John Chrysostom’s Greek Classical Education and its Importance to Us Today

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SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM HAS BEEN RIGHTLY PRaised BY A VARIETY of scholars. One scholar writes that Chrysostom was “one of the great Greek Fathers”; another one adds that Chrysostom was “one of the great personalities of the Christian Church and humankind in general”; a third specialist describes him as “one of the three great ecumenical teachers of the Greek Church”; a fourth expert comments that Chrysostom is “the most prolific and influential Church Father”; and a fifth authority concludes that Chrysostom represents “the best thought and temper of the Church” in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹

Some others, both ancient and modern, have praised specific qualities of the saint. Isidoros Pelousiotis (360-440), Chrysostom’s contemporary and a great Church Father in his own right, acclaimed Chrysostom as the “all-wiseman,” the “wise prophet of God’s mysteries,” “the eyes of the Church in Byzantium and the Church everywhere” (ὁ τῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἄποροτων σοφὸς ὑπορέης Ἰωάννης, ὁ τῆς ἐν Βυζαντίῳ Ἑκκλησίας καὶ πάσης ὅφθαλμος).

¹The present essay is a slightly revised text of an address delivered on February 6, 1991, before the faculty, students and guests of Hellenic College and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, when the Institution bestowed upon the author the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity.

Isidorus applauded the Attic qualities of Chrysostom’s language, the purity of his discourse, his natural thought, his style, his superb imagination and figures of speech — all qualities of a person excellently educated in the Greek classics. In a rhetorical hyperbole, Isidorus adds that Chrysostom’s Attic qualities surpassed those of Plutarch, Gorgias, and even Plato. In a letter addressed to a certain Herakleios, Isidorus writes that the beauty of Chrysostom’s writings was already well known to all educated people from corner to corner of the earth and the sea. He adds that John’s language is music which tames wild beasts and human beings, and makes wolves cohabit with lambs. “Take Chrysostom’s lyre and the lethargic in you will start dancing to his articulate music” is Isidorus’ advice.

Chrysostom’s Greek classical education has also been highly acclaimed by leading classical philologists of recent years. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, one of the great philologists and Hellenists of all times asserts that Chrysostom’s writing is “the harmonious expression of an Attic soul.” But what do these writers mean by “Attic qualities” and “Attic soul?” We shall discuss this question later in our essay. For the moment let me underline that today there is unanimity among Christian (Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant) and non-Christian scholars about the importance of Chrysostom for history, and also for church and society.

Nevertheless we do not now much about the celebrated saint. We do not even know the exact year of his birth. Was it in 345, 347, 354, or what? The only period of his life and ministry, including his trial, exile, and death, for which we have reliable information, is between the year of his elevation to the Patriarchal throne of Constantinople in 398 and the year of his death in 407. Palladios, the long standing authority of the saint’s biography, is silent on several major questions. Modern scholars are reassessing Chrysostom’s life in the light of the writings by Martyrios, Patriarch of Antioch (459-470) and George, Patriarch of Alexandria (621-630), whose biographies have been found reliable. But long before modern students returned to the Antiochian Martyrios and George Alexandrinos, Photios, the great

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2 Isidoros Pelusiotis, Epistles, Bk. 1, no. 156; Bk. 2, no. 42 in PG 78.288B; 484B-D; 1217C-1320A.
ninth century scholar and patriarch, whose memory we honor today, had read and extracted the biography of Chrysostom by George of Alexandria.

Sometime before his departure with a group of other dignitaries for an ambassadorial visit to the court of the Caliph at Samara in 845, Patriarch Photios compiled his literary memoirs, summaries of books and notes read either with his students or by himself. In one of them he writes:

I read the work of George, bishop of Alexandria, entitled The Life of John the Chrysostom. Who the author is, I cannot state with certainty. . . . The author says that he has compiled his history from material taken from bishop Palladius, who has written an admirable and careful life of Chrysostom in the form of a dialogue, from Socrates, and other writers.5

We know about Palladius, the bishop of Elenopolis, who was well trained in the Greek classics, and Socrates, the ecclesiastical historian, but who are the other anonymous writers? We do not know, but apparently they provide important information on Chrysostom's classical education omitted by Palladius.

Photios accepts the validity of Chrysostom's biography by George of Alexandria with some critical reservations. He writes that George "appears to relate much that is contrary to the truth of history, but there is nothing to prevent the reader from picking out what is useful and passing over the rest." I follow Photios' advice and I accept the information of George according to which Chrysostom received an excellent Greek classical education not only in Antioch but also in Athens. At Antioch Chrysostom studied Greek literature, grammar, and rhetoric under the sophist Libanios, philosophy under Andragathios, and theology under Diodore of Tarsus.

