

George E. Karamanolis, *The Philosophy of Early Christianity*, Acumen, 2013, pp. 317, \$ 27.50, ISBN 9781844655687

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The study conducted by George Karamanolis overviews the main topics of Early Christian philosophy, where the term “philosophy” is used in a broad sense as a field that also addressed theological problems. Karamanolis places these philosophical ideas of Early Christianity in their historical context, explaining their links with the corresponding ideas of Classical philosophy (hardly surprisingly, since the author is Assistant Professor in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Crete). The book covers almost all the topics of relevance to Early Christian philosophical thinking. Size restrictions prevented the author from considering so many topics in the detail they deserve, however, so many of them are only briefly outlined.

The introductory chapter describes the philosophizing methodology adopted by the Early Christian authors.

In the most extensive chapter of the book, entitled *Physics and Metaphysics: First Principles and the Question of Cosmology*, Karamanolis describes the primary principles of reality and cosmogony in the Early Christian philosophy. In discussing Tatian, he suggests that Tatian distinguished between two stages of creation, the first relating to the creation of matter, and the second to the creation of everything else; and he concludes that, in this respect, Tatian could depend on Plato’s *Timaeus*. As Karamanolis points out, however, Tatian’s contemporaries already wanted to break away from their dependence on Plato to develop a properly Christian cosmology. One of them, Theophilus, criticized the idea of creation from primordial matter and maintained that God was the only creating principle.

When he comes to the cosmological views of Basil of Caesarea, Karamanolis discusses the relationship between creation and temporality, as well as doctrines of the *logoi* of the creation, material substrate, and material body as a sum of constituent qualities. On the latter aspect, Karamanolis refers to Basil’s *Homiliae in hexaemeron*, 1.8, 21B, and claims that Basil denied the idea of the substance of the material body being a qualityless matter, and supported the concept of the material body as a sum

of constitutive qualities, drawing some analogies with Plotinus and Porphyry (p.99). There are good reasons for disagreeing with Karamanolis in this respect, however. As discussed in the scholarly literature (R. Hübner, “Gregor von Nyssa als Verfasser der sog. Ep. 38 des Basilius: Zum unterschiedlichen Verständnis der ousia bei den kappadokischen Brüdern”, in *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offerts au cardinal Jean Daniélou*, ed. by J. Fontaine, Ch. Kannengiesser, Paris, 1972, pp.478-481; D. Balas, “The Unity of Human Nature in Basil’s and Gregory of Nyssa’s Polemics against Eunomius”, *Studia Patristica*, 1976, 14:5, p.279; D. Robertson, “Stoic and Aristotelian Notions of Substance in Basil of Caesarea”, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 1998, 52), along with the Platonic tendency to see the substance of the material body as a sum of constitutive qualities, Basil shows traces of the Stoic doctrine of substance as a qualityless substrate. Thus, in the *Contra Eunomium*, 1.12 (PG 29b, 577), Basil says, “...I call material substrate substance...”. David Balas showed that this passage is extremely important because Gregory of Nyssa, in citing the passage in his own *Contra Eunomium* 3.5.22.7-8 (Jaeger), was compelled to invert its meaning and say, “... I do not call material substrate substance...,” thus contradicting Basil. Concerning the reference that Karamanolis makes to Plotinus and Porphyry when talking of Basil’s teaching on the substance of the material body as a sum of constituent qualities, the suggestion advanced by P. O’Cleirigh (P. O’Cleirigh, “Prime Matter in Origen’s World Picture”, *Studia Patristica*, 1985, 16, pp.262-263) that Basil relied on Book 4 of Origen’s *De principiis* (7 [34]) seems much more plausible.

Karamanolis goes on to briefly review the theology of the Arian Controversy, and discusses the concepts of *homoousios* and three hypostases (relating to the notions of *idion* and *idiotes*) (pp.113-114). In doing so, he mentions Basil’s *Letter 236* and the so-called *Letter 38*, which - to my knowledge - the majority of scholars now believe to have been written by Basil’s brother Gregory of Nyssa (see, for instance, P. Fedwick, “Commentary of Gregory of Nyssa on the 38th Letter of Basil of Caesarea”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 1978, 44:1; R. Hübner, *Op. cit.*; A. Choufrine, “The Development of St. Basil’s Idea of ‘Hypostasis’”, *Studi sull’Oriente Cristiano*, 2003, 7:2).

