

NOTE

THE FUTURE OF PATRISTICS*

My original title was "Good-bye, Patristics." The idea was to invite you to join me in my own exciting journey out of the past five decades of European patristics. Although friendly mentors advised me to avoid the paradoxical or even shocking overtones of that original title, I still think that such an *invitation au voyage* makes sense. Let me begin by explaining how I understand these past fifty years of patristics, for any scholar who invests energy in the patristic enterprise today will benefit greatly from a better understanding of our discipline's recent past. Developments in patristics since the late thirties specifically determine our own work in process. And I believe that only a critical awareness of the developments of the past five decades will enable us correctly to identify the nature of the cultural shifts which are shaping the future for our discipline.¹

As we contemplate the progress of patristic studies from 1940 to 1990, what we discover is essentially a European phenomenon. Far be it from me to ignore the authentic patristic achievements that have come from beyond Europe, in particular from North America; but I would nevertheless single out the European mainstream as characteristic of these five decades. During the second half of the 20th century, the post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment cultures of Europe experienced, among many other revivals, a patristic revival—one comparable only with the Jansenist revival and the Benedictine patristic revival, both in the 17th century, or with the monastic developments accompanying the so-called Carolingian renaissance of the 9th century.

Characterizing this 20th-century patristic revival are two main features: the sheer comprehensiveness of the discipline, and its expanded social dimension. The first feature, comprehensiveness, allowed scholars to define patristics in a new way marked essentially by academic professionalism. The second feature, social extension, involved patristics breaking out of its former clerical and theological ghetto and extending its appeal to new categories of scholars. It entered into collaboration with other disciplines and achieved recognition in secular universities.

COMPREHENSIVENESS OF 20TH-CENTURY PATRISTICS

Let us consider how the field of patristics has broadened and deepened since the early forties. At the core of the whole process lies a specifically

* Substantially the presidential address delivered at the general meeting of the North American Patristics Society at Loyola University in Chicago, May 25, 1990. Only the final conclusions have been rewritten and somewhat expanded.

¹ I draw here upon my article "Fifty Years of Patristics," *TS* 50 (1989) 633–56.

scientific development which generated a new consensus in the scholarly community and effected what we may call a paradigm shift in patristic self-understanding. This development may accurately be described as a massively increased access to the wealth of manuscript sources which have survived from late antiquity.

Let me illustrate this statement by the example of someone who was particularly close to me, my "doctor-father," Marcel Richard. Dating from the time of World War II, Richard's spectacular initiative in exploring, identifying, and cataloging collections of ancient manuscripts has developed into a prestigious Institute of the state-owned National Council of Scientific Research (CNRS) in Paris. Thanks to this single industrious scholar, the number of known Greek manuscripts has climbed from around 35,000 to almost 55,000.² One can best judge the extent and import of Richard's accomplishment by comparing it to that of Jean Paul Migne, to whose initiative we owe the 161 volumes of the *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) produced up to 1866, the 217 volumes of the *Patrologia Latina* (PL) produced up to 1890, the *Index locupletissimus* of PG (1936), and the PL Supplementum which appeared between 1958 and 1974.³

More important, the comparison of Richard's work with the Migne collections immediately highlights the scientific core of the patristic renewal in the 20th century. Migne's concern was for the education of the clergy and the rebuilding of a Catholic culture after the turmoil of the French Revolution. Richard's concern was specifically scientific: to study the handwritten sources for themselves.

Around 1840, Abbé Migne had conceived the idea of making the vast body of patristic sources available to everyone in France and in Europe. By acquiring, at a relatively modest price, the full collection of these sources and the early medieval writings which followed, private and institutional libraries would be able to foster a broad retrieval of the ancient traditions of Christianity. Inspired by a romantic love of the past, no other clerical entrepreneurial undertaking has been as consistent and successful as Migne's. Scholarship is still attempting to digest and analyze the enormous mass of Greek and Latin texts included in the 378 large volumes of the Migne collections.

Motivated by the nationalistic division of Europe at the end of the 19th century, a response to Migne came from the Prussian Academy of

² M. Richard, *Opera minora* 1 (ed. M. Geerard; Turnhout: Brepols, and Leuven: University Press, 1976) 5.