After Antioch, Chrysostom, like Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Libanios, Julian, and every ambitious fourth century young man, pursued advanced studies in Athens where presumably he stayed for several years. Athens was still the most important center for philosophical and literary learning. While in Athens, Chrysostom

impressed greatly several non-Christian Greeks such as Anthemios, the priest of the temple of Athena on the Acropolis, reputed as the wisest man of Athens, and Demosthenes, the prefect of the city. We are told that Chrysostom's learning and eloquence, as well as his piety and prayers, contributed to the conversion of Anthemios who received baptism along with all the members of his family. His example was imitated by many non-Christian Athenians.\textsuperscript{6}

It was Chrysostom's quality education in "thyrathen, secular, paideia," liberal humanities as well as in "hiera grammata," the Holy Scriptures; his persuasive eloquence and his sincere piety and convictions, his Attic mind and his Christian soul, that influenced his pagan audience to turn to Christianity.

But is this historical truth or invented tradition? Because Palladios is silent about Chrysostom's studies in Athens, some scholars reject George Alexandrinos' information that Chrysostom had indeed spent some years in Athens. They advanced the theory that because it seemed incomprehensible to Byzantine hagiologists that Chrysostom "the greatest orator of the Christian Church had not been in Athens," still the most important center of learning, they invented the story. It found its way in later Byzantine hagiology including the writings of Photios and Symeon Metaphrastes. Symeon Metaphrastes relates that when Chrysostom had enjoyed to the utmost his education in Athens, he was overwhelmed by nostalgia for his mother and country and decided to return to Antioch, resisting the plea of the Athenians who wanted him to become their bishop.\textsuperscript{7}

But why did Palladios neglect to write something about Chrysostom's studies in Athens and say more about his classical education? Why did Chrysostom himself make disparaging remarks against some classical luminaries including Plato?

The fourth and the fifth centuries were critical for the consolidation, codification and propagation of Christianity. Paganism was still very much alive and antagonistic to Christianity. Some major non-Christian intellectuals, such as Themistios, Libanius, Julian, Ammianos, Markellinos, Hypatia, defended old beliefs and practices. There were many Christian scholars and Church Fathers who had been educated


\textsuperscript{7}Symeon Metaphrastes, "Bios kai Politeia . . . tou Chrysostomou," PG 114.1049D--53C; Photios, \textit{Bibliotheca}, no. 96.
in the pagan tradition, the Greek classics in particular. The strong reaction of some of them against paganism was an expression of their desire to avoid any identification with its culture.

Unlike hagiologists of the later Byzantine centuries, such as George Acropolites for example, who embellished their lives of saints with scriptural verses and an equal number of passages from classical authors, hagiologists of the early Byzantine centuries such as Palladios, Kyrillos Skythopolites, Ioannes Moschos, systematically avoided referring to the classical background of some of their heroes. The reason is obvious. In the early centuries of Christianity the classical heritage presented a threat while in the later centuries it was the established faith and for that very reason many later Church Fathers felt not only secure to use freely but also to initiate the revival of the Greek heritage.

Whatever the explanation may be, it is certain that Chrysostom’s mind had been trained not only in Holy Scripture but from the earliest days of his life he had been diligently educated in the Greek humanistic classics. He had read carefully and exhaustively all the important literature of the ancient Greeks—poetry, history, and philosophy.

It was customary even for less well known church fathers to study Greek authors. Socrates, the fifth century ecclesiastical historian relates that Attikos, Chrysostom’s successor, was such a person. “Being intent, if an opportunity offered itself anywhere, he [Attikos] exercised himself in the most approved Greek authors.”8 Others contributed much more to the symbiosis of Greek learning and Christian scriptures. Apolinaris the presbyter of Laodicea as a grammarian “composed a grammar consistent with the Christian faith. He also translated the Book of Moses into heroic verse and all the historical books of the Old Testament, putting them partly into dactylic measure, and partly reducing them to the form of dramatic tragedy.” Socrates adds that Apolinaris “purposefully employed all kinds of verse, that no form of expression peculiar to the Greek language might be unknown or unheard of among Christians.”9

Apolinarios the younger, too, placed his Greek education to the service of the Christians. He was a rhetorician and excellently trained in the classics. As bishop of Laodicea, he “expounded the Gospels

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8 Socrates, Ecclesiastical History, 7.27.
9 Ibid. 3.16.
and apostolic doctrines in the way of dialogue, as Plato among the Greeks had done.” Summarizing the attitude of Church Fathers toward the Greek classics, Socrates adds:

“Greek literature certainly was never recognized either by Christ or his Apostles as divinely inspired, nor on the other hand was it wholly rejected as pernicious. And this they did, I conceive, not without serious thought. For there were many philosophers among the Greeks who were not far from the knowledge of God; . . . for these reasons they have become useful to all lovers of real piety.”

