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Theological Strands and Directions in Origen's Work

Abstract

In this paper I deal with Origen's theology and more specifically with the basic theological strands and directions in his works *On First Principles* and *Contra Celsum*. Besides I am going to see certain aspects of his theology like divine *oikonomia*, free will, *apokatastasis*, Biblical Interpretation, eschatology and how he responds to Celsus' accusations against Christianity, using arguments of Stoa and Academy. Another question is about Origen's view on the pre-existence of souls and demonology. Finally, I will focus on later writers and theologians who have been influenced by Origen and modified certain aspects of his theology, namely Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius Ponticus and Maximus the Confessor.



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1 Introduction

Origen of Alexandria was born around 185-186 AD at Alexandria of Christian parents.¹ His father, Leonides, who was a literary professor and a well-known Christian, was first imprisoned and then beheaded, during the persecutions of Emperor Septimius Severus in 202. Since Origen was the eldest of his seven brothers, he tried to support his family.² When the position of the headship of Catechetical School became vacant after the departure of Clement from Alexandria, Origen was appointed to fill the vacancy at the age of eighteen. His career as a teacher was successful. His lectures attracted many people, who not only attended his speeches but also wanted to speak with him in private.³

After Origen's disagreement with the patriarch of Alexandria, Demetrius,⁴ Origen had been excommunicated and moved to Caesarea, where Theoctistus, the bishop of Caesarea, appointed him to be an honored teacher of the Church. Origen remained and worked there from 231 until his death.⁵

In 250, during the persecutions of Decius, Origen had been imprisoned and tortured. Although the passing of the former in

¹ Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. by G. W. Butterworth (London, 1936), p. i.

² John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen* (London, 2006), p.3.

³ Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. Butterworth, p. i.

⁴ The reasons and the details of that excommunication will be discussed in next unit.

⁵ Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. Butterworth, p. ii.

251 allowed Origen his release from prison, his health had already deteriorated and he died two years later in his seventieth year.⁶

Origen was a real defender of Orthodoxy against heresy and also effective in persuading his opponents about his views.⁷ Besides, Origen's education was of a high level. His father taught him the Christian Scriptures and pagan Greek literature. He had a broad range of knowledge, provided that he studied Hellenistic literature, mathematics, and astronomy.⁸ Origen was a great exegete of the early church. He not only influenced many later thinkers, but he also introduced a formal biblically based mystical theory.⁹

2 His works and his views

Origen's work is vast in extent.¹⁰ His two works which will be discussed here are *On First Principles* and *Contra Celsum*. The *First Principles* might have been written between 219 and 230. The originality of this work appears in the unity of its purpose, the genius with which it was executed and the enormity of its plan.¹¹ It consists of four books, and it could be considered the first Christian systematic theology handbook.¹²

The title (*First Principles*) can have two meanings. Principles could be 'fundamental principles of being' alluding to a philosophical meaning back to the Pre-Socratics or could be 'elementary principles' of the Christian rule of faith.¹³

⁶ Ibid., p. v.

⁷ Ibid., p. v.

⁸ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (New York, 1998), p. 5.

⁹ Bernard McGinn (ed. and intr.), *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York, 2006), p. 6.

¹⁰ Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. Butterworth, p. iii.

¹¹ Ibid., p. viii.

¹² Joh A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, pp. 36.

¹³ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, p. 18.

Origen argued that God is the Creator and Lawgiver of the Old Testament and also the Father of Jesus Christ. The Son is His logos, wisdom and a second divine hypostasis eternally generated by the Father. The Holy Spirit should be considered the third divine hypostasis who shares in the Father's eternal existence. Thus, further to God the Father, there are two distinct divine hypostases, which either mediate His knowledge to people worthy of it or hide it from those who are unworthy of it.¹⁴

There was a misunderstanding from Origen's opponents about his opinion on the relationship between the Father and the Son. Origen had been accused of introducing a Platonic understanding in the Christian teaching, especially regarding the divine hypostases, given that the second is inferior to the first. These who wanted to oppose Origen stated that similar to Arius and his heresy, Origen considered the Son and Holy Spirit created beings that differ from the angels just in dignity.¹⁵

Nonetheless, it could be said that what Origen says about the subordination of the Son and Holy Spirit derives from the New Testament and not from Platonism. It is in the New Testament where the Son acknowledges his Father's superiority. It is true that Origen turned to Platonism, to speak about the relationship of the three persons in the Trinity. However, he modified it, following a different route: that of biblical faith. He managed to do so by replacing a Platonic continuity of being in an eternally existing cosmos, with the biblical distinction between the Creator and the creation.¹⁶

When Origen deals with Christ in *First Principles*, he makes the distinction between his two natures. On the first hand his deity, provided that he is the Son of God and on the other hand his humanity since he accepted this role to fulfill his divine plan. Christ's incarnation and resurrection constitute a significant

