A problem that plagued the early Church for several centuries and was destined to have far-reaching historical results was that of the attitude to be adopted to the old learning. The degree to which the infiltration to Christian minds of pagan culture was admissible became a source of constant anxiety. To what extent was a Christian desirous of preserving an honest balance in his intellectual and moral life entitled to indulge in the reading of pagan books and allow them to constitute a harmonious element in his outlook on life?

For the members of a community whose very existence was subjected to the intense pressures of an aggressively alien environment the issues involved were acute. For the new faith, Graeco-Roman civilisation in many of its facets engendered distrust, bitterness and antagonism. Christianity with its preoccupation with the essential seriousness of human existence and the tragedy of destiny could not sympathise with a society steeped in a literature which had become largely divorced from reality and destitute of any real taste for, or appreciation of, truth. The moral miasma infecting too many works expressing the very soul of antiquity awakened an impassioned animosity in the Christian conscience. The \textit{regula fidei}, virtually the code of the Christian's marching orders, was impugned on every hand by the arrogance of traditional pagan philosophies of which the intellectual independence eroded alike the idea of God, of Providence and any belief in an after life. And the fact that the State was persecutor and enlisted a whole gamut of atrocious penalties in its endeavour to crush the new movement could not but acerbate an already instinctive aversion.

The opposition of the \textit{simpliciores} to the powers that be was actuated by a rough, but not incomprehensible, sort of logic. In the circumstances what was to be gained by coquetting with a civilisation which to Christian belief was already doomed? A civilisation with which true faith had so few points of contact? Whose ethos was so unpalatable, so many of its public manifestations positively nauseous?

The extreme or intransigent attitude towards the old order is brilliantly illustrated by Tertullian. In his tract 'On Idolatry' he lays it down that every form of idolatry must be renounced, and idolatry assumes many forms. The schoolmaster and the \textit{professor litterarum} were particularly liable to be disloyal to Christ. Their holidays were heathen festivals and

1. c.160 - c.220 A.D.
their very fees in part due to Minerva. Their business was to instruct the youth in the literature and the scandals of Olympus. Christians must not be instructors in pagan literature though believers in Christ are permitted by Tertullian to study it on the ground that ‘without secular studies divine studies cannot be pursued’. He apparently took the view that the religious indoctrination that the pupil received at home would counteract whatever conflicted with his faith.

The savageness of Tertullian’s attack on pagan philosophy is unmeasured. He never weary of widening the ditch separating the world from the Church. Philosophers are branded as ‘hucksterising wiseacres and talkers’. For the art of dialectic he evinces supreme contempt. This invention of the ‘pitiable Aristotle’ is the mother of heresy. ‘What indeed,’ he cries triumphantly, ‘has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians? . . . So much the worse for those who have broached a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic and dialectic composition! We have no need of curiosity after possessing Christ Jesus, nor of investigation after enjoying the Gospel!’ The thrust of this question was not to lose its pertinacity for many a year.

Tertullian’s standpoint is substantially reflected in Theophilus of Antioch. The sole remaining specimen of his writings consists of three books addressed to his pagan friend Autolycus. Speaking of the glory of the six days’ work in creation, he remarks: ‘Many writers indeed have imitated (the narration), and essayed to give an explanation of these things; yet, though they thence derive some suggestions, both concerning the creation of the world and the nature of man, they have emitted no slightest spark of truth. And the utterances of the philosophers and writers and poets have an appearance of trustworthiness, on account of the beauty of their diction; but their discourse is proved to be foolish and idle, because the multitude of their nonsensical frivolities is very great; and not a stray morsel of truth is found in them’.

‘On account of the beauty of their diction.’ The lack of this was the nub of much denigration of Christian documents. The simplicity and sometimes crudity of their language offended the canons of genteel taste. This point is

2. de Idololatria, 10.
5. ob. c.183-185.
noticed and countered by the vigorous rhetoric of Arnobius, a late convert to Christianity from Sicca in North Africa. Diocletian’s persecution was in progress when he wrote and gave verve to his brilliant invective and flashes of sardonic humour. ‘Our narratives, my opponent says, are overrun with barbarisms and solecisms, and disfigured by monstrous blunders. A censure, truly, which shows a childish and petty spirit. . . . How is the truth of a statement diminished, if an error is made in number or case, in preposition, participle, or conjunction? Let that pomposity of style and strictly regulated diction be reserved for public assemblies, for lawsuits, for the forum and courts of justice, and by all means be handed over to those who, striving after the soothing influences of pleasant sensations, bestow all their care on splendour of language. But when we are discussing matters far removed from mere display, we should consider what is said, not with what charm it is said nor how it tickles the ears, but what benefit it confers on the hearers. . . .’

