

Readings for the Society for Classical Learning's Summer Seminar in Orvieto

File 1: This document contains excerpts from several influential texts that *explain* a view of the relation between a pagan or non-Christian heritage and the revealed faith in Christ

File 2 contains excerpts from texts that *illustrate* that relation.

File 3 contains excerpts from texts that *embody* that relation.

From Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*

Found on the internet at the New Advent website:

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12022.htm>

(or on p. 75 of D. W. Robertson's fine translation published in the Library of Liberal Arts series)

Chapter 40. Whatever Has Been Rightly Said by the Heathen, We Must Appropriate to Our Uses.

60. Moreover, if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said anything that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority, but by the command of God, the Egyptians themselves, in their ignorance, providing them with things which they themselves were not making a good use of; in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad, and are perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of devils. These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel. Their garments, also—that is, human institutions such as are adapted to that intercourse with men which is indispensable in this life—we must take and turn to a Christian use.

61. And what else have many good and faithful men among our brethren done? Do we not see with what a quantity of gold and silver and garments Cyprian, that most persuasive teacher and most blessed martyr, was loaded when he came out of Egypt? How much Lactantius brought with him? And Victorinus, and Optatus, and Hilary, not to speak of living men! How much Greeks out of number have borrowed! And prior to all these, that most faithful servant of God, Moses, had done the same thing; for of him it is written that he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. [Acts 7:22] And to none of all these would heathen superstition (especially in those times when, kicking against the yoke of Christ, it was persecuting the Christians) have ever furnished branches of knowledge it held useful, if it had suspected they were about to turn them to the use of worshipping the One God, and thereby overturning the vain worship of idols. But they gave their gold and their silver and their garments to the people of God as they were going out of Egypt, not knowing how the things they gave would be turned

to the service of Christ. For what was done at the time of the exodus was no doubt a type prefiguring what happens now. And this I say without prejudice to any other interpretation that may be as good, or better.

Pope Gregory (590-604), Letter to Abbot Mellitus

As narrated by the Venerable Bede in his History of the English Church and People, Pope Gregory wrote a letter to Bishop Mellitus, who (in the year 601) was going to join Augustine of Canterbury's mission to the English, giving instructions for dealing with the holy places of the newly converted Saxons and their pagan practices.

Available on the internet at:

<http://www.britannia.com/history/docs/mellitus.html>

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/greg1-mellitus.txt>

To our well-loved son Abbot Mellitus: Gregory, servant of the servants of God.

Since the departure of yourself and your companions, we have been somewhat anxious, because we have received no news of the success of your journey. Therefore, when by God's help you reach our most reverend brother, Bishop Augustine, we wish you to inform him that we have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols in that country should on no account be destroyed.

He is to destroy the idols, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up, and relics enclosed in them. For if these temples are well built, they are to be purified from devil-worship, and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that its temples are not destroyed, may abandon idolatry and resort to these places as before, and may come to know and adore the true God.

And since they have a custom of sacrificing many oxen to devils, let some other solemnity be substituted in its place, such as a day of Dedication or the Festivals of the holy martyrs whose relics are enshrined there. On such occasions they might well construct shelters of boughs for themselves around the churches that were once temples, and celebrate the solemnity with devout feasting. They are no longer to sacrifice beasts to the Devil, but they may kill them for good to the praise of God, and give thanks to the Giver of all gifts for His bounty.

If the people are allowed some worldly pleasures in this way, they will more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit. For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb to a mountain top climbs gradually step by step, and not in one leap.

It was in this way that God revealed Himself to the Israelite people in Egypt, permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the Devil to be offered thenceforward to Himself instead. So He bade them sacrifice beasts to Him, so that, once they become enlightened, they might abandon a wrong conception of sacrifice, and adopt the right. For, while they were to continue to offer beasts as before, they were to offer them to God instead of to idols, thus transforming the idea of sacrifice. Of your kindness, you are to inform our brother Augustine of this policy, so that he may consider how he may best implement it on the spot. God keep you safe, my very dear son.

Coluccio Salutati, [A Defense of Liberal Studies in:] Letters (1378)

[translated by Ephraim Emerton, included in *The Portable Medieval Reader* (New York: Penguin Viking, 1949; 1977), pp. 613-18; an excellent passage explaining and defending the humanistic accommodation of literary classics, such as Virgil, to Christian belief]

And now, my dear colleague, I will come to a matter in which you have stirred me up in no slight degree. I wrote to you asking you to buy for me a copy of Virgil, and you reply reproving me for not occupying myself with quite different matters and calling Virgil – to quote your own words – a “lying soothsayer.” You say that, since it is forbidden in the canon law to concern oneself with books of that sort, I ought not to burden you with such an errand, and you generously offer me a number of volumes of pious literature. I beg you, my dearest Giuliano, to pardon me if, in order that the due supremacy of honour be maintained for the prince of Roman eloquence, the divinest of all poets, our own countryman, Virgil, and also that I may set you free from the error in which you seem to be involved, I address you in language rather more severe than is my wont.

I seem to feel a deep obligation to defend Virgil, of whom Horace says that earth never bore a purer spirit, lest he be shut out from the sanctuaries of Christians. I am bound also to clear up that error of yours which gives you such a horror of Virgil that you fear to be polluted by the mere purchase of the book.

