

## The Impact of Hellenism on Christianity at the Dawn of History and Up to the Present Day

Piotr Liszka, CMF

Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław  
[liszka.p@wp.pl](mailto:liszka.p@wp.pl)

The term *Hellenism* refers to all that originated in ancient Greece and from there impacted other cultures, or only to the Greek culture that was formed after the expeditions of Alexander the Great. At that time, an eclectic culture of a pantheistic nature appeared in Greece. This culture included Christianity, which was not a cultural amalgam, but a new religion capable of entering all cultures. According to the anonymous author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, Christianity does not create a new culture, but rather encompasses people belonging to diverse cultures. In the following article, the term *Hellenism* will refer to the latter meaning. Hellenism was not created out of nothing. It was created upon the foundations of the centuries-old cultural tradition of ancient Greece, which can be described using the term *Hellenic*. These foundations did not disappear; they developed alongside the inflowing culture, thus creating a new eclectic culture known as Hellenism. Hellenism became integrated with the mosaic of various Oriental cultures, but it remained, was distinguishable, and was capable of impacting not only Greece, but also the entire world along with the entirety of Hellenism or independently, thus showing its original face.

### 1. The Influence of Hellenism on the New Testament

The source of the Christian religion is the incarnation of the Son of God, whose person consisted of human nature independent of Divine nature. In Christianity, everything is shaped in accordance with the mystery of Christ, which was definitively described at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Christianity is open to all cultures, but it does not mix with them, instead maintaining its own autonomy as well as that of all cultures, while at the same time it creates an integral whole with them. Such is all of revelation,

but above all the New Testament, both in the formal and substantive sense. Revelation is God's entry into human history, into a culture that is only about to be transformed. Culture has no impact on God's coming to people; in any case, it is without significance. There is, instead, an impact on people who embrace revelation and on the culture that is shaped by it. The impact of Hellenism on the milieu in which the books of the New Covenant appeared and on Christian culture is reflected in terminology, in the way of expressing one's thoughts, and in behavior; in many cases, it led to heresy but could not change the core contents of revelation.

### 1.1. Similarities between the Formal Texts of the New Testament and Hellenic Texts

The accommodation of the cultural code by revelation consists of borrowing vocabulary, linguistic structures, and the literary style down to the foundations into the way of thinking. One element of inculturation is the use of literary genres familiar to a given milieu to aid in the proclamation of the message of salvation. The most distinctive literary genre that is common to all cultures is the biography. In Sacred Scripture, the biography serves to present a real person in relation to the true God, Who is transcendent with respect to the world, yet is concerned about it. The purpose of biographies in Hellenic literature was to present the divinity of some people as well as the history of their aspirations to become one with divinity. One could say that in the formal aspect, the Gospels are biographies of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> From the formal perspective, the Gospels are not different from Greek biographies; rather, they are unique in the substantive dimension. They carry within them new contents and a new truth.<sup>2</sup>

Contents that were also new for Jewish milieus were presented in the Hellenic literary form and way of thinking. The truth about the Messiah proclaimed by Christians was not a previously known Jewish teaching transformed

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1 Cf. J. Czernski, *Metody interpretacji Nowego Testamentu*, Opole 1997, p. 90 (Opolska Biblioteka Teologiczna, 21). "Like the Gospels, Hellenic biographies may contain mythical and legendary elements. Both biographies and the Gospels reinterpret the accepted tradition and share three common goals: a) correction of the false image of the teacher, b) winning over the reader to him, and c) offering a model of imitating the teacher."

2 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 92: "The aim of biographies is the moral evaluation of human existence, while the Gospels deal with the journey of the Son of Man from His baptism in the Jordan River to the crucifixion in Golgotha."

by Hellenism; rather, it was something completely new. Understanding of the idea of the Messiah was born from paschal Christology, which interpreted new events in the context of previously known ideas contained in the Prophetic Books, especially in Deutero-Isaiah. It was on the basis of this that the Messianic title *Kyrios* appeared in the writings of St. Paul. "In this way, St. Paul fixed the idea of the Messiah at the forefront of the world and history, both from the perspective of eschatology and that of eternity."<sup>3</sup> Biographical elements also often appear in the Acts of the Apostles. For example, St. Peter's second speech (Acts 3 : 12–27) was treated by Luke as a "historiographical speech" similar to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament used terms used in the books of the Old Testament as well as terms borrowed from Greek. The influence of the Greek language became evident not only in texts written in that language, but also in Hebrew and Aramaic texts written in a Palestinian milieu, where the influence of Greek culture was very evident. One example of a concept borrowed from the Old Testament is "face," which the Septuagint expressed with the aid of the Greek word *prosopon*.<sup>5</sup> The contents of revelation, previously contained in the Hebrew language, were expressed in a foreign language. The translator's aim was to present a precise and literal translation. There were new words but, at least to a large extent, the language in which Jews from the Diaspora who read them remained Hebrew. Naturally, the new words introduced a meaning that they had in the Greek milieu. They also introduced a new way of thinking. Apart from meaning (semantics) and structure (syntactics), cultural references as well as the forms of thinking and proceeding (pragmatics) were also new. From the linguistic aspect, a translation into another language is not a faithful reproduction; much less is it a new phenomenon in the cultural aspect. There is a bilateral impact, while on the part of Judaism there is a desire to change the latter culture according to an unambiguous cultural model, while on the part of Hellenism there is a tendency to absorb and mix, which means a tendency toward the disappearance of Hebrew originality not only at the level of language and form of thinking, but also in the uniqueness of the message. Radical Hellenization is the elimination of revelation and entry into purely earthly, secular contents.