Socrates emphasized that the Fathers followed the example of Saint Paul who “not only does not forbid our being instructed in Greek learning, but that he himself seems by no means to have neglected it, inasmuch as he knows many of the sayings of the Greeks.” Socrates questioned the need to elaborate on the subject because “it is well known that in ancient times the Fathers of the Church by unhindered usage were accustomed to exercise themselves in the learning of the Greeks, until they had reached an advanced age: this they did with a view to improve themselves in eloquence and to strengthen and polish their mind, and at the same time to enable them to refute the errors of the pagans” he adds.

It was because of their great learning in the Greek humanities that enemies of Christianity such as Julian resented Christian intellectuals including Apollinaris, Basil the Great, Gregory the theologian, and others.

The fourth century Greek Fathers did not condemn Greek philosophy and the human urge to philosophize and think critically because the tradition had been established by some major Christian theologians of the pre-Constantinian era. Clement of Alexandria had taught that “philosophy is the clear image of truth, a gift of God to the Greeks”; it can be used to demonstrate not refute the faith. God gave the Law to the Hebrews but philosophy to the Greeks which can serve as a paidagogos leading to Christ” the Logos. And the

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10Ibid.
11Ibid.
12Sozomenos, Ecclesiastical History, 5.18.
13Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis, 1.1, 20.1.
great Origen used the strength and vigour of Greek philosophical insight to establish the principle that Christianity is not irrational, a religion only for the simple-minded.

In the great debates between Hellenism and Christianity in the early Church, some Church Fathers, including Chrysostom, condemned only methods of philosophising, and pseudo-philosophies which engaged in theories without practical results. They were interested in the actual salvation of the human being and any philosophy which cannot transfer it to its source of origin was considered in error. The great debate between Hellenism, its ideology and principles, and Christianity itself continues to our own time because many of its consequences have relevance to contemporary theological dialogues. But let us return to Chrysostom’s relationship with Hellenism.

Whether in terms of style, form, or ideas Chrysostom’s background in the Greek heritage was both broad and influential on his ministry and writings. And he did not acquire it only in the four walls of a classroom, or the dusty libraries of his teachers. His whole native city was an open university of Greek classical civilization.

Antioch had a gymnasium which offered intellectual stimulation and provided an all embracing education through observation and active temples and sacred altars; the statues of gods, goddesses, semi-gods and heroes; the great state and city library called the museum; the theater on the slope of the Acropolis, the stadium where the Olympics were held. All these and more provided opportunities for cultural enrichment and gave Chrysostom a sense of continuity with his heritage, pagan, nonetheless his own. Chrysostomus Baur, one of Chrysostom’s most authoritative modern scholars, writes that during Chrysostom’s life time “between Greek classicism and Greek Christianity the most intimate relations existed.” Such was the dominance of Greek linguistic literary and philosophical culture in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire that very few Church Fathers and literary persons became interested in learning any other language except Greek. Chrysostom never learned Hebrew, Latin, or Syrian which he called “a barbarous language.”

14The best book on Antioch, the city and its civilization, is Glanville Downey, A History of Antioch in Syria (Princeton, 1961). There are two other shorter versions of the same work.
15Baur, Chrysostom, 1, p. 9.
Chrysostom was born and raised in a city which boasted of itself as the "Syriades Athenai" (Syrian Athens). "Not only in blood did Antioch think of itself as an offshoot of Athens, but all the religious and intellectual activity of the city was a continuation and reaffirmation of the achievement of classical Greece. In its worship of the old gods, in its study of classical literature, history, and philosophy, in its rich artistic activity, in its local counterpart of the famous Olympic Games of Greece, Antioch could justly and proudly claim that it endeavored to live in the great tradition of ancient Hellas" to quote my teacher Dr. Glanville Downey, who participated in Antioch's excavations between 1932-1939 and remains the outstanding authority on Antioch.

In his monumental volume Ancient Antioch, Downey writes: "Antioch had a special mission, first in transplanting Greek culture into Semitic Syria in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great, then as a vigorous Christian center in which Christianity and the Greek tradition were in time harmonized to form the new Christian Hellenic tradition which in turn was brought to a new fruition in Constantine the Great's new foundation, Constantinople, which as the center of Byzantine culture preserved the Greek Christian heritage for transmission to the West at the Renaissance.""10

It was in this "Athens of the East," that Chrysostom acquired his "Attic soul." His success as a preacher is attributed not only to an excellent knowledge of the Christian Scriptures and his homiletical charisma but also to his broad Greek rhetorical and classical learning. The critical and transitional early Byzantine centuries (330-565) provided the climate and the means which contributed to the formation of the Greek Christian civilization which, however, was built on the living substance of the old pagan Greek civilization. Greek and Christian were not antithetical terms. Thus "a Christian could still be proud of being a Greek" in the words of Glanville Downey.19 The spiritual and intellectual force of Byzantine civilization, its integrity and inner strength, was the synthesis of the new vitality of the Greek intellectual achievement and the power of the Christian gospel. It

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Chrysostom, 1, 24.

