



## The Lingering Effects of Latinization

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Alfred North Whitehead states in his book *Adventures of Ideas* that “*the general type of the cultural development of western civilization was predetermined when the center of Mediterranean*

*learning was transferred from Athens to Alexandria*”. Obviously this is a reference to the expansion of Hellenism, (Greek culture and thought) at the time of the conquests of Alexander the Great. But it is equally true that the transfer of Mediterranean learning from both Alexandria and Athens to Constantinople predetermined the cultural development of Europe.

The new capital of Emperor Constantine became the center of the Christian Greco-Roman world from the political, as well as from the cultural standpoint. Old Rome began withdrawing from the Christian Hellenism of the empire which, by the fourth century, had reached the zenith of her growth, giving lasting direction and shape to a revitalized civilization. Rome on the Tiber was gradually alienated from the spirit of the Christian culture which had emerged in Constantinople with the synthesis of religion and government, Hellenism and Christianity. Rome lost living and organic contact with the empire to which she had given birth and name. The Roman Empire as a bearer of the cultural growth of the Christian faith and the Greek spirit was destined to continue its existence in New Rome on the Bosphorus, while Old Rome played unwittingly the role of a builder and custodian of a new culture in the west.

### New Version of Christian Truth

A new character was permanently

imprinted upon the culture of Western Europe beginning with the fall of Rome to the barbaric races which came down from the north in the fifth century. The restoration of civilization under Pope Gregory the Great in reality marked the inception of a society quite different in spirit and ethos from that of earlier times. The knowledge of Greek was disappearing along with familiarity with Greek philosophy and the theology of the Greek Fathers. “*Gregory represents the patristic mind passing into a more barbarous stage...Augustinianism is altered in form and barbarized.*” (Henry Taylor, *The Medieval Mind*).

Widespread Latinization of the Church in Italy marked the beginning of intellectual decadence. Pope Gregory’s attempt to restore the earlier culture proved abortive, as was later the attempt of Charlemagne to revive the Imperium Romanum. He turned out to be a “dark re-fashioner” of ancient theology. Knowledge was lowered to a more immature level. “Latin Christianity was but the popularized version of Christian truth suited to the undeveloped capacity of the new races that were entering the empire. Greek theology, with its comprehensive range and its lofty spirituality, was unsuitable.”

It was during the fifth century of growing Latinization that the seeds of future tensions and cultural disruptions were sown. **A de-Hellenized and authoritarian**

**Christianity arose out of the ruins brought about by the barbarian invasions coming from the north.**

The earlier thought of the Church which was formulated in the Greek language fell into oblivion and Latin became the universal language for the west and the instrument of theological articulation and communication.

The cataclysmic age of Pope Gregory the Great gave birth to a new Christian tradition fundamentally based on the writings of St. Augustine who wrote in Latin. But the Augustine that was introduced into the west as the singular interpreter of the Christian faith was detached from the framework of Greek thought in which he was steeped. The result was that the classical tradition, as kept in the Greek Church and was as cherished by St. Augustine himself, was lost to the western Church. A crude Augustinianism emerged and set its mark thereafter on the bulk of western theology. The Germanic spirit that intruded from the north was also a factor in adulterating the Greco-Roman ethos.

It is an ironical fact that, although the Roman Church originally Christianized the nations of western Europe, as the Mother Church in the west, she fell later under the power of the alienating influence of the daughter churches. By the time Pope Gregory Hildebrand was able to restore the independence and sovereignty of the Church of Rome, the Church of the Franks and Germans had left their mark on Rome.

### The Roman Church Germanized

That there was a tension in the relations between Rome and the Churches to the north is clearly evident also in the rejection of the 7th Ecumenical Council (of 787 A.D.) by the local Council of the Frankish Church in the ninth century under

Charlemagne, despite the Papal endorsement of the Ecumenical Council. It was much later than this Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea was acknowledged as ecumenical in the north. During the Carolingian period Rome was gradually losing her unity with the Greco-Roman spirit of the historical Church and under the pressure of the northern nations, she identified herself finally with the Frankish-German mentality. The domination of the Church of Rome by the German kings in the tenth century completed the cultural and theological rift between west and east. As a result, the *filioque* was officially accepted, compulsory celibacy of the clergy was established, and several other doctrines and practices were introduced into the Roman Church during this period in the west.

