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# Tatian and Basil: Differing views regarding the pagan educational system of antiquity

Scott A. Rhodes

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, United States of America  
scott@brazosmeadows.org

**Key words:** Basil of Caesarea; Christian education; church history; paideia.

## Abstract

**Advanced education for Christians of antiquity was only available through schools which used classical Greek methodology. This included literature, poetry, and philosophy closely tied to polytheistic and pagan traditions. Christian families and leaders at that time had to consider the spiritual implications of participating in such a system. This article contrasts the opinion of Tatian with that of Basil of Caesarea regarding Christian participation in pagan education. Basil and Tatian had similar ascetic views, yet they differed on this issue. Tatian believed Christians should not take part in pagan education. Basil believed that Christians could benefit spiritually from this education if they experienced it selectively and wisely. It is concluded that Basil's view is the wiser choice.**

## Introduction

Stories of Christian young people having their faith challenged at university (or before) abound in our day. For this reason, many parents and other spiritual leaders wrestle with how to counsel their children and other students in regard to higher education. This problem is not new, however. I will explore a similar conundrum that was faced by Christians in antiquity.

The only opportunity for advanced education during the first few centuries of Christianity was schooling in the classical Greek tradition. This included quite a bit of pagan and polytheistic material. Not all Christians agreed on whether or not to partake in this form of education. Tatian of Assyria expressed his negative ideas about pagan education in *Oratio Ad Graecos*. On the other hand, Basil of Caesarea wrote one of the most important treatises on the positive aspects of pagan education

for Christians, *Ad Adulescentes*. The purpose of this article is to compare Tatian's view with that of Basil, simultaneously comparing the reasons behind each view as well as potential outcomes of each, to demonstrate that Basil's generally represents the better course of action. This is accomplished by comparing relevant passages in *Oratio Ad Graecos* with *Ad Adulescentes*; while pointing out the importance of the positive arguments in the latter.

## Background of the problem

For ancient Christians, advanced education could only be obtained by paying to attend pagan schools. This type of education was necessary for those seeking high-level careers in politics or advancement in the military (Schlager, 1991, p. 38). In addition, Christians needed this formal training to engage in apologetics and theology (Weltin, 1987, p. 13). Therefore, families with means who wanted their sons to be educated had to send them to schools that essentially espoused false gods.

This was not a small problem for Christians in antiquity. Dimitris Alexandrakas describes it, "Christians were caught in a cultural dilemma. From one side, classical education, logic, human philosophy, and polytheism; from the other, Christian learning, faith, divine philosophy, and the true God" (Alexandrakas, 1994, p. 287). Furthermore, the problem persisted until the seventh century when a Christian culture based on the Bible became dominant (Liebeschuetz, 1995, p. 193).

Roy J. Deferrari and M. R. P. McGuire in translating Basil (1934) declare that "...no one of the Fathers has expressed himself as opposed without compromise to pagan literature in its entirety" (p. 368). Bakke (2005) asserts that with two exceptions all the leading theologians from the second through the fifth centuries who discuss this matter held that the Greek classical literature (and by extension the classical education) was valuable to Christians (p. 212). Of course, this only represents opinions for

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which we have records.

Therefore, families who looked to church leaders for opinions on this matter might hear somewhat different opinions. According to Bakke (2005), the opinions of the early church fathers regarding the classical system of education fit into three basic positions. First, Christians should withdraw completely from the classical education. Second, while there might be spiritual dangers inherent in this education it is necessary, and Christians should participate, cautiously. Third, this education is a positive experience (p. 203). Tatian will first be examined as a representative of the view against the classical educational system and then Basil as a representative in favor of it.

