PSYSOC 2013

The Role Of Greco-Christianity In Preserving Ancient Aristocratic Cultural Values

Nela Filimon a *, Mario Campaña b

a University of Girona, Campus Montilivi s/n, Girona 17071, Spain
b Freelance Hispanic-Ecuadorian writer and essayist, Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

Historical evidence shows that Christianity survived Greco-Roman civilization to become its cultural heiress. In this paper, we focus on the Greco-Roman social values assimilated and transmitted by Christianity, leaving aside the institutional and political dimensions of the process. We are interested in the system of values because, as values determine peoples’ everyday lives, they transfer us directly to the domain of morality. Thus, the ancient Greco-Roman moral legacy takes on more importance than the political one (democracy). The quintessence of this archaic moral legacy resides in the idea of agathós (the superior man), an idea assumed by Greek (Athenian) democracy and inherited by Rome before being incorporated into the Christian doctrine and passed onto the bourgeoisie, who made it part of the culture of modern democracies.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of PSYSOC 2013.

Keywords: aristocratic culture; democratic culture; Greco-Christianity; Greco-Roman moral legacy

1. Introduction

The fact that the ancient Greco-Roman order is at the origins of Western culture is not only a historical but also an epistemological reality. Some of the central principles of our civilization today are built on concepts inherited from ancient Greece and Rome, such as, for example, those of moral difference, empire, world and humanity. To both the Greeks and Romans, the concepts of ‘empire’ and ‘world’ do not only coincide in a physical or geographical sense, but also mutually condition each other’s existence: it is widely accepted that the empire created the world by endowing the life of amorphous spaces and communities with a sense of organization and universality. To the Greeks and Romans, the human space, or the world, existed only in politically organized communities. The

* Corresponding author name. Nela Filimon. Tel.: +34-972-41-8223 ; fax: +34-972-41-8032
E-mail address: Nela.Filimon@udg.edu

1877-0428 © 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of PSYSOC 2013.
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.463
The logic behind this thinking is clearly summed up by the stoic philosophers: all things are ruled by the material principle and by the logos, which moves and regulates it; the universe is therefore ruled by a rational principle; the world is a rational animal, animated and intellectual; God is rational, immortal, perfect and intelligent; 'destiny governs world'; and human beings are 'rational animals' acting according to 'common law' or 'right reason', which is actually the positive law that governs the life of the community. This is particularly important if we bear in mind that all Greek and Roman moral and spiritual life was focused in the State (Buckhardt, 1998:288). From this perspective, the world existed only in communities ruled by right reason, common law, positive law, where the inhabitants, acting according to rational principles, respected political organization, institutions and rules.

Aristotle is one of the main representatives of this doctrine with his concept of Zoom Politikon, according to which only the men who live in the Polis or civitas live in the space where they can develop their capacity and potential, their humanity –they have logos, language and rationality (see Aristotle, 1998, 2000; Campaña, 2010). Given that the only cities with the status of Polis and civitas were Athens and Rome, this implies that the only human beings, strictly speaking, were the Greeks and Romans; those who lived outside the Polis were not considered humans and could legitimately be enslaved.

These aristocratic concepts are summarized very clearly by Kagan (1991:97): “Since they [the barbarians] had not been raised as free men in free communities, but lived as subject to a ruler, they were manifestly slaves by nature; so it was perfectly all right to dominate and enslave them in reality”. According to this thinking, humanity is not a biological issue and dignity is not a mere consequence of existence. This aristocratic principle was so strong that it applied even to other inhabitants of Athens and Rome, who were not all treated as equals: slaves, foreigners and women did not form part of the political community and did not have a civil existence, as “they all lacked what Aristotle called timai, or political status” (Riesenberg, 1992: 28). Neither were the other Greek and Roman citizens equal, as there was a distinction between the aristoi, men of superior character, and the rest: the inferiors and the poor (see also Plato, 1992 and Aristotle, 1998).

The influence of Greek and Roman thought can also be found in the Christian doctrine and the institutional organization of the Christian church; starting with St. Paul in the year 60 AD, Christianity embraced a concept of universality similar to the stoic. This idea of the universality of action and human destiny, which was at the basis of the Greco-Roman idea of empire, was also fundamental in the development of Christian thought. For centuries, in the European conscience empire, Christianity, world and humanity were all inextricably linked as one, where the economic, political and juridical structures (empire) were combined with the religious (Christianity) and the ontological-moral spheres (world and humanity), endowing Europe with a coherent and powerful basis that conditioned its relationships with the other continents.

This paper is structured as follows: in section two we discuss the transmission of aristocratic values through Christianity and the transformation of the Church; section three explains the transformation of its message; and section four presents our conclusions.