By the eleventh century the Church of Rome was Roman only in name. It was no longer the Rome that the early Church had known as the guardian of the Church's norm in faith and practice. **The Church that once mirrored the Church universal in her historical identity now assumed a peculiarly Teutonic and occidental character which denoted her estrangement from original Christianity.** Professor of Christian history at the University of Paris, Charles Guignebert, in his book *Christianity: Past and Present*, wrote the following: "*The religion which the Western peoples have constructed upon the Christian dogmas through their own spirit was something different, both in spirit and in essence, from Eastern Christianity. The Western people have, strictly speaking, never been Christians, although on its face this statement appears to be a paradox.*" (P. 500).

It is important to remember the reign of barbarism and the decline of Hellenism in the west as that juncture of history at which the foundation of Western Society were laid. It was

at this time that western Europe broke with the Christian Greco-Roman empire whose capital was in Constantinople. By 800 A.D. the break in the continuity of the west is consummated with the crowning of Charlemagne by the pope. The Frankish king tried to revive the Roman Empire in the west, but what he succeeded was to revive "*the ghost of the ghost of the Roman Empire*", as Arnold Toynbee so aptly described it.

### **The Emergence of a New Society**

The passing away of Hellenic thought and language and the subsequent Latinizing of theology gradually banished the freedom that later was to avenge itself in a devastating way. Organizational structure and discipline to authority took on primary importance in the Church. The continuity between faith and reason so characteristic of the teachings of the Greek Fathers became a forgotten notion. The concept of the all-embracing divine reality in the universe was substituted by an extreme emphasis on the transcendence of God. The unity between the divine and the human so typical of earlier Christian thought was replaced by a deistic relationship bridged over by the authoritarian Church. The Church of Rome inherited the old Roman genius for organization and discipline. In the west it was the Church that preserved the spirit of Roman legalism, while in the east it was the state which functioned as the heir of Roman jurisprudence because it was historically and organically connected with the original Imperium Romanum.

In the absence of legitimate imperial authority in Italy the pope assumed the unofficial role of political exarch or ethnarch for the emperor in Constantinople. Not only the Roman emperor in the east, but

even the pope could not completely reconcile himself to the fact that there could be a second emperor in the west who could arbitrarily take upon himself to rule in the name of Rome. The subsequent rivalry of the popes with the western monarchs was unconscious testimony that the pontiffs could not accept them as legitimate rulers apart from the authority of the lawful emperors who continued to rule in Constantinople.

The medieval belief finally prevailed that the absolute and arbitrary will of a transcendent God is the ground of right and truth. Grace was interpreted as an impersonal force and as an act of divine condescension designed to exhibit the power and glory of God. This contrasts with the earlier Christian Greek doctrine of Divine Immanence, the idea of the presence of God in nature, in humanity, the process of history, the idea that reason itself is but the evidence in man of an Immanent Divine activity.

### **Western Nostalgia for Christian Hellenism**

There was always an instinctive longing in the west for the earlier theology. In the mystics of the middle ages, St. Bonaventura, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of St. Victor, and others, we can discern a re-echoing of the earlier thought of the Church which was rooted in the theology of Divine Immanence long forgotten in the west. They gave stirring expression to the nostalgia of the age for the spirit of the ancient Church in which religion and knowledge were joined together into a meaningful whole. Even in the liberal philosophy of men like Hegel, Schleiermacher, Leibnitz, Spinoza, and Whitehead we have this profound propensity for the original form of thought in which all aspects of reality are organically related.

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In view, however, of the failure of scholasticism, it was inevitable for cultural disruptions to follow. The seeds of unrest sowed at an earlier period were to germinate and blossom with the fruits of secular humanism which the modern world is still reaping. **The renaissance, the reformation, and the enlightenment were in effect so many protests against the established tradition in the west which came about because of its separation from the east.** They represent abortive attempts to return to the thought of early Christianity. They are cultural revolutions marking stages of repeated interruptions in the course of western civilization. They are outbreaks of the intellectual and religious discontent caused by the west's departure from the Eastern Church. The history of Western Society has been one long record of continuous cultural upheavals that have signaled new stages in western man's quest for filling a deep void.

