

Orthodox theology and Pagan culture

—A Tribute to St. Basil

St. Basil was one of the best educated persons of his time, second to none, Christian or pagan, in sheer erudition. Not only that, St. Basil sent his disciples to study with the best masters of the time—be they Christian or pagan. He sent many students from Cappadocia to study with Libanius, the leading pagan Sophist and Rhetorician of his day.¹ Libanius was so much an admirer of St. Basil that the quality of both men shine out of their letters despite the sophistry of the pagan :

Libanius to Basil:

“Behold I have sent you a speech, all streaming with sweat as I am! How should I be otherwise, when sending my speech to one who by his skill in oratory is able to show that the wisdom of Plato and the ability of Demosthenes were belauded in vain? I feel like a gnat compared with an elephant. How I shiver and shake, as I reckon up the day, when you will inspect my performance! I am almost out of my wits!”²

And the equally impressive reply of St. Basil: “I have read your speech and have immensely admired it. O Muses! O Learning! O Athens! What do you not give to those who love you! What fruits do not they gather who spend even a short time with you! Oh for your copiously flowing fountain! What men all who drink of it are shown to be! I seemed to see the man himself in your speech, in the company of his chattering little woman. A living story has been inscribed on the ground by Libanius, who alone has bestowed the gift of life on his words!”³

-
1. See epistle 335 and 337 addressed to Libanius, introducing a student. The debate about the authenticity of the Basil-Libanius correspondence has now subsided, and most scholars regard them as authentic.
 2. Epistle 352 (full text). Eng. Tr. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series Two Vol. VIII: p. 325
 3. Ep. 353. Greek Text in Roy. J. Deferrari (Ed). *St. Basil, the Letters*, 4 Vols. Loeb Classical Library, Harvard Univ. Press, 1926.

This was not mere rhetoric, for St. Basil despite his sophist training, was resolutely honest and his admiration for the pagan Libanius was sincere, as was Libanius' for Basil. And Libanius had that bold affection towards St. Basil, to say in the preface of a letter requesting the Bishop to help the pagan with some timber rafters from the Pontic Woods for the latter's house construction: "Every bishop is something hard to get something out of" but, in saying so used an expression *pragma dysgripiston* which really means "something hard to fish from". And St. Basil promptly accepts the banter and sends the rafters with a reply that is a rhetorical delight. Basil says in effect "you with your sophistry has fished out from the depths of Plato the fish that you wanted and that it is Basil who is impaled on the rafters".

This was not just rhetorical playing with words, but out of genuine respect for what was good among the pagans. But for St. Basil, faith was necessary to truly test knowledge as he makes clear in his epistle 235 to Amphilocius of Iconium in his reply to the latter's questions. But the human mind has a double tendency, one for evil and one for good, one for the false and another for the true. Right judgment is possible with the aid of God's spirit; but even this judgment is but partial, even when it is true. The mind can know; but it has limits.⁴ There is nothing bad about knowing as such. And pagan knowledge is not forbidden to the Christian.

But the Christian has to have the special capacity for the discernment of the good. There is no objective criteria that can be publicly and generally applied to pagan knowledge. The discernment is a gift that comes with growth in grace.

Yet growth in grace does not automatically bring this power of discernment. It comes with internal freedom and integrity. Some people may be far advanced in forms of piety which to us look like growth in grace, and yet their judgments about outside reality may be quite ignorant and prejudiced. It was St. Basil's acquired knowledge, when combined with his growth in grace and integrity, that gave him the freedom and the power to know what is good outside the Church and to be fearless in its appreciation. Much of our present day theology is so culturally insular and so uninformed about reality outside the Church, about other cultures and other religions, other philosophical perspectives and religious experiences.

This is especially true of much Orthodox theology which claims to be patterned after the style of St. Basil. We have all to become much more open and unafraid, if we are to make the vibrant splendour of Orthodox theology hum and shine again.

4. Ep. 234, 235