2. The transformation of the Church

During the first half of the first century AD there was no Church but only communities and assemblies (eklesies). In these decades following the death of Jesus, the social texture of Christian communities did not include members of the nobility, with most of the first Christians coming from the low and middle social classes. As mentioned by Jeffers (1999: 194), “the extreme top and bottom of society are absent from the churches of the New Testament... Based on the New Testament, the churches included no senators or equestrians and at most two decurins”. Nevertheless, this social structure began to change gradually as a consequence of the institutionalization process followed by the Church. The conversion of the emperor Constantine and the transformation of Christianity into the official religion of the Roman Empire –with the associated privileges derived from this– was a crucial inflection point contributing to the Roman aristocracy’s ultimate adhesion to the Church. By the middle of the fourth century,
this ‘natural’ alliance was already in place as a result of the merger of the aristocracy and the governing clergy, two groups that perceived each other as ‘chosen’, ‘the light of the world’, and ‘the best part of the human genre’. In the beginning, this alliance was forced to coexist alongside the so-called ‘pagan’ religions. Although they eventually succumbed to Christianity, as the power of the Christian Church initially grew, it struggled to banish the pagan cults from the public space. They were finally banned by the Edict of Thessalonica, issued by Theodosius in 380, and persecuted in both East and West by the imperial authority and the bishoprics. By the end of the fourth century, paganism was relegated to the margins, a development which turned out to be decisive for the future of European culture. The alliance between the emperor, the aristocracy and the Church grew stronger and Christianity enjoyed great privileges; in respect of this, the decision by Theodosius II in 415 to reserve public positions in the administration of the empire for Christians increased the upper social classes’ interest in Christianity. Thus, the Christian Church became a part of the empire and its symbolic power was used by the aristocracy and the emperor himself. As commented by Kagan (1991:108) both the Church and the empire took advantage of this symbiosis: “... Christianity took control of the Roman Empire only three centuries after its birth and has been able to live comfortably with various empires down to our own century...”

Within this new framework, Roman emperors also adopted the title of Pontifex Maximum, which entitled them to full administrative and doctrinal power: “Desirous that there should be among the ministers of religion the same gradation of ranks as existed among the officers of State, he [Constantine] assumed the power of arranging them into patriarchs, exarchs, metropolitans, and archbishops…” (Kidder, 2012:27). The emperor would also participate in theological debates and even called councils. An example of this is the first council of Nicaea, which was held in 325 with the aim of resolving disputes and remodeling the Christian doctrine for the first time.

The strategy followed by the upper social classes was to capture the highest position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The social origins of popes, cardinals, archbishops and bishops is clear proof of this. Similar to other hierarchical bodies in the empire, within the Church there was also a clear separation between high and low status clerical positions. Three of the four Fathers of the Church –St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, St. Gregory the Great– were aristocrats and the fourth, St. Augustine, came from a 'prominent family': “Like the greater number of those whom the Church honours as saints, Gregory was of noble birth, and sprung from a family of saints. Arguing with De Rossi from inscriptions, it is the opinion of the learned that Gregory belonged to the patrician family of the Anicii, a family famous in the annals of the State and of the Church” (Mann, 1914: 16).

A further aspect worth taking into account relates to the political environment. In 476, after the fall of the Western Roman empire, its territories, people and church all came under the authority of distant Constantinople. The role played by the former administrative imperial structure, now gone, was smoothly replaced by the Church, which by the end of the sixth century had substantially increased its power and control. As stated by Hutton (1906:91), during the time of St. Gregory the Great, the papacy was “the most important political power in the Western provinces of the Empire”.

The power of the popes was actually the power of the aristocracy and royalty –the Lombards and the Franks– who designed, protected, deposed, punished and expelled them according to their own interests. Following the Frankish king Clovis’ conversion to Christianity, German nobles joined the group governing the Church, together with the Roman nobility. By 824, the Church was officially controlled by the Carolingian kings of France, who were dominating a great part of Europe and intended to re-establish the Holy Roman Empire. The Roman Constitutio, signed by the emperor and the pope in 824, framed the legal relationship between the Church and the empire and introduced a special article stating that before the consecration the pope had to take an ‘oath of loyalty’ to the emperor. Thus, from 476 to 824 sixty-three popes were elected, of whom at least twenty-four belonged to the nobility (see also Carocci, 2007). From the twelfth century onwards, the election of popes was reserved exclusively to the cardinals, excluding the laity from the process. The bishoprics also received attention from members of the aristocracy. According to Morsel (2004) and Rapp (2005), between the fifth and the sixth centuries, most bishops
were of ‘senatorial background’, coming mainly from the Gallo-Roman aristocracy. With weighty functions in civil administration, they were the most important ecclesiastical authority in their jurisdictions.

