

A research paper exploring the education of children of Christian families in the early Church, and its connection, if any, to the educational system operating in the Graeco-Roman world.

Given the current Christian education movement, it is interesting to investigate what the Christians of the early Church did to educate their children. In today's context, the term 'Christian education' brings to mind images of children attending a school in which a Christian atmosphere and perspective pervades teaching and learning. People find it natural for the Church 'to claim the right to its own schools as an immediate corollary of the Faith' (Marrou 1964, p. 424). Surprisingly, however, the early Church never provided any kind of *general* education for the children of its members (Barclay 1959, p. 238). This paper will explore a variety of evidences that build the case to support such a claim. Some possible reasons as to why the early Church utilised the pagan education of the times rather than establishing a separate system of general education will also be explored. However, to understand the significance of this issue, the education system of the Roman Empire must also be outlined.

First, the educational setting of the Roman Empire at the time of the early Church needs to be considered. During the days of the Roman Republic, the family was central to education. Mothers educated their children until the age of seven. At this stage in the child's life, fathers took over the education of their children. However, with the Hellenisation of the Roman Republic, many schools of grammar for children began to appear. The teachers at these 'primary' schools effectively took over the role of the father in education (Gangel & Benson 1983, pp. 52-54). Education played a key role in establishing and maintaining the Roman Empire. Throughout the entire empire, in towns both large and small, the 'process of Romanizing through the schools went steadily on, and by the Second Century the Roman schools were practically universal' (Boyd 1950, p. 75). The Romans formalised Greek

education by establishing a three-tiered system. At the elementary level was the *ludus* for children aged seven to ten or eleven. Next was the *grammatikus*, a grammar school for those aged ten to sixteen years. The third stage of education was the rhetorical school for students between sixteen and eighteen years old (Gangel & Benson 1983, pp. 53-55).<sup>1</sup>

The type of education received depended on one's societal standing. The education of slaves was significantly different. The children of slaves were brought up to serve their master. The goal of their education was learning how to perform their particular job and to behave in a proper manner. Thus, the slaves' masters saw no need to send them to a school. Training took place on their estates. However, some gifted slaves also received an intellectual education so they could act as readers or secretaries (Marrou 1964, pp. 359-60). Then there was private tutoring for the children of aristocratic and wealthy families (Marrou 1964, p. 359). Although many children were tutored, it seems quite likely that these pupils received an education 'substantially equivalent' to that of their contemporaries attending school (Townsend 1971, p. 141). The education of slaves and private tutoring were the only exceptions to most children, both boys and girls, attending school. Education was definitely not reserved for the privileged few. Widespread literacy must not be regarded as an entirely modern phenomenon. In the Roman Empire, even the poor prized a certain degree of literacy, and 'there were many places in the ancient world where literacy, if not general, was extremely common' (Townsend 1971, p. 141). While basic education was common, relatively few received advanced schooling (Townsend 1971, p. 141).

The focus of elementary education was literacy. The teacher's main job was to teach students how to read aloud and to write. Children began by learning the alphabet, then syllables and next, single syllable words. The word lists students studied were not restricted to everyday language. The lists emphasised rare, archaic words that were tongue twisters.

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<sup>1</sup> Ages for entry into the various levels varied, since Marrou indicates that some may have been attending the rhetorical school as young as fifteen and staying beyond twenty (1964, p. 358f).

There were also lists of gods, rivers, months of the year and proper names from Homer. Once students had mastered their word lists, they moved on to texts. These were not simple readers, but selections from the very best writers, particularly Homer and Euripides. The students first learnt how to read the selections aloud and then committed them to memory. The greatest authors were chosen because their style was worthy of imitation. In learning to write at the elementary level, the focus was completely on the mechanics of handwriting, not on composition or grammar. Students would also learn simple arithmetic and participate in some physical training (Townsend 1971, pp. 144-5).

At the secondary level, the grammar school, students studied the classics. Homer was the pre-eminent author studied. Virgil was considered the most important Latin author. The study of the classics involved four disciplines: (1) textual criticism, since texts were hand copied; (2) reading with expression; (3) exegesis, which involved translating the classical literary Greek into the common language and expounding the content; and (4) moral evaluation of the classics. Students also learnt how to write in the classical style (Townsend 1971, pp. 145-148).<sup>2</sup>

Education in the Roman Empire ‘was permeated with pagan ideas and worship of pagan gods’ (Frost 1966, p. 100). As has already been discussed, the classics (especially Homer) were at the heart of education. Homer and the poets tell of the gods and their loves, wars and exploits (Barclay 1959, p. 239), ‘as impious as they were immoral’ (Marrou 1964, p. 428). The religious philosophy portrayed by Homer can be described as ‘artistic polytheism’, based on a sense of beauty rather than conscience (Gangel & Benson 1983, p.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to discuss the first two stages of education. However, this note gives a basic summary of the third level of education. After secondary school, students had a number of options, including medicine, and a preparatory course for the military (Townsend 1971, p. 149f). However, the rhetorical schools dominated Roman higher education (Gangel & Benson 1983, p. 56). Learning how to prepare speeches was central in rhetorical training. However, studying rhetoric involved far more than learning the art of public speaking. Rhetors were expected to be able give a speech on any given topic. Thus, the student of rhetoric had to study most branches of knowledge, including logic, philosophy, astronomy and history (Townsend 1971, p. 151f).