10Glanville Downey, Ancient Antioch (Princeton, 1963), pp. 4-5. This is a condensation of Downey's History of Antioch cited above.

19Ibid. p. 275.

Ibid.
was this Greek Christian heritage that shaped the strength and the
backbone of the Byzantine Empire enabling it to resist the assaults
of so many enemies, old and new (the Persians, Arabs, Ostrogoths,
Visigoths, Huns, Bulgars, Slavs, Russians, Patzinaks, Magyars, Turks,
Franks) for nearly one thousand years.

Thus Chrysostom was brough up in an intellectual, social, and
political climate, of a city where both elements, the Greek and the
Christian co-existed with a special intensity and strength. Their symbiosis became the rule rather than the exception. Whether directly
or indirectly Chrysostom contributed to their interdependence.

Nevertheless, Chrysostom’s greatness lies not so much in the form
and style of his writings but in the content and the essence of his
message; in the variety and timelessness of his subjects. His essays
and sermons are “a rich treasure house” for ordinary folk, theologians,
philologists, social historians, even archaeologists. In many of his ideas
he is as contemporary as any. It is for this reason that Chrysostom
has earned the respect, admiration and affection of all centuries. He
is frequently cited not so much for doctrinal theology as for ethics,
behavior, piety, social relationships. His passionate denunciations of
social inequality, of the rich and heartles, the gluttony, avarice, and
luxury of laymen and clergymen alike have the same import and value
for today and tomorrow. He remained a source for the enrichment
of sermons and essays throughout the Byzantine centuries. Saint
Photios, for example in his Amphilochoia and Epistles refers to the
mind and views of Chrysostom more than 65 times.20

Like the Cappadocian Fathers, and long before them the
Apologetics, the Alexandrians and other Church Fathers and ecclesiastical writers, Chrysostom asigned Greek Classical thought below
Holy Scripture. The Fathers were fully aware of their benefit of learning which synthesizes the biblical truth with the inherited intellectual culture. “The fruit of the soul is preeminently truth, yet to clothe
it with external wisdom is not without merit, giving a kind of foliage
and covering for the fruit and an aspect by no means unbecoming”
writes Basil the Great.21

As already indicated, Chrysostom’s study of the Bible was extensive

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20Photios, Amphilochoia and Epistles, ed. by B. Laourdas and L.G. Westerink, 7
21Basil of Cesarea, “Proe ton Neous,” 2. ed. B. Psamtagas in the series Basiliscou
and exceptionally profound. He is reported to have known by heart the whole Bible and that you can reconstruct it on the basis of the passages with which he embellished his homilies and other writings. It is also true that Chrysostom appears as a critic of Greek philosophers like Plato whom he compared unfavorably with Saint Paul. He attacked the philosophy of others as pseudo-wisdom. But in spite of some disparaging remarks about the classical heritage Chrysostom was only superficially against it.22

The influence of his classical education is evident in many of his writings. For example, his essay On the Priesthood is cast in a Platonic dialogue pattern and has been described "as a literary device in classical form." On the other hand, the concept of the Greek polis as an organism, where the citizen lives out his individuality, exerted a tremendous influence on Chrysostom. In his homilies On the Statues, he appealed to the Antiochans' pride as citizens of a distinguished polis; he reminded them of the city's glorious history and of the duty to prove themselves worthy. He emphasized that the greatness of a city lies in the virtues of its citizens. "This is in the pure Hellenic tradition" in the words of Dr. Downey.

From Justin the philosopher and martyr, through Clement of Alexandria and the Cappadocians, consistent efforts were made to achieve the spiritual symbiosis between classical Greek ideas and the Christian ideology. Several major Church Fathers considered it their task to graft a "wild alive tree," every ancient good Greek idea, into a Christian idea. They tried to transform human philosophia into divine theognosia to paraphrase Theodore Dukas Laskaris, the 13th century philosopher-theologian, Emperor of Nicea.23

In this sense Chrysostom followed a well established paradosis. When someone tried to prevent them from studying the classics because of their commitment to Christianity they protested, claiming that no one had the right to deprive them of what was their own patrimony.

