a long time to scorn death,' wrote Prudentius (*Contra Symmachum* II, 660). Rome was still the 'Middle Kingdom.' As in ancient China, educated persons knew no other civilized state. The Empire was upheld by the loyalty of a class resembling the 'Mandarins' of imperial China, by cultivated senators and bureaucrats whose ranks the young Augustine hoped to join.

The background of the making of orthodoxy is a profound change in the sensibility of this class, the cultivated minority to which the Fathers belonged. The old patterns of Roman civilized life no longer satisfied them. They even dressed differently. The Roman toga would appear on statues of officials and great men. But the men themselves would have worn dress as flamboyant as any in the Arabian Nights; a tunic and huge cloak pinned at the shoulder with a clasp of barbarian origin, its billowing silk sewn with gold thread and decorated with panels of colour appropriate to the rank of the wearer or with scenes from the Bible. Nor would they have lived in the houses of the past, built foursquare around a courtyard, but in intricate palaces, bright with inlaid marble and rainbow coloured mosaics, built from the inside out to convey by their arcades, by halls on different levels, domed ceilings and a proliferation of heavy curtains, a new sense of privacy and opulent mystery. But the expressions of late antique men on their statues often display the most far-reaching change of all. They are no longer realistic portraits. Their upraised eyes and immobile lengthened features show the preoccupations with another world and with the inner life more readily associated with a Romanesque saint.

Thus in the late fourth century for the young Augustine the traditional life will only be a veneer. At the height of his career teaching public speaking as a professor of rhetoric, part of him at least will listen to the teachings of the Persian visionary Mani. His life will be changed by reading the works of Plotinus, a philosopher who 'seemed ashamed of being in the body.' A great pagan senator, Praetextus, will speak of his traditional Roman titles as 'bankrupt' and of his mystical initiations as 'true blessedness.' Ambrose, sent to Milan as Roman governor, will be consecrated its Catholic bishop. Another nobleman, Paulinus, will suddenly abandon his great estates in Aquitaine to become a monk.

1.3 Cosmology

To comprehend something of the invisible world these people lived in, their representation of the universe, we need to look up to the heavens. We live in a bleakly sub-monotheistic age and when we look into the sky we find it empty. But, as Peter Brown describes in *Authority and the Sacred*, what they saw was the *mundus*, a physical universe as heavy as a swollen cloud for good or ill with the presence of invisible beings. They believed in an everlasting universe inhabited and governed by intertwined hierarchies of divine beings and their ethereal ministers. The highest divine power was thought to inhabit the shining upper reaches, far beyond the brilliance of the stars. Human beings on earth dwelt in the drain of the universe but could enjoy the benevolence of that higher power largely through a host of lower spirits who brushed the earth with their ministrations. This imaginative structure constituted a religious common sense shared by Christians even as their doctrines of Creation and Eschaton slowly redrew the map of the divine world.

Persons in late antiquity sought to localize and make palpable through art, ceremonial, religious practice and literature, the few, clearly delineated points at which the visible and invisible worlds met on earth. On entering a church, a participant in the liturgy did not just learn something about the great truths of Christian teaching. He or she could realize that they were present in both seen and unseen worlds, worlds that were joined in the body of an ascetic and the relics of a saint.

2. The History of a Subculture

2.1 Doctrine as exegesis of martyrdom

The making of orthodoxy is the history of a subculture, which comes to be in the ascendant, defining itself in conflict with the administrators of the imperial ideology, with Jews, pagan philosophers, and other Christians rejected as heretics, all of whom made competing claims to rationality, authority and power.