63). In addition, students were often taught in classrooms decorated with representations of pagan gods. Furthermore, 'students were often expected, and even compelled, to take part in pagan religious festivals' (Townsend 1971, p. 149). Several schools included some musical training for the purpose of having school children provide choral singing at various religious festivals (Townsend 1971, p. 142). The basis of school organisation was the heathen religion. Timetabling was according to the festivals of the gods (Barclay 1959, p. 239). In arguing against the propriety of Christians being teachers, in *On idolatry*, Tertullian gives a stark picture of the extent to which schools were inseparably aligned with paganism. While discussing teachers, he writes:

In the first place, they are bound to praise the gods of the heathen, rehearse their names, genealogies, stories, and all their ornaments and attributes. Next, they must keep their feasts and celebrations, since it is by them that they compute their income... He consecrates the very first payment of a new pupil to the honour and name of Minerva<sup>3</sup>... Your schoolmaster must put out his hand for new year presents and what he gets at the feast of the Seven Hills. He must exact the mid-winter dues and the offerings at the festival of Remembrance. The schools must be garlanded for Flora, the priests' wives and the newly appointed aediles bring their sacrifices, the school is bedecked for holy days. It is the same on an idol's birthday; the whole pomp of the devil is celebrated. Can you think this fitting for a Christian...? (Tertullian 1956, pp. 92-3).

Amazingly however, it was to these overtly pagan schools that the Christians sent their children to be educated. In spite of Christians being determined to make a break with the pagan world, which they constantly criticised, they never sought to develop their own school system in the Graeco-Roman world (Marrou 1964, p. 422). In fact as long as the pagan schools lasted, the children of Christians attended them (Townsend 1971, p. 149). Parents faced the choice of having their children educated in pagan schools or remaining ignorant (Foakes-Jackson 1924, p. 202; Frost 1966, pp. 100-1). Most parents did not have the ability to give their children an education sufficient for them to succeed in adult life. Education was

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<sup>3</sup> Minerva was the patroness of schoolmasters and pupils (Boissier as cited in Cubberley 1948, p. 93).

important, and their children could not afford to be ignorant and uneducated. Thus, in the absence of Christian elementary schools and in spite of their aversion to the pagan schools, Christian parents reluctantly sent their children to them (Frost 1966, p. 101; Greensdale 1956, p. 92; Boyd 1950, p. 82). While adopting the pagan education system, Christians certainly did not accept the culture it promoted. The fundamental duty of parents was to provide a Christian education for their children so that they would grow up to share in the treasury of the faith and discipline themselves according to Christianity's moral ideals. Parents were the child's first teacher. They aimed to induct their children into the faith (Marrou 1964, pp. 419, 426; Frost 1966, p. 100). However, 'A Christian upbringing was something superimposed on a humanistic education' (Marrou 1964, p. 429).

The fact of this situation regarding education and the early Church can be proved in a variety of ways, including the writings of the Church Fathers, the education some Church Fathers received, and anecdotes from the early Church. When considering the Church Fathers in this context, Tertullian provides the best evidence that Christian parents sent their children to pagan schools. Tertullian was a controversial rigorist, uncompromising with paganism and unafraid to make the absolute demand and lay down the absolute standard (Marrou 1964, p. 428; Townsend 1971, p. 149; Boyd 1950, p. 82; Barclay 1959, p. 239). In his work, *On idolatry*, Tertullian tackles in detail the practical implications of the principle that Christians must not worship idols. For Tertullian it was clear-cut that a Christian should not serve as a magistrate, soldier or schoolmaster because these positions had direct involvement with idolatrous ceremonies. Nor should a Christian craftsman work on pagan temples or produce images for pagan use, while a Christian businessman should not sell wares such as incense. Even indirect services to idolatry were to be avoided (Greensdale 1956, pp. 79-80).

Tertullian's argument against Christians being teachers has already been cited. Given the forcefulness of that argument, it would seem natural for Tertullian to argue a case against

the Christian pupil being defiled by attending a pagan school. He acknowledges that such a case could be made, but shrinks from this obvious conclusion (Boyd 1950, p. 82; Barclay 1959, p. 239).<sup>4</sup> Instead, Tertullian argues that elementary education, albeit pagan, was a necessity so that children could learn to read the Bible for themselves. To justify this position he distinguishes between teaching and learning. Tertullian proposed that to teach something necessarily meant to commend, affirm and bear testimony to it (Barclay 1959, p. 239). However, when a Christian learns something in connection with idolatry, he or she does not have to accept or affirm it, because they understand the nature of idolatry.