When, for example, in the middle of the fourth century Emperor Julian issued laws (362-363) forbidding Christian teachers to teach Greek classics, Church Fathers reacted against Julian's policies. They


felt themselves unjustly excluded from their own Hellenic heritage. Gregory the Theologian questioned the emperor’s law by saying: “Who gave you the right to deprive us of speaking and teaching Greek (to hellenizein) and who told you that Greek is your own patrimony and not ours as well?” Gregory was totally versed in Greek literary and philosophical heritage, including mythology. In his defense against Julian, he uses many Greek rhetorical devices to compare the accomplishments of Christians with those of pagans.24

In his essay The Blessed Babylas and Against the Pagans (Hellenes), John Chrysostom condemns pagan religion but not the Greek cultural inheritance. “Chrysostom is faithful to traditional Greek ethical theory,” in the words of one of Chrysostom’s special scholars.25 He uses the principles of Greek ethical theory in order to demonstrate that the Hellenic idea of virtue is realized only among Christians. In his apologetic discourse on the Blessed Babylas Chrysostom reveals his debt to Hellenism, and his views about Hellenic ideas.

First, his essay is constructed in the best rules of classical learning. Second, his narrative about the achievements of Babylas in life and after death correspond to the elements used to eulogize the hero in Greek literature. Veneration of the hero in life and in death, the reward of virtue during life and after death; honor paid to the public person; the sacredness (agiotes) of the good person in life and in death are common in the Homeric epics and later in Plato and other Greek masters.

The most important of the Church Fathers respected the religious quest of the ancient Greeks whose search came to converge in the teaching of Herakleitos on “universal logos,” the “ultimate living mind or Divine intelligence” of Anaxagoras — teachings which led to the belief of Socrates and Plato that there is “a provident and benevolent maker and father of the universe.”26 Chrysostom, along with other Greek Fathers educated in the Greek classics, appreciated the ancient belief that virtue is the health of the soul. Virtue is the perfection of the divine intelligence that the human person shares

with the divinity. The duty of every human being is to "follow God" and thus "become immortal." The human soul, though fallen and tainted by association with its bodily prison-house, is of divine origin and able to regain divinity or immortality.

There are several more outstanding values of ancient Hellenism both philosophical and ethical which were compatible with Christianity. Christian intellectuals and many Church Fathers realized, for example, that the knowledge of the Divinity's nature and inner life was the first and primary goal of the Hellenic wise person. The acquisition of divine language and the possession of criteria to judge the validity of this knowledge convinced the ancient Greeks that there is no conflict and no contradiction between the divine source of wisdom (apocalypsis-revelation), and the human quest for divine wisdom (logos-reason). These two sources of wisdom converge and complement one another.

It is in the light of this background that no major Church Father or ecclesiastical writer ever raised the Tertullian question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Since the divine exists in the human (for in the divinity "we live and move and have our being" as Aratos and Epimenides said and Paul of Tarsus confirmed, Acts 17.28), reason is a God-given gift. Thus divine revelation and human reason originate from the same source.

One of the principal talents of the Greeks was their natural disposition for the religious mysteries and theological truths. They were philosophers and seekers after truth. They believed that the rule of law, freedom itself, have religious foundations. By instinct and through intuition, search and observation, they arrived in the belief of the divine origins of human kind and of the cosmos. With a few exceptions, such as Protagoras and Isocrates, Greek thinkers never believed in secular humanism, that the human being is the measure of all things, and that pure reason could dethrone the divine from its uncreated and all pervasive presence. It is for this reason that modern scholars are against the de-Hellenization of Christianity. They acknowledge that on the whole the adoption of Hellenic thought, categories, language, ethical principles was beneficial to Christianity. Thus they advocate the re-Hellenization rather than its de-Hellenization. 27

Sophocles, in the Oedipus Tyrannos, makes central this very point. When Creon and Iocaste ridiculed Teiresias the prophet, placing queen reason over the law of heaven, they were reminded that they will not escape divine punishment because the law of heaven originates with the divinity and not in the nature of the human person. And in his Antigone, Sophocles emphasized the eternal immutability of divine law which cannot be violated by any human pretentions to power.

Greek ethics were especially valued by the Christian Fathers for they were ecumenical in nature. Philoxenia, philanthropia, isonomia, timocratie — hospitality, philanthropy, equality under the law, meritocracy. Just a few observations on philoxenia-philanthropia, highly admired and pursued by the ancient Greeks from as early as the Homeric age. One of the best illustrations of the Greek concern for the human person in need is related by Homer who has been part of Greek education throughout the centuries.

In the Odyssey, Odysseus finds himself in a strange land and wondered to what land of mortals fate had delivered him: “Are these people proud and savage and without justice, or are they friendly to strangers and have a god-fearing mind?” He had landed on the island of Phaeakians (Kerkyra?) and at the beach he was discovered by Nausica and her servants. What followed is an illustration of ancient Greek religious humanism.