### Tatian's background

Not a great deal is known about Tatian. Matthew Crawford (2016) explains that putting together much uncontested information about him and his work is difficult (p. 544). His precise date of birth is unknown but he lived in the mid-second century (Koltun-Fromm, 2008, p. 1). By his own testimony, Tatian was born in Assyria (Tatian, trans. 1982, 42.1) and received a thorough Greek education (Tatian, trans. 1982, 35.1, 42.1). Further, Tatian was a pupil of Justin Martyr who, after Justin's death, became a teacher of Christianity in Rome (Crawford, 2016, p. 542). Irenaeus (Irenaeus, n.d., para. 1), Clement of Alexandria (Clement, trans. John Ferguson, 1991, 3.81.1-3.81.3), and Eusebius (Eusebius, trans. Christian Frederick Cruse, 1955, 4.29) indicate that Tatian began teaching heresy later in his life. However, Crawford (2016) offers plausible arguments against some of these judgments (pp. 545-570), as does Naomi Koltun-Fromm (2008, p. 3).

One reason knowledge about Tatian is limited is that little of his written work has survived. Only one of his written works is available intact, one other has come down to us in pieces (Foster, 2008, p. 107). The rest are lost except for a few fragments quoted in other ancient sources. The two we have are *Oratio Ad Graecos*, an apologetic work, and the *Diatessaron*, a gospel harmony used among churches that spoke Syriac (Koltun-Fromm, 2008, p. 2). No original *Diatessaron* manuscripts are available, but the work is quoted in enough other ancient sources to enable a partial reconstruction of it (Foster, 2008, p. 110).

### Oratio Ad Graecos

*Oratio Ad Graecos* provides the scanty evidence accessible regarding Tatian's views against classical education. This tome is not primarily designed to address the issue of pagan education. Rather,

it is an apologetic work in response to claims by the Greeks of superiority in culture, theology, and philosophy (Foster, 2008, p. 107). Further, it is an attempt to call Christians to separate themselves from Greek culture. In this regard, Allan T. Georgia (2018) says Tatian's,

legacy is a passing vision to a version of Christian communities that did not pursue legitimacy by appealing to existing cultural values, but rather sought to turn over the tables of the cultural marketplace and establish something else, something other. (p. 219)

It is apparent, therefore, that as Tatian lambasts Greek philosophy and literature he is exhorting Christians to separate from them; including Greek educational settings.

The work is not very systematic. Foster (2008) describes the overall content asserting, "The structure of the work is a mixture of theological reflection, combined with strong polemical attacks... The impression is that the work is spontaneous rather than planned" (pp. 109-110). Therefore, this discussion will not try to organize the whole piece, but simply mention themes and passages pertinent to his view of education.

It is worth noting that Tatian indicates that he received a classical Greek education (trans. 1982, 35.1; 42.1), which lends credit to his opinion of the Greek ideas he criticizes. One theme in *Oratio Ad Graecos* important to the Greco-Roman educational system is Greek philosophy. In chapters two, three, and 25 Tatian soundly ridicules the philosophers and their teaching. Another pertinent theme is Greek religion, which he derides in chapters eight through to ten, and 21 to 22, by calling the Greek gods demons and pointing out the atrociously immoral acts they were known for. Tatian clearly has no respect for these two pillars of Greek culture—their philosophy and religion. It is easy to surmise that he would abhor an education that involved the study of these fields.

Literature was another important aspect of Greek culture and education. He addresses this in chapter 26, which contains the clearest statement against the pagan educational system. Tatian criticizes Greek literature comparing reading it to wandering in a maze. He ridicules the Greeks for thinking that they have more wisdom than others and blames this attitude on those who teach literature. Essentially, he says these grammarians have no wisdom and pass their foolishness on to others. Therefore, he has, "abandoned you and cut off contact with you; we follow God's word" (Tatian, trans. 1982, 26.3). Thus, Tatian declares a distinct

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separation from Greek *paideia* [Gr: education] (Bakke, 2005, pp. 203, 204).

