



Christianity and Culture: Ancient and Modern Perspectives

A common concern for Orthodox Christians is the relationship between the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ – and the teachings of the Church – and the surrounding culture. It is no secret that our contemporary culture is dominated by secularism which provides a (sometimes) neutral space for the promulgation of various competing, complementary, and contradictory ideas, views, and beliefs (political, economic, religious, etc.). Among the latter, there is the dimension of ‘culture,’ which, at its best, has to do with achievements that reflect the depth of human experience and imagination: e.g. language, philosophy, art, architecture, folklore, literature, and poetry. At its worst, these cultural mediums become avenues for subversive ideas which are incompatible with the Christian Gospel. Many Orthodox Christians inevitably find themselves at some point in their lives questioning how to relate to culture; how to navigate between the ‘Scylla’ of fundamentalism, which rejects and condemns all aspects of culture without exception, and the ‘Charybdis’ of relativism, which erodes the uniqueness of the Orthodox way of life by fusing and confusing contradictory beliefs and behaviours with its ‘anything goes’ attitude.

Both of these positions can be dangerous, and many Orthodox Christians find themselves navigating the waters near these ‘sea monsters’ at some stage in their life in Christ. But there is a reason why I have used ‘Scylla’ and ‘Charybdis’ – that the ancient Greek hero, Odysseus, tried to avoid on his long journey home to Ithaca – in my analogy above. They appear in an ancient Greek classic, Homer’s *Odyssey*, which – while a pagan text – is a story that has elements that can be approached positively from a Christian point of view. This text has moreover been used in the past by St Basil the Great, who interpreted the scene where Odysseus tied himself to his ship’s mast and blocked his ears to resist the song of the sirens – which lured sailors to the rocks, thus destroying their ships – as an analogy for what Christians should do if they happen to read anything bad in literature: to simply shut their ears. Here, St Basil used an example from non-Christian literature to demonstrate what the faithful should do if they

happened to read anything that contradicts the Gospel. In general, Basil’s approach followed an oft’ repeated parable, that of the bee. The Church Father taught that:

“Just as bees know how to extract honey from flowers, which to men are agreeable only for their fragrance and color, even so here [in literature] also those who look for something more than pleasure and enjoyment in such writers may derive profit for their souls. Now, then, in the manner of bees must we use these writings, for the bees do not visit all the flowers without discernment. Nor in fact do they seek to carry away entire those upon which they land, but rather, having taken so much as is suitable to their needs, they let the rest go. We too, if we are wise, shall take from this literature whatever is suitable for us and is allied to the truth, and shall pass over the rest. And just as in pruning roses we avoid the thorns, so also from such writings as these we will gather everything useful, and guard against the harmful.” (St Basil the Great’s Address to Youth on how they might benefit from Classical Greek Literature, ch. 4)

Ultimately, the Christian approach to culture can be a positive one. A believer may engage with their prevailing culture in order to appropriate and utilise its positive aspects, while bypassing – and even criticising – those that are negative. This should not be taken, however, as a license to spend one’s time entirely in the throes of culture while neglecting the life of the Church. On the contrary, St Basil addressed youth called to actively participate in the Christian life: to partake of the sacraments, to pray, to read spiritual literature, etc. He suggested a middle way – a narrow path between fundamentalism, on the one hand, and relativism, on the other – when it comes to young peoples’ engagement with culture. The Church Father emphasised that this has to be undertaken with Christian discernment, which can only come from saturation in the Church’s life. And it is with this middle way in mind that the Fellowship of Orthodox Christian University Students at the University of New South Wales, under the astute leadership of its president Ms Georgia Georgiou, is organising a forum entitled ‘Christianity and Culture: Ancient and Modern

Perspectives’ under the patronage of St Catherine’s Greek Orthodox Church, Mascot NSW, where Revd Fr Athanasios Giatsios, Greek Orthodox chaplain at the University, will be speaking at this event, along with Dr Andrew Mellas (Lecturer in Church History at St Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College) and Mr Chris Baghos (PhD Candidate at the University of Sydney).

These distinguished speakers will be addressing various aspects of the Orthodox Church’s historical approach to culture. More precisely, they will cover several important and integrated topics, including: philosophy and classical literature, hymnology and poetry, and art and architecture. Mr Chris Baghos, in a presentation titled ‘The Church Fathers and Classical Culture,’ will demonstrate how various prominent saints maintained the uniqueness of the Gospel while at the same time appropriating and reinterpreting ancient Greek philosophy, literature and rhetoric: namely, to communicate and defend the Christian faith, as well as strengthen their respective flocks. Dr Andrew Mellas will address the topic, ‘From Ancient Music to Christian Hymns: The Song of Theology.’ He will trace the melodies we sing today in the Orthodox Church to the ancient world of classical Greece. Whereas the ancients saw music as a source of ethical formation, Christianity perceived in music the power of spiritual transformation: even today in the Orthodox Church, there is almost nothing in liturgical life that is simply spoken; it is always sung or intoned. Father Athanasios will be looking at the Christian preservation and appropriation of the Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens – in ancient times dedicated to the goddess Athena, but transformed by the Byzantines into a church dedicated to the Mother of God – with his talk ‘The Christian Parthenon: A Divine Chamber that Touched Heaven.’

The forum will take place on Thursday 19th of September at St Catherine’s ‘new’ church at 180 Coward Street, Mascot. Refreshments will be served at 6:30pm for a 7pm start. Time will also be allocated for Q and A. While primarily directed to our youth, this event is open to all and not to be missed.

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