This man, a wretched wanderer, has come here whom we must look after, for all strangers and beggars are in the care of Zeus, and a gift, no matter how small, it should be given gladly. Come girls, give food and drink to the stranger, wash him in the river where is a shelter against the wind. So Nausica said, and they stood and vied with each other and they took Odysseus down to a shelter, as Nausica... had ordered. They put down a mantle and a tunic and clothes for him, and gave him liquid olive oil in a golden flash..."28

Elsewhere we read that when Athena in the guise of a stranger, the Taphian leader Mentor, visited Odysseus’ house in Ithaca, Telemachus rushed to the stranger and said: “Welcome stranger, our home is your home. When you have eaten dinner, you will tell us

28Homer, The Odyssey, Bk. 6:180-184.
what it is you need." And when Nestor, king of Pylos and his sons
saw Telemachos and his companions, they ran toward them to
welcome, and asked them to sit down for a meal. "No one will go
away from my house without necessary help...," and "so long as
children are left to me... to entertain strangers (xenos) whoever
comes to my house" said Nestor. The same tradition existed in other parts
of the Greek world. For example when Menelaos the king of
Lacedaimon saw the two strangers coming to him, he welcomed them
and urged them "to take some food and enjoy themselves:" adding
that "when you have partaken of dinner, we shall ask what kind of
men you are." 29

Philoxenia, hospitality to strangers, reveals the ethos and the
ethical disposition, the characteristic and distinguishing attitudes,
habits and customs of a person or a people and in this sense Greek
ethical thought was not exclusive in practice but in its application
it embraced any human being. At no time do we find ethics among
the Greeks which excluded non-Greeks from humanitarian treatment.
Their chief god Zeus provided the example. Among other attributes
he was a Xenios Zeus, a lover of all strangers, needy and destitute.
"He protects pious suppliants and he is a friend and the protector
of strangers and his grace follows them wherever they go." "Open
to any one who knocks on your door" was the divine command-
ment. 30 When compared to ethical philanthropic concerns and ac-
tivities of other ancient peoples, Greek ethical theory has been found
broader in scope and more encompassing in practice. In its benevolent
attitude towards the strangers, the elderly, orphans, and wayfarers,
Greek society clearly achieved pre-eminence. In comparing Hebrew
and Greek attitudes toward hospitality, W.C. Firebaugh an author-
ity on the subject, writes:

One phase of hospitality there was, in the Heroic Age, which
placed it far above the standards practiced by the Hebrews,
at least in the later ages of their history and the only examples
which can be cited to compare with their Greek standard are
those of Abraham and Lot. To the Greek, it made not the
slightest difference whether his guest was a Dorian or an Io-
nian, a Locrian, a Corycian, or an Attic, it made no dif-

29P. 127.
30Ibid.
to food and shelter, and also to protection while under his host’s roof. The Hebrew, in the later period of his history, while always hospitable, confined his charity and entertainment to members of his own race, or to those closely allied to it. The unlimited scope of Hellenic hospitality will be better understood after a thorough perusal of Homer, the gospel of the ancient Greeks.\textsuperscript{31}

The Jewish people regarded themselves as the exclusive people of God, a belief that involved the rejection of all other people. “The Lord is merciful and gracious” but “he is only gracious to Israelites; other nations he will terrify.” “If a man repents God accepts him, but that applies only to Israel and no other nation.” Jewish exclusiveness had influenced every aspect of daily life. An Israelite was forbidden to do business with a Gentile and he must not go on a journey with a Gentile; an Israelite must neither give hospitality to, nor accept hospitality from a Gentile; or compare Socrates’s ethical principle that “it is evil to retaliate evil for evil” with Deuteronomy’s advice: “you shall have no pity, an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth, a life for a life.”\textsuperscript{32}

It is in the light of this background that Church Fathers did not reject Greek ethics. Ultimately Christian ethics came to be viewed closer to the Hellenic than the Hebrew mind. Some Greek perceptions about family life were received as very noble. For example when Odysseus sought the assistance of Nausicaa he addressed her as follows:

May the gods grant you as much as your heart desires; may they give you a husband and also a home, filled up with love. For there is nothing more beautiful and noble than husband and wife in love taking care of their household with one mind, man and woman, two bodies with one soul a pain to their enemies and a joy to the friends.\textsuperscript{33}

The Greek Fathers rejected belief in polytheism but adopted many aspects of the Greek religious life. The attitude of the average Greek toward the divine was expressed most directly in liturgy, ritual, observance, in prayers and hymns of the temple service. To be sure religious


\textsuperscript{32}Plato, \textit{Crito}, 49.c; 54.c; Deut 19.21.