This conflict was initiated by the distinct identity of Christians in their first context. As Rowan Williams has argued (2005), we make the best sense of doctrine in this historical context by seeing it as an exegesis of martyrdom. Civic Roman religion assumed that the true unit of sacred reality was the empire itself, with its sacred rituals and the unifying practice of venerating the divine power of the emperor. Three elements in the language of Christian groups in this context would have caused disquiet, especially when put together. In the texts they read to each other in their assemblies, Christians referred to themselves as *hagioi*, as people who were holy or sacred. They called the groups in which they met *ekklesiai*, 'civic assemblies'. And they also described themselves as *paroikoi* or *paroikountes*, 'resident aliens' or 'settled migrants'. They claimed, in other words, that they occupied a special place, the territory that belongs to the divine, that their corporate identity could be compared to a sanctuary; that they were 'citizens' of something; and that their actual roots and loyalties were in another context than the cities in which they actually resided. This language that defined 'church' was a language that raised problems for a system claiming to be the ultimate source of holy and legitimate power. Against this background, we may better understand why, for the first hundred years or so after the writing of the literature of the New Testament, the most distinctive genre of Christian writing is the narrative of martyrdom. Narratives like that of the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna in 156 demonstrate what 'church' means, and so of what holy power looks like and what is involved in claiming a different sort of citizenship for which the legitimacy of the empire cannot be the last word. For Williams, the early Church shows us the connection between the risk and cost of an

alien citizenship and the necessary words to speak about Christ. The language of the creeds was the least that could properly be said about the basis of the *ekklesia* as such, the sort of thing which, if not said, would alter dramatically the Church's claim to appeal beyond the powers of this world and to deny the ascription of unqualified holiness to any system of earthly government. So, for example, as we shall see, Arius and his supporters seemed to their opponents to fail what we might call, 'the Polycarp test.' Arius' account of Christ leaves an infinite gulf between God and the Word, so that the Word was still a reality contained within the universe. And if so, could the Word truly be the ground for a wholly different citizenship? Eusebius of Caesarea was an apologist for the new Christian empire of Constantine, and a cautious supporter of Arius at first. Constantine attributed his victory against Maxentius, his rival for the imperial throne, outside Rome at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 to the God of the Christians. In *Empire to Commonwealth*, Garth Fowden notes how the religious universalism of the Christians was also well suited to the needs of an imperial ideology. He argues that Islam, in its successful combination of a monotheistic religious universalism with 'world-empire', should be seen as the culmination of trends already present in late antiquity, rather than as an external, destructive force. The theology of Eusebius entailed a hierarchical picture in which divine power 'cascaded' from God to the Word and from the Word to the Christian emperor. Arius' opponents, frequently locked in controversy with a Christian emperor whom they believed to be doctrinally mistaken, were grateful for a theology that could oppose the Word to the emperor when necessary; for them 'the Polycarp test' was what made Arius and his supporters dangerous, absorbing the radical difference of Christ back into the systems of the created world. Theology must justify the witness of the martyr.

2.2 'Away with the third race!'

A phrase shouted by the crowds who watched the death of Christian martyrs in the arena offers another clue to understanding the making of orthodoxy in its living context. They shouted 'Away with the third race!' The first Christians were a 'third race' distinct from the more ancient races of Jews and pagans. Imbued with an imperative to evangelize the early Christians deliberately and repeatedly engaged in controversy. First they sought to differentiate themselves from the matrix of Greco-Roman Judaism and claim the legitimacy and heritage of the 'true Israel.' Daniel Boyarim in *Dying for God* describes the sibling rivalry between a nascent rabbinic Judaism and its prime heresy, nascent Christianity, and the way the discourse of martyrdom helped them invent their separate identities. To belong to the 'third race' meant more than being initiated into a religious group and participating in its observances, as in pagan religion. Christians claimed to offer more than another cult, another set of rituals. They also claimed truth in a distinct way. In the ancient world questions of truth came to be thought of as the concern of philosophy rather than of pagan religion. Philosophy and cult had become alternative approaches to the divine as speculative thinking gained an early detachment from mythological thinking among the Greeks. But philosophy in its various traditions,

such as the Stoic or Platonic, came increasingly to mean a concern with the divine, an ascent to union and vision. Philosophy was seen as a way of life involving renunciation and inner exercises of thought and will, and the philosopher was a spiritual guide. As Jean Leclercq explained, 'In the monastic Middle Ages, just as much as in Antiquity, philosophia did not designate a theory or a means of knowledge, but a lived experienced wisdom, and a way of living according to reason.' (Quoted in Hadot 1995:130)

Conversion to philosophy was perhaps the nearest the ancient world came to approaching the idea of conversion to Christianity.