Arnobius appears to have exercised little influence on the mind of his pupil Lactantius who strangely does not mention his mentor. Lactantius survived to enjoy the freedom of Christianity. He belonged to a period of rapid change when masses were soon to stream into the Church and repression was virtually a thing of the past. He obviously realised that a constantly widening Christian constituency, however various in quality, demanded a modification of traditional Christian attitudes and a tempering of time-honoured rigorism. On the whole his writings display a moderate and genial tone. What imparts a real interest to his Institutiones Divinae is the presence of conflicting tendencies, some a legacy from an uncompromising past, others informed by a new spirit. While upon occasion Lactantius can be as unyielding as his predecessors, he does not reach the devastating logical conclusions of Tertullian. He is perhaps aptly described as a genuine lover of a purist past constrained by the trends of impending change to realise that a system geared to extreme attitudes must give place to less exacting norms of conduct if human frailties as exemplified in a multitude of hesitating and often unenthusiastic adherents were to be constructively utilised in a Christian interest. Arnobius excelled in demolition of the structures of pagan religion. He revelled in heavy irony. His Latinity has been compared, not without justice, to that of Apuleius, though it lacks his brilliancy and is not so thickly studded with recherché ornaments. The charm of Lactantius with his delightful style and the exuberance of his imagination has won for him the title of the Christian Cicero. The Emperor Constantine entrusted him with the education of his son Crispus of

7. ob. c. 330 A.D.
8. Against the Heathen, Adversus Gentes 2.59.
9. c.240-320 A.D.
lamented memory. He is believed to have died at Trèves about 325 A.D.

Reference must be made in this study to the significance of Ambrose,\textsuperscript{10} bishop of Milan, and an outstanding figure in the latter part of the fourth century. He demonstrated the lines on which secular learning could be constructively employed to serve Christian ends. It was in connection with his administrative and spiritual responsibilities that he composed what may pass for the first systematic formulation of Christian ethics. The treatise bears the title \textit{De Officiis Ministrorum}. It may have had in view the needs of the younger clergy. It shows how the Latin tradition could be made to function in the new Christian environment.

The main interest of the \textit{De Officiis} lies in the fact that it reveals how Ambrose used his source—Cicero's \textit{De Officiis}. Inclusion of subject matter, alteration and rejection are alike illuminating. Ambrose displays no hearty penchant for pagan philosophy even when he is purloining it. He attributes its positive value to an original derivation from Jewish wisdom—a theory that enjoyed a vogue among apologists for several centuries. The whole body of Ciceronian thought is adjusted in the light of Christian principles. Individual moral ideas acquire a new meaning, efficacy and power, when rethought by a Christian mind. \textit{De Officiis Ministrorum} is important in the history of human thought as indicating how many of the moral and ethical problems of the Graeco-Roman milieu have been transformed or eliminated by basic Christian beliefs. If not a \textit{Summa} of Christian morality, Ambrose's book is solidly ballasted by the fruits of extensive pastoral experience.

Jerome\textsuperscript{11} is, of course, the scholar par excellence. His books were part of himself. He was familiar with the Latin classics, especially Cicero, Vergil and Horace. At Rome the famed pagan teacher Aelius Donatus\textsuperscript{12} counted him as well as the Vergilian commentator Servius among his pupils. On his first visit to the East\textsuperscript{13} Jerome fell seriously ill with a fever, and had a memorable traumatic experience as he lay close to death. He describes this in a letter to the nun Eustochium\textsuperscript{14} about a decade after the event. In an ecstasy he was conscious of being arraigned before the tribunal of God. 'I was asked as to my profession, and I replied: "I am a Christian". Then he who presided said: You lie: you are a Ciceronian, and not a Christian: where your treasure is, there is your heart also. . . .'	extsuperscript{15} As a result Jerome promised to abandon secular learning and to devote himself to sacred

\textsuperscript{10} 374-397 A.D.
\textsuperscript{11} c.342-420 A.D.
\textsuperscript{12} His Latin grammar remained standard for more than 1000 years.
\textsuperscript{13} Around 374 A.D.
\textsuperscript{14} Letters, 22.
\textsuperscript{15} Interrogatus condicionem, Christianum me esse respondi. Et ille qui residebat: 'mentiris' ait, 'Ciceronianus es, non Christianus: "ubi thesaurus tuus, ibi et cor tuum"'.


