

Book Reviews

George E. Karamanolis. *The Philosophy of Early Christianity*. Ancient Philosophies. London: Routledge, 2014.

My attention has been drawn towards the recently published book, *The Philosophy of Early Christianity* by George Karamanolis—a work that has received a fairly warm academic reception. Given also that I myself run courses on the philosophical issues that emerged as a consequence of the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries, I eagerly anticipated a book which would concentrate on the early-Christian philosophy that precedes that period. After all, detailed but comprehensive studies, devoted to specific periods of development of Patristic philosophical thought, are hard to find. In most cases, the entirety of Patristic philosophical thought is presented as an initial part of medieval philosophy (by representatives of the Gilson school), or as a part of late-ancient philosophy (by, for instance, Lloyd P. Gerson¹). The two studies by Moreschini devoted exclusively to Patristic philosophy are, it must be said, quite exceptional in this respect, in that they not only present it comprehensively, but also analyze it in accordance with the latest research in the field of Medio-Platonic and Neoplatonic studies.² To my knowledge, those works have not yet been translated into English, so their use in broader academic studies is quite limited—something which is most unfortunate. Because of all of this, I approached Karamanolis' work with a high sense of anticipation.

1. Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

2. Claudio Moreschini, *Storia della filosofia patristica*, Letteratura cristiana antica. Nuova serie (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2004); Claudio Moreschini, *Storia del pensiero cristiano tardo-antico*, Il pensiero occidentale (Milan: Bompiani, 2013).

In the book under scrutiny, Karamanolis sets out to present the philosophy of early-Christian writers through a discussion of six issues: 1. "The Christian conception of philosophy and Christian philosophical methodology"; 2. "Physics and metaphysics: first principles and the question of cosmogony"; 3. "Logic and epistemology"; 4. "Free will and divine providence"; 5. "Psychology: the soul and its relation to the body"; 6. "Ethics and politics." The internal structure of each of the six parts follows a more or less chronological mode of organization.

In the preface, Karamanolis states that his work is "an introductory book in two senses: it aims to introduce the reader to the philosophy of early Christianity and also aims to show that the philosophy of early Christianity is part of ancient philosophy as a distinct school of thought, and deserves to be studied as such" (ix). And indeed, since each issue is considered by the author in only a very sketchy manner, with the author going so far as to make sweeping generalizations on the basis of what amounts to an extremely selective approach to the sources, the book cannot be considered anything other than introductory reading.

The author claims to be concentrating on thinkers who lived between the second and fourth centuries, but with a special focus on the time period preceding the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), at the same time treating Christian writers of the fourth century only selectively (1). Thus, he feels that he can leave out not only Augustine, but also John Chrysostom, Arnobius, and Marius Victorinus (27). In practice, he passes over even more authors of the fourth century—and of the preceding one. Such selectiveness, in his opinion, is justified. Karamanolis states that he is primarily interested in "the rise of Christian philosophy: the setting of the scene" (2). He also maintains that the Council of Nicaea introduced an important shift into Christianity, making "the decision of the assembly of bishops" the criterion for settling doctrinal disputes. The latter, as Karamanolis believes, is "largely" a matter of politics. From that particular moment on, we see that "Christianity relies more and more on ecclesiastical and political authority" (27). In making such a claim, Karamanolis reveals a paucity of knowledge concerning the subjects of doctrinal authority and conciliarity in the Christian tradition and the history of the pre-ecumenical councils. But what is actually much more important is that he does not take the trouble to explicate how such a change of political character may have affected the philosophy of Christian authors, or how it might serve to explain his own selectiveness. It would seem that inclusion of the Cappadocians evidently does not satisfy the author's criteria for taking certain Christian writers into consideration. Although their activity falls within the period

after Nicaea, Karamanolis asserts that it does not mean that Christian philosophy was then “eclipsed,” and he states that Basil and Gregory of Nyssa were engaged “with some of the most central questions of Christian philosophy that arise earlier but for which a systematic treatment was still pending.” Therefore, he decided to include them in his book (27).