Christianity, therefore, was more than cult. To pagans it would have seemed like a philosophy as well. It introduced its disciples not only to a cult and a cult-community, but at the same time to a 'school' with its own vision of the saving truth about God, persons and the world, and how to live. Christians were aware that cult and philosophy were united by their religion, and beginning in the second century with Justin Martyr, they claim to be philosophers and to have the true philosophy. To uphold this claim against pagan philosophers, Christians had to offer reasoned arguments. Against Jews, Christians could offer competing exegesis of biblical prophecies. They could claim divine power in competition with pagans with the *son et lumière* of signs, marvels, and miracles. But to vindicate their claim to truth their *kerygma* had to show itself to be based on *logos* (reason). Addressing the trained minds arrayed against them Christians could not persuade by merely asserting and reiterating their claims, like the Bellman in Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark* whose principle was 'What I tell you three times is true.' Pagan philosophers regarded Christians as barbaric and stupid plagiarists. Their account of Christians as the *stulti* may have been widely held. A satirical graffito from the Palatine in Rome show a man worshipping a crucified donkey with the caption, 'Alexamenos worships his God.' A polemic begins which lasts to the end of antiquity. In the second century Celsus accused Christians of only being able to impress women, children, and old men. He was incited to reject Christian claims by reading Justin, and was in turn answered for the Christians by Origen. The arguments of Origen provoked Porphyry to write *Against the Christians*, a work considered so threatening that the Christians sought to destroy every copy when they came to power with the conversion of Constantine. Augustine has been described as waging a lifelong vendetta in his writings against this philosopher who may have been a Christian apostate. The need to win this conflict and so to express Christian belief in a way that would meet the requirements and answer the objections of others claiming rationality, authority and power is a crucial motive for the making of orthodoxy. And so, as Edward Gibbon describes in his great *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* XXI.i (1781: II.243-244), 'the abstruse questions of metaphysical science' that elite philosophers once meditated upon became a preoccupation of the masses and the 'cold indifference of philosophy was inflamed by the fervent spirit of devotion.'

2.3 Diversity and heresy

This Christian abolition of the internal frontiers between the learned and the vulgar made virtually every Christian a potential exegete and theologian. But a true philosophy could not allow them the relative freedom of opinion of speculative philosophers and nor could it merely insist on the correct performance of ritual acts. So this universal way was fraught with the potential for conflict between Christians, especially given their diversity, through widespread diffusion and lack of central organization. Even within each city, the indeterminacy of Christian authority, distributed among charismatic ascetics and confessors, scriptures, synods and communal consensus, and holders of ecclesiastical offices, gave ample room for differences to arise while also making them difficult to resolve. Later the Christian emperors gave their patronage to the bishops, strengthening their authority against these centrifugal forces. Adapting the imperial tradition of relying on the leading men of local cities to rule, emperors dealt primarily with bishops as ranking heads of a hierarchy and as Christian spokesmen. Bishops began to aspire to more effective control over their communities when they were given juridical authority in principle over internal Christian disputes. This could undermine any previous willingness among Christians to compromise. Now disputants could hope for an enforceable decision in their favour when they appealed to the emperor's arbitration; to exclude their opponents from social bodies and imperial patronage also gave them more booty to fight over. Ideological strategies for managing conflict in such situations were fundamental to the development of later orthodox identity and culture. Bishops, for example, will claim to side with simple and God-loving ascetics against the sophistic dialecticians whom they claim to be their opponents. But in conflict with those judged to be heretics the Church was also forced to articulate her beliefs with an increasing measure of precision. As Maurice Wiles remarks in *The Making of Christian Doctrine*, a baby begins its reasoning by distinguishing between self and not-self and so pays particular attention to those things that appear to stand on the border between the two – things like fingers and toes; so too with the Church in the story of the making of orthodoxy. It was those seen as heretics who seemed to stand on the border between the Church and the distinctively non-Christian environment outside who demanded most attention. 'Orthodoxy' defines itself against what is rejected as heresy in a way that it is almost impossible to exaggerate. A phrase of Ambrose, for example, suggests that the unscriptural word *homoousios* was used in the creed of Nicaea because it was known in advance the followers of Arius were committed to its rejection.