Whatever interpretation is placed on the dream its incidence demonstrates how deeply addicted at the time Jerome had remained to the old tradition. In his conscience it was not as yet fully integrated into his Christian allegiance.

Despite himself, Jerome retained a propensity for the distant past. The associations of a singularly retentive mind would obtrude on slight provocation in his new métier. He was forced to adopt a change of stance. He now claims an absolute right to utilise the Graeco-Roman literature in the defence of the Faith. In a letter dated 397 A.D. he replies to one Magnus, an orator of Rome, who had criticised his predilection for making quotations from 'superannuated' profane authors. Excerpts from a lengthy communication must suffice. ‘You ask me at the close of your letter why it is that sometimes in my writings I quote examples from secular literature and thus defile the whiteness of the church with the foulness of heathenism. . . . Who is there who does not know that both in Moses and in the prophets there are passages cited from Gentile books and that Solomon proposed questions to the philosophers of Tyre and answered others put to him by them. The Apostle Paul also, in writing to Titus, has used a line of the poet Epimenides: “The Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies.” Half of which line was afterwards adopted by Callimachus. It is not surprising that a literal rendering should fail to preserve the metre, seeing that Homer when translated into the same language is scarcely intelligible even in prose. In another epistle Paul quotes a line of Menander: “Evil communications corrupt good manners.” And when he is arguing with the Athenians upon the Areopagus, he calls Aratus as a witness citing from him the words “For we are also his offspring;” In Greek τού γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμεν, the close of a heroic verse. And as if this were not enough, that leader of the Christian army, that unvanquished pleader for the cause of Christ, skilfully turns a chance inscription into a proof of the faith. For he had learnt from the true David to wrench the sword of the enemy out of his hand and with his own blade to cut off the head of the arrogant Goliath. He had read in Deuteronomy the command given by the voice of the Lord that when a captive woman had her hair shaved, her eyebrows and all her hair cut off, she might then be taken to wife. Is it surprising that I too, admiring the fairness of her form and the grace of her eloquence, desire to make that secular wisdom which is my captive and my handmaid, a matron of the true Israel? . . . My efforts promote the advantage of Christ’s family, my

16. ‘Domine, si unquam habuero codices saeculares, si legero, te negaui.’
17. Josephus is apparently the authority for this.
19. Acts 17.22
so-called defilement with an alien increases the number of my fellow-
servants. . . . 21

In rebutting the charges of his once bosom friend but now arch-enemy,
Rufinus, that he had broken his promise ‘never again to pay attention to
secular literature’ Jerome retorts: ‘I think I have here lighted on the man
who, under the name of Sallustianus Calpurnius, and through the letter
written me by the orator Magnus, raised a not very great question. My
answer on the general subject is contained in the short (!) treatise which I
then wrote to him. But at the present moment I must make answer as to the
sacrilege and perjury of my dream. I said that I would thenceforward read
no secular books: it was a promise for the future, not the abolition of my
memory of the past. . . . If you had had a literary education your mind
would retain what it was originally imbued with as a wine cask retains its
scent. The purple dye on the wool cannot be washed out with water. Even
asses and other brutes know the inns they have stopped at before, however
long the journey may have been. . . . I must be very much mistaken if you
do not study Cicero in secret. . . . 22 I might well reply as I have done even if
it were a question of a promise made with full consciousness. But this is a
new and shameless thing; he throws in my teeth a mere dream’. 23 Cornered,
Jerome artfully escape. Are vows made in dreams binding?

The fusion of the old pagan tradition with the nascent Christian order
received further impetus in Jerome’s younger contemporary, Augustine.24
Like Jerome, he was deeply versed in Latin literature. It was his youthful
study of the now lost dialogue of Cicero’s Hortensius that had opened his
mind to the attraction of philosophy, especially as embodied in Neo-
Platonism. In 384 the recommendation of Symmachus the prefect of Rome,
and the patriarch of the demoded paganism, had obtained for him the
coveted chair of rhetoric at Milan. There under the preaching of Ambrose
he was converted to orthodox Christianity. Despite his tremendous
achievements in the area of Christianity, particularly in its upper reaches of
thought and speculation, with the onset of old age Augustine shows signs of
becoming more exclusive in his outlook. In his Retractions, written at the
age of 72, he is at pains to play down his affection for the disciplinae
liberales and disavows all in his former writings whether in form or expres-
sion that could be construed as a reflection on his primal Christian commit-
ment.