Karamanolis’ argumentation makes me wonder whether his implication is that after the Council of Nicaea, the development of Christian philosophy was really limited by ecclesiastical authority to the extent that it became nothing more than a systematic treatment of issues that had arisen previously. If this is his intention, then such a bold claim should be supported with factual evidence and / or references to the relevant research as it currently stands. Nonetheless, the real intentions of the author remain obscure. What he does explain, though, are his reasons for excluding an examination of Augustine’s philosophy from his study. Karamanolis states (1) that Augustine’s work, because of its impressive volume, would require a study of its own, and (2) that in his own opinion, Augustine’s philosophy as a whole has been granted sufficient academic attention over the past decades, while he prefers to concentrate here on writers who have been “much less studied from a philosophical point of view and have been much less known to the historian of philosophy.” Also, in Karamanolis’ view, in spite of numerous studies dealing individually with the philosophical thought of Clement, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, “we still lack an appreciation of the philosophical agenda of these thinkers” (2). As a scholar working primarily in the fields of Neoplatonism, Patristic philosophy, and early Byzantine thought, I can scarcely agree with Karamanolis’ claims. This is not the place to list all of the published studies that have been devoted to the philosophical agenda of, for instance, Origen or Cappadocians. The works of Clement, Origen, Nemesius, and, once again, the Cappadocians, have come to be very much appreciated, due to the rekindling of interest in studies of both Medio-Platonism and Neoplatonism. They are valued both as important sources (or testimony) with regard to lost works by ancient philosophers (e.g. Pantaenus, Porphyry), and for the sake of their own original philosophical conceptions. As a matter of fact, Karamanolis presents only some aspects of the thought of certain very well-known writers, ignoring those who are actually less well-known in philosophical terms, such as Gregory Thaumaturgus, Methodius of Olympus, and Hippolytus of Rome—to mention just a few.

I am paying so much attention to the issue of selectivity here not only because the author fails to provide the reader with any clear and methodologically sound criterion for it, but also because such arbitrary and ill-

founded selectiveness does not, it seems to me, furnish an appropriate basis for comprehensive studies of the sort to which the author aspires. I would even go so far as to say that it may rather engender a quite biased view of the subject, affecting the reliability of any argumentation or conclusions.

However, in my opinion, the main problem we face here lies in fact that the author presents his deliberations concerning the question of whether the legacy of Christian writers should be counted as a philosophy or not as a kind of novelty, when at the same time it appears that he has quite limited knowledge of (or has chosen to ignore) academic discussions that were already getting underway a century or so ago.

In academic scholarship, the question of whether Christian philosophy is a genuine philosophy or not became a subject of intense debate in the 1930s, when leading representatives of French philosophy carried out an attack on the idea of Christian philosophy, questioning its very being and originality. Since then, such prominent scholars as Jacques Maritain, Maurice Nédoncelle, and Joseph Owens, as well as many others, have taken the floor in the discussion. Yet one of the most original and deep solutions to this question was proposed by Étienne Gilson, who formulated and defined the very notion of Christian philosophy as such. In his *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (first published in 1932),³ Gilson differentiated clearly between philosophy employed by a Christian who just happens to be a philosopher and essentially Christian philosophy. He introduced an understanding of Christian philosophy as “every philosophy which, although keeping the two orders [i.e., the one of philosophy and the other of supernatural revelation] formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason.”⁴ It is thanks to this conception that early Christian authors became a part of philosophical discourse, not only as a source of knowledge concerning certain lost ancient philosophical texts, but also as furnishing some original philosophical content that merited consideration and analysis in its own right. Unfortunately, it seems that Karamanolis does not know much about Gilson’s input; at least, he does not mention any of Gilson’s works.

To be sure, one could say that Gilson and a number of representatives of his school devoted their attention primarily to medieval philos-

3. Étienne Gilson, *L’Esprit de la philosophie médiévale*. “Gifford lectures,” *Université d’Aberdeen*, 2nd revised ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1969). Originally published in 1932. English translation, based on first edition: Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediæval Philosophy*, trans. Alfred Howard Campbell Downes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936).

4. Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediæval Philosophy*, 37.

ophy, giving only a rather cursory account of early Christian philosophy. Hence, Karamanolis might be right to ignore most of the academic legacy of Gilson and his school. Yet it is difficult to justify ignorance of Gilson's monumental solutions and interpretations regarding the question of Christian philosophy as such. Moreover, it is even harder to justify Karamanolis' lack of references to the works of such a prominent scholar in the field of ancient philosophy as Claudio Moreschini. His works on early Christian philosophical thought—*Storia della filosofia patristica* (2004) and, especially, his latest offering, *Storia del pensiero cristiano tardo-antico* (2013)⁵—are detailed, and take into account the very latest studies in the philosophy of late antiquity. Yet instead of discussing the actual state of current research, Karamanolis opts for limiting himself to quite general statements, supported by very limited references, such as “There is, in fact, a long line of thought traceable back to antiquity that disputes that the Christian thinkers I mentioned above qualify as philosophers or have a philosophy worthy of study.” He also makes the strikingly bold claim that “It may actually be one reason why there are not many books with titles similar to this one” (3). Such claims, most regrettably, indicate ignorance about more than half a century's worth of academic research.

