

# **Basil the Great on "Outer Wisdom" and Ethical-Moral Principles (According to Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature)**

Tamar Melikidze

The attitude of the Religious Fathers concerning the problem, what should be accepted from paganism and what declined is rather different. In the case of the variety one of the most interesting issues is its relation with philosophy. It is a fact, that for Christian teaching philosophy is rather important, but at the same time also somewhat dangerous. If we take a look at the relationship between Christianity and the pagan culture in history, it becomes clear that the situation was especially tense when the pagan world at its ending gave mankind three final philosophical synthesis: Stoicism, Epikureizm and slightly later Neo-Platonism. To overcome them Christianity was forced to take in and adjust the dialectic tradition. The understanding of "Demiurge", who was the constructor of galaxy, settler ("Timaeus" Plato) was identified as the God-creator of the Bible [Аверинцев, 1976:17-64].

Due to the fact that first Christian Fathers got their education in pagan schools, they were well aware of the doctrines of Homer, Demosthenes, Hesiod, Euripides and their ideas was somehow a part of their thinking. Therefore, the liberal viewpoint of Christianity is like Plato's ideas. Thus, for Christians, whose doctrine was a revised version of ancient ideology, an important role played the pagan upbringing.

The founder of Catechist Church Clement of Alexandria is the first one trying to adjust Christianity with antiquity. He believed that Hellenic Culture existed by the will and desire of God and it was a preparatory stage on the road of Christianity.

For more than decades the linguistic-cultural Hellenism was rather actual, alongside with the issue of its acceptance-denial "The Resistance between faith and knowledge, theological and its secular expression, classical forms (Greek Rhetoric - Philosophy) between Alexandria and Cappadocia school scholars ended by subjecting knowledge to belief. The attitude towards Hellenistic education meant the adoption of this form of education as secular-literary form, in the service of Christian ideology. The Hellenistic literature (rhetoric-philosophy, poetry, historiography, etc.) and its creative forms of expression, creation of artistic images, paradigms, high-style concepts and terminology was accepted by Christian literature, as an already developed, ready-made, sophisticated art - literary form" [Bezarashvili,2004:106].

The ideological successor of Clement of Alexandria was Origen, who was the first trying to sum up the Christian Religion with Greek Philosophy. The second period of "Holy Fathers" work was created by the representative of Cappadocia Church in the East – Gregory the Theologian (329-390), Basil the Great (330-379) and Gregory of Nyssa (331-394), and in the West – Saint Augustine. They were the defenders of Plato's line in Philosophy and on it they based the dogmas of Christian Orthodoxy which thereafter they used in fighting heretics. In the works of the Cappadocia Fathers it is still a great deal of striving towards pagan antique Philosophy. The desire of being both a Philosopher and Theologian at the same time was quite powerful in them.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the attitude of one of the outstanding Cappadocia Father's– Basil the Great – "outer wisdom" and ethical-moral principles according to "Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature." On the detailed analysis of the text the possible sources of the doctrine is researched and its inter-textual relations towards Plato and Plutarch is outlined<sup>[1]</sup>. Detection of Such relations (Allusion, Citation) shows the attempt of Basil of Caesarea to adjust Christianity and Antiquity, achieve some kind of Consensus among them.

One thesis of the discussion of Basil of Caesarea is what profit can a Christian gain from Greek Literature. The argument about benefits is expanded and applies to several directions. The author tries to offer a balance between the classical thinking and the orthodox postulates. Since the ultimate thing is to protect the soul from harmful influence it is necessary for a person during his existence to desire obtaining virtue and to tame the body for the good of soul. In considering this issue, the author refers comparisons and metaphors in Christian and non-Christian literature and uses them to put forward as arguments for his outlined the provisions.

In the beginning of the doctrine the author develops the idea that life is like a journey, during which people get to know to human cases. And since the author has already almost reached the end of the journey, he dares to have some kind of advice to give them (the young trainees) who are at now the ones accepting the challenges of life. He regards it as his duty to indicate them the safe road, that ultimate leads people towards truth. At the same time youth is also given a special role. They should show the skill of "cognition", and should be able to differentiate good and evil.