3. Theological questions

The making of orthodoxy is thus the story of ideas contested in the living context of this strange culture. But understanding something of the 'real world' of the Fathers need not mean that their ideas can no longer interest theologians as well as historians of late antiquity. Historical awareness can raise theological questions about the validity of their

achievement. Was their establishment of an orthodox or normative Christianity an arbitrary imposition, dictated by a male, power-driven episcopate strengthened by their imperial patrons, suppressing all alternative voices by the exclusion and demonization of 'heretics'? Or was it instead a valid development, intrinsic to the proclamation of the Gospel itself? Beliefs may serve interests without being explained away by them. And the complex patristic theologies involve an attention to Scripture that should still claim the attention of all who define their faith as 'scriptural.' The Fathers present their ideas as the most coherent reading of the plain sense of Scripture. They present their ideas as bound up with the Gospel itself and the question of the right way to interpret it. Their ideas are bound up with the theological question of orthodoxy.

But is this apparent obedience to Scripture real? Attention to the form of the arguments they use raises another pressing theological question. For this form is determined by the *logos* of the Greeks, by metaphysics. Orthodoxy was not made in the world of Jewish apocalyptic but in the world of Hellenistic ideas whose fundamental characteristic was its ontology, its approach to, and understanding of, what is truly real. Philosophical reflection was concerned to distinguish between the visible phenomena of the physical world and the eternal essences, which lie behind them. It was to these essences, approached not by the senses but by a process of intellection, that the highest reality were to be ascribed. It suggests an approach to theology in which its affirmations are regarded as descriptive accounts, albeit very imperfect accounts, of ultimate realities existing in the spiritual world.

There are radically different interpretations of what it meant for the Gospel to pass beyond its original Jewish milieu. Some have argued that only its forms of expression and not its content were changed in this process of linguistic transition and intellectual examination. Heinrich Dorrie, for example, compares the hellenisation of the Gospel to a hermit crab which makes itself at home in another's shell. For him Greek ways of thinking were only a shell for the Gospel. But content and form cannot be so neatly divided. Pierre Hadot suggests instead the transposition of a piece of music as a better image. At the end of antiquity different systems of thought, Jewish, Greek, Roman, and Christian all interacted with each other. He sees a vast transposition in which all the forms of structures, political, juridical, literary, philosophical and artistic, cross over into new environments and contaminate themselves with other forms and structures, modifying their original meanings, or receiving new meanings, which are sometimes mistranslations. The Christian faith in the form that we have it emerges from the matrix of this inculturation, in the thought of the Fathers, which informs the councils that promulgate the creeds of the Church.

But then the theological question arises, was this translation, considered as a whole, really a vast mistranslation? The greatest of eighteenth-century German church

historians, Mosheim, set out this charge at enormous length in his account of an intellectual history that was captured early on by the alien forces of Platonic philosophy, so that authentic Christian thought was repeatedly distorted by the influence of this cuckoo in the nest. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, Adolf von Harnack gave definitive shape to this interpretation in the name of a liberal reconstruction of the Gospel of Jesus, which removed all strictly dogmatic content. He described the 'Hellenization' of the Gospel into a philosophically articulated doctrinal system only distantly related to the words of Scripture, a mistranslation of the primitive Gospel into the abstract language of Greek metaphysics (cf. Harnack 1986). This model has had immense influence in the last century.

The theological and historical persuasiveness of this model can be tested by attention to the sources of patristic doctrine.

4. The Sources of Patristic Doctrine

Recent scholarship has contested this model by describing how Scripture acts as a source of patristic doctrine, and the ways in which exegetical concerns shaped the theology of the Fathers. Of course the emergence of the Scriptures and the development of doctrine were not successive stages in Christian history; in the earliest period of that history the two processes went on simultaneously. The Church was never without Scriptures of some kind, from the Old and New Testaments and by the year 200 something quite close to our Bible had taken shape, in response to the internal development of Christian liturgical practice and the specific demands of conflict between different groups. By the early- to mid-fourth century theologians could refer confidently to a canon of Scripture accepted in the same form by all the major churches. Inseparable from debates about which works were to count as Scripture was the issue of the correct interpretation of Scripture. Early Christian teachers such as Irenaeus summarized the Scriptures in 'rules of faith' seeking to present the Christ spoken of by the apostles, or in creeds that formed the basis of catechesis, and this received faith became the assumed context for their reading of Scripture.