How do you happen, my dear colleague, to have this dread of Virgil? You say that he records the monstrous doings of the gods and the vicious practices of men, and that, because he did not, as you say, walk in the way of the Lord, he leads his readers away from the straight path of the faith. But, if you think Virgil ought not to be touched because he was a heathen, why do you read Donatus, or Priscian, who was something far worse, an apostate? Or Job, to whom you yourself call attention, was he a Christian or was he of the circumcision? Or shall we give up Seneca and his writings because he was not renewed with the water of regeneration? If we throw aside the heritage of the Gentiles, whence shall we draw the rules of literary composition? Cicero is the fountain of eloquence, and everyone who since his day has handed on the art of rhetoric has drawn from that source. Read Augustine on Christian doctrine where he seems to touch [the heights of] eloquence, and certainly you will find the Ciceronian tradition renewed in the style of that great man. Not to read the inventions of the heathen out of devotion to the faith is a very weak foundation, especially when with their assistance you can the more easily combat the futilities of the Gentiles. Don’t imagine that I have ever so read Virgil as to be led to accept his fables about the heathen gods! What I enjoy is his style, hitherto unequalled in verse, and I do not believe it is possible that human talent can ever attain to its loftiness and its charm.

I admire the majesty of his language, the appropriateness of his words, the harmony of his verses, the smoothness of his speech, the elegance of his composition, and the sweetly flowing structure of his sentences. I admire the profundity of his thought and his ideas drawn from the depths of ancient learning and from the loftiest heights of philosophy.

In these days there is no mixture of heathenism among Christians throughout the civilized world; . . . [those gods] whom that accursed blind superstition worshipped have vanished from their altars and their shrines and have abandoned their glory to the true God, to Christ our Lord.

It may have been worth while to warn Christians against the study of the poets at a time when heathens still lingered among them, but since that pest has been exterminated, what harm can it be for consecrated men to have read the poets who, even if they are of [no] profit for the moral conduct of life, nevertheless cannot spread such poison for the destruction of our faith that we shall cease humbly to adore our Creator. . . .

But you will say, that when we are reading these vain things we are wandering away from the study of sacred literature, since – to continue the Psalm which I began elsewhere – that man is blessed, “whose delight is in the law of the Lord and in his law doth he meditate day and night.” I grant you, it is a more holy thing to apply oneself without ceasing to the reading of the sacred page; but these devices of the heathen, even the songs of the poets of which you have such a horror, if one reads them in a lofty spirit are of no little profit and incline us toward those writings which pertain to the faith and the reading of which you urge in your letters. . . .

I have dwelt upon this at such length that you may not suppose the reading of Virgil to be a mere idle occupation if one is willing to take the right view of it and to separate the wheat from the tares. Not, indeed, that I believe one should look there for the teachings of our faith or for the Truth; but, as Seneca says of himself, I go over into the enemy’s camp, not as a guest or as a deserter, but as a spy. I, as a Christian, do not read my Virgil as if I were to rest in it forever or for any considerable time; but as I read I examine diligently to see if I can find anything that tends toward virtuous and honourable conduct, and as I run through the foreshadowings of his poetry, often with the aid of allegory and not without enjoyment, if I find something not compatible with the truth, or obscurely stated, I try to make it clear by the use of reason. But, when it is my good fortune to find something in harmony with our faith, even though it be wrapped up in fiction, I admire it and rejoice in it, and, since our poet himself thought it well to learn even from an enemy, I joyfully accept it and make a note of it. . . .

As to Jerome, on whose authority the sacred canons forbid the reading of Virgil and other poets, I would maintain without hesitation that if he had been ignorant of the poetry and rhetoric against which he inveighs so beautifully he would never have handed down to us the volumes of Holy Writ translated in his sweetly flowing style from both Greek and Hebrew into the Latin tongue. Never could he have spoken against his critics with such brilliancy of ideas and such charm of language. Nor, in his criticism of rhetoric – which I should regard as a fault in another man – would he have made use of the forces of rhetoric.

Furthermore, Aurelius Augustine, exponent and champion of the Christian faith, displayed such knowledge of the poets in all his writings that there is scarcely a single letter or treatise of his which is not crowded with poetic ornament. Not to speak of others, his *City of God* could never have been so strongly and so elaborately fortified against the vanity of the heathen if he had not been familiar with the poets and especially with Virgil. . . .

Now, if you, through the power of your intellect, without a knowledge of the poets can understand grammar or most of the writings of the holy fathers, filled as they are with poetical allusions, do not forbid the reading of Virgil to me and to others, who delight in such studies, but who have not attained to the lofty heights of your genius. If you enjoy reading your books as by a most brilliant illumination, allow me, whose eyes do not admit so much light, in the midst of my darkness to gaze upon the stars of poetry, whereby the darkness of my night is brightened, and to search out a something for the upbuilding of truth and of our faith from amidst those

fables whose bitter rind conceals a savour of exceeding sweetness. If you neither can nor will do this, then, with all good will on my part, leave the poets alone! . . .

So, good-bye! And, according to that verse of Cato – for that apocryphal book has by usage come to be thus known – go right on reading your Virgil, secure, since you are not a priest, against any prohibition by your law. You will find in him delight for your eyes, food for your mind, refreshment for your thought, and you will gain from him no little instruction in the art of eloquence.