Christian people must constantly strive to gain profit for their souls, and such profit can be found in "the writings of ancient men," the pagan writers. However, in this case, distinguishing ability of the human mind should be on, so that the person does not sink in pagan writings. "It is not necessary [youth] to subdue the steering wheel of the mind to the ideas of these people, they should only get useful information and getting rid of the Rubbish should be managed.

What kind of tragedy the ship to sink, the same is death and decay of the spirit, causing lots of troubles"[Migne, 1857:565], and pagan works contain such threat. The idea of such vessel originates from Platonic thinking. In the Dialogue "The State" while talking about the future rulers Plato several times addresses the analogy of the ship and the captain. Idle and haughty people are constantly trying to persuade the owner of a vessel in order to gain control over the ship. As soon as you reach a goal, they will invade everything, endless orgies begin and they govern the ship as such people are supposed to do. In fact, they have no idea how the real captain of the ship should govern, who must take into account the time of year, watch the sky, the wind blow, in short, everything that is related to his craft, if one wants to proficiently run the ship. And these incoherent people think that it is impossible to gain teaching management skills, experience and skills of the captain, [The Republic...1968:488c, d, e] therefore such people bring the ship to inevitable death.

Basil of Caesarea calls on young people to prevent the reading of literary works of less importance, such as Odysseus - mermaid songs, who suppressed his hearing. Here's a slightly different form of the myth of Odysseus by the author. In Homer's Odysseus, he fills his companion's ears with wax and instructs them to tie him to the mast, so that he is not carried away by the sweet singing of the mermaids and does not get carried away and throw them into disaster. This passage in the work of Basil the Cappadocia is shown in a transformed way. In this case, Odysseus suppresses his hearing as well. It seems that he does so in order to somehow avoid temptations because music can have both negative and positive influence the human person. Odysseus in wants to be fully ensured that passion won't pour into his soul.

The Holy Scripture by means of secrecy develops and grows human spirit, "Sometimes because of the age we cannot understand the depth of the thinking that is why we exercise our spiritual eye with many different writings, which are not far from the Holy Scripture, which are not rather far from it, like shadows and reflections [Migne, 1857:565]. In the quoted passage in the "different writings" the literary works of pagan epoch is thought, because "outer wisdom" will help people to understand biblical truth. From the above mentioned we can derive that some kind of pagan thinking aids us to achieve that "ultimate knowledge". To this confirmation Basil uses the example of biblical characters – "Moses, who got famous for his wisdom, exercises his mind firstly with Egyptian Sciences, and thereafter began the understanding of the essence. Later it is said about the wise Daniel, who mastered thinking of the Chaldeans in Babylon, and only then partook of the divine wisdom" [Migne, 1857:568].

St. John of Damascus argues like Basil of Caesarea - in spite of the fact that lot of things are unacceptable in the pagan wisdom, distinction of "pure gold" is still possible: "If we will be able to gain useful things from outside, it is not forbidden, to become skilled gold-seekers and muster up the true and pure

gold, while get rid of the false ones. Get the best words (the funny tales of gods and strange stories give away to the dogs), because we are able to get the greatest strength from them" [Damascus, 2000:445].

According to the author "outer wisdom" is useful for exercising the mind, correspondingly science and philosophy which helps us to seek truth should be appraised. The wisdom of this world in Basil's work is compared to a tree, which is able to bare lots of fruit; also the tree is full of branches with leaves that are its jewellery. Such a fruit is for the soul the truth, although dressing in this worldly wisdom is also good, just like the leaves protect the fruit and beautify the tree.