³ As the Supplementum illustrates, the new riches added to PL derive from a diligent and systematic search for manuscript evidence in the vast field of Latin Christian literature. A sort of climax in this regard was J. Divjak's publication of the newly discovered letters of St. Augustine: *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Opera* 2/6: *Epistolae ex duobus codicibus nuper in lucem prolatae* (Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum 88; Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Temsky, 1981).

Berlin. The Berlin collection of *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* would produce original critical editions instead of simply reproducing, with the inevitable quota of additional misprints which we find in Migne, already existing and, in part, not very critical editions.

Nevertheless—and this is my point here—the comprehensive depth of the patristic revival in the second half of the 20th century led the young Abbé Richard to conceive a systematic inventory of available ancient manuscripts on the basis of an unprecedented self-definition as a scholar in the field. He would explore the manuscripts for themselves, define the new rules of a consistent codicology, and fix the standards for analyzing and editing catalogs of ancient manuscripts.⁴ Gone was the theological motivation of earlier patristics. Gone as well the apologetical afterthoughts lingering in patristic research, inherited from the 19th century, in Lutheran and Reformed, or in Anglican and Roman Catholic, circles. With a strictly philological and historical task in mind, the French priest, who himself had been trained in the most traditional fashion as a cleric, secularized the status of patristics, just as many of his colleagues were then, and still are, in the process of secularizing exegesis in the field of biblical studies.

There is good reason, therefore, to choose Richard as paradigmatic of the patristic revival of the past fifty years. The revival is based on a scientific control over the whole corpus of ancient Christian literatures, a control methodologically and internationally organized in such a way that microfilms of ancient manuscripts, by the thousands, can circulate as never before.⁵ All at once students in classics and in ancient history were given keys to the literary and documentary riches of late antiquity which they could now examine with new eyes. The rigor applied in the analysis of handwritten sources and in the study of their transmission appealed to many young scholars who otherwise would never have thought of entering the field of patristics.⁶

A further characteristic of the patristic revival of the past five decades in continental Europe is that it enjoyed such scientific strength that it could change its status without losing its identity. After his apprenticeship at the Vatican Library, where he had prepared his doctorate in

⁴ *Répertoire des bibliothèques et des catalogues de manuscrits grecs* (Publications de l'Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes 1; Paris: CNRS, 1948); *Supplement I: 1958–1963* (Documents, Études et Répertoires publiés par l'Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes 9; Paris: CNRS, 1964).

⁵ The microfilms are distributed on request and at affordable prices by the Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes, 15 avenue d'Iéna, F-75016 Paris.

⁶ In France, Italy, and Spain, as well as in Holland and Germany, the majority of university positions which opened in the field of patristics from the early sixties on have been awarded to junior faculty in state institutions.

theology under the guidance of Robert Devreesse,⁷ and after having escaped from a German prison camp, Marcel Richard found himself thrust, by the circumstances of the war and its aftermath, into the world of secular academia. There he became a source of inspiration worldwide for many scholars. Without religious or social or even scholastic discrimination, Richard served actively as an educator and a resource person, generously sharing the invaluable fruits of his labors, and even devoting a substantial part of his own time to other people's work.⁸ His case seems to me paradigmatic, not only because of his personal initiative in the exploration of ancient manuscripts, but also because it illustrates the decisive migration of patristics out of its clerical cradle into secular European scholarship.

Born out of confessional polemics and, at least in the Roman Catholic tradition, closely bound to historical theology as opposed to neoscholasticism, patristics in the second half of the 20th century modified fundamentally the very nature of its own scientific relevance. An easy way to diagnose the shift would be to check, in sequence, the authors and the format of the 370-plus volumes of *Sources chrétiennes*. This series, founded shortly before World War II by a small group of Jesuits in Lyon, gradually included more and more editions produced by faculty and students from state universities, until the whole enterprise found itself sheltered under the administrative and financial umbrella of the state-owned CNRS. Thus, out of its ecclesiastical past, patristics entered the realm of professional academia. One could hardly conceive a more energizing and fruitful transfer.

To complete my remarks about the changes produced in patristic self-understanding over the past five decades, let me add a brief personal recollection. In 1954, when I was preparing to enter the theological stage of my formation, a senior fellow Jesuit advised me to read the whole body of ancient Christian literature, in selections of course, but also in chronological order, from the time of the New Testament on. After three years of daily reading, I had reached Athanasius of Alexandria, and again three years later, Maximus the Confessor. I mention this anecdote, not at all because of the quickly forgotten information which I gained from this exercise, but essentially because it opened my mind to the achievement of my theological heroes, Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Jean Daniélou. I became aware of the fact that most of the

⁷ The author of a still valuable *Introduction à l'étude des manuscrits grecs* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1954) and of several volumes in the series *Studi e Testi* dedicated to analyzing biblical catenae and ancient Greek manuscripts in the Vatican.