3. Transformation of the message

According to Salzman (2004:200), between the fourth and the fifth centuries, “in the interaction between Christianity and the aristocracy… the message of Christianity changed in certain ways as Church leaders assimilated key components of the aristocrats’ worldview and status culture”. This symbiotic process between the Church and the aristocracy allowed the aristocracy to exert a crucial influence on the Christian doctrine. While the primitive doctrine was to defend the concept of equality before material wealth, the new message was intended to fit better with the values and interests of the nobility. According to Janes (1998:159), the idea of hierarchy was not challenged by Christianity; the concept of universal brotherhood diffused by Jesus was replaced by the metaphor of the unity of the body and the binomial head/legs or soul/body (equivalent to the distinction between superior and inferior individuals). The modesty of the weak was replaced by the pride of the chosen; universal love and fraternity among people was substituted by the distinction between Christians and non-Christians and the subsequent decision to fight against the non-Christians (the barbarians). The transformation of the Church triggered a transformation in the meaning of religion and the identity of its believers; from the fourth century onwards, being Christian implicitly meant to pray for the emperor and his accomplishments and to gain social acceptance, while for the middle and upper social classes it also meant to gain honour, prestige, prominence and power. All of these elements became part of the Christian identity.

The main changes to the Christian doctrine, according to Salzman (2004), involved concepts relating to material wealth and charity, honour, nobility and virtuosity, friendship and literary culture. If we take, for example, the issues of material wealth and charity, according to the new ecclesiastical perspective the existence of rich and poor people did not affect the concepts of equality, justice and fraternity, because welfare is also part of God’s plan. Avarice, on the other hand, remained blameworthy: according to the Christian doctrine, the rich exist to look after the poor and the poor exist to test the rich’s beneficence (Salzman, 2004:209). Honour, a very precious concept to the Greek and Roman aristocracy, has never ceased to be a central part of Christian societies and became part of ecclesiastical doctrine in the fourth century. Thus, the adoption of honour within the Christian framework allowed the maintaining of differences in social status, ensuring more power and privileges for the aristocracy (see Salzman, 2004:202).

The concepts of ‘noble’ and ‘nobility’ (nobilis and nobilitas) have their origin in the Roman order, referring to the upper social classes comprising the oldest families, descendants of patricians, senators, consuls or members of the richest plebeians. During the empire (from 27 B.C.), these concepts were already used to designate any person who had either a privileged position in the social hierarchy or achieved great accomplishments. “Above all, late Roman senatorial aristocrats desired to possess nobilitas. This concept… signified renown, distinction, or superiority” (Salzman, 2004:213). According to Rapp (2005:187), this concept was later related to Christian virtue, a concept which added an ethical dimension to the social one. Nobilitas, charity and honour were qualities associated with the upper social classes, while modesty and obedience corresponded to the lower ones. Thus, by consecrating nobilitas, the Church provided the upper social classes with an incentive to seek a higher status in the social hierarchy, that of nobilitas, via the ecclesiastical life.

The Church attached great importance to intellectual work, St. Jerome’s book –De Viris Illustribus (On Illustrious Men)– documenting the biographies of early Christian authors being a good example of this (see Halton, 1999). In the new doctrine, the well-established ecclesiastical writers, the saints and Doctors of the Church, were called upon as the new examples to follow, the new guides, as was the case with the famous philosophers and thinkers of ancient Greece and Rome consecrated by Suetonius Tranquis in his Greek version of the book. The support given to cultural literacy, to the detriment of ordinary people, is proof of the new moral hierarchy of the Church aimed at the promotion of excellence, an exclusive attribute of literate people, as in ancient Greek and Roman culture. Another important characteristic of the renewed moral doctrine of the Church relates to the concept of friendship, which replaced that of fraternal love. Friendship has a much more limited scope than universal love: as defined by St.
Ambrose, friendship exists only among people who share affinities, faith, beliefs; that is, people who live in the same moral and social world. From this perspective, Christian friendship makes equality between superior and inferior individuals possible –without removing the social differences between them– while excluding the non-Christian world. “To Paulinus of Nola, for example, Christians could have true friendships only with other Christians” (Salzman, 2004:212). Thus, the Christian narrative, encompassing not only a system of values but also a historical view of the world, was assumed by the nobility as far back as the fourth century, as shown by the work of St Augustine, De Civitate Dei (The City of God), a treaty that exalts the Roman nobility and its role in the history of humanity (see Böer, 2012).

4. Conclusions

Our research has focused on the role of Christianity in transmitting and consolidating the cultural values of modern Western democracies from a socio-historical perspective. The review of some of the most representative writings on the expansion and diffusion of the Christian religion among the upper social strata, both in the East – where its origins lie– and the West –where its see was ultimately established– shows that Christianity not only survived Greco-Roman civilization but turned itself into its cultural heir: part of the Greco-Roman (aristocratic) legacy, including classic aristocratic values, was assimilated by the Church, which shaped a doctrine that would end up invading all existential dimensions of the European nations and their zones of influence.

References