Alternatively, when he is beginning to understand, he must first understand what he learned first, namely, about God and the faith. Thus he will reject and repudiate the idols, and will be as safe as one who wittingly takes poison from the unwitting and does not drink it (Tertullian 1956, pp. 93-94).

Necessity is the excuse because there was no other way for children to obtain a basic education. Tertullian also believed that students would be able to avoid at least some of the pagan festivals, whereas a teacher could not (1956, p. 94).<sup>5</sup>

Several other Church Fathers mentioned education. The Cappadocian Fathers ‘taught that every Christian must know what is best in pagan education, the better to learn how to love and serve God’ (Lockerbie 1994, p. 50). One of these Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great, wrote an essay to his young nephews titled *On the reading of the profane authors*. The young men he addressed were coming to the end of their studies. Basil attempted to enable them to glean the best out of all they had learned by developing their Christian insight

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<sup>4</sup> In Tertullian’s own words: I know it can be said: ‘If the servants of God are not allowed to teach letters, they will not be allowed to learn them either’, and: ‘How could anyone be educated in everyday human wisdom or taught how to think and behave, since letters are a tool for every part of life. How can we reject the secular studies without which divine studies are impossible?’ (1956, p. 93).

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, the church did not adopt Tertullian’s view and did not prevent its members from being teachers (Barclay 1959, p. 240; Boyd 1950, p. 83).

(Marrou 1964, p. 429). At the funeral of Basil another of the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus argued that ‘the first of our advantages [as Christians] is education’ and that Christians should ‘reap what advantage we can’ from learning (cited in Lockerbie 1994, p. 50). Then there is Jerome who berates priests for neglecting the Gospels and the Prophets, wasting their time instead by reading the profane authors. He claimed ‘it is a crime to do voluntarily what children are obliged to do for the sake of their education’ (Marrou 1964, p. 428), showing that children were obviously attending pagan schools.

The education of some Church Fathers who were born into Christian families provides further insights. Origen had Christian parents. His father, Leonidas, was well educated and was probably a school teacher or teacher of rhetoric in Alexandria. He took responsibility for Origen’s education. In spite of being a Christian, Leonidas still decided that Origen should study the normal curriculum of secular subjects. However, Leonidas also prioritised religious study and Origen was required to memorise and recite Bible passages every day. When Origen was sixteen, his father was martyred, which left his mother and five or six younger brothers destitute. In order to support his family, he obtained a position as a grammar teacher, since he had a good grounding in Greek literature. Not long afterwards, Origen gave up this secular teaching because he had been appointed head of the catechetical school in Alexandria (Eusebius 1989, pp. 179-183; Frost 1966, p. 100; Cole 1950, pp. 91-92; Foakes-Jackson 1924, p. 100; Gangel & Benson 1983, pp. 86-87).

The education of Augustine is also significant in supporting the fact that Christians sent their children to pagan schools for a general education. Augustine’s father was pagan, but his mother, Monica, was a fervent Christian. At the age of 11 or 12, Augustine’s parents sent him about 20 miles south to the town of Madaura to study grammar and literature. He did very well, and at age sixteen went to Carthage to study rhetoric for three years (Kibre

1965, p. 96). In reflecting on his education later in life while writing his *Confessions*, Augustine felt

The instruction that he received was utterly immoral ... A noble deed was condemned, if it was recited in a faulty style, and an immoral deed praised, if its style was faultless. A man was taught to be more afraid to murder a word by dropping an aspirate than to murder a fellow man (Barclay 1959, pp. 252-253).

However, Augustine did acknowledge that he benefited from his studies through acquiring useful skills (Kibre 1965, p. 97).

An interesting incident in Church history further establishes that in the Graeco-Roman world no Christian schools existed. In about 372 AD, two orthodox priests from Edessa were exiled to Antinoë as punishment for resisting Emperor Valens' Arianising policy. They were shocked to discover that Christians were a small minority in Antinoë. In an attempt to convert the pagans, one of the priests established an elementary school. However, since he was also a missionary, he taught a type of catechism to the children through the careful selection of passages for dictation and recitation from the Psalms of David and the New Testament. As a result of this teaching, his care for the students and the miracles of his fellow priest, all were converted to the faith. The fact that this was a unique occurrence and something previously unheard of is evidenced by the astonished delight with which it is reported (Marrou 1964, pp. 433-434).