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3 C. S. Bartnik, *Dogmatyka Katolicka*, vol. 1, Lublin 1999, p. 531.

4 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 618.

5 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 401.

When translating sacred texts into foreign languages, Judaism and Christianity preserved the original meaning of particular words so that the contents of the revelation would not be infringed upon in any way. Above all, words containing information about this world were borrowed from Hellenism. It constantly defends its originality against foreign influences and pursues evangelization. Thus “secular” words that describe the realities of the cosmos, nature, and ordinary lives of people are borrowed and gain new meanings in the context of the religious message. The word “time” and how it is understood has great significance for better comprehension of revelation. One of the benefits for the New Testament originating in Hellenism is a new understanding of time.<sup>6</sup> Events described by the Biblical authors take place in an appropriate time. They not only take place at the appropriate moment, but also in time shaped in such a way that it is appropriate for the realization of a given redeeming event. God has created time and space in a way that allows Him to enter it. We can understand this better than people in those times, because we know the structure of time better than they did. Scientific discoveries open minds and allow us to better understand how the universe was prepared for the creation of man and for revelation. God prepared the time of His coming for us as well as the time of writing down and editing Biblical texts. *Chronos* was transformed into *kairos* so that after the incarnation and paschal events ordinary material could transform into sanctified material with the passage of time and at the end of the world could become worshiped material.<sup>7</sup>

The Hellenic understanding of time does not deform the contents of the Christian faith, although it in a way blocks and obscures them, just as the entirety of Hellenic culture can be helpful, but it can also direct thoughts in the wrong direction, thus bringing one farther away from the important contents of revelation. The same pertains to philosophy and poetry. Philosophical systems and literary genres should be conducive to revelation. The incorrect approach consists of placing them above revelation. Thus philosophy or poetry are not threats to the Christian faith, but a way of thinking characteristic of Hellenism that mixes everything is. A complete rejection of science, philosophy, and poetry is wrong, but so is mixing them with revelation. Hellenism either radically separates or radically mixes everything together.

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6 Cf. P. Liszka, *Wpływ nauki o czasie na refleksję teologiczną*, Warszawa 1992, p. 68.

7 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 69.

The Hellenic way of thinking is present throughout history, especially in our times. This is especially visible in the case of scholars who study the New Testament. A typical example is that of the exegetical current known as *Formgeschichte* (the history of literary forms). The supporters of this theory do not recognize the novelty and originality of the New Testament, which in their view does not surpass Judaism or is perversion of Judaism influenced by Hellenism. They do not recognize new, original contents, nor do they recognize novelties at the literary level. Meanwhile, the Gospels are an original and unique literary genre that cannot be imitated. Supporters of the *Formgeschichte* have ignored the analogy of literary genres of the Old and New Testaments as well as their originality, both with regards to Judaism and Hellenism.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2. The Originality of Gospel of John

John's community consisted mostly of Judeo-Christians. The language used at liturgical meetings and by catechists to introduce catechumens to the secrets of the Christian faith was influenced by Gnosticism.<sup>9</sup> Hellenic Jews as well as Jewish thinkers influenced by Platonism and stoicism influenced the milieu in which the Gospel according to St. John was written. This does not mean, however, that St. John was also influenced by Hellenism. He made use of language and expressed his words with the aid of Hellenic literary forms familiar to Hellenistic milieus in order to describe Jesus' life and express the crux of His teaching in a way that would be comprehensible to his audience.<sup>10</sup>

St. John's Gospel is a model example of inculturation, as it does a wonderful job of maintaining balance between fidelity to the fundamental Christian kerygma and the requirements of the cultural and religious milieu. Maintaining balance by appreciating autonomy while at the same time encompassing its entirety makes this Gospel the polar opposite of the form of thinking typical of Hellenism. John does not lose the essence of the message; he expresses the conviction that the Gospel is capable of transforming the world. One can and even should speak about the world, but one cannot make

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8 Cf. J. Czernski, *Metody interpretacji Nowego Testamentu*, op. cit., p. 85.

9 Cf. S. Mędała, *Chrystologia Ewangelii św. Jana*, Kraków 1993, p. 28.

10 Cf. G. Sánchez Mielgo, *La obra de S. Juan, un modelo de inculturación*, [in:] *Cristianismo y culturas. Problemática de inculturación del mensaje cristiano. Actas del VIII simposio de teología histórica*, Valencia 1995, p. 243 (Facultad de teología San Vicente Ferrer, Series Valentina, 38).

accommodations to the world. Meanwhile, we should proclaim the Gospel in a way that is comprehensible and for the reader of any cultural environment could correctly understand its contents.<sup>11</sup>