In my opinion, it would make perfect sense to write a book on the subject of the philosophical dimension of early Christian thought, re-examining the issue of the existence of a distinctively Christian philosophy at this time in the light of recent developments in the history of ancient philosophy and Patristics. This, however, is not what Karamanolis offers us. His aim appears to be to minimize any essential differences between “pagan” and Christian philosophy, in respect of both the claims made and the arguments that led to them. We need hardly mention that making assertions of this kind involves a great deal of simplification, at the level of both exposition and argumentation.

Karamanolis begins his presentation of almost every issue with a description of ancient philosophical accounts. In most cases, the presentation of ancient accounts of the issue in question takes up half of the text—text that, it was expected, would be devoted to the presentation and analysis of the philosophical thought of Christian authors. What is more, Karamanolis' descriptions of ancient philosophical accounts are so general that they are really only appropriate for a very sketchy guidebook. Moreover, they do not take into account recent studies in the field of Hel-

5. See note 2.

lenistic and later philosophy (those by Jean-Marc Narbonne, Lloyd P. Gerson, Stephen E. Gersh, etc.), just recycling some well-known but vague statements instead. By contrast, the book by Moreschini, while devoted to the entirety of Patristic philosophy, is nevertheless considerably more detailed, and in line with the actual state of current research in the field. From the point of view of original approaches to the subject, compared to Moreschini's book published a year earlier, the study of Karamanolis does not represent an improvement, but rather a sizeable step backwards.

A number of errors are committed in those sketchy presentations, some of them methodological in nature. The author does not even try to define the actual object of his study: i.e. to propose a definitional account of what Christian philosophy is, or at least enumerate its characteristics. It might be because of this that he confuses the purview of philosophy with that of theology, considering such subjects as Incarnation or Salvation to be matters discussed by Christians in their philosophy. Neither does he distinguish between the philosophical ideas Christian authors borrow from pre-existent philosophy and make use of in their theology from philosophy that is essentially Christian: i.e. from purely philosophical discourse developed independently by Christians within the context of, and for the purposes of, elucidating Christian beliefs. Rather, he presents any element even remotely approximating to philosophical discourse as the Christian philosophy of the writer under scrutiny. For instance, even as he agrees that the philosophical material found in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* form "an anthology of passages copied by (sic!) pagan sources and paraphrase," he presents it as furnishing Clement's own philosophical tenets (125–9).

While someone might argue that this lack of methodological discrimination is not so much an error as just the result of adopting a non-technical and inclusive view of philosophy, one cannot dismiss in such terms the many factual errors and inaccuracies to be found in the book. In point of fact, much of the information he offers is outdated. The accounts of the philosophical views of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and the Cappadocian Fathers rely on obsolete positions concerning Stoic and Platonic philosophy. Especially in the case of the Cappadocians, the author shows his unawareness of recent scholarship concerning their thought. He does not seem to know, for instance, that Basil of Caesarea's authorship of *Epistle 38* has been questioned, and that the work is nowadays attributed to his brother, Gregory of Nyssa (113).

Many more remarks of this kind could be made here, but I shall focus only on the most consequential among Karamanolis' factual errors

and inconsistencies. One of them consists in not distinguishing between the word “logos” and the philosophical meanings ascribed to this word in various philosophical traditions. The latter did not come about as a natural development, but rather, as a result of debates between various schools of thought. But the author does not see any qualitative difference between the Platonic faculty of rational argument, the Stoic divine *logos*, the Medio-Platonic lower principle, the Neoplatonic *logoi*, and the Christian Word of God. He also manages to ignore the famous *logos*-mind of God in Philo of Alexandria.