The chapter on *Logic and Epistemology* starts with a brief analysis of the notion of *pistis* in Ancient Greek and Early

Christian thought. Much attention is paid to the theory of demonstration related to beliefs and categories in Clement of Alexandria, who understood them as “elements of beings in matter” (p.127). Karamanolis concludes that the doctrine of categories in Clement combines Platonic ontological and Peripatetic semantic aspects, a situation common in Late Antiquity.

In his treatment of the doctrine of names in Eunomius, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa, Karamanolis (p.134) shares the position that became popular after the study of Jean Daniélou (J. Daniélou, “Eunome l’arien et l’exégèse néo-platonicienne du Cratyle,” *Revue des Études Grecques*, 1956, 69, pp.412-432), who linked Eunomius’s doctrine of language with the naturalistic theory of names expressed in Plato’s *Cratylus*. But since the publication of S. Hebrüggen-Walter’s “Augustine’s Critique of Dialectic: Between Ambrose and the Arians” (in *Augustine and the Disciplines. From Classicism to Confessions*, ed. K. Pollman, M. Vessey, Oxford, 2005, pp.194-196), it is presumably possible to view Eunomius’s teaching on names as being close to the Stoic teaching, and to distinguish it from the doctrine contained in *Cratylus*. I argue for this in my article: D. Birjukov, “The Strategies of Naming in Polemic between Eunomius and Basil of Caesarea in Context of Antique Philosophical Tradition”, *Scrinium. Revue de patrologie, d’hagiographie critique et d’histoire ecclésiastique*, 2008, 4.

It is also worth noting that, in discussing the views of Eunomius in the *Apology* (p.134), Karamanolis refers only to short passages from the *Contra Eunomium* cited by Basil of Caesarea, though an edition of the full text of the *Apology* is available, published by R. Vaggione.

In his chapter on *Freedom of Will and the Divine Providence*, Karamanolis makes the point that the Christian doctrine of free will was initially elaborated by Justin Martyr and Theophilus, and he discusses Justin’s polemic argument against the deterministic views based on the scriptural passages containing prophetic predictions, and also Justin’s considerations on the Stoic idea that everything was driven by fate. Karamanolis argues that Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines were the sources of Justin’s stance on free will, while Theophilus and Tatian relied on a combination of Platonic/Aristotelian (insisting that human actions were not due to fate) and Stoic views (the idea that humans are enslaved to sin). In his discussion of the

polemic debate between Irenaeus of Lyons and the Gnostics, Karamanolis draws attention to Irenaeus's teaching on the affinity of all people with God and the capacity for free will granted by God to all human beings because of that affinity (pp.162-164, 170).

In the chapter *Psychology: Soul and Its Relation to the Body*, Karamanolis charts the course of two trends in the Early Christian authors' understanding of human nature. The first concerns the tripartite nature of human beings (spirit, soul and body), while the second suggests a bipartite view of human nature (spirit and body). The first trend was expressed by Justin Martyr, Theophilus, and Irenaeus of Lyons, the second by Tertullian. The second trend also found its reflection in Origen, who followed a complex doctrine according to which the human being consisted of soul and body, and at the same time, the soul was a fallen mind. This doctrine was challenged by Gregory of Nyssa, whose sophisticated teaching is described by Karamanolis together with its Platonic connotations.

In the last chapter of his book, *Ethics and Politics*, Karamanolis discusses ethical and political aspects of Early Christian thought, comparing it with the views of Antiquity. According to Karamanolis, the main aspects of the non-Christian ethics of Late Antiquity were shared by the Christian authors too. This applies both to the idea that ethics possessed a cosmological/soteriological dimension, and to the doctrine of sin. As far as sin is concerned, despite the prevailing view that a considerable difference exists between the principles of pagan and Christian ethics, Karamanolis maintains that the differences are not significant, since both traditions formally share the idea of sin. The objection that sin was interpreted differently in the two traditions is countered by the argument that Christian philosophy did not have a unanimous understanding of sin (p.224).

Karamanolis's book is informative and competent. He illustrates the doctrines of the Early Christian writers set against the background of the teachings of Ancient Greek philosophers, and this enables him to trace the context and outline the interactions between non-Christian and Christian aspects of Late Ancient philosophical and theological thought. This approach seems to have a downside, however: the author pays too much attention to possible influences and parallels between the Classical philosophical traditions and the Early Christian authors,

neglecting more immediate influences and intersections with earlier Christian writers. This is the case, for instance, of Basil of Caesarea's teaching on the material body as a sum of constituent qualities, as mentioned above.