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

part of the divine plan, which derives from the New Testament. God's Logos which is the divine nature, shares in the Father's eternity and incorporeality and also in our human nature.¹⁷

This is what Origen says about the two natures of Christ:

First, we must know this that in Christ there is one nature, his deity because he is the only-begotten Son of the Father, and another human nature, which in very recent times he took upon him to fulfill the divine purpose.¹⁸

Also, Origen insists on the union of Christ's two natures. The union of the Logos with his human soul makes possible the assumption of a human body. In that way, Christ mediates between the absolute and straightforward oneness of God and a large variety of created beings.¹⁹

Dealing with the divine *oikonomia* in *First Principles*, we should focus on Origen's position of a two-stage Creation. First, there are the rational beings which are united with God by free choice. These rational beings became distant from God; some at a high point, some others did not fall very far. These are the angels and the spirits, and they animate the heavenly bodies and serve those who have fallen further and are below them. The second group of rational beings are the demons, or as Origen names them, 'adverse powers.' These are far from God, and their fall makes them distant from Him. Also, there is a middle group of rational beings, under the name 'souls' whose relation with God is cooled.²⁰

The second stage of creation, which is our material cosmos, comes to the surface when we draw attention to the primeval fall of rational spirits. Origen maintains that this creation constitutes a crucial element in God's plan to bring all fallen rational spirits back to him. Although for Origen the cosmos is a place where conflicts and struggles take place, it is still

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁸ Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. Butterworth, p. 15.

¹⁹ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, pp. 25-26.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

beneficent. According to him, the goal of the cosmos is the fact that it provides rational beings with the opportunity to become like God by free choice.²¹

Another crucial issue in *First Principles* is that of eschatology. It is interesting to note that according to Brian Daley, *First Principles* was the reason why Origen had been characterized as the most controversial figure in the development of early Christian eschatology. Daley declares that Origen stresses the relevance of eschatology to the spiritual life of Christians at a greater point compared with all other Christian thinkers.²²

Origen believes that eschatology should be seen in connection with the rest of the divine *oikonomia*, as a continuity of it. Eschatology begins with those cooperating with God's grace and proceeds 'bit by bit and by stages', while 'the amendment will occur and the correction is followed through painstakingly in each individual'. In addition, Origen writes: 'as the eye naturally seeks light and vision and our body seeks by its nature desires food and drink, so our mind harbors a natural and proper desire to know God's truth and to learn the causes of things.'²³

In that way, Origen conveys his view that the Christian hope is a kind of education in continuation.²⁴ Furthermore, it could be said that he presents knowledge for God and His truth as a natural need for humans, drawing on the similes of eyes vision and body-food. Thus, we reach the goal of this education which is not only the knowledge of God but also the procedure of moral purification.²⁵

Nonetheless, there is a point in Origen's view of eschatology which became the object of discussion and disagreement. This is his theory of *apokatastasis* which suggests that all rational

²¹ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

²² Ibid., p. 29.

²³ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

beings will return to their primary union with God since they were at one with Him. This implies that even demons' salvation seems to be a possibility.²⁶

Apokatastasis is a restoration of all things to a previously existing and perfect state and also a cosmic vision, which takes place for all beings simultaneously. Incarnation is the starting point, while the appropriate punishment for all individuals should be in accordance with their sins. When the soul reaches the peak point of understanding and reclaims its intelligible qualities, we have the return to God. In Origen's mind, the fall of souls is not always the same since some of them fell less than others.²⁷

A basic factor in Origen's system is the free will of each rational being.²⁸ Free will implies that each being thinks and acts by his initiatives and desires. Thus, he goes far from God at a primary or minor grade, since throughout his course he commits many or few sins, which place him on the appropriate scale of a graded system. So, if the sins are too many a rational being has to work a lot for his salvation. If his sins are few, he is closer to his salvation.

Free will gave rational beings the 'choice' not to obey the divine law. This disobedience categorized them in angels, human, and demons. The most crucial point, certainly, is the return of demons to the divine unity. However, Origen explains that God could never reject the return of His creatures to the divine unity. So demons could, indeed, coexist in this unity with other rational beings, but the former's punishments will be harsher. Also, the therapies and methods for soul cleansing will be sharper and more intense on them than angels or humans.²⁹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

²⁷ Celia E. Rabinowitz, 'Personal and Cosmic Salvation in Origen', *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 No. 4 (1984), pp. 319-322.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

²⁹ Δημητρίου Ηλ. Μακρυγιάννη, *Η αποκατάσταση του Ωριγένη* (Athens, 2008), p. 194.