We may cite a noble passage from Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana

21. Letter 70.
22. chap. 30 in medio.
23. chap. 31, italics ours. From Jerome’s Apology against Rufinus bk. 1. Written from
24. 354-430 A.D.
which is genuinely ecumenical in sentiment. ‘There is no reason why we should not have studied literature just because pagans say that Mercury is its god, nor need we avoid justice and virtue because they have dedicated temples to justice and virtue and preferred to worship in stone what should be borne in one’s heart. Rather, every good and true Christian should understand that truth, wherever found, comes from God.’

The controversial question of the utilisation of pagan authors by Christians was materially furthered by Basil the Great who played an outstanding role in the stabilisation of Eastern monachism. His dual culture, Christian and profane, enabled him to bring a singularly well-balanced and judicial mind to the solution of this awkward question.

Among the homilies or sermons of St Basil is a celebrated opusculum in which the Bishop of NeoCaesarea in Cappadocia discourses to a young auditoire, showing how they may study Greek literature with advantage. It carries the caption πρός τούς νεούς όπως αν ἐκ τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν ὠφελοῖτο λόγων. It was composed apparently when Basil was advanced in years. This delightful little treatise has often been reprinted since the Renaissance, and has been always cherished by lovers of antiquity.

Basil’s discussion is a little haphazard, but such a minor dislocation is more than compensated for by an abundant infusion of good nature in his remarks. Some important principles emerge from his treatment. Basil is of opinion that, allowing that sundry criticisms of profane literature are only too justifiable, from a moral point of view not all are reprehensible. Poets, orators, and historians have united to eulogise the good in it, and it abounds in precepts and examples calculated to lay the foundations of a worthy character. There is one necessary caveat, however. A proper selection of subject matter must be made and what is questionable eliminated. Such expurgation accomplished, Basil is assured that his young charges will greatly profit from their perusal of profane literature. ‘For just as in the case of other beings enjoyment of flowers is limited to their fragrance and colour, but the bees, as we see, possess the power to get honey from them as well, so it is possible here also for those who are pursuing not merely what is sweet and pleasant in such writings to store away from them some benefit also for their souls. It is, therefore, in accordance with the whole similitude of the bees, that we should participate in the pagan literature. For these neither approach all flowers equally, nor in truth do they attempt to carry off entire those upon which they light, but taking only so much of them as is suitable for their work, they suffer the rest to go untouched. We ourselves, too, if

25. 2.72.
26. c.330-379 A.D.
27. No. 22. Wrongly included as such. Is it a polished essay?
28. It might well be drawn into the ambit of classical studies. Warmly recommended is Saint
we are wise, having appropriated from this literature what is suitable to us and akin to the truth, will pass over the remainder. And just as in plucking the blooms from a rose-bed we avoid the thorns, so also in garnering from such writings whatever is useful, let us guard ourselves against what is harmful. At the very outset, therefore, we should examine each of the branches of knowledge, and adapt it to our end, according to the Doric proverb, "Bring the stone to the line." 29

On Basil’s system the young auditors would be able to find many examples of virtue in Homer (whom he specially stresses under this head), Hesiod, Theognis, Solon, Euripides, the philosophers, above all Plato. From all of these quotation is made. This initial formation will form the groundwork to be completed later by the study of Holy Writ. It will accustom their untrained eyes to endure with less discomfort the dazzling light of the teaching of Scripture. In other words, pagan literature is for the young Christian what the learning of the Egyptians was for Moses. It was useful as an initiation into a superior study, viz. that of the Old and the New Testament. Basil is fully aware of the advantage of an erudition which combines the Christian truth with the best of an inherited culture. ‘Now if there is some affinity between the two bodies of teachings, knowledge of them should be useful to us; but if not, at least the fact that by setting them side by side we can discover the difference between them, is of no small importance for strengthening the position of the better. And yet with what can you compare the two systems of education and hit upon the true similitude? Perhaps, just as it is the proper virtue of a tree to be laden with beautiful fruit, although it also wears like a fair raiment leaves that wave about its branches, so likewise the fruit of the soul, the truth is primarily its fruitage, yet it is clad in the certainly not unlovely raiment even of the wisdom drawn from the outside, which we may liken to foliage that furnishes both protection to the fruit and an aspect not devoid of beauty.’30

Basil’s approximates to the modern view with the reservation that in his estimation Greek literature is on a distinctly lower level than is Holy Scripture. Yet his conception of a Via Media deserves praise when we bear in mind the prejudices with which he was assailed. These prejudices are not entirely extinct. The thought of a complete rupture with a corrupt and detested past will always have an attraction for certain types of mind.

30. L.C.L. id. 3.