⁸ On one of his famous trips to the monastic libraries on Mount Athos he succeeded in photocopying for me the tenth-century manuscript of Athanasius *On the Incarnation* in the monastery of Saint John on the island of Patmos.

theological courses which I endured from 1955 to 1959 sounded narrow and superficial because they lacked critical and imaginative familiarity with the ancient Christian tradition. On the contrary, I found that familiarity very evident in the writings of my heroes. They based their approach to what they took to be the fundamental issues in all Christian theology on a solid and original study of the Fathers. They responded to decisive contemporary challenges in the form of a discourse which was deeply informed by their reading of patristic and medieval theologians. I began to realize that the time for patristics to be viewed as a marginal and secondary theological discipline had passed, and that, once more, the time for a thorough reinterpretation of Christian traditions was at hand. During those same years, in the early sixties, as I worked under the guidance of Marcel Richard on the preparation of a critical edition of Athanasius' treatise *On the Incarnation*, I was being prepared, in my private corner, for the amazing adventure of the Second Vatican Council.

You may forgive me this stroll through some personal memories, if you can agree with me that the ongoing crisis of Christian theology which we have been experiencing since the 1940s provides a critical and decisive context for understanding the patristic renewal that developed during these same five decades.

SOCIAL EXTENSION OF 20TH-CENTURY PATRISTICS

The shift in patristic self-understanding which led Richard and others like him to a strictly professional and secular involvement in the study of early Christian sources also introduced a broad social dimension to our discipline. The field of patristics has undergone both a methodological and a social metamorphosis, out of which it has been reborn as nothing less than a hermeneutic of the historical foundations of European culture.

Everyone knows the old French saying, "Le roi est mort, vive le roi." So let me rephrase my good-bye: patristics is dead, long live patristics. Fr. Congar lies in Napoleon's hospital of the Invalides in Paris plagued by multiple sclerosis in its final stage. Cardinal de Lubac, 95 years old, survives like a shadow. Fr. Mondésert, the man responsible for the success of *Sources chrétiennes*, suffers from terminal cancer.⁹ Daniélou, Rahner, Urs von Balthasar, like F. L. Cross and most patristic scholars of their generation, are gone. Aloys Grillmeier, very fragile in his old age, still works at his desk but finds it difficult to accept what has been happening to patristics and to Roman Catholic theology as a whole in the aftermath of Vatican II. I should desist from this lament, but not without addressing a farewell tribute to the romantic and reformist concept of patristics which inspired the splendid achievements of those giants of one or two generations ago.

⁹ [Editor's note: Fr. Mondésert died on September 12, 1990.]

What they could not imagine, it seems to me with all due respect, is the new social dimension of patristics, which resulted precisely from that renewal of which they had been the main artisans. On the one hand, they had faced, like many theologians in all Christian churches, the call of the 18th- and 19th-century Enlightenment for historical criticism and, in particular, for a new approach to the very foundations of Christianity. They produced the patristic renewal of the second half of the 20th century as an epoch-making response to that call. On the other hand, strongly focused as they were by their fascination with Christian origins, and deeply embedded as they claimed to be in the continuity of Christian traditions, they were unable to perceive the quite obvious fact that the patristics renewal they engineered was only an episode in a far more outreaching shift of Christian life to something beyond post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment modernity, in the framework of which they had found their motivation.

It may seem pretentious to evaluate a historic shift in which one is oneself included. The prophets of ancient Israel ventured such a risky task, but they were endowed, as they said, with special divine assistance. Left to our own judgment, we need to assess more cautiously the new social dimension acquired by patristics during the past five decades, in order to appreciate the new identity of our scientific discipline in the emerging postmodern era. What I have called "a hermeneutic of European foundations" may help to clarify the matter.

