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# Patristic Research: The Status Quaestionis

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by David D. Bundy

A study of Patristics involves not only studying the writings of the fathers of the church, but studying all aspects of the period which contribute to an understanding of those writings. In Greek and Latin literature, however, the patristic period includes all those writings which can be placed between the New Testament and John of Damascus. In the traditions encompassed by the Syriac, Georgian, Armenian, Ethiopic, Arabic and Coptic languages, on the other hand, the patristic period extends much later. There is no generally agreed upon terminal date for any given corpus of literature.

In consideration of this fact, this article does not pretend to be a complete *status quaestionis*. Instead, it seeks to identify a major trend in philosophy and methodology and to indicate certain projects and tendencies, realizing that there is no hope of providing adequate coverage.

## A Revolution in Methodology

Patristic study has been undergoing a reformation in methodology. There has been a breakdown in what one might call *ideological approaches*,<sup>1</sup> and an increasing consensus around a particular methodology which one might designate the *structural approach*.<sup>2</sup> This means primarily that the approaches of Jonas,<sup>3</sup> Danielou,<sup>4</sup> Pelikan<sup>5</sup> and Voobus,<sup>6</sup> to mention only four, have been found wanting in their method and analysis, indeed, in their concept of the nature of the task of patristic study. Gnosticism cannot be described adequately by recourse to the existentialist model; the origins of Jewish-Christianity are infinitely more complicated than Danielou suggested; Syrian asceticism and the history of the Syriac versions of the Bible cannot be distilled into the neat paradigms proposed and defended by Voobus; and it is generally felt that the synthesis of

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Pelikan has come too soon to be useful. What is it then that is generally felt to be needed?

Primarily, it is an examination of the primary sources, that is, of the texts themselves as phenomenon worthy of study in their own right. Due attention is to be paid to all diachronic and especially synchronic relations, but the focus of attention is to be reserved for the texts as units. Any theories will then arise from this study of texts, and will not, instead, be developed to explain the texts.

This tension is perhaps best illustrated by example. From March 11 through 14, 1980, a colloquium on Gnosticism and the Hellenistic World was held at the Catholic University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. The lectures fell into two distinct categories. The first included lectures concerned with the origins and diachronic relations of Gnosticism. There were passionate arguments and appeals for support of theories of Egyptian, Persian, Jewish, Christian, or Mystery Religions origins or of a theory of syncretism. The second category included presentations on a given biblical text, on a gnostic text, and on a text of a Christian critique of a Gnostic system.

During the course of the conference, the chairman appointed a committee composed of seven professors from different universities to draft a statement about Gnosticism and methodology of research in Gnosticism. The committee returned to the conference a statement which was severely criticized for its history-of-religions approach. The result was a compromise: "the work of the Colloquium has indicated the interest that there is to develop thematic studies and those which would identify the structures of each particular treatise and as much as possible, to examine its internal coherence and the doctrine contained therein, this without neglecting the study of sources, origins and influences."<sup>7</sup>

The structural approach is not without its drawbacks, the most significant of which may be the problem individual scholars have in separating their own religious and political beliefs from their historical study. When there is no generally accepted paradigm to help depersonalize historical study and no formation of schools to push historical inquiry to the logical conclusion of a given system of thought, the personalization of that research appears to be an inevitable outcome. In practice, this means that the historian's work becomes even more severely limited to his knowledge of primary sources. The synthetic work as practiced by writers such as Martin

Marty<sup>8</sup> comes to be built upon the shaky foundations of monographs of many researchers whose personal concerns and agendas, more than their “ideology”, are determinative for their research. This does not mean, of course, that an “ideological approach” allows one to take a stance of objectivity. Quite to the contrary. It only means that when one philosophical perspective dominated the historical understanding of a period, it provided an agreed upon set of categories within whose parameters the primary sources were to be interpreted.

### **Trends and Projects**

Remarks will be limited here to projects which appear to be tendentious and which seem to have the best chance of influencing patristic scholarship. Such projects can be grouped into the six categories below:

(1) *Source and Bibliographic Control*. The *Clavis Patrum Latinorum* (2nd ed. Steenbrugge, Belgium), providing a 640 page inventory of Latin patristics writers from Tertullian to Bede, has been followed by the even more remarkable *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* (Turnhout, Belgium) to be completed in four volumes by Maurice Geerard. To date we have the second volume (1974) on writers from Alexander of Alexandria to John Chrysostom and the third (1979) covering the period from Cyril of Alexandria to John of Damascus. These have provided the background of and framework for the CCL and the CCG (see below).

More limited in scope but more exhaustive is the work of Henri Crouzel, *Bibliographie critique d'Origene* (Instrumenta Patristica, 8, Den Haag, 1971), which will soon be followed by a second volume. Paul J. Fedwick of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, is completing *Basil of Caesarea: A Comprehensive Guide to All the Manuscripts, Ancient Testimonia and Quotations, Editions, Translations and Studies of His Works*.

The *Bibliographia Patristica* (Bonn) attempts to locate all work in patristic studies and is currently preparing volume 22 (1977). *Bulletin d'arabe chretien* (1976 - ) is trying to maintain current bibliographic control over a corpus of literature defined by language tradition. *Patristics*, the newsletter of the North American Patristic Society published by Professor Louis Swift of the University of Kentucky, has introduced accounts of recent publications. Both the *BAC* and

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*Patristics* also attempt to encourage coordination of research.

Perhaps the most significant project in North America is the Hill Monastic Microfilm Library (HMML) microfilming program of St. John's University, Collegeville, Minn., through which microfilms of manuscripts from all over the world are being collected. The HMML is establishing itself as an extraordinary center of documentation. Less broad in scope is the Documentatiecentrum directed by P. S. van Koningsveld of the Faculty of Theology at Leiden who is collecting documentation on the relations between Christianity and Islam, especially in the Sinai and in Spain.

