

STEALING EGYPTIAN GOLD: EARLY CHRISTIANS REACT TO PAGAN LITERATURE

The early church fathers had two different reactions to non-Christian thought. When it came to non-Christian education, philosophy, and pagan literature, many argued that Christians should rely on faith rather than knowledge, and they called for Christians not to read or learn anything from a pagan source:

"If again, we despise the teachings of secular literature as being foolishness in God's eyes, our duty is plain enough. . . . What you reject in deed, you are not to welcome in word."

---Tertullian (c. 197 A.D.) *Writings* 3.87

"Abstain from all pagan books. For what have you to do with such alien discourses, laws, or false prophets? For these subvert the faith of the unstable."

---Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. 390 A.D.)

"Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced pagan sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas."

---Acts 19:18-19

Many such writers (and later more famous individuals like Savonarola) called for Christians to burn non-Christian books, to destroy pagan temples, sculpture, and artwork, and to turn to faith rather than education. This tendency culminated after 390 A.D. in a fanatical mob burning the library at Alexandria (and over 200,000 books) after murdering the pagan librarian and mathematician Hypatia.

However, another camp led by Saint Augustine argued that intelligent Christians can learn even from non-Christian sources, that even pagans or atheists often have wise or valuable insights about ethics, about history, or about nature. He compares this to the way that, even as the Israelites fled Egyptian idolatry, they still took with them Egyptian gold and treasure which they later melted down to make the Ark of the Covenant and the decorations for the temple.

"If those . . . [pagan writers] have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as from unjust possessors and converted to our use. Just as the Egyptians had not only idols and grave burdens which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put them to a better use. . . . In the same way, all the teachings of the pagans contain not only simulated and superstitious imaginings . . . but also liberal disciplines more suited to the uses of truth, and some of the most useful precepts concerning morals. Even some truths concerning the worship of one God are discovered among them."

---Saint Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*. 40.60

"Often a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other parts of the world, about the motions and orbits of the stars and even their sizes and distances, . . . and this knowledge he holds with certainty from reason and experience. It is thus offensive and disgraceful for an unbeliever to hear a Christian talk nonsense about such things, claiming that what he is saying is based in Scripture. We should do all that we can to avoid such an embarrassing situation, lest the unbeliever see only ignorance in the Christian and laugh to scorn."

-- Saint Augustine, *"De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim"*

If it weren't for Christian intellectuals like Saint Augustine, it is probable that early extremists in an anti-intellectual frenzy would have destroyed much of the writings on mythology, philosophy, and natural science--knowledge accumulated over centuries. Saint Augustine's importance in the Christian tradition cannot be over-emphasized. He argued that good Christians can and should be intellectuals, and pagan writings do have value.