As patristic scholars, most of us are located in departments of theology, religion, or religious studies. Some individuals may belong to religious institutions and work in nonacademic positions; but they too are closely linked with academia, of which they are members in a broader sense. The current size and vitality of patristic academia can readily be visualized from the table of contents of the latest publication of *Studia patristica* (Peeters: Leuven, 1989). I refer to the five volumes of papers delivered at the Oxford Patristic Conference of 1987: 204 papers reflecting the major trends of research and the extremely diverse topics which engage the attention of today's patristic scholars. Many more papers were read at Oxford than are printed in *Studia patristica*, and there were many more patristic experts at work in 1987 than made the trip to Oxford. Nevertheless, in the *Studia* we find a striking picture of the patristic community in its modern identity.

I discussed earlier in this journal¹⁰ the massive contribution of *Studia patristica*, currently 23 volumes strong. Let me take a moment here to pay vibrant tribute to the late F. L. Cross, who died in December 1968, but whose founding intuition and dedicated expertise molded the whole concept of the Oxford conferences in such a way that their structure has

¹⁰ *TS* 50 (1989) 648-52.

remained identical and their success unchallenged since 1951. In Dr. Cross's pious projection, these patristic gatherings, held every four years, were supposed to set the pace for a reunion of all Christian churches based on a common study of the historic foundations of Christianity as such. I am not sure that reality has conformed to that idealistic ecumenism, but nobody would question the social representativity of the Oxford conferences in our field.

THE FUTURE OF PATRISTICS

From my scattered reflections on the past 50 years of patristic renewal, I would like to turn now toward the future, more specifically toward the proper relevance of our discipline as both determining and determined by current shifts in our Western culture. I will limit myself to three basic theses.

1. In this postmodern era of ours, which still remains intensely in quest of its own identity, patristic academia is first of all participating in a broad recovery of Western foundations. The fact is that Western as well as non-Western intellectuals are increasingly aware of entering into an electronic form of civilization in which human space and human time are undergoing a technological transformation. The Gutenberg galaxy is already fading, just as, at the threshold of modernity in the 15th century, the many millennia of handwritten cultures faded. Those ancient millennia represented a classical and ecclesiastical inheritance which generations of humanists explored like a paradise. Today's shifts require us not only to preserve the inheritance of antiquity as transmitted through modernity, but also to consider modernity itself as becoming a *past* legacy. In modern times, from the Italian Renaissance and 16th-century Humanism on, mountains of antiquarian collections were filling up museums and libraries all over the world. Today we contemplate the modern scholars of former generations, patristic scholars among them, as forming a cultural unit of a new type, in continuity with classical antiquity and the Western Middle Ages.¹¹

2. My second thesis: In this postmodern era, patristics seems no longer motivated by the properly modern ideologies, which were religious, confessional, and Eurocentric, if not downright nationalistic. Yet patristics, in being properly nonreligious, pluriconfessional, and increasingly engaged in encounters between Western and non-Western cultures, maintains its well-defined identity. In short, through this very continuity patristics becomes a source for the hermeneutics which is badly needed today for the ongoing interpretation of Western historical foundations.

¹¹ A new sense of modernity, seen in retrospect as belonging to earlier cultural continuities, has inspired the creation of a Society for the Classical Tradition, which is gathering for an inaugural meeting in Boston on March 22-23, 1991.

We all know that the focus of patristics is on the *Christian* component of Western foundations. But what precisely does it mean, at a time when patristics is beginning to claim a postmodern status, to focus on Christian foundations in late antiquity? Which values of such foundations, if any, is a postmodern patristics supposed to retrieve and validate for the pluriracial and multicultural global village of the next millennium? Modern patristic scholars used to be immersed in their work, surrounded by a humanistic society in which, even beyond academic boundaries, classical languages were an affordable commodity. Postmodern scholars no longer benefit from the same type of society. The questions assailing postmodern patristic scholars do not precisely deal with philological niceties. They are questions which are addressed to the primary patristic sources as well as to their modern interpreters.

