Philosophy in Review

George Karamanolis, "The Philosophy of Early Christianity" (2nd ed.)

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George Karamanolis. *The Philosophy of Early Christianity* (2nd ed.). Routledge 2021. 278 pp. $160.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780367146290); $44.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780367146306).

Reason vs. Faith. That is often the prism through which the period of the 2nd century to the 4th century AD is viewed. This time was one in which the rational, logical world of Greco-Roman antiquity was overrun by fanatical followers of the faith established by Jesus of Nazareth, giving way to a new dark age of superstition, or so is assumed. The problem with this common narrative is that it is wrong. *The Philosophy of Early Christianity* by George Karamanolis, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Vienna, shows how wrong this story is.

A common criticism of Christianity levelled at it by its Pagan opponents such as Celsus and others, was that it was a faith for the uneducated and the irrational. Its followers, they said, relied on faith alone and did not defend their views philosophically. This is the view that seems to have spread to our modern era too. Pseudo-historians constantly fill websites and books with stories of fanatical monks destroying Pagan temples and like to pretend that this was all that characterized antiquity. Indeed, and unfortunately, things like this did sometimes occur. But the story of Christianity and philosophy is nowhere near as black and white as the criticism of Celsus and his modern descendants would indicate.

As Karamanolis makes clear in the introduction to his work, the important thing to note is that Christianity was born within a particular cultural and intellectual paradigm – that of Greco-Roman antiquity, and more importantly, a paradigm that was made up of the various philosophical schools, such as Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism and so on, that already inhabited that landscape. Influences between these Hellenic schools and the new faith went back and forth, and these schools had already reached a considerable degree of philosophical and intellectual sophistication. If Christianity, which characterized itself as a universal religion, and the only path to salvation for humanity, was to convince the educated elite of the Roman Empire of its truth, then Christians would have to take up philosophy and they did just that. As Karamanolis writes: 'The Criticisms of Celsus, Galen and Lucian… show that educated pagans would not assent to Christianity unless they could be convinced by means of argument that Christian doctrines are shaped by reason and appeal to reason in the same sense that pagan and philosophical and scientific views do' (7). Karamanolis' excellent book is the story of how Christian philosophers engaged with their Pagan counterparts, addressing the same issues and arguments, with the same sophistication and philosophical acumen. He even goes as far to argue that Christian thinkers made up their own philosophical school, alongside the Pagan ones, that expressed its own unique views and arguments. To convince us of this view, each chapter, after discussing the Christian view of philosophy, is dedicated to how Christians addressed the following philosophical issues: physics and metaphysics, logic and epistemology, free will and divine providence, psychology, the soul and how it relates to the body, and lastly, ethics and politics.

The Philosophy of Early Christianity examines the views of Christian thinkers from across the Roman Empire, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen

and many more. They debated not only Pagans, but also each other. Since there was no such thing as 'Orthodoxy' yet, Christianity had yet to decide its main beliefs and so there was a lot of room for maneuver. Throughout the book, Karamanolis shows that Christian thinkers, far from simply relying on faith (or scripture, as The Bible, the Christians recognized, lacked definitive answers to many philosophical questions), were capable of formulating some extremely interesting and complex ideas and arguments. For example, in answer to the question of how God, being so ontologically different from matter, could have created the material universe, Gregory of Nyssa said that God did not actually create matter at all, but that matter is made up of qualities that are created in God's mind and are 'put together' as matter by human minds in a cognitive sense (84-88). Why are some people so good at some things, when others are not if we all share the same nature? Origen answered this question by postulating that, before birth, everyone existed as an 'intellect' in an ethereal or spiritual body in which they could make choices and have thoughts. When these intellects descend into mortal bodies and become 'souls,' the choices made in the pre-birth world impact how the person develops once they have become embodied in mortal flesh (181-85).

Did people possess free will, or were certain classes of people simply pre-destined for salvation or damnation as the Gnostics taught? Irenaeus replied by asking them why God would divide people into these classes and how he would justify doing so? He says that if one believed, as the Gnostics did, that everything (for some people) is pre-determined, the value of such categories as 'good' and 'evil' is devalued. Finally, he argues that God created all humans with the same nature, and with the free will to choose either good or ill for themselves (144-146).

Lastly, what about ethical questions? Was it morally justifiable that some had so much whilst others lacked the most basic necessities? Clement of Alexandria argued that God had created us all equally and had made all things for everyone to share equally. It was 'monstrous,' he said, 'for one to live in luxury while many are in want,' and we should therefore do our best to give to others (209-212). Was slavery morally justifiable and were some people, as Aristotle believed, destined to be slaves by their very nature? Slavery was, unfortunately, very widespread in the Greco-Roman world and although many philosophers, such as the Stoics and Cynics, believed in and preached the essential equality of human beings, slavery still continued as a normal part of life in antiquity with not many speaking out against it—but two brothers from Nyssa. Basil of Nyssa said that slavery was not a natural state for any human and that everyone shared a single nature that could not be divided into masters and servants. As Karamanolis says, though, Basil did say that it would be better for some people to be guided by others. His brother Gregory, whom we met earlier by contrast, gave what is likely the most passionate denouncement of slavery from antiquity. Using St Paul's famous declaration in Galatians 3:28 that 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free…' as the foundation to his argument, Gregory says, as Karamanolis explains, that humans possess a single nature that God created in his own likeness which involves freedom as an essential element in both. As a result, no one has the power to take away the freedom of another and slavery introduces a division that goes against what God had intended for humanity (224-227).

Karamanolis shows that many other answers were given by Christian thinkers to these and other questions. What is made clear throughout the book is that there was no one 'Christian' answer to

these issues, or even to the issue of whether or not to accept philosophy as a valid source of truth at all. Some Christians fully embraced philosophy and the Hellenic culture that came with it, revering Plato and Aristotle as authorities in their own right, and even sometimes as precursors to Christ himself. Some were more cautious and admired philosophy itself as the pursuit of truth but denied that the pagan tradition had reached any degree of truth, and some rejected it entirely, seeing it as a source of heresy and thought that Christianity offered the only truth worth knowing. Regardless of individual viewpoints, the idea that *all* Christians of antiquity were anti-intellectual, anti-philosophical and irrational is shown to be unfounded and false by Karamanolis. In many cases, Christians had been educated in the same way as their Pagan counterparts, so, despite their differing religious beliefs, Christians and Pagans generally inhabited a common intellectual and cultural framework and freely influenced each other.

Reading the book is helped by Karamanolis' clear and engaging prose and is made even better by the fact that Karamanolis gives translations for the many complicated Greek and Latin philosophical terms that crop up, allowing the reader to expand their philosophical vocabulary. In addition to this, there is a helpful further reading section, a bibliography for each chapter, as well as a general introduction to the historical context, including the relevant Pagan philosophical viewpoints, such as those of the Platonists, Stoics, and others. Lastly, there is an interesting biography of each thinker discussed at the end of the book.

To conclude, George Karamanolis has written an excellent book that works well for both the seasoned scholar of antiquity, as well as the beginner. He brings an often-neglected area of philosophy into the limelight and proves his case that the Christians made up another philosophical school in the diverse landscape of late antiquity that deserves to be taken as seriously and as respectfully as the schools of their Pagan counterparts. Most importantly, he shows that, even though they may have differed in their beliefs, there was plenty more that Pagans and Christians had in common. These debates between them may seem outdated and distant from us now, but they would go on to shape philosophy for centuries to come, and so they still have a lot to say to us.

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