(2) *Publication of Texts*. The most important series have continued to expand during the last decade and have announced ambitious programs for the coming years. The *Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca* (CCG) of Leuven, the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (CCL) of Steenbrugge and Leuven, the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (CSCO) of Louvain, *Patrologia Orientalis* (PO) and *Sources Chretiennes* (SC) of Paris, and the *Studi e Testi* (Rome) have established themselves as essential tools for the patristic scholar.

Of considerable promise are projects editing several versions of a given text in close cooperation. The *Ascension of Isaiah* is being edited at the Istituto per le Scienze Religiose at Bologna, Italy in its Greek, Coptic, Ethiopic, Latin and Slavonic versions. At Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, a team of scholars under the direction of Professor Gerard Garitte is editing the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, and Syriac, as well as in Greek. This type of work should produce superior editions of the patristic writings.

(3) *Ancillary Studies*. The shift toward a structuralist methodology has served to stimulate ancillary studies. Codicology and palaeography are receiving badly needed attention. Eric G. Turner's *A Typology of the Early Codex* has been well received and the influence of *Scriptorium*, a journal devoted to manuscript studies, has been growing.

Sociological and demographic concerns have occupied John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975) and Gerd Thiessen, *Sociologie der Jesusbewegung: Ein Beitrag zur Entste-*

*hungsgeschichte des Urchristentums* (Munich: Kaiser, 1977). They are marred by their efforts to use early Christianity to support their social ideals (especially Thiessen) and by the homogenization of evidence (Gager), but are still important pioneering works. A more productive use of this type of information has been suggested by Pauline Allen, "The 'Justinianic' Plague", *Byzantion* 49 (1979), 5-20. The article adds important features to our understanding of the sixth century.

Our conceptions of Gnosticism and Manichaeism are being revolutionized by the continued publication of the Nag Hammadi materials as well as by our understanding of the relationships between Gnosticism and monasticism and the role of Gnosticism in the larger church. An actual edition with French translation is being done under the auspices of the Faculty of Theology, Laval University, Quebec in cooperation with Jacques Menard of Strasbourg. This is a welcome addition to the Leiden facsimile edition published by E.J. Brill, 1972-1977.

Lexicography is being revitalized through projects such as the *Augustinus - Lexikon* under the direction of the Augustinus-Institut der Augustiner at Wurtzburg, BRD, and the Ephrem dictionary project of Dr. Margot Schmidt of the University of Regensburg.

(4) *Increased Importance of Oriental Patristics.* Due to the awareness (heightened by the publication of the *CPG*) that the oriental versions of the writings of the Church Fathers are very important witnesses to the textual traditions of those writings, often providing witnesses centuries earlier than the earliest Greek or, more rarely, Latin manuscripts, there has been a renewed interest in those ecclesiastical traditions in their own right. Because of the availability of many texts now in the *CSCO* and the *PO* with modern language or Latin translations, there has been a gradual realization that the Oriental Christian traditions have a relevance to contemporary theological issues. This has resulted in a greatly increased output of research and publication during the last decade in the field of Oriental Christian studies.

(5) *History of Exegesis and Pneumatology.* Current lively topics of thematic research begin with W. Jaeger's *Gregor von Nyssa's Lehre vom Heiligen Geist* (Leiden, 1966) from which there has been a plethora of dissertations on the Holy Spirit in the writings of

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individual fathers or in groups thereof. Precise reference to these may be found in *Bibliographia Patristica*, or in the case of American dissertations, a subject search print-out from University Microfilms, Inc. For materials relevant to the history of exegesis, reference is most easily made to *Biblica's* bibliographic supplement or to *Ephemerides Theologia Lovanienses*.

(6) *Liturgy*. This vast area of study needs much attention for it is vitally important in understanding the thought of the Christian church through the centuries. At the Faculty of Theology, University of Amsterdam, there is a project in process to gather all of the texts and bibliographic material relevant to all of the liturgies of all of the churches. Now in its initial stages, the effort should provide an invaluable service to the patristics scholar.

### **Conclusion**

Patristic study is a rapidly expanding area of research. It is a field in which materials are published in hundred of journals in at least forty countries, but in which little is translated from the language of first publication. It is an area in which the problem of duplicated work, or misunderstood work, is too commonplace. And it is an area which has perhaps remained too attached to theology faculties of Universities. It is to be hoped that the efforts of *Bibliographia Patristica* and of other bibliographic control instruments, along with the increased concern for sound historiography and methodology, will lead to more scientifically sound publications. ■

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>This term is used to designate doctrinaire methodologies: for example, history of religions, history of dogma, comparative religions, and other similar schools of thought and method. It is recognized that the term "ideological approach" is vague. Also, I do not mean to imply that the questions raised by these disciplines are not important aspects to be considered.

<sup>2</sup>For an exposition of this approach, see J.W. Dixon, Jr., "Outline of a Theory of Structuralism," *Cross Currents* 22 (1972): 257-280, and J. Piaget, *Structuralism* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

<sup>3</sup>Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spatantiker Geist*, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1934-1935).

<sup>4</sup>Jean Danieliou, *Etudes d'exegese judeo-chretienne; les testimonia* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1966).

<sup>5</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971- ). The work is to be completed

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in five volumes.

<sup>6</sup>Arthur Voobus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 2 vol. CSCO 184, 197, Subs. 14.17, (Louvain, 1958-1960), or *Early Versions of the New Testament* PETSE, 6, (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Faculty in Exile, 1954).

<sup>7</sup>"Document Final" du Colloque, *Gnosticisme et Monde Hellenistique* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 11-14 mars 1980), to be published in 1981.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Marty, *A Nation of Believers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).