Another significant error consists in not seeing any difference between the mode in which ancient philosophers read authorities such as Plato and that in which Christians read the Bible (51–55 and *passim*). The fact that the Bible was a subject for rational explanation means, for Karamanolis, that it was treated, in point of fact, as “a human construction requiring skill and ingenuity, not the allegedly authoritatively delivered word of God.” Karamanolis appears to be completely unaware of the fact that Christians have treated the Scripture first and foremost as revealed and undisputable truth, even while admitting that it needs to be elucidated in a rational manner. Even the allegorical reading of the Scripture did not erase the truth of the primary meaning of its words. This was a significant departure from Stoic or Neoplatonic allegory. Pagan philosophers like Porphyry could treat texts written by authors such as Homer as divinely inspired, yet in their rational interpretation of those texts, their primary meaning was completely erased. This is because for pagan authors, even the authority of Homer—not to speak of that of Plato and Aristotle—was above all the authority of reason, and not that of revealed and undisputable truth. The truly complex approaches of both pagan and Christian authors to authorities have already been discussed in much detail in scholarship from the 1950s, when Jean Pépin drew attention to the allegorical element of Medio- and Neoplatonism, and when he compared and contrasted the Stoic and Platonic use of allegory with Christian allegorical reading of the Scripture.

Karamanolis would not be able to draw the conclusions that he does, if he had attended to some important works by Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory pointed out most clearly that, in the rational argumentation employed in discourse concerned with theological matters, the light of faith has absolute primacy. He was deeply convinced that such matters cannot be subjugated to the authority of bare reason, such as was employed by pagan philosophy, but instead need to be considered in the light of faith (see for instance *Or.* 37, *Or.* 38, *Or.* 27).

Those important inaccuracies make one wonder whether they are not, in point of fact, a part of the author's method. When one proposes a short inquiry into a complex matter, much has to be overlooked. A serious and comprehensive discussion of Patristic philosophy—of even just the initial stage of its development—through a series of six themes, would probably not result in a work shorter than the six volumes devoted to the six most important issues of Western scholasticism in the fifteenth century by Stefan Swieżawski.⁶ In a short work, it is possible to simply pass over texts that are inconvenient for the thesis being defended by the author.

It appears, therefore, that the conclusion to which Karamanolis leads his reader is, as a matter of fact, a pre-conceived thesis, uttered with the aim of giving relevance to early Christian thought precisely by denying its Christian character. His final conclusion is phrased as follows:

The other tendency is to conceive of early Christian thought as a special case, different from ancient pagan philosophical thinking. I have tried to show that this view is equally misguided. I cannot think of one topic that early Christian thinkers do not treat in ways similar to their pagan contemporaries.

In Karamanolis' view, Christian philosophy is distinct from its contemporaneous pagan counterpart only in respect of "a distinct point to defend, which accounts for the new twist they [Christian writers] give to old theories." Supposedly, the doctrine of Incarnation is one of those "distinct points to defend" (239).

This is by no means a new conclusion. Some similar claims were made, for instance, by Werner Beierwaltes in *Platonismus im Christentum*.⁷ A defense of this thesis, if undertaken today, would need to take into account the last sixty years of scholarship on late-Ancient and early-Christian thought. It could be treated as a piece of controversial yet valuable scholarship, if it tried to deal with passages like the ones in Gregory of Nazianzus that I have referred to above—somebody whom, in theory, the book of Karamanolis purports to cover. More importantly, it would have to address the views of Augustine, who developed a challenging and subtle defini-

6. Stefan Swieżawski, *Dzieje filozofii europejskiej w XV wieku* [History of European Philosophy in Fifteenth Century], vol. 1, *Poznanie* [Cognition]; vol. 2, *Wiedza* [Knowledge]; vol. 3, *Byt* [Being]; vol. 4, *Bóg* [God]; vol. 5, *Wszechświat* [Universe]; vol. 6, *Człowiek* [Human] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademii Teologii Katolickiej, 1974–1983).

7. Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, Philosophische Abhandlungen (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), "Einleitung," 11–12.

tion of Christian scholarship and Christian use of reason, involved in a hermeneutic circle of faith and reason that is almost twentieth-century in style. Neither should a contemporary defense of this thesis shy away from debating the classical proposals of Étienne Gilson. As it stands, this book by Karamanolis looks rather like a revival of old claims, which can only be presented as forming an original and convincing thesis on the basis of its extreme selectiveness, both in respect of the ancient sources it discusses and the recent scholarship it takes under consideration.

In any case, I must thank the author for making me realize that the issue of Christian philosophy is a matter that has to be constantly reconsidered, as it is a special instance of the permanently reevaluated relationship between faith and reason. Also, I am deeply thankful to Karamanolis for making me re-read, after many years, that splendid work of Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, and once again appreciate, only now in a new way, his philosophical intuitions and deep understanding of what the core of Christian philosophy is and what its novelty consists in.

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