3. As a third and last thesis about the new status of patristics at the dawn of the postmodern era, I will briefly take up a few of these questions and treat them as signs of possible openings in the field of future patristic research.

a. At the top of all priorities are *decisive questions concerning the Bible* as received in the ancient traditions of Christianity. Modern critics have struggled with problems of authenticity and of manuscript traditions, they have speculated about the formation of the scriptural canon, or they have tried to analyze the exegetical methods and hermeneutical principles proper to the Fathers. Nothing is obsolete in such inquiries, and they may very well continue indefinitely. But when I contemplate the dramatic divorce between today's scientific exegesis of Scripture and the real people in all the churches, I see a whole set of new questions looming on the patristic horizon, or, to change the metaphor, flaming up like a revelatory bush on the journey of our current exodus into postmodernity. There was indeed a time when scientific exegesis and humble illiterate believers met: that was also the time when the Hebrew Bible in its oldest Greek and Latin translations became thoroughly christianized. Through the extremely complex and lively process of its reception in the Church in the first six centuries or so, the Bible served, in fact, as one of the irreplaceable keystones of Western traditions. Amazingly enough, the cultural and social procedures according to which the Bible functioned in given areas or periods of ancient Christian traditions are still somewhat *terra incognita* for patristic scholarship.¹² For those procedures were not

¹² It was out of such an awareness that the Parisian publisher Beauchesne decided in the early 70s to replace a former series of biblical commentaries, *Verbum salutis*, by what became the eight-volume series *Bible de tous les temps*. A reformatted English edition will be published by Notre Dame Press from 1992 on, under the series title: *The Bible through the Ages*. This multivolume project includes collections of essays on the relevance of the Bible in society, culture, and politics from century to century in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

on the agenda of modern confessional ideologies, preoccupied as they were with more immediately apologetical and self-serving issues. Only a postmodern perception would urge the need of a thoroughly critical retrieving of Christian traditions and foundations apart from any theological and confessional concern.

Only in a postmodern context will some fundamental questions be given the critical edge they need: How did the Bible actually circulate in local and regional church communities of East and West in the Mediterranean world? How did the notion of the Old Testament produce an effective use of Hebrew Scriptures in the early Church? The *Biblia Patristica* from Strasbourg constitutes only a preliminary tool for a vast array of inquiries still to be carried out.¹³ With what categories did educated Greek or Latin people receive the Bible as a *sacred* book? Can we compare their understanding of Scripture with the understanding of Christians in the Semitic Orient? Can we retrace the assimilation of biblical data to the rhetorical culture of late antiquity, for instance down to Ambrose or Augustine? This list of questions is not exhaustive; the field to be explored is simply overwhelming. For example, not one single monograph or article has ever discussed Athanasius of Alexandria's use of the Bible, or his attitude toward Scripture, despite the fact that several critics have noted his amazing familiarity with it. It was not appropriate to the modern bias in Athanasian historiography to ask questions of this kind.¹⁴

Other large questions, less directly theological in scholastic terms, are thrust on us by the idea of patristics entering a postmodern era. I will mention only two of them.

b. There is the question of *how to interpret the very nature of Christian origins*. In a modern projection, dictated by the Enlightenment's notion of continuous historical progress, tentative origins were followed by elementary systems of thought. Basic institutions gradually became more complicated and powerful. The Fathers served as mediators between the gospel and the Middle Ages and were in turn followed by the innovative leaders of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

It was, and still is, a fascinating task to retrace the intellectual history of half a millennium of Western thought, almost entirely dominated by

¹³ *Biblia Patristica: Index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature patristique* (ed. by the Centre d'Analyse et de Documentation Patristiques; Paris: CNRS, 1975-). Five volumes have been published to date.

¹⁴ A thorough critical analysis of that bias is now offered in Duane W.-H. Arnold's *The Early Episcopal Career of Athanasius of Alexandria AD 328-AD 335*, a dissertation from Durham, England, published by the University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, in the series *Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity*. I discussed the same unfortunate bias in my review of the late R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) in *The Catholic Historical Review* (1989).

the many unexpected and creative initiatives of the Fathers. The secular quest for a clear and accurate picture of European foundations has found many answers in the patristic sources explored since the 19th century. This secular quest was matched, on the other side, by an ecclesiastical eagerness to understand more accurately the essential continuities and discontinuities between gospel and early Church.

The study of patristics since the early 20th century has introduced a new sense in the Christian mind for the legitimate diversity of liturgical and doctrinal traditions inside the Church. It has helped to initiate a dialog between modern churches. Not only was the spirit of ecumenism fostered among scholars familiar with patristics (John XXIII was one of them before he became pope), but even on a broader level theologians of separated churches read the same patristic sources. Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar both enjoyed Irenaeus of Lyons.