\textsuperscript{33}Homer, \textit{The Odyssey}, Bk. 6:180-184.
thought was never absent from literary products such as poetry, history, philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Indeed as St. Paul had observed in Athens the Greeks were very religious (Acts 17.22). Whether of the Greek Orthodox Christian tradition or the Latin Western, practicing Christian or not, people educated in Western Civilization have been nourished on a tradition that rests on Hebrew monotheism reformed by Jesus Christ and Paul of Tarsus, combined with a metaphysical theology derived from Herakleitos, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle; and the ritual, symbolism, mysticism and the element of mystery from ancient Greek and Hellenistic inheritance.

Chrysostom's liturgical language "theognosias akeraton fos"; "philanthropos Theos"; "anenochon kai akatakrion tin parastasin tou hagiou sou thyssisteriou"; the "aphaton kai ametretron sou philanthropian"; "streptos kai analoitotis gegonas anthropoe" - these and many more ideas and theological expressions remind us of Chrysostom's debt to the Greek religious and philosophical background. Chrysostom was not an original systematic theologian. Even in his catechetical orations he presents no profound theology. But his writings are a rich reservoir for social history; liturgy and liturgical life; church customs and social conditions which made his moral concerns achieve original expression. Through his homilies on wealth, poverty, charity, philanthropy, Chrysostom raised the level of personal and social conscience and emphasized the importance of conscience as the innate voice of God.

There is in Chrysostom's writings much for all of us: theologians and theological students, clergy and lay people alike. In addition to purely theological reasons for studying Chrysostom, like the other great Fathers of the early and medieval Church, in his own characteristic way Chrysostom shows the results of the interaction of Christianity and Hellenism. His classical education, his use of Attic Greek language and style, his thorough knowledge of the Holy Scriptures remind us of what real theological training should be.

One of the most important objects we learn from a study of Chrysostom's writings is that he was a person of strong moral principles, profound personal faith, and a sincere commitment to improving the lot of the less fortunate members of society. Less interested in controversial theological issues, he was a champion of practical ethics. Whether in Antioch or in Constantinople, Chrysostom's aim was the moral reformation of Church and Society. He spared the sinner but he was merciless against sin. He attacked the ostentatious
luxury of the wealthy classes as well as the sensuality, gluttony and avarice of women of the imperial court, the clergy higher and lower alike — monks, nuns, and deaconesses. Chrysostom became "as a torch burning before sore eyes" in the words of Palladius.\textsuperscript{34} As priest and bishop Chrysostom was described as "very charitable, so that many called him the Eleemos RECEIVER giver."\textsuperscript{35}

By modern philosophical standards, Chrysostom was a liberal because he was concerned with liberal values — freedom of the oppressed, eradication of inequality and suffering, elimination of social injustice. As a priest in Antioch and Patriarch in Constantinople he attacked luxury and pretension, extravagance and ostentatious display of power and wealth. He was the champion of simplicity, sincerity, openness and virtue. He did not separate the values of his public from his private life. One of the major lessons we learn from his life and ministry is that there is no theological or ideological way that would justify a separation of our private from our public life; our private religious convictions from our public ministry and testimony.

Among other contributions to Christianity, Chrysostom is credited with successful missions among the Kelts, Scythians, Phoenicians, and Marcionites. In Christian worship he introduced new prayers and liturgical practices. For example, increasing the number of nightly services with chanting. As an administrator, he expelled at least 12 bishops for Simoniac reasons. Accepting fees for consecration was regarded as the most serious sin for a bishop.

There are several other aspects of Chrysostom’s life, education, and teachings which are significant for us today. His views on the priesthood, on education, on wealth and poverty, and several more ecclesiastical and theological issues. Here we can only touch upon what he has to teach us about theological education and priestly formation. Only his training in the Scriptures was superior to his Greek classical education. Today more than ever, in an age of high technology and the physical sciences, we need to place more emphasis on the classical humanities as a preparation for theology and pastoral ministry. Not too long ago Vatican issued a special encyclical asking


Roman Catholic seminaries to bring back Greek and Latin as indispensable tools in a well rounded theological education. Secular and non-Christian humanists\textsuperscript{86} decry the loss of traditional values which go back to classical humanities. The Greek classics are reproducible and relevant to all times for they speak endlessly of morals and virtue, and the universality and the sacredness of the human being. Whether pre-Socratic, Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Epicurean thought, Pagan Hellenism and Christian Hellenism have much in common. If some people are not aware of this symbiosis, it is because our theological training (yours and mine) has been terribly deficient in the study of classical humanities. Whether because of historical circumstances, an overloaded curriculum, or prejudice and bias, theological education has been narrow. It was not so with the Fathers, including Chrysostom.