In the debased Augustinianism which was introduced into western Europe chiefly during the time of Pope Gregory (who links the ancient and medieval period) we find the origins of deism which, having become a permanent part of the structure of western thought, has reached its ultimate stage of development in the modern philosophy of existentialism—a philosophy and theology of despair. We can point to it as the natural upshot not only of the disillusioned Protestant mind which has placed a static and impersonal thing known as “grace” in the place of the indwelling Spirit, but also of Latin thought which has placed an authoritarian Church in the place of an absent Christ. The last two world wars have given impetus to the traditional idea of divine transcendence and to its corollary—man's essential impotence, depravity, and separation from God. Existentialism demonstrates the impasse which western religious thought has reached, as the only alternative to the religious tradition of the authoritarian Roman Church. It is chiefly concerned with the anguish and despair of the human soul.

### The Tragic Upshot of a de-Hellenized Theology

It would have been possible to regard existentialism as the culmination of the long process of de-Hellenization in western thought. But its final outgrowth in the divorce between faith and reason, authority and freedom has appeared most recently in a new confused school of thought—the “God -is-dead” theology. The new fad of “Christian atheism” has come to complete the picture of the sense of the futility and uselessness of reflecting on God's existence. Western theology has reached a stage of frustration. Neither the Biblicism of Protestantism nor the authoritarianism of the Roman Church has justified western man.



It is a truism that *“Greece was the mother of Europe; and it is to Greece that we must look in order to find the origin of our modern ideas”*. We like to think of our Western Society as the heir of the Greek, Roman and Judaistic cultures. **But it is difficult for western man to understand that Hellenism has really not been absorbed into the total life of western civilization, as it occurred in the Orthodox east.** When Hellenism made its way back into the west through the Arabs at the end of the middle ages, it proved to be a disruptive influence. The Roman Church began by banning the Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas and then subsequently approved of philosophy as being only externally related to theology. The Church never recovered its Hellenic heritage.

Consequently, it would not be a mistake to say that “Greek Christian thought has not yet done its work in the west”. Scholasticism and the renaissance represent unsuccessful attempts to regain a lost Hellenism. Even the Enlightenment can be thought of as a similar venture, since the loss of Hellenism meant the loss of freedom and rationality of thought. Rather than benefiting Europe, therefore, Greek ideas only served to unleash the forces of chaotic thinking and to accelerate the cultural predicament of the west.

It was only in Orthodox Catholic Christianity and in the Orthodox empire of New Rome that Hellenism found its rightful place and its proper evolution. There it was believed that Hellenism was the divine gift which prepared man to recognize Christ as the realization of his spiritual yearnings in a broad and comprehensive sense. Hellenism helped man to understand that Christ brought to the world not only a religion centered in the sacrifice of Calvary, but also a new culture and civilization founded on Christ as King.

Christ is not only the High Priest of the supreme vicarious sacrifice, but also the immanent principle of Wisdom and Reason in Whom are the “treasures of wisdom and knowledge”. Christ is the all-embracing reality of existence in Whom all truth and knowledge assume a unified whole. Only in a perspective afforded by Hellenism does Christ become the key which unlocks all philosophical and metaphysical truth. Hellenism provides the categories for the Christian interpretation of the structure of existence.

It is this largeness and inclusiveness of Christ's revelation that our age needs today. The loss of the Hellenic past by the western Church as a result of the barbaric invasions has been costly to western civilization. The magnitude of this misfortune for the west can never be exaggerated. The present crisis of Western Society can be traced back to the pseudo-morphosis of Christian Hellenism in the west. The failure



to recover the authentic Christian Hellenism of the early Church led to the permanent divorce of religion and science. Edith Hamilton was correct in saying: *"If the Western Church had chosen the Greek way, she would have found Christ's way far easier. But she chose the Roman way...If the Church had chosen the Greek way some of the most terrible pages in history might never have had to be written"*.