Tatian's work illuminates much that is immoral and false in classical Greek philosophy, religion, literature, and poetry. He is correct to recognize that falsehood does not come from God and Christians should be wary of it. The benefits his solution to avoid it completely would bring, can be questioned though,

There might be some Christians who would be tempted into sin by exposure to such material and certainly, they should avoid it for the sake of personal holiness. Yet for other Christians, abstaining from classical education would reap no spiritual reward. Those Christians would be less prepared apologetically, they would have no practice in connecting the virtues in Greek culture to Christian virtues. Further, they would be less prepared for the job market. Basil's work will demonstrate his opinion there are spiritual benefits that accrue to Christians who participate in Greek *paideia* with specific goals in mind.

### **Basil's background**

Basil of Caesarea was born approximately AD 330 in Caesarea, Cappadocia to a devout Christian family. He was educated in rhetorical schools in Caesarea, Constantinople, and Athens. He is remembered as an orator, theologian, ascetic, and monastic. In 370, he became bishop of Caesarea. Further, he is known as a very important defender of orthodoxy against the heresy of Arianism. Basil's writings were influential in the defeat of Arianism at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381, only about two years after his death (Basil of Caesarea, 1991, pp. 12, 13).

Basil was himself a product of the Greco-Roman educational system. Jacob N. Van Sickle (2014) tells us Basil spent several years in Athens obtaining the best classical education possible at that time. However, soon after returning home Basil experienced a transformation of sorts in which he saw that the truth of God was much more valuable than all his learning (p. 14). Yet, his learning eventually became valuable in his gospel ministry. For example, Basil was able to use his own education to train people regarding the flaws of secular wisdom and the reasonableness of the Bible (Hildebrand, 2014, p. 38). Furthermore, Kiriatis (2010) asserts that Basil's understanding of Greek culture and scholarship enabled him to explain the Trinity in a meaningful way (pp. 74-75), which

<sup>1</sup>The full title of this address is "To Young Men, On How They Might Derive Profit From Pagan Literature." But this shorter name, *Ad Adulescentes*, seems to be commonly used to identify the treatise.

allowed him to explain the gospel in a way that was understandable and effective for his cultural and historical context.

### **Ad Adulescentes<sup>1</sup>**

*Ad Adulescentes*, the most well-known of all Basil's works (Basil, 1934, p. 371), is a very clear statement of his thoughts on pagan education. A brief review of the literature related to this work follows, then a discussion of Basil's themes in the address. Sherman Garnett Jr. (1981) examines the treatise from the standpoint of the way in which Basil guides the young men. Garnett seems to be impressed with what today might be called Basil's age-appropriate education. Ultimately, Garnett values Basil's role in the life of the students. He believes that the students will be able to make use of pagan poetry and philosophy because of the instruction Basil has provided (p. 223).

Robert E. Winn (1999) expresses the notion that even a passing reading of this document shows, "Basil's overwhelming concern is promoting a virtuous life" (p. 293). This is clear from the statements Basil (1934) makes. For example, he tells the youth to read poetry and if the poet recounts deeds of good men, then the readers should copy those deeds (4.2, pp. 387-389). However, a desire for these young men to grow in virtue surely cannot be the sole reason that Basil writes as his opening sentence begins, "There are many considerations which urge me to counsel you, my children..." (1.1, p. 379).

Arthur G. Holder (1992) believes that the focus of the argument is not whether or not Christians should study in the pagan schools, because it is already a given that they must do so in order to be educated people. The focus of the article, he explains, is on practical application. Basil wants the young men to understand precisely how they can benefit from their secular education. He wants them to know what they must do in order to receive positive spiritual benefits from the Classical education (p. 401).

Bernard Schlager (1991) also points out the practical nature of what the address is saying. He notes that, according to Basil, eternal life is the objective for Christians. Therefore, pagan works are only worthwhile to the extent that they help one achieve eternal life (p. 44). Surely, this is the attitude one would expect from a pastor.

Benjamin D. Wayman (2016) used "Address to Young Men, on How They Might Derive Benefit from Greek Literature" to contrast the views of

<sup>2</sup>Identified as Julian the Apostate by Christians, due to his rejection of an early life of Christian education and practice for Neoplatonism and subsequent governance to endeavour to establish Hellenistic polytheism as the state religion.