Bearing in mind the fact that demons will not be confronted in the same way by God with the other rational beings during the process of *apokatastasis*, it could be said that Origen did not teach the strongest form of the universal salvation, which would suggest the final restoration of devils.³⁰

Furthermore, this new situation will not keep forever, because rational beings will never lose their free will. So, they are still prompt to fall, which will be followed by a new *apokatastasis*. This means that worlds will succeed others and *apokatastasis* will never be stable.³¹

Finally, another important theme in *First Principles* is that of Biblical Interpretation. Here, Origen states that Scripture should share in divine power since its goal is to influence not only a small group of intellectuals but a great mass of humanity.³² Scriptures should attract the majority of people and make them highly interested in seeking their meaning.

Origen believes that literal interpretation is unworthy to give the real meaning of the Scriptures; it is untenable.³³ However, a clarification is needed here, because the literal meaning does not have the same notion for Origen and modern critics. The latter use it to express what the sacred writer was trying to say. On the other hand, Origen means the raw matter of what is said, before any possible attempt of interpretation.³⁴ So, Origen finds literal interpretation incoherent, because it is contrary to Christ's preaching. Consequently, literal meaning is not useful at all.³⁵

Origen introduced a threefold interpretation, in which the Scriptures have the following meanings: bodily, soulish and spiritual. By that, Origen wanted to demonstrate that the

³⁰ John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, pp. 61.

³¹ Δημητρίου Ηλ. Μακρυγιάννη, *Η αποκατάσταση του Ωριγένη*, p. 195.

³² Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, p. 32.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁴ Henri Crouzel, *Origen* tr. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh, 1989), p. 62.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62-63.

Scripture satisfies the needs of rational beings at different levels of progress. God's *Logos* is planned in such a way to include even obstacles and impossibilities to make intelligent interpreters proceed beyond the obvious sense of the text.³⁶

Also, he observes that most of the Bible's narrative is factual. Nonetheless, there are some passages which have only a spiritual meaning. This spiritual interpretation presupposes two elements. Firstly, when interpreting the Scriptures, a dedicated and accurate examination is needed, in combination with obedience to Christ's command, 'Search the Scriptures.' Moreover, secondly, God's assistance is helpful for the faithful to reach wisdom and knowledge. This kind of support is of high importance in understanding the gospels.³⁷

The goal of spiritual exegesis is to bring Christ, who is the hidden treasure in the Scriptures, into view and make readers seek and live with his truth. Besides, spiritual exegesis is a large scale project.³⁸ In Origen's mind, one should concentrate from the beginning to the end of the Bible. Otherwise he will fail to understand the meaning, and this is a sign of heresy. Interpretation is supposed to guide the faithful in the right direction. Moreover, the spiritual approach is the peaceful and secure way of interpretation.³⁹

Finally, the spiritual interpretation should only be understood in conjunction with contemplation and prayer. It is not possible to appreciate and realize the spiritual exegesis without the content of prayer; someone who does so condemns himself to understand nothing.⁴⁰

After analyzing *First Principles*, we shall proceed with *Contra Celsum*. Origen wrote this work to defend Christianity from the

³⁶ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, p. 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁸ R. R. Reno, 'Origen and Spiritual Interpretation', *Pro Ecclesia* Vol. XV, No. 1 (Winter 2006) pp. 111-112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 116-117.

⁴⁰ Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, pp. 74-75.

accusations of Celsus, whose work, *True Word*, was an attack against Christians. We cannot have any certain information about Celsus' life; all Origen himself knew was that Celsus died a long time ago.⁴¹ *Contra Celsum*, which is divided into eight books, was the result of Ambrosius' request, who was a friend of Origen⁴². Ambrosius wanted Origen to write a response not only to Celsus' accusations but also to the persecutions against Christians.⁴³ It could be dated between 244 and 249.⁴⁴

According to Celsus, Jesus could not be divine because of his poverty and the fact that he was the son of Joseph and Mary. The incarnation was just foolishness without any real validity, while Jesus' miracles took place only in the imagination of uneducated people.⁴⁵

Jesus' miracles had been characterized by Celsus as magic arts. He also doubts the apparition of the Holy Spirit during Christ's baptism.⁴⁶ He saw the doctrine of resurrection as a corrupted version of the Greek idea of souls' immortality. Moreover, he compares Plato's views with the Scriptures, maintaining that the former is superior.⁴⁷

Celsus states that Christianity is an illegal body which should be out of existence because Christians violate the common law. In his mind, the Church is a secret society whose doctrine was barbarian. The barbarian nations are of high importance for him, and there are ancient doctrines that passed through the times.⁴⁸ Celsus declares that the gods are one; the fact that we give so many names should be attributed to our ignorance.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, tr. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, 2003), p. xxiv.

⁴² John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, p. 72.

⁴³ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, p. 53.

⁴⁴ John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, p. 72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁶ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, pp. