

Jaroslav Pelikan, *Creștinismul și cultura clasică, Metamorfoza teologiei naturale la întâlnirea creștinismului cu elenismul*, translation by Sergiu-Adrian Adam, edition by Gheorghe Ovidiu Sferlea, Iași, Doxologia Publishing House 2018, 486 p., ISBN: 978-606-666-656-5.
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For Romanian readers, Jaroslav Pelikan is a reasonably familiar name, the famous historian of Christian doctrine whose works have been translated into Romanian for several years. The latest work to be added to the consistent number of his books already present for the Romanian public is *Christianity and classical culture: the metamorphosis of natural theology in the Christian encounter with Hellenism*, which represent his *Gifford Lectures* from 1992-1993, translated into Romanian by Sergiu-Adrian Adam with the title *Creștinismul și cultura clasică, Metamorfoza teologiei naturale la întâlnirea creștinismului cu elenismul*. A short comment regarding the style of the book: any reader of Pelikan knows his general depth of his analysis, as well as the breadth of his scope. This book is no exception in this regard, touching upon every necessary aspect for the intended purpose. Furthermore, the Romanian reader can enjoy a beautiful translation when both its exactitude of the rendering of theological or philosophical terminology and its literary style are taken into consideration. The title can be somewhat misleading as the work concerns specifically with the theological thought of the three Cappadocians, Gregory of Nazians, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, with whom the author adds “the fourth Cappadocian”, namely, Macrina, sister of the last two. However, this minor criticism fades into insignificance when we consider that the Cappadocian’s time was a vital period for the synthesis of the classical culture (especially philosophy) and Christian thought.

It would be entirely inappropriate, not to mention sterile, for the aim of this text (and in a sense for any review) to get into lengthy details trying to unravel Pelikan’s treatment of his topic. The reader is invited to discover each step by himself, being assured that the effort is intellectually fully rewarded. Instead, I will narrow down my text to shine some light upon the core intention of the author, namely to approach the issue expressly stated in the title of the book (or of the lectures) through the lens of the question of natural theology. Also, I will highlight Pelikan’s contribution to establishing what distinguishes the Eastern approach to natural theology from its Western counterpart. I dare to say that more than in the examination of particular

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ideas or Christian doctrines, in this bringing to light of the specificity of the Orthodox natural theology lies the genuine contribution of this work. And, in the end, I will address the topic of the relevance of this text today, both for Romanian readers as well for others, notwithstanding the fact that almost thirty years have passed since its appearance.

1) We must never forget that the interaction between Christianity and classical culture formed “the historical matrix” in which the idea of natural theology arose. Influenced by the Western development of the academic theological *curricula*, we tend to draw a very firm line of division between natural theology and dogmatic theology. Methodologically this can be very sound, but we often forget that in a certain sense the entire Christian theology, or at least its core teachings, took shape at this interaction and in this tension. So much so, in fact, that this book can in a sense be reasonably considered an introduction to Orthodox theology.

Furthermore, when we think about natural theology, it is very plausible that the first name that comes to mind is Thomas Aquinas, with his “proofs” of God’s existence. Or at least we have in mind this kind of theological endeavour that is used in what we call apologetics. Little do we think about the Greek Fathers when speaking about natural theology. Referring to two of his predecessors at *Gifford Lectures*, namely Etienne Gilson and Karl Barth, Pelikan remarks:

Those two series of Gifford Lectures, Gilson’s on the Middle Ages and Barth’s on the Reformation, have, however, still left a significant lacuna in the examination of the theme of “natural theology” in the history of Christian thought; for both Gilson and Barth dealt almost exclusively with the Latin West, whether Catholic or Protestant, and neither addressed, except in passing, the place of “natural theology” in the Greek Christian East.

If not for any other reason than the fact that it comes to help filling a void in the study of the Christian thinking, Pelikan’s work would still remain a salutary effort. Many factors could be counted responsible for this overlooking, and it is not the place here to delve into this subject that pertains not only to the history of Christian dogma in the East, but also to the history itself of Eastern Christianity with its Christian Byzantine Empire and its subsequent fall to the Muslim power. Yet it is still worth noticing, with Pelikan, that “It has become a truism of the comparative intellectual history of the Middle Ages to observe that Byzantium never had an Augustine and that this constituted a fundamental difference between East and West.” This is a rather unfair observation if we keep in mind the influence upon the ulterior theological development, from which point of view Augustine meets his Eastern counterpart in the Cappadocians.

The encounter with classical culture has been a constant theme in the writings of theologians since the very beginnings of Christianity, and with this the accusation of subordinating the truth of the divine revelation to the Greek philosophy. This accusation resurfaced with enhanced force in the attacks of the Reformers towards scholastical theology, but it took the shape of a quasi-definitive and very common explanation for the development of Christian dogmas in the modern period, with Adolf von Harnack perhaps being the one who best epitomized this tendency in speaking about “the Hellenization of Christianity”. This orientation is very characteristic of much of modern Protestant theology, for which Christianity in its traditional form was not too much more than a restatement of Greek philosophy; a clothing of pagan philosophy in Christian garment. Indeed, this accusation still remains well alive in scholarly thinking.

Consequently, Pelikan's book is of inestimable value in showing that this is an unfortunate generalization. As he also showed in his *Christian Tradition*, vol. I, “Hellenization” is too simplistic and unfit a term to describe what took place in the birth of Orthodox Christian doctrine. Of course, a good part of the Greek philosophy or of the philosophical conceptual apparatus remains in the Church's dogma; in this sense, the victory of theology over philosophy being won at a very high price. And yet, there was something fundamentally different, not only a superficial clothing, that makes it possible to speak about “the enormous difference which there is between Platonism and Christian Platonism” (Stanley L. Jaki as cited by Pelikan). What happened was that which was mentioned earlier, the fact that the specificity of Christian *kerygma* was proclaimed and maintained in a creative tension. Consequently, both the thesis of the total repudiation of classical culture and that of the essential Hellenization of Christian doctrines are inherently false. As Pelikan sums it up:

Each of the three (or four) Cappadocians stood squarely in the tradition of Classical Greek culture, and each was at the same time intensely critical of that tradition. Each was in constant intellectual interchange, and in no less constant controversy, with the monuments of that culture and with contemporary expositors of the monuments.

2) We mentioned earlier the firm line that separates in modern theological curricula natural theology from dogmatic theology. At this point we will add a few words about what singularizes the Cappadocians' method of natural theology in comparison to what was to become in the West the standard pursuit. This aspect is of crucial import in understanding what truly constitutes the Cappadocians' (and, by extension, the Eastern Orthodox) approach to natural theology. To put it simply, far from particularizing or even insulating itself in a (quasi)completely studying domain of Christian

thinking, with a complete set of theological “techniques” and terminology, for the Cappadocians’ natural theology played a double role, both in the “negative” side of apologetics and in the “positive” side of dogmatic affirmations. Therefore, we can speak about the “natural theology as apologetics” alongside “natural theology as presupposition.” As Pelikan formulates it, there has been (especially in Gregory of Nyssa) a

congruence between natural theology as apologetics and natural theology as presupposition, arguing that in a proper statement of orthodox doctrine – in this case the doctrine of the Trinity – there would be a harmony with the presupposed truths to which a rational theology could also attain. [...] But at the hands of such thinkers as the Cappadocians – who were philosophers and apologists and yet at the same time priests and prelates, but neither opponents nor critics of the orthodox cult – natural theology underwent a fundamental *metamorphosis*. It became not only an apologetic but a presupposition for systematic, dogmatic theology.

Pelikan chooses to illustrate this in the best way possible making the second part of his book basically “an exposition of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in the light of this dual task.” Having considered this, it is no wonder that it would be nearly impossible to find a counterpart for Thomas Aquinas (or any scholastic for that matter) in the Eastern Christian theology.

This crucial aspect of the dual functioning of natural theology in the Cappadocians has also a direct influence over the problem of the Hellenization of Christianity, because, as Pelikan has written elsewhere in *The Christian Tradition, vol. I*, in a sense, it is more adequate to define dogma as a “dehellenization” of theology, a safeguarding of the specificity of Church’s *kerygma*, a proof that the Christian doctrine could not live only on the foundations of philosophy but had to appeal to the Word of God enshrined in the two Testaments.

3) What can Pelikan’s book tell or show us today, besides filling a gap in the study of the Church’s dogmatic development? As we have noticed, at a scholarly level, the assumption of the Hellenization of Christian thinking still functions as a working hypothesis, being not only one of the most frequent but also most convenient explanations for the conceptualization of Christian dogma in the golden fourth century CE. We can reasonably assume that this will remain a perennial question or debate, so that any study that carries further and deepens the research in this area is welcome. Of course, we must notice in passing that this assumption fits well in the attempt to downplay any claim to superiority or presupposed prominence of Christianity. Be that as it may, Pelikan’s book shows us that the issue is infinitely more nuanced and does not fit in some rigid black and white schemata.

On the other hand, this work is also of help in counteracting another level of attack, on the opposite side of the spectrum, that of Christianity as the destroyer of classical culture. I will not dwell too much at this point, as this thesis (which had in Edward Gibbon one of its illustrious representatives) is no longer sustainable in a serious academic research, at least in its hard-core form. Yet, at a popular level, this attack is still in vogue. We can think for example at Catherine Nixey's book *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World* (Pan MacMillan, 2018), now translated also in Romanian (*Epoca întunecării. Cum a distrus creștinismul lumea clasică*, Humanitas, 2019). Again, Pelikan reminds us not to fall in this trap of oversimplification.

Thinking more at the possible directions of research that the book opens for us, I believe it would be interesting to deepen the approach of the problem of natural theology in Eastern theology also from the point of view of the encounter between Reformation and Orthodoxy, another ongoing matter of debate. We can adequately presume that one of the reasons for the difficulty that the Reformation met when trying to get in touch with Eastern Church was this type of natural theology, which led to building a whole other theological mindset, and which, in the same time, strengthens the affirmation that the Reformation was primarily a Western problem.

In the end, the problem taken up by Pelikan serves as a historical particularization of a perennial issue. As long as history continues, Christian theology will have to deal with the tension between its *kerygma* and the culture milieu in which it functions. Being a theology of incarnation implies that Christian dogma will relate to and use the intellectual means of its time, both in language and concepts, in a perpetual creative tension. In a way, we could say that every new historico-cultural stage imposes a new exercise in natural theology for Christian dogma.

The Cappadocians show us how one can create a relevant theology for one's day (and as Pelikan says from the beginning, the fact that the New Testament was written in the Greek of Socrates and Plato was of utmost importance) but in the same time true to its specificity. Those who accuse too easily or hastily the Greek Fathers of Hellenization tend to forget that there can never be a "pure" theology, for the simple reason that, as said above, Christianity is a theology of incarnation, of the coming of God in body and human language.

As Helmut Thielicke remarked, every theology is in debt to its time, theology always involving "a debate between *kerygma* and the self-understanding of an age, or, in popular terms, between eternity and time." The Cappadocians, or all the Church Fathers for that matter, remain for us the great reminders of this truth.