A remarkable feature of Roman education was its sameness and uniformity under diverse conditions throughout the empire's existence (Boyd 1950, p. 76). One would expect that after the emperor was converted and Christians were no longer a persecuted minority that considerable changes would have occurred in the character of education. In spite of the

changed circumstances, however, Christian parents still sent their children to the pagan schools, which still studied mythology (Marrou 1964, pp. 428-429).<sup>6</sup> Boyd comments:

In spite of its political triumph, the Church at the end of the Fourth Century was scarcely any nearer a definite educational policy than it had been at the end of the Second. There was still the same distrust of pagan learning and the same inability to conceive of any practical alternative (1950, p. 88).

The Roman education system was strongly organised and Christian influence was merely superficial (Foakes-Jackson 1924, p. 202). An example of this is an exercise book belonging to a young Christian schoolboy in fourth-century Egypt. This workbook is basically the same as a Hellenistic book six or seven centuries older. It contains the same lists of mythological names and the same maxims and anecdotes, both moral and immoral. The exercise book of the Christian student only has a “Blessed be God” at the top of the first page and a carefully drawn grammatic cross at the beginning of every page to distinguish it as Christian (Marrou 1964, pp. 432-433). Thus, Christian influence on education was minimal, even after Constantine.

It remains to consider reasons why the Church simply utilised the existing pagan schools rather than establishing its own. Barclay proposes three reasons. First, Christians of the early Church had ‘an intense and passionate belief in the imminence of the Second Coming’ (Barclay 1959, p. 238). Preparing for life in the world through secular education was somewhat irrelevant, and there was definitely no point in establishing a Christian school system if the Lord was coming again shortly. Secondly, the early Church was poor. It did not have the means to set up a separate system of schools. Added to that, Christianity quickly became illegal, which practically ruled out the possibility of Christian schools (Barclay 1959, p. 238).

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<sup>6</sup> Consider that the statements of the Cappadocian Fathers and Jerome (discussed above) were all made in the fourth century after Constantine’s triumph. Augustine’s educational experience also occurred in the fourth century. This demonstrates that the church was still utilising the pagan education system in spite of the favourable circumstances for Christianity.

Over time, however, these barriers were removed. After Constantine won the battle of the Milvian Bridge, he ordered persecution to cease. The church steadily increased in wealth and influence. The Second Coming of the Lord seemed delayed and the Church could not afford to ignore schooling. Marrou argues that

If the Christian religion was to persist and spread, if it was to continue its teaching activity, or even merely to preserve its form of worship, there was an absolute minimum of literary culture that it could not do without. Christianity is an intellectual religion and cannot exist in a context of barbarism (1964, p. 421).

This was true for the early Church since Christianity was a religion of the Book, it increasingly valued the written word in Church life, and had a rapidly growing tradition of doctrines and explanations, a whole literature that was rich and varied (Marrou 1964, p. 421).

It is interesting to note that Christians did set up religious schools whenever the Church moved into a barbarian land (i.e. a land that had not assimilated classical culture). In fact, ‘in countries which had previously had no written culture, Christianity gave birth to a national culture, a national literature, and above all a national script, all for its own purposes’ (Marrou 1964, p. 423). The primary goal was to translate the Bible into the people’s native tongue so they could also experience the source of Christian life. However, in the Graeco-Roman cultural area, nothing like this ever took place (Marrou 1964, p. 423). The question still remains to be asked, ‘how could the Church tolerate the pagan schools for so long?’ Marrou points out that Christianity is fundamentally about the relationship between God and human beings, not primarily a cultural ideal or a manifesto about how to manage life on earth. While a profound doctrine about human beings and their existence will naturally lead to certain principles with practical implications that will “react on civilization”, this is a process taking many centuries. Marrou continues:

The early generations of Christians had not worked out any specifically Christian form of education, any more than they had worked out a Christian system of politics. They put first things first, and they laid the rock-bottom foundations of any Christian

civilization to come: a system of dogma, a system of morals, canonical discipline, and the liturgy (1964, p. 425).

In conclusion, the Christians of the early Church educated their children through the existing pagan schools. The Roman education system was universal within the empire, readily accessible to the majority of children and inseparably aligned with paganism. Surprisingly, the Christians of the early Church sent their children to these schools without ever establishing their own schools for general education. The witness of the Church Fathers attests to this, as does their experience. Furthermore, there are other stories and documents preserved that also support the above conclusion. Parents, however, certainly instructed their children in the things of the Lord to help their children reject the pagan ideas they would be exposed to at school. While initially the church was poor, outlawed and looking for imminent the Second Coming of Christ, it did not stay that way with the conversion of Constantine. A minimal amount of education was necessary for the church to survive, and when the Church moved into a barbarian land, it established its own educational system. However, this did not occur in the Graeco-Roman world, where the Church was slowly working out the implications of the faith. It seems 'the Church had annexed the Roman educational system, and had made it her own. She had in fact baptised pagan education into the service of the Church' (Barclay 1959, p. 251).

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