The fourth Gospel is evidence that St. John knew the literary techniques used in religious Hellenistic literature, such as: dialogue, irony, and misunderstanding; he also knew the rules of Greek rhetoric. He made use of various concepts borrowed from Hellenistic culture, such as: “Logos,” “life,” and “truth.”<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, without a doubt the Gospel of John as well as the remaining Gospels are original with respect to the literary forms typical of Hellenism and Judaism, as well as with respect to their contents.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, one should say that the Gospels are a literary genre that cannot be compared with any other. This is a result of the original teaching and behavior of Jesus Christ. The methods of studying literary forms used by the milieu that accepted the way of thinking characteristic of Hellenism led either to the mixing together of everything and blurring of differences between the Gospels and hitherto known literary forms, or to the semantic destruction of the Gospel made through the sterile fragmentation of it into many parts. The New Testament presents an integral way of thinking and should be studied using methods capable of recognizing, studying, and expressing this integrity without imposing one's own way of thinking.<sup>14</sup> Integral thinking asks about the type of the relationship between what is novel and what had been absorbed from the environment. One novelty is discussion about fulfilling what had been expected for centuries (*Erwartungsdruck*). The integral thinking of the Gospel is expressed in the fact that its contents are intertwined with the life of the ecclesiastic community, which contains within itself tradition and is open to religious novelty.<sup>15</sup>

The openness of the Gospel of John to mysticism and dialogue with the gnostics does not indicate syncretism. Today, we understand this better in light of new discoveries in Qumran, Nag Hammadi, and other places, as well as in light of the studies on the history of religion (Mandaeism, Gnosticism,

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11 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 246.

12 Cf. S. Mędala, *Chrystologia Ewangelii św. Jana*, op. cit., p. 19.

13 Cf. A. del Agua, *Aproximación al Relato de los evangelios desde el midrás/dérás*, „Estudios Bíblicos” 45 (1987) no 3–4, p. 262.

14 Cf. J. F. Toribio Cuadrado, «Evangélio», *obra abierta*, „Mayéutica” 20 (1994) no. 49, p. 20.

15 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 22.

and Jewish mysticism).<sup>16</sup> St. John's Gospel is not the *Hellenization* of St. Paul's mysticism. St. John's thinking was also immune to mystery religions, in which the myth of the divinity that dies and is born anew plays a decisive role. Speaking of the real, invisible world that is antithetical to the world of pure cognition, John was not under the influence of Platonic philosophy. One must also reject uncritical succumbing to stoicism.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.3. The Originality and Independence of the New Testament with Regards to Hellenism

Due to the essence of Hellenism as well as Judaism and Christianity, which is the culmination of the former, the impact of Hellenism is superficial, while the impact in the opposite direction is total. Judaism and Christianity put all their efforts into defending their orthodoxies, while Hellenism is marked by the fact that it arose from the amalgamation of various cultures. Hellenism was capable of absorbing all Jewish and Christian contents, processing them in accordance with its own way of thinking. However, Judaism did not disappear, and Christianity was not a Hellenistic perversion of Christianity. In fact, the opposite happened. The cultural amalgam known as Hellenism disappeared. It was preserved only in the way of thinking, which sporadically appeared across the centuries up to the present day, as in the case of gnosis. One can find only the traces of Hellenism in the way of thinking of various religious and cultural communities. Analogously, we can see traces of Hellenism in the Christian holy books and in later literature, but these traces are superficial and do not affect the contents of revelation.

Hellenism of from the first century AD heard opinions that Greeks had never thought of from Christians. In order to convert the Greeks, the first Christians, who were Jews, had to first learn the Greek language, but they also had to perfectly master the Greek way of thinking and of seeing the world. Starting with Aristobulus (in the middle of the second century AD), the Hellenistic Jews read the ancient Greek poets and philosophers. They compared the doctrine and customs described in Sacred Scripture as well as in Greek literature. Seeing this, Justin Martyr developed the theory of *furta*

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. G. Sánchez Mielgo, *La obra de S. Juan, un modelo de inculturación*, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. A. de la Fuente, *Trasfondo cultural del cuarto Evangelio*, „Estudios Bíblicos” 56 (1998) no. 4, p. 492.

*Graecorum* about the Greeks' plagiarism of thoughts from Old Testament texts.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the authors of the Bible presented the influence of Judaic though on Greek thinkers. Even the books of the Bible written in the Greek language contained Hebrew thinking and preserved the truth about God in an uncorrupted way. The Christians' Biblical books attest to the same attitude; they are free of the influence of Hellenistic ideas.

Two contradictory ways of thinking – the more realistic stoicism and the more idealistic Platonism – appeared in the vernacular Greek culture. Classic, Hellenistic philosophy tried to create a model of integral thinking in which autonomy is maintained, while unity is emphasized. Hellenism discouraged the search for an integral conceptualization. The contradictory ways of thinking became radicalized and moved towards extreme dualism or towards pantheism. For Christianity, however, integral conceptualization was something natural and obvious. The stoic current developed in Asia Minor, while the Platonic current developed in Alexandria. As a result of Hellenism, these centers developed respective models of separate and eclectic thinking. They contained different visions of the world: materialistic stoicism and spiritualistic Platonism. Both of these currents of Christian theology influenced the image of God, Christology, the conception of humanity, and ultimate realities. Christianity rejected the tendency towards radicalization, but it was prone to the unique twofold way of thinking that was typical of both centers. In this way, two theological currents, known as the School of Antioch and the School of Alexandria, appeared. The School of Antioch included: Saints Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, Irenaeus, and Theophilus, while the School of Alexandria was represented by Clement and Origen.<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on material and humanity in Christology which was typical of Antioch and Asia Minor led to Nestorianism, while the Platonic spiritualism of Alexandria led to monophysitism.<sup>20</sup> The impact of Hellenism on Christian theology appeared from the very beginning, or ever since the New Testament revelation was written down.