Fourth and fifth century champions of pagan Hellenism such as Libanius, Themistios, and Julian, and critics such as Epiphanius of Cyprus, Cyril of Alexandria and to some degree Chrysostom, agreed that Hellenism and Christianity shared many similarities in the realm of both religion and ethics. In the debates between Christian Hellenists and Pagan Hellenists the following agreements become evident:

1) All authentic wisdom consists in the correct understanding of the divine and human reality as far as the human being is capable to comprehend.
2) The correct understanding can be acquired through contemplation of the Divine Reality and the practice of virtue.
3) True contemplation and genuine practice of virtue derive from imitation of and communion with the divinity.
4) Imitation and communion with the divinity reveals the transcendental qualities of unity, truth, goodness and beauty of the divinity as they are reflected in the life of the virtuous and wise person.
5) The duty of the individual who has achieved this state of being is to communicate his experience to his fellow human beings.
6) The first responsibility of the wise person is to practice piety — εὐσεβεία and then imitate the divinity in a life of purity.

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and service to humanity. The relationship of love for God and neighbor through the practice of piety, philanthropy, justice and moderation (metron, diacrisis) brings inner freedom and genuine life.

7) The goal of the wise human being in both Hellenism and Christianity is happiness on earth and salvation which is identified with life in the Divinity (theosis).

8) Divinely revealed truth was not the prerogative of Hebrews and Christians. The Greeks claimed to have received their own truths from the Divinity directly through their philosophers and prophets.

9) Both Hellenism and Christianity affirm that the unique source of all true wisdom is the divinity which reveals it in diverse manners and various ways: the external created cosmos with its harmony and beauty, and the inner world of the human person’s moral and spiritual life. The divine will is communicated in the legacy wise men whether philosophers or prophets and apostles of the past have left behind.

10) The last of this comprehensive synopsis is the belief that the human being came from God, or the divinity, and its vocation is to seek communion with the divine through worship and imitation.37

Respect and honor for John Chrysostom, the Cappadocians, Photios and the whole patristic tradition means imitation of their learning and attitude toward their cultural and intellectual background and priestly formation. A theology which concentrates on easy learning, including biblical fundamentalism, utility, and short cuts in historical learning is a shallow, a pseudo-theology. Greek Orthodox theology in particular cannot subscribe to the Tertullian myopia and religious romanticism and seek to divert itself from its sources and long standing classical humanistic heritage. Only imperfect knowledge of genuine Hellenic thought leads to bias, prejudice and polemics. The educated Christian Fathers saw much good in Sophokles’

Antigone, Plato's Dialogues, and Aristotle's Ethics — to mention only a few of Greek classical antiquity's heritage. Their ethical teachings are reproducible in any place and all times.

Saint John Chrysostom's Greek classical education reminds us that a modern theologian priest or bishop should be excellently trained in the classical humanities in order to better understand Christianity, its cultural background and its intellectual inheritance.

To be sure our theology should be studied and understood in terms of its basic scripture (the Bible); its theological and canonical expression as it was formulated by Ecumenical Synods and the patristic mind (Sacred Tradition); but also in its historical experience (the Praxis) and cultural milieu; the experience of the living Community of believers at any given time and place in history.

All three aspects were the theoretical and practical concern of Chrysostom and other major Church Fathers. They relied on the Scriptures but they also borrowed heavily from Greek thought which dominated the intellectual environment of their time, especially Neoplatonism and Stoicism. These two philosophical systems in particular concerned themselves with the dignity of the human being, the doctrine of the human soul, social ethics and metaphysics — all topics of modern concern. Moreover, the Fathers were fully aware of historical realities which shaped the daily life of their people. In a sense theirs was a holistic approach to the problematics of the human being.

Orthodox theology possesses strong rootedness and it has inherited a living tradition which, however, calls constantly for a re-evaluation but also a re-baptism in the theological language and symbolism, rationalism but also mystical sensibilities, psychological insights and creative spirituality, historical experience and contemporary realities. The past both Christian and non-Christian is internal in the life of our people. Chrysostom's Greek classical heritage is part of our own heritage. A study of history reveals that in every culture and ideology there are certain constants and irreducible ideological components. Our classical heritage includes several such components.

Moreover, students of theology should always remember that St. John Chrysostom received a liberal education, studying Greek language, history, literature, and philosophy for the sake of a more successful ministry of the Gospel (exeskete tois logois pros diakonian ton theion logon) — writes his biographer Palladius.38

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38 Palladius, Dialogos, S. In contrast to H. Moore, the translator, and P. R. Cole-
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No wonder why after some disastrous experiments in recent years, many seminaries are reintroducing to their curricula the basics, including Greek and Latin languages and humanities.

Can we afford to do less in our theological education?

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