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the Roman emperor Julian<sup>2</sup> on education and its purposes, with those of Basil. Wayman describes Julian's view of the educational system as one that was very connected to the religious and moral views of Roman culture. Julian essentially saw the role of education as being to form young men into good, pagan citizens of Rome. He even wanted the schools to be places where Christian children became converts to paganism (p. 254-255).

Conversely, one might expect that a church father would see the educational system's purpose to be about converting pagans to Christians. However, that is not what Wayman describes. He writes that for Basil, Greek education does not offer full-fledged moral training. Rather, it provides "literary and philosophical training and even preliminary moral instruction" (Wayman, 2016, p. 257). Basil, he explains, would consider the grammatical, rhetorical, philosophical, and moral education only as an addition to the religious instruction Christians received at home and in the church. For Basil the role of Greek education in spiritual formation is minor (p. 257).

Before Deferrari and McGuire translated and published this address of Basil (1934), they furnish some of their thoughts on it. They conclude that Basil's thinking in regard to the pagan classics is, "the most enlightened and well-balanced of his time" (p. 370). They add that Basil is very aware of the dangers present for Christians in pagan literature, yet he does not condemn the whole for the sake of the bad. Therefore, they explain, Basil advises the study of pagan Greek literature for ethical reasons rather than aesthetic or scientific. The reason to study this material in Basil's mind is to learn to practice virtue and to prepare the students to understand the Bible. At the same time, Basil clearly appreciates the positive things found in pagan Greek literature (1934, p. 371-372).

Ernest L. Fortin (1996) takes a fairly critical view of Basil's teaching in this address. He claims that when Basil used references to classical Greek texts that he frequently twisted the words or meanings of the authors (p. 137). Fortin believes that Basil did so in an attempt to, "blind him [the student] temporarily to the true nature of the objectionable parts and thus prevent him from seeing in the text at hand anything that might be construed as a serious alternative to his faith" (p. 143). In other words, Fortin did not consider Basil to be in favor of pagan education therefore, he was trying to inoculate students against it.

The authors discussed have somewhat different views of this treatise. However, except for Fortin, they do not directly contradict one another; rather they speak to different aspects of the address. The

following examination of the text itself, looks for answers to the question, What value does Basil perceive exists for a Christian to participate in the pagan educational system?

The letter has ten sections which Holder (1992) has demonstrated divide into three main parts. Chapters I-III make the claim that reading Greek literature can have value. Chapters IV-VII set out a principle that can guide Christians as they read pagan literature. Chapters VIII-X challenge the students to grow in virtue as a means of preparing for their future lives in eternity (Basil, 1934, p. 401-402). Within this organizational framework, there are several prominent themes. One theme Basil communicates is that pagan literature can be valuable for Christians. Another is that true value is found only in things which profit one's eternity. A sub-theme to that idea is that true virtue provides profit towards eternity. A final theme in the work is that Christians should be selective in their dealings with pagan works by accepting from them only useful material.

Basil (1934) opens by saying, "There are many considerations which urge me to counsel you, my children, on what things I judge to be best, and on those which I am confident, if you accept them, will be to your advantage" (1.1, p. 379). By claiming that acceptance of his advice on dealing with pagan writings would be to the students' advantages, Basil shows us that there is something valuable here if the pupils will learn how to 'mine' it out. This notion that the pagan corpus can be valuable is highlighted throughout the letter as Basil repeatedly tells the young men to take what is useful from the non-Christian authors. For example, chapter IV says, "But that this pagan learning is not without usefulness for the soul has been sufficiently affirmed..." (4.1, p. 387).

Basil's skill as a rhetor is evident as he instructs the young men that true value is found only in things that prepare us for eternity. Chapter II declares,

but our hopes lead us forward to a more distant time, and everything we do is by way of preparation for the other life. Whatever, therefore, contributes to that life, we say must be loved and pursued with all our strength; but what does not conduce to that must be passed over as of no account. (p. 381, 382)

Clearly, Basil wishes the students to spend their lives on pursuits that have eternal significance and as will become apparent he believes that the classic Greek poetry and literature can be among those.