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18 Cf. P. A. Redpath, *Odyseja mądrości. Od filozofii do transcendentalnej sofistyki*, Lublin 2003, p. 65; P. A. Redpath, *Wisdom's Odyssey. From Philosophy to Transcendental Sophistry*, Amsterdam 1997.

19 Cf. G. M. Vian, *Cristianismo y culturas en la época patristica*, [in:] *Cristianismo y culturas. Problemática de inculturación del mensaje cristiano. Actas del VIII simposio de teología histórica*, Valencia 1995, p. 58 (Facultad de teología San Vicente Ferrer. Series Valentina, 38).

20 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 59.

## 2. The Impact of Hellenistic Culture in the History of Christianity

Hellenistic culture's contact with Christianity began in the earliest days of Christianity, which first appeared in a Judaic milieu prone to Hellenistic influences. The geographical sites were first of all Palestine and the neighboring areas, and later Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece, and the entire Roman Empire.

Christianity as well as Greek culture and broadly understood Hellenistic culture mutually impacted each other. Persistent motifs of ancient, classical Hellenistic thinking were conducive to evangelization. Hellenism that made up the essence and historical foundations of Greek culture resonated with the way of thinking that was characteristic of Christianity. The process of Christianization meant the overcoming of Pantheistic thinking, or the transformation of Hellenism into Hellenicness.

### 2.1. The Beginning

Initially, theology was a reflection on what had happened and what had been said in salvation history. This was the foundation for the creation of a more stable formula that encompassed the essential contents in a metaphysical system. With the passage of time, history was forgotten to the extent that it had to be discovered anew. Today, both historical and narrative theology have been developed, as are the theology of history and structural theology, which contains the entirety of history in one consistent synthesis. The metaphysical aspects as well as the historical and space-time dimensions are taken into consideration in reflections on narrow phenomena. The influence of Hellenism caused the appearance of unilateral formulations in theology: theology either became limited to a simple description and the essence was overlooked, or metaphysical conceptions were created and the historical dimension was ignored. Both levels developed alongside each other without any connection, or, on the contrary, they mingled with each other. Various heresies – adoptionism, Arianism, Nestorianism, monophysitism – appeared within the context of erroneous ways of thinking in Christology. Theological reflections were reduced only to narratives and accounts; they were only described at the level of abstraction, whose subject was reality, but only at a conceptual level. It was forgotten that the incarnation is the link to the perspective from which Christianity begins. The incarnation is the central point of theology, which contains within itself the entirety of Christian theology.

Theology's relationship to history has become a central theology topic even in Protestantism, which presupposes the radical distinction between metaphysical reflections and typically historical theology. A Protestant axiom is the relegation of metaphysical reflections to the field of philosophy and the limiting of theology solely to discussion of Jesus Christ's redemptive actions. In this context, a scholarly reflection on the entirety of the history of salvation, or the theology of history created by the Protestant theologian Oskar Cullman, is of momentous significance to Catholic theology as well. The acknowledgment that the actions of individual persons as well as their entirety that creates history are relevant to salvation is unprecedented.<sup>21</sup>

Within the context of the theology of history, Cullmann became interested in the impact of Hellenism on Christianity. The starting point was not the encounter of Christian doctrine with Greek philosophy, but the life of the first Christians in a milieu that had been impacted by Hellenism for a long time. Cullmann set forth the thesis that the Church had encountered Hellenistic culture from the very beginning in Palestine. Integral Christian thinking that is in accordance with the Chalcedonian dogma is opposed to the Hellenistic way of thinking; it radically rejects both separation and amalgamation.

Meanwhile the Tübingen School, whose representatives did not acknowledge any connections between early Jewish praxina (*Urkirche*) and late Hellenistic Christianity (*Christtentum*), was under the influence of Hellenism. It turns out that Hellenism had previously influenced Jewish milieus both in the Diaspora and in Palestine itself. Theological reflections should describe what this connection consisted of. Ultimately, theology reaches back to the historic Christ, returning to the source that is the incarnation.<sup>22</sup> Personalistic theology notes that history is created not only by the human exterior, but also by the integral understanding of the person. Human intentions, rather than external expressions, are most important. Material actions result from activities of the human spirit, or from the activities of the intellect, feelings, and will.

Visible reality, including the political reality, is an expression of a significantly deeper foundation, which comprised an appropriately shaped mentality. The paradigms of Jewish, Hellenistic, and Christian thinking were different; they had something in common, but they also had something that made them

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21 Cf. K. Gózdź, *Perspektywa historyczbawcza teologii Oscara Cullmanna*, [in:] K. Gózdź, *Zwycięstwo wiary*, Lublin 2002, p. 53–77.