In *Nicaea and its Legacy* (2004), Lewis Ayres describes how patristic theology took its point of departure in exegesis of the 'plain' sense of the text of Scripture; 'the way the words run', the meanings that seemed most obvious in their communities. They then chose the terminologies and philosophical resources that they judged to be best suited to explicating that plain sense. They negotiated between the text and other resources that seemed attractive and persuasive. Scripture was the fundamental resource for their imaginations. For Ayres (2004: 39), 'The better we understand the process of adapting (and transforming) technical terminologies and persuasive non-Christian ideas to read the resource of the plain sense, the better we understand early Christian "theology."'

In *The Way to Nicaea* (2001) and in his two-part *The Nicene Faith* (2004), John Behr uses an idea from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein to argue that the doctrines of the Fathers are bound up with the Gospel itself to preserve the truth of a definitive revelation. Wittgenstein proposed that theology is the grammar of the word 'God.' Theology is about learning to trace what may rightly be said about the divine, and what has to be excluded as inappropriate or obsolete. For example, people might dispute about how many arms God had, and someone might enter the dispute by denying that one could talk about 'arms of God'. Behr argues that Harnack's model overlooks the way in which a basic scriptural 'grammar', a set of basic rules for how to speak of the divine, is preserved in the most abstract discussions of the fourth century. For Behr this scriptural grammar – that the one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, made known in and through the Spirit - is a source of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Maurice Wiles' account of the sources of patristic doctrine mentions two other sources in addition to Scripture, liturgy and soteriology: *Lex orandi lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief). But there was also a process of interaction between what was prayed and what was believed. So, for example, formal liturgical prayer was offered to God through Jesus Christ but, side by side with this, popular piety from the very beginning was addressed directly to the Lord Jesus. Thus when Athanasius attacked the Arian denial of the equality of Father and Son he could claim to be defending the 'simple faith' of the Church. But the consequence was that the liturgy itself became fortified by Trinitarian expressions and the 'Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit' took its present form in which the equality of the divine persons is made explicit at the expense of their mutual relations. Soteriology, understanding salvation, was a third source for patristic doctrine. The debates about the person and work of Christ of the fourth and fifth centuries involved two great soteriological principles; that a saviour must be fully divine, and that what is not assumed, and taken upon himself, by God is not healed.

In *Being as Communion* (2004), the Greek Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas goes further in ascribing a decisive role to the ecclesial experience of the Fathers, an experience at once of both the Eucharistic liturgy and of salvation. In their account of God as Trinity their understanding approached the being of God through the experience of ecclesial being. Their assumption was that the being of God could only be known through personal relationships and personal love. Zizioulas argues that for the Fathers being means life, and life means communion, and that this ontology came out of the experience of bishops who presided in the ancient church at the Eucharist.

The term 'Fathers of the Church' has never been formally defined. But as the Zizioulas notes, it was associated with bishops. In the account of his martyrdom Polycarp is called 'the Father of Christians.' As bishops, Fathers presided at the liturgy and orthodoxy means not only 'right opinion' but also 'right worship' or 'true glory.' Though not all the Fathers were bishops none of them were professional theologians or academics. Later the term came to specify one from the past who conveyed the authoritative interpretation of Scripture in the Apostolic tradition. The Orthodox still approach the Fathers' holy texts with the same liturgical reverence with which they approach and venerate their holy relics and holy icons.

The Texts

The texts for this unit are *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Philo of Alexandria's account of philosophy in *On the Special Laws* 2, 44-48, and the treatise by the third century Platonist philosopher Plotinus, *Beauty*, from a collection of his treatises known as the *Enneads*. This is likely to have been among the Platonic texts that were to profoundly change Augustine's life when he first read them.

Further Reading

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Questions for discussion

1. Why was Polycarp executed by the Roman authorities?
2. What does martyrdom have to do with doctrine?
3. What did 'philosophy' mean in late antiquity?
4. How does Plotinus imagine 'salvation'?
5. What are the sources of patristic doctrine?
6. Is Harnack's model of the 'Hellenization' of the Gospel persuasive?