Concomitant to the notion that only eternal things are of true import is the notion that Christian

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virtue helps prepare one for eternity. Beginning in chapter V, Basil (1934) stresses this notion of virtue through much of the remainder of the treatise. The chapter begins:

And since it is through virtue that we must enter upon this life of ours, and since much has been uttered in praise of virtue by poets, much by historians, and much more still by philosophers, we ought especially to apply ourselves to such literature. For it is no small advantage that a certain intimacy and familiarity with virtue should be engendered in the souls of the young, seeing that the lessons learned by such are likely, in the nature of the case, to be indelible, having been deeply impressed in them by reason of the tenderness of their souls. (5.1, p. 393)

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Basil goes on to reference Greek poets, authors, sages, and mythological characters that demonstrate or praise ideas regarding virtue. It is very important to him that the young learners aspire to seek virtue in the pagan material they will interact with.

The last big idea that Basil (1934) stresses to his readers, deals not with if they can benefit from secular education, but how they can do so. In fact, this work asserts this is his thesis as he closes the introductory chapter by stating,

that you should not surrender to these men once for all the rudders of your mind...rather, accepting from them only that which is useful, you should know that which ought to be overlooked. What... these things are, and how we shall distinguish between them, is the lesson which I shall teach you from this point on (1.2, p. 381)

Essentially, Basil's lesson in how to benefit from pagan education is a lesson in being selective. Basil exhorts the young men several times to accept (by putting into practice) only what is useful from pagan poetry and prose, but to reject (or ignore) what is not (Basil, 1934, 4.1, p. 387; 4.3, pp. 389-393). Again, what is useful according to Basil, is whatever deals with virtue and prepares them for eternity.

In summary, the themes present in *Ad Adulescentes* show us Basil not only as a scholar and rhetor, but also as a pastor. It is clear from the address that Basil is well versed in pagan literature. However, it is also clear that Basil has spent time thinking about how exposure to this material might affect a Christian spiritually. Essentially, this letter is pastoral counseling for young men on how they can participate in secular education while gleaning from it that which would edify them spiritually rather than hinder them. Basil expects that young men who

follow his teaching will come away from contact with pagan education more virtuous, better prepared to understand scripture, and more focused on eternal things. Basil's reasoning and expected outcomes to students demonstrates the superiority of his position compared with Tatian's.

## Conclusion

Tatian of Assyria and Basil of Caesarea, though separated by almost two centuries, were wealthy, well educated, ancient Christians who both believed that Christians should live quite separately from the world. Yet, they held opposite opinions regarding Christian participation in pagan education. This paper, argues that Basil's view was generally more beneficial to Christians of his time. It does so by comparing his view as presented in *Ad Adulescentes* with Tatian's view articulated in *Oratio Ad Graecos*, simultaneously evaluating likely outcomes to demonstrate the better position. Basil clearly demonstrates how young Christians could reap eternal benefits from such an education. Moreover, his use of this education in his own ministry proves the veracity of his claims.

Basil's method offers a great opportunity for current application in the pastoral ministry of churches. Families today face a similar challenge in regard to education. Not all Christians can homeschool their children or alternatively enroll them in private schools with religious affiliation. Through avenues such as family ministry, children's ministry, and youth ministry churches can include 'curriculum' that trains young people to benefit from secular education rather than suffer. Following Estep, White, and Estep's (2012) recommendations churches could develop theology based materials that would help students develop their relationship with Jesus while preparing them to deal with secular academic ideas (p. 61). **TEACH**

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## Author information

**Scott A. Rhodes** serves as Minister of Students and Education at Brazos Meadows Baptist Church in Hewitt, TX. He is also an EdD student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His background includes teaching at the high school and post-secondary level, as well as local church educational ministry.