In the postmodern status of patristics, Christian origins are no longer seen as the beginning of a continuous line of traditions which need only to be described with the appropriate documentary accuracy and some apologetic purpose. That was precisely the task brilliantly fulfilled, on a worldwide scale, by modern patristics. But after Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, and other critics of modern rationality, and even more after a century of scientific exegesis, the structural significance of the gospel in its original setting no longer evokes such continuities. Christian origins in the modern sense were seen as a harmonious development of doctrine, with an inner dialectic, preparatory of later stages in the history of Christian thought. Patristics based on such a view is, as John Collins has said about "biblical theology," "a subject in decline."¹⁵

The gospel event, as explored today by Jewish and Christian historians, participates in the unpredictable fragility of all human deeds. The core of the event, the birth of Christian faith, bound to the public appearance of Jesus, does not strictly imply any kind of institutional foundation. It represents a hermeneutical shift, radical enough to assume all the past centuries of Jewish beliefs. That inner structure has its proper dynamic. It operates in a similar way anywhere and any time that the event reproduces itself in the mind of believers.

It is with such an understanding that the postmodern historian tries to approach, in an open-minded way, the complexities of Christianity in its first five or seven centuries. If it is proper to the gospel event, as reenacted in the Church, to entail a hermeneutical conversion by which believers reinterpret their whole religious and cultural heritage, then it is worth exploring anew the shifts imposed by such a dynamic. For it is

¹⁵ "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters* (eds. W. H. Propp, B. Halpern, D. N. Freedman; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 1-17.

under the pressure of similar shifts that the postmodern patristic scholar today scrutinizes the origins of the Church. The same structural efficacy of the gospel opens today the possibility of new and decisive conversions by which the past millennium of the Christian movement is assumed inside believing communities through radical shifts in their self-definition. The experience of postmodernity gives a new relevance to the study of Christian origins, being itself an experience of hermeneutical changes which equal those origins.

In such a situation, it becomes highly opportune to explore the patristic achievements with a new vision. From an awareness of our own present beginnings, we look at what happened in the early Church, eager to discover how the structural truth of the gospel persisted in being translated in so many heterogeneous contexts. It gives us hope for our own time.

c. Finally, there are challenging questions about the future of patristics which are raised by *contemporary women's studies*. The feminist claim has become established in theological circles, mainly in the U.S. I should say, and it sets a promising trend for research. Feminist scholarship is frequently content with uncovering forgotten ancient Christian traditions, writing new chapters of social history. But a more systematic and far-reaching trajectory of leading feminist scholarship addresses "patriarchy" as a new sort of original sin transmitted to our age by Christian discourse and Christian institutions. The Bible itself is to be expurgated of "patriarchal" overtones. Even the mention of God's name will involve, henceforth, a mental exercise of gender crossing, so that what Goethe called "das ewig Weibliche," the eternally feminine value of godhead, is recognized.

I am not entering into that debate at this point, since I am dealing here only with the future of patristics, not of Christian theology as such. I would merely like to underscore the properly postmodern character of the feminist claim, comparable in this regard with contemporary biblical exegesis. Current exegetical research conceives its scientific strategy and achieves its goals in complete independence from the exegetical traditions of the past. Its critical assessments proceed from rational presuppositions proper to the genius of modernity. In both cases, a consistent and reasonable point is made, which signals a structural discontinuity in the traditional Christian self-understanding.

The very term "patristics" is directly affected by the feminist claim. Some even question its use in the titles of learned societies (such as the North American Patristics Society) or in designating a field of historical scholarship. The new context of patristics is secular, in contrast to its theological, scholastic, nonhistorical context prior to World War II. The

Fathers can be considered doctrinally and spiritually relevant only as long as a minimal cultural consensus connects the contemporary student and the ancient sources. Thus the "Fathers" can hardly serve as a fair introduction to early Christianity when the only aspect of their thought which is highlighted is their sexist chauvinism. It is clear that a properly postmodern conversion of the mind requires us to rethink the relevance for us of patristic foundations as a whole in the history of the Christian movement.

My intention here has not been to raise all the possible questions, but to stress the urgent need for a reformulation of patristics in the light of contemporary cultural trends. My attitude is optimistic. Unlike Oswald Spengler in his pessimistic *Decline of the West*, I look forward to a rebirth of the West in the postmodern era. And I believe that patristics has a long and active role to play in the process of such a rebirth. So, as Libanius wisely counsels in his autobiography, "we should return to our studies and learn."

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