22 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 56.

significantly different. The theological models created by Christians were different. This did not mean that Christians isolated themselves and became impervious to other cultures for fear of contamination. Isolation would be a corruption of Christianity, which is different from other systems of thinking in that it does not close itself off from different cultures, but instead mixes with them. An example of the impact of Hellenism on Christians is Tatian, who isolated himself in the Judeo-Christian mentality and rejected everything Greek. As a result, he expressed a form of thinking that was characteristic of Gnosticism. He disputed both the Jewish tradition and the official Greek thought, although he himself was prone to Hellenism in his way of thinking.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from Palestine, Christian missionaries encountered Jews and Greeks who believed in the God of Israel as well as Greek pagans. Philo of Alexandria was a pure Hellenic Greek, but not a Hellenistic one. At the same time, he was a deeply pious Jew. Most of his writings are commentaries on the Torah. In them, he defended the necessity of respecting the Law and following its prescriptions.<sup>24</sup> Philo was a unique witness to the most serious problem that faced the Jewish community in his day: that of how to oppose Greek secular culture, which was remarkably influential and compelling and permeated everything, captivating every area of human life, even impacting Israel's traditional faith (cf. Dan 7 : 7). Christians would also face this problem and follow the instructions introduced by the Alexandrian Judaism that was present in the Hellenistic milieu. The apologists' area of interest was the same as that undertaken by Philo: dialogue with Hellenistic culture and assimilation of it within the acceptable limits set forth by the faith.<sup>25</sup>

The apostles preached the Gospel to the Greeks, who were shaped by pluralistic Hellenism. They encountered not only foreign nations and languages, but also a foreign way of thinking. Their aim was not only to transmit the appropriate information, but to change the way of thinking as well. The faith did not solely consist of a perception of the contents, but also of the transformation of the person, including the way of thinking.<sup>26</sup>

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23 Cf. S. Fernandez Ardanaz, *A la búsqueda del paradigma original del hombre*, „Scriptorium Victoriense” 38 (1991) no. 1–2, p. 82.

24 Cf. G. Uríbarri Bilbao, *Monarquía y Trinidad*, Madrid 1996, p. 50 (Publicaciones de la Universidad Pontificia Comillas. Madrid: Serie I: Estudios, 62).

25 Cf. A. Tornos, *El servicio a la fe en la cultura de hoy*, Madrid 1987; G. Uríbarri Bilbao, *Monarquía y Trinidad*, op. cit., p. 51.

26 Cf. P. Leks, „*Stowo Twoje jest prawdą...*”. *Charyzmat natchnienia biblijnego*, Katowice 1997, p. 41.

The apostles' students included both Jews and Greeks. Ignatius of Antioch was a Greek. The influence of rhetoric typical of Asia Minor and that of the diatribes of the cynics and stoics is evident in Ignatius. He grew up in a Hellenistic milieu and was prone to stoicism as well as Middle Platonism; these philosophical currents made him threatened by gnosis. As a result of this, specific topics and ways of resolving them appeared in Ignatius' work. Among them, it is worth noting his reflections on life.<sup>27</sup> He was pervaded by Greek culture, but his way of thinking was typical of Christianity, not of Hellenism. Ignatius overcame Hellenistic thinking and was opposed to gnosis. He preached that man's oneness with God does not happen through an escape from the body but, on the contrary, in Christ's body and spirit and through imitating Christ, the central point of which is the Eucharist. He also preached that Christians do not desire liberation from the body but, on the contrary, seek resurrection through oneness with the Body of Christ. Christian mysticism is strictly tied to the tangible body, invisibility is tied to visibility, metaphysics is tied to history, and theocentrism is tied to anthropocentrism.<sup>28</sup>

From the very beginning, Christians made full use of Greek culture in order to bring the Gospel to it. They distinguished between humanism and the authentic search for God from the pseudo-humanism and the pseudo-religiosity that are devoid of man and the living God. Tertullian quoted Virgil and the philosophers, who spoke of the natural encounter with God and the immortality of the soul. In addition to the theory of *furta Graecorum*, Justin Martyr also developed a theory on the "seeds of the Word;" the theory was of stoic origin.<sup>29</sup>

The Alexandria community and the so-called School of Alexandria that was born in this milieu were open to Greek culture. The reference point for Christian thinkers of this tendency was Philo of Alexandria; it began with Clement and followed with Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianus, and Augustine, from whom the entire Middle Ages followed.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, the School of Antioch referred back to Greek culture, although the reference point for it was the history of Israel, whose culmination was Jesus Christ and continued at a higher level: at the history of the Church. In his *Preparatio evangelica*, Eusebius of Caesarea attacked pagan mythology, at the same

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27 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 50.

28 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 133.

29 Cf. G. M. Vian, *Cristianismo y culturas en la época patristica*, op. cit., p. 67.

30 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 70.

time keeping those truths that pagan philosophy to an extent contained. In *Demonstratio evangelica*, he interpreted the works of the Jewish prophets from a Christological perspective. He made a historiographical and ideological distinction between the Hebrews and the Jews: beginning with Moses, the former were the precursors of the Christians, while the latter underwent a process of degeneration. Thus Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica*, which was an extension of the *Acts of the Apostles* and explained the stages in the foundation of the Church beginning with the earliest beginnings is important.<sup>31</sup>

Its connection to Greek culture and, at the same time, its clear surpassing is evident in Christian anthropology. Beginning with St. Paul, the triune division of humanity fragments man even more than the dual division. The reference to 1 Thessalonians 5 : 23 by advocates of the triune division is incorrect. St. Paul used the term *psyché* relatively rarely. This term appeared alongside the term *sôma* only in 1 Thessalonians 5 : 23. Paul did not place much emphasis on this division. He borrowed it from Greek philosophy and was aware that it could be misinterpreted.<sup>32</sup> *Sôma* means the integral person embedded in time and space. This term indicates a specific relationship to other objects: things and people. *Psyché* emphasizes man's vital strength, which moves one to act (specifically, a person capable of acting).<sup>33</sup> In referencing St. Paul, Justin made a connection between the Bible and Hellenistic thinking. He rejected the Platonic doctrine about the nature of the soul, about its preexistence and transmigration to various parts of the body. Man does not exist as an eternal being that at some point fell from the heavens onto the earth, but was created by God.<sup>34</sup>