### **Latinization and the Anti-Hellenic Reaction**

The Church Fathers of antiquity held that Greek philosophy was the precursor of the true philosophy that was to come with Christ. It prefigured the philosophical truth which was to be revealed in the incarnation of the Logos. In this way the Gospel was able to respond to the philosophical need of man as exemplified in the Greek, just as it came to meet his religious need as typified in the Jew.

After the fourth century there was no serious question about the place of Hellenism in the Church. It was no longer a controversial issue. The Christian revelation was accepted as the answer to the philosophical quest of the Greeks. For the community of Christian believers there was only one true philosophy that led to the knowledge of wisdom and everlasting blessedness, since Christ is the eternal Sophia, (Wisdom) of God. The term "philosophy" now represented the total experience of the Christian life. The method and structure of conceptualizing this life was Greek, but the substance of philosophy was the "love of wisdom" found in Christ. It is for this reason, therefore, that the question whether there can be a Christian philosophy or not never arose in the Orthodox east after the fourth century. It is strictly a western problem.

Western Latin theology has been troubled with the question of the legitimacy of a Christian philosophy since the time of Pope Gregory the Great (540-605), when Greek culture began fading in Italy under the barbarian invasion. Under Gregory at a cataclysmic time of political and social upheaval,

philosophy lost its traditional status within the framework of Christian thought. Philosophy in principle became distrusted as the *"artifice of the devil"* and a dangerous intruder into the sacred science of theology. Tensions that were to rise later between religion and the demands of reason can be traced to this period. The seeds were then sowed for the later divorce between the sacred and the secular.

Five centuries later the Roman Church came face to face with the challenge of philosophy when Aristotelianism was introduced by the Arabs into the west. She could no longer continue to ignore the intellectual stimulus supplied by Greek thought. In the attempted reconciliation of faith and reason in Scholasticism, theology marked a further stage of alienation from the authentic Catholic tradition of the east. The gap was widening between western thought and the theology of the Greek Fathers. The result of the acceptance of Thomistic Aristotelianism as the *philosophia perennis* of the Roman Church was the pseudomorphosis of Christian Hellenism. The Platonic emphasis on the contemplative approach to knowledge was forgotten. Aristotelian empiricism and rationalism was to usher in a period of religious and intellectual confusion. *"By exalting Aristotle as the new dictator of reason,"* Hampdon observes, *"the Latin Church not only retracted her original intentions, but cut herself off from the philosophy of the early Church"* (*Scholastic Philosophy*, p. 62).

Students of Christian thought who usually view scholasticism as the first or major attempt at the creation of a Christian philosophy are seriously mistaken. Little do they realize that in actuality the Thomistic philosophy of the Roman Church represents an abortive endeavor to achieve what had been accomplished several centuries prior to the time of the scholastics. Thomistic philosophy was merely Aristotelian philosophy in Christian dress, or a Christian philosophy without a Christian content.

Philosophy and theology remained externally related to each other. Like icing over a cake, theology was simply superimposed over philosophy.

In his *Continuity of Christian Thought* Alexander Allen states: *"The scholastics were unaware that there had been an earlier interpretation of Christianity, made by a people in the full maturity of their intellectual powers, whose reason had been trained for ages by a philosophical culture of the highest order, and in possession of a language beautifully adapted as a perfect vehicle for the expression of the subtlest forms of human thought"*.

Luther, on the other hand, in his aversion for Scholasticism, discarded the very notion of philosophy along with Aristotelianism and initiated the age of *theologia biblica*. In tearing the Bible from the context of sacred tradition, it was only natural for the Protestant Reformers to reject the philosophical implications of Christianity which were set forth by the Fathers.

Both traditions, Roman and Protestant, are rooted in the separation of reason and revelation, in the divorce of the human and the divine; they differ only in degree. It is in Existentialism and in the God-is-dead theology that the age-long dichotomy reaches its ultimate and tragic stage of development. It points to a kind of religio-intellectual confusion which finally grips the western mind in despair. Its increasing estrangement from the Christian Hellenism of Catholic Orthodoxy ended in tragic irrationality and inner impoverishment. This is why from the Orthodox standpoint, if there is any progress at all in human thought, it must be based on organic continuity. Christian thought which deals with Christ as ultimate truth must especially be a continuum. This remains the challenge which must be met by both western Churches, since the historical record demonstrates they have consistently violated this principle.