Because pagan works can be harmful for the soul, people should use their ability of distinguishing, just like bees, because these insects are able to gain both profit and aesthetic pleasure: „Bees fly from flower to flower and try to gain not everything, but only what is necessary and useful for them, and the rest they leave untouched" [Migne, 1857:569]. The metaphor of the bee shows us that gaining profit can be done through anything that exists. The bee's work is of practical nature, because it gains only that what is necessary. Basil underline the fact that person should behave just like the bee. They should gain profit from the ancient writings but decline the threat, just as a flower has a nectar and smell, so do the "ancient people's" writing contain wisdom, an if the bee has the ability to gain nectar from the flower why should not the thinking people be able to gather wisdom from classical literature? This is the aesthetic-ethical which is empty from religion, but will help the human soul to get virtue.

What is near and related to Christian ideology, that should be learned by the students, but keep away from that is different "just like we avoid thrones while picking the roses" [Migne, 1857:569]. Just like the "thrones" represent worldly deeds, it can also show the relation between "outer" wisdom and divine wisdom. The rose among the thrones is a representation of the opposition of worldly and divine truth, in secular wisdom – separation good from bad. For example, in the works of Gregory of Nazianzus, Ephrem Mcire, St. John of Damascus: "they have a border along their vineyards, with beautiful fruit, and only those who are true in their thoughts are able to taste the fruit of this vineyards and to get pleasure from it" [Bezerashvili, 2002:167].

Basil warns the readers to be careful in relation to literary works, just as they take care of what they should eat, because if people consider whether this or that food with damage their health, so does a literary work damage their soul. "We should not become a risen river that joins everything that comes on its road" [Migne, 1857:577].

For Basil in the reading of pagan works ethical views are important. Only those authors should readers be interested that reflects moral and morally

perfect man, who steadily and dignifiedly lives and does heroic deeds. In this case, we should listen to the author and be inspired by the characters created by him[2].

Basil treats the works of historians in the same way, youth should distinguish and do not take into account the works of such chroniclers, who write only to entertain people.

For the contrast of this and that worldly values the doctrine tells the story of Hercules, which the author learned from Prodicus of Ceos – the sophist philosopher. Hercules according to the doctrine is as follows: He is sitting at the crossroad when two women approach him, they are visually radically different, one is beautiful and passionate with a seductive look, promising him endless pleasure, while the second is ugly and poor, if Hercules chooses her way, suffering and danger awaits either on land or at sea, however, at the end ahead lies theosis. The Passage cited is important in a different ways. Basil during narrating the story of Hercules emphasizes his age and compares it to the age of his students. It is highlighted that he addresses his young audience to follow the actions of Hercules, who chose the path of virtue. It should be noted that women represent both virtue and flaws, but the women did not try to win over Hercules by word, but remain silent until the end of the story. The following section is explained in detail the author of the doctrine followed the word itself is important, but if the actions are strengthened with words it becomes more important. The difference between words and actions are mostly large, it is possible to seem fair, but also lead a way of life that is not necessarily full of justice. To support his argument Basil uses Plato's words: "This is extreme injustice, to seem fair, when in fact you are not" [The Republic... 1968:361a].

Morality is a kind of innate goodness in humanity given by God. Moral law constantly reminds oneself as the Apostle Paul says: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: [Which](#) shew the work of the [law](#) written in their hearts, their [conscience](#) also bearing [witness](#), and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;" [Rom. 2:14-15]\*. From this derives that the pagans have a chance for survival, as well as the Jews. Pagans act in accordance with conscience, the inner voice of conscience, which is intuition.

Maximus the Confessor develops the same idea, maintains that the kindness of barbarians are due to the fact that they prefer good over the evil, that is achieved by the aid of the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is in a person from birth: "We can find people among the nomads and barbarians who refuse to live in accordance with the cruel laws and are kind. This is a clear example that the Holy Spirit is in every person." [Scholarly... 2004].

Well-known pagan figures, thanks to the natural law, showed us virtue not only by words, but strengthen it with examples full of high morality.

The Politician from Athens, Pericles, was insulted by a man all day long, but in spite of such humiliation, Pericles saw the man off to his home, so that the success he achieved in wisdom-loving that day did not become in vain.

Basil brings the amazing example of forgiveness and absolution, when tells the actions of Euclid the Megarian, who swore that he would befriend the man who threatened him with death.

The examples of pagan Pericles and Euclid are in relationship with Evangelical commandments: And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" [Matthew 5:40-44].

Basil believes that if such examples of morality come to people's mind when they are in rage, this will turn out to be a bridle and will take care of his soul, because during the times of anger nothing good comes from the soul<sup>[3]</sup> [Migne, 1857:576].

The action of Alexander of Macedon in the doctrine is related to the wisdom of the gospel: "but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" [Mathew 5:29].

The example of moral restraint by Alexander of Macedon should be worthy for the youth. When the Persian king's Darius daughters were captured in war, Alexander did not want to see them, because this would yield desires in him and he thought that the control of his own passions was more a behavior of a worthy king, than victory over the enemies. According to historical records Plutarch informs us that until Alexander's marriage to Bactria he had no physical connection with any another woman. This fact reminds us of the preservation of virginity before marriage in the Christian religion.

Youth should be able to manage their own mind and do not abide to the passions. Basil discusses the arguments and emphasizes the ability to imitate bringing the antique examples of people – Polydamas and Milo of Croton. Their efforts were directed to the perfect preparation for the competition and in case of winning get both praise and crowns. Christian youth should try hard to

imitate the athletes' dedication and willingness to properly prepare for eternal life. The Athletes did their best to improve their abilities, Christians have to experience everything to achieve that, but it is not easy. Like the athletes he will have to shed sweat and do intense activities.

Just as the Athletes had to overcome many physical dangers, so should the soul of a Christian person be tempered, because spirit is much more important than body. This argument has much in common with Paul's words: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" [II Corinthians IX:24-27].

As the Apostle Paul, Basil of Caesarea also emphasizes the radical difference between the physical and incorruptible crowns. If an athlete is so brave to achieve this world's glory and train the body, like this Christian people should not fear the difficulty of the exercise, which is done in order to gain the divine crown.

After indicating about the issue of imitation of the Athlete's, Basil turns his argumentation about how the soul should gain control over the body. He does not see it as necessary for people to worry about the body too much and he should give freedom to the soul and get rid of physical demands. He should eat as much food as he needs so that the body does not weaken but not more, because caring too much about one's body is a kind of evil.

The relation between soul and body reminds us "Phaedo", where we read: will be by itself apart from the body, but not before. And while we live, we shall, I think, be nearest to knowledge when we avoid, so far as possible, intercourse and communion with the body, except what is absolutely necessary, and are not filled with its nature, but keep ourselves pure from it until God himself sets us free. And in this way, freeing ourselves from the foolishness of the body and being pure, we shall, I think, be with the pure and shall know of ourselves all that is pure,-" [Plato, 2005:67A].

The exaggerated care for the pleasures of the body damages the soul and makes it dirty that is why people should avoid it, if they think to gain profit for the soul. The same is said by the Apostle Paul – A person should not care too much about the flesh [Rom. XIII:14]. The flesh is created to serve the soul (as Philosophy – Thinking). Therefore, the desires that arise in the soul, a person should calm it down and should overcome it. The person should not become like

a charioteer, whose undisciplined horses take him anywhere they want [Migne, 1857:584].

During the comparison of the body and the soul Basil cites the analogy of the craftsmen who care for the tools, but the use of the art tools is being ignored. The passage most likely stresses that the importance of the body, is being reset to the device, through which the soul works, and the body should serve the mind, or philosophy. Body as an instrument, in order to survive, needs very small things, but if you take too much care of it might incline to other things and change its function.

Hence, it is clear that Basil of Caesarea belongs to the category of patristic, who is trying to adapt the Christian worldview with the achievements of pagan culture. It emphasizes the need for secular knowledge, but that knowledge is only a preparatory step in achieving the most important goal. People at the same time, should be cautious in dealing with this type of work because of the fear that might be under the influence of pagan ideology.

According to the works of Basil of Caesarea it is clear that he attaches great importance to classical education; in addition to the treatise, as an example, we can name the Epitaph of Basil the Great by Gregory [Migne, 1838: 509BC - Orationes 43].

Archpriest George Florovsky rightly observes that among the decrees of Julian for the Christians were the hardest ones which forbade the teaching of science and art. In fact, it was a belated attempt to eliminate the Christians from the construction of culture, and to protect the ancient culture from Christian influence and pressure [Florovsky, 2004 ]. That is what caused strong irritation of the church fathers of Cappadocia. Basil of Caesarea felt it as his duty, to appeal to youth and explain, "What benefits can Hellenistic literature bring to people." The main essence of Byzantine culture possesses all the basic elements of culture and a new way has been assessed as "worthy of mankind", and Basil of Caesarea contribution in this case was great.

---

[1] In Science it is indicated that the source of the work by Basil the Great, apparently, was the work of Plutarch "For Youth, on how to read the poets", as well as Plato's opinions about poets formed in his "State". Accordingly, parallels with Plutarch are presented in the notes.

[2] Compare Plutarch: "The bee seeks flowers on fields, the goat – green grass, the pig – roots, other animals grass and fruit. This is true about writing as well, some research the construction, some are interested in the sweet sounds an beauty, and are those who true to argue and think about the morality and see it as profitable and necessary. The person who is aware of his virtue does not read just for fun, but looks at it from an educational point of view. He does not read such passages unnoticed, which tells about bravery, justice, wisdom, like the Iliad XI, 313" [Памятники... 1964].

\*The Bible citations are from the version of Bible published under the editorship of George Mtatsmineli

[3] Compare Plutarch: "The most valuable virtue that people have is that divine spark, which they have thrust upon them from God and it is useful for us, because all of us aspire to be like Him. Anger and anger suppression - it's the greatest thing. The example of Achilles is important, when he has mercy upon Priam; he does not kill him and even gives him Hector's corpse. This is an example that should be followed, because people are trying not to be given, not to serve anger [Памятники... 1964].

## References

The New Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ	Critical edition of the text and the complete publication one by Giorgi Mtatsmineli <a href="http://www.orthodoxy.ge">http://www.orthodoxy.ge</a>
Bezarashvili K. 2004	Georgian translation of the works of Gregory the Theologian; Tbilisi Allegories and Aphoristic in Patristic and Rustaveli, Literary Researches, # 22, <a href="http://www.nplg.gov.ge">www.nplg.gov.ge</a>
Bezarashvili K. 2002	"Christianity and Civilization", "Emaos", #3, <a href="http://www.nplg.gov.ge">www.nplg.gov.ge</a> .
Plorovsky Georgy 2004	Saint Maximus the Confessor, "the Scriptures of varying difficulty, the question 15"; Scientific-Theological Works", II, <a href="http://www.orthodoxy.ge">www.orthodoxy.ge</a>
Damascus 2000	Saint John of Damascus, "Transition of Orthodox Belief", Tbilisi Theological Academy Press, Tbilisi.
Аверинцев 1976	Судьбы европейской культурной традиции в эпоху перехода от античности к средневековью; Из истории культуры средних веков и Возрождения. - М., <a href="http://www.philology.ru">http://www.philology.ru</a>

Памятники... 1964	Памятники поздней античной научно-художественной литературы". М., Перевод Л. А. Фрейберг. <a href="http://ancientrome.ru">http://ancientrome.ru</a>
Migne J. -P. 1838	Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca, vol. 36
Migne J.-P. 1857	Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca, Vol. 31.
The Republic.. 1968	The Republic of Plato, Second Edition, translated by Allan Bloom, Basic Books, A division of HarperCollins Publishers
Plato 2005	"Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus" with an English translation by Herold North Fowler. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London