Among Christians, the positive impact of Hellenism was contained in the fact that it was open to different cultures and to distinct forms of thinking and believing. In Justin, this is visible in the fact that he included people who are not Christians yet attempt to act in accordance with their conscience to those who are saved. Openness and dialogue, however, are not synonymous with ceasing to preach the Gospel.<sup>35</sup>

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31 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 73.

32 Cf. J. L. Ruiz de la Peña, *Imagen de Dios. Antropología teológica fundamental*, Santander 1988, p. 71 (Sal Terrae, Colección "Presencia teológica", 49).

33 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 77.

34 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 95.

35 Cf. L. Misiarczyk, *Teologia wcielenia u Apologetów Greckich II wieku*, „Vox Patrum” 20 (2000) vol. 38–39, p. 58.

Theophilus of Antioch, who died before 190 AD, also could boast of good knowledge of Hellenic literature and culture. His work *Ad Autolyicum* is a continuation of the current of Hellenistic Judaism. Reading the works of the prophets inclined him towards Christianity. The central topic of his theology is monotheism: God the Creator, the struggle against idolatry and polytheism, and the defense of resurrection as well as the existence of the soul after death. He spoke with the Greeks and the Egyptians (*Aut.* I, 1. 9–10). In principle, however, he preferred to emphasize a positive presentation of the faith to polemics. The most important source of his anthropology was faith in the resurrection (*Aut.* I, 8–14), which led to faith in the Triune God.<sup>36</sup> The second book of the *Ad Autolyicum* juxtaposes and compares Greek opinions with Christian doctrine. After a short introduction (*Aut.* II, 1), Theophilus presents the opinions of Greek poets, philosophers and other writers (*Aut.* II, 2–8). Next, he compares them to the prophets (*Aut.* II, 8–9), which leads him to the topic of the beginning of the universe (*Aut.* II, 10). Theophilus notes the chaotic views of the Greeks, which he juxtaposes with the consistent views of the Christians.<sup>37</sup>

## 2.2. The Nature of the Impact of Hellenism on Christianity in Specific Centuries

The history of the impact of Hellenism on Christianity will be presented in a general, fragmentary way with discussion of specific centuries.

### 2.2.1. The Fourth Century

Gregory of Elvira, who knew the philosophical systems that formed in Hellenism's sphere of influence, was active in the Iberian Peninsula in the fourth century. Like the second century apologists and many other Christian thinkers, he treated Greek culture solely as a tool for the expression of revealed truth and for the defense of the faith of the Church. He was faithful to everything contained within the Christian *regula veritatis*.<sup>38</sup> Consistent with the thinking that had been shaped by the truth of the incarnation, he tied history to a theological reflection of a philosophical nature, while discussion

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36 Cf. G. Uribarri Bilbao, *Monarquía y Trinidad*, op. cit., p. 107.

37 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 108.

38 Cf. T. Czapiga, *Antropocentryzm teologii Grzegorza z Elwiry. Studium patrystyczno-teologiczne*, Szczecin 1996, p. 46.

about God expressed in His work (*gesta Dei*) was tied to discussion of God limited by human words and human concepts.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, St. Augustine was active in Carthage. Similar to the authors of the Biblical books written in Greek, he also made use of Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelianism, but he made a choice, and the Greek terms used by him gave Biblical meaning to his works. Augustine made generous use of Greek culture, but he purified it of foreign influences; in particular, he rejected the syncretic Manichaeism of the Gnostics and the creative dualism of the Persians. He was inspired by Platonic anthropology, but he did not consider the human body to be a prison for the preexisting soul. For him, Christ was not a figure from pre-Christian mythology, nor was he an intercessor between God and the world whose purpose was to teach people how to free themselves from matter. He found the program of the defense of the Catholic faith against heresy and the program of imitating Christ in the Letter to the Philippians. He connected the knowledge he gained in the sphere of Greek culture with a dynamic and functional mentality, which was characteristic of Biblical Semitism. In doing so, he made use of the Christian principle of simultaneous formulation of both the autonomy of parts and the new understanding of the whole. St. Augustine contemplated the fundamental unity of God's nature in order to substantiate the unity of the activity of God as Three Persons in the history of the world. The one divine nature is possessed by God's Three Persons as well as the intimate relations which are in this same substance and are non-communicational (*De Trin.* IV, 21. 20; *Contra serm. Arian.* 15, 9; *In Io. tr.* 20, 3).<sup>40</sup> In responding to the accusation by Central European theologians that Christianity was being Hellenized by St. Augustine, one must note the modern semiotics of Augustine's teaching and on the basis of the philosophical context study the difference, and sometimes the opposition of the meaning of its terminology with regards to the meaning given to it in Greek philosophy, especially Aristotelianism. Augustine rejected the way of thinking that was typical of Hellenism.<sup>41</sup>

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39 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 47.

40 Cf. A. Turrado, *Agustín*, [in:] *El Dios Cristiano. Diccionario teológico*, dir. por X. Pikaza, Salamanca 1992, p. 18.

41 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 19.

### 2.2.2. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Hellenism, a cultural amalgamation that was visible above all in the way of thinking, was dominant in the eastern part of Byzantium after the fall of the Roman Empire. Christianity respected the models and inspirations put forwards by Greece's ancient culture and acknowledged Hellenicness, as it saw within it values similar to Gospel values. However, it rejected Hellenism, which was a cultural amalgamation. Rome was more open to Hellenicness, while Byzantium was more inclined towards Hellenism. Among the literary genres previously used, those that supported the building of a Christian civilization were more accepted. Their contents were new, Christian, and Biblical, but their cultural context arose from Hellenism.<sup>42</sup>

In the early centuries, Christianity thrived in Western Europe also thanks to missionaries of Jewish and Greek origin. The fall of the empire led to the increase in strong divisions between its eastern and western halves. Unfortunately, the migrations of people led the western part to cultural ruin and, at the same time, to a loss of contact with the legacy of Greek culture. The Islamic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 confirmed the break with Christianity, but the influence of Greek culture in Western Europe was not finished. Ancient Greek philosophy impacted Islam, bringing to it a way of thinking that was typical of Hellenism. One century later, the Carolingian Renaissance appeared in the area neighboring the Iberian Peninsula as a result of a lively relationship with the Byzantine Empire. Greek culture reached the Carolingian Empire from both sides, which breathed life into Central European philosophy from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries and ultimately led to the Renaissance, or European thinking's rapid turn towards its Greek roots.

Christianity's encounter with Greek culture gave birth to new Christian philosophical systems that began to appear in the eighth century. John Scotus Eriugena continued Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's thinking, which was embedded in the system of Proclus' late Neo-Platonism. Later, this line was extended by Albertus Magnus, Nicholas of Cusa, Leibniz, and Hegel.<sup>43</sup> The apothatic theology created by Pseudo-Dionysius and later by Meister Eckardt

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42 Cf. S. Wielgus, *Badania nad Biblią w starożytności i w średniowieczu*, Lublin 1990, p. 168.

43 Cf. G. Lafont, *Storia teologica della Chiesa. Itinerario e forme della teologia*, Cinisello Balsamo 1997, p. 24.

and St. John of the Cross as well as some currents in the Franciscan School were an anti-system in opposition to the philosophical systems.<sup>44</sup>

From the very beginnings of Christianity and through the Carolingian Renaissance, Middle Ages, and Renaissance up to our days, the return to ancient Greek culture takes place in two currents. One of them, which resonates with Christian thinking, reaches back to the classical vernacular Greek culture. The other is rooted in Hellenism.

### 2.2.3. The Present Day

Scholasticism was reborn in the late nineteenth century. The line of return to medieval philosophy was extended to classical Greek philosophy. At the same time, there was a reaction, especially in German Protestant theology, that consisted of a decisive break with metaphysics (Albrecht Ritschl). One could be tempted to think that on the one hand the influence of Hellenism was reborn in theology, and on the other purely Evangelical thinking free of foreign influence was reborn.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the opposite was true. Hellenism was not based on unambiguous intellectual formulas; rather, it was a cultural amalgamation in which irrational mysticism was at the forefront. Wisdom was an internal postulate in the teaching of Jesus, Who said that He was the truth.

Neo-Scholasticism looked for support in Hellenicness, not in Hellenism, in order to present the contents of the Gospel in a more accurate way through the lens of metaphysics. Meanwhile, the current that fought against metaphysics adopted all the traits that were characteristic of Hellenism. Misunderstandings resulted from the inability to distinguish between Hellenicness and Hellenism. In Christianity, the conflict between reason and emotions is wrong and harmful. There is the need for rational thinking based on reality in opposition to poetic thinking based on mythical fantasies related to pagan worship and mysticism inclined towards pantheism. The rejection of metaphysics, including by many Catholic theologians, led to the discontinuing of reflection on many important topics related to the Christian faith that were only indicated in the Middle Ages, as there was not enough time to develop them. Some

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44 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 25.

45 Cf. W. Pannenberg, *Człowiek, wolność, Bóg*, tł. G. Sowiński, Kraków 1995, p. 143: "Ever since Adolf Harnack's *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (*History of Dogma*), the Christian consciousness has regarded the Hellenization of Christianity as the saturation of Jesus' original simple message with foreign influences. [...] The task of freeing Christian religious awareness from all sorts of metaphysical fossilization that found its permanent form in Church dogmas appeared."

topics were not resolved during the Neo-Scholastic era and were relegated to the margins. In effect, there are many “blank spots,” or topics related to the faith that theologians do not write about and that preachers and catechists consequently evade.

Hellenism dealt with metaphysics, but it limited itself to only one system: that of pantheism. Something similar happened in modern times. A typical example is that of the current of German idealism in the nineteenth century and Samuel Alexander’s processional philosophy as well as that of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne in England.<sup>46</sup> In the twentieth century, many philosophers and theologians proposed renewing metaphysical thinking based on ancient Hebrew and Greek wisdom. Metaphysical thinking was typical of medieval scholasticism. However, the lack of a historical error was a dimension. Today, the opposite tends to be true. An integral formulation is needed.

### 2.3. The Hellenization of Christian Spirituality

The thinking of Hellenism contradicted the classical Greek philosophers’ way of thinking. For typical Hellenism, it was not a rational discourse of human reason, but a mystical experience similar to the spiritual experiences typical for the great religions of Asia. Philosophical systems with Eastern mysticism were mixed up with Greek Hellenism. Hellenism influenced Arab philosophy, and starting with the thirteenth century this road began to impact European mysticism. In this situation, it is necessary to distinguish between Christian mysticism and monistic mysticism. A typical example of the impact of Hellenism was Islamic Sufism and the movements of *los alumbrados* in Spain in the sixteenth century. Spanish alumbradism belonged to the current of monistic mysticism, like Gnosticism, Messalianism, Sufism, Bogomilism, and, in the twentieth century, New Age.<sup>47</sup> Monism is based on the assumption that it is possible to know everything, because the human intellect is ontologically connected to the entirety of reality and acts in the rhythm of eternal laws. Christian mysticism presumes the distinctiveness of God and transcendence, or the difference between the Absolute and an accidental,

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 144.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. S. Lopez Santidrian, *Decurso de la heterodoxia mística y origen del alumbradismo en Castilla*, Burgos 1982, p. 3.

limited being. These two systems of mysticism were noticed by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata*, I, 15). He was cautious with respect to the Greek cultural heritage, in other words with respect to Hellenism prone to the influences of India, Persia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. In this system, cognition consists of direct seeing. In it, thinking is not a discourse, but rather the directing of people towards a mysterious reality.<sup>48</sup> Plotinus, who mixed up Plato's mystical religious system discovered during his journey to Persia, was a typical representative of Hellenism.<sup>49</sup>

Plotinus' students shifted the emphasis towards mysticism influenced by the discussions they had with Christianity.<sup>50</sup> Hellenism absorbed and combined with itself many Christian elements. It impacted Christianity in such a form, which insidiously led to its becoming blurred. A current conducive towards Christianity, of course understood in accordance with the criteria shaped by it, developed in Alexandria, the cultural capital of Hellenism. For Christians, the linking together of faith and love with the intellect for knowing God was possible, albeit while maintaining the autonomy of reason and faith, the intellect and emotions. The intellect transformed by grace does not disappear; on the contrary, it performs its own function even better. The encounter of God through the intellect transformed by grace is tied to the transformation of the human person.<sup>51</sup>

Hellenism emphasizes contemplative speculation, or man's efforts to know God. The Hebrew paradigm emphasizes opening oneself and listening, readiness to accept God's strength in constant conflict between the situation of the person and the situation of the new endowment.<sup>52</sup> Christianity transcends Judaism and is opposed to Hellenism. The de-Hellenization already began with the incarnation. The culmination was the Cross and, subsequently, death and resurrection. The Immaculate Conception of Jesus Christ by Mary condenses within itself everything that is opposed to Hellenism. The Church will defend itself against Hellenism and maintain its fidelity to the Gospel.<sup>53</sup> The central

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48 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 4.

49 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 5.

50 Cf. M. Krupa, *Duch i litera, Liryczna ekspresja mistycznej drogi św. Jana od Krzyża w przekładach polskich* Wrocław 2006 (mps), p. 30.

51 Cf. P. Evdokimov, *Poznanie Boga w Kościele Wschodnim. Patrystyka, liturgia, ikonografia*, przeł. A. Liduchowska, Kraków 1996, p. 42.

52 Cf. J. L. Ruiz de la Peña, *Imagen de Dios. Antropología teológica fundamental*, op. cit., p. 26.

53 Cf. C. G. Llata, *Misterio trinitario y misterio mariano en el Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*, "Scriptorium Victoriense" 45 (1998) no. 3, p. 256.

point of the Christian mystery is the Cross, in which God's strength is revealed within radical weakness and cleanses of the pride of Hellenistic pantheism, which offers people all the virtues of all cultures in the world at the same time. The Cross cleanses Christianity of Hellenism.

## Conclusion

The impact of Hellenism on Christianity has existed since the beginning and will certainly last until the end of the world. The threat resulting from this is dangerous because it is a total phenomenon that encompasses all areas of human life and furthermore is difficult to grasp and is difficult to avoid. Not everything in this cultural mix is bad. Certain values are contained in various cultures. The mixing of cultures that leads to the expression that everything is good and what we call evil can be valuable on it is combined with good as a complementary factor is dangerous. Hellenism is a threat to Christianity. Some of its elements can be useful when fidelity to the basic principles of Christianity is maintained; in other words, when full orthodoxy is preserved.

## Abstract

### **The Impact of Hellenism on Christianity at the Dawn of History and Up to the Present Day**

The impact of Hellenism on Christianity has been present right from the start up to the present day, and it will certainly remain so till the end of the world. It poses a threat, since the phenomenon is all-encompassing, difficult to pinpoint, and hence hard to deal with. Not everything in this cultural amalgamation is bad, however. The danger arises when cultures are mixed, which leads up to the contention that everything is good and what we call evil may, as it is argued, be regarded as good when coupled with the good as a complementary element. Hellenism poses a threat to Christianity. Some of its elements may only be useful when Christian principles are not compromised, and when full orthodoxy is preserved.

**Keywords:** Hellenism; Christianity; beginning; history; impact; culture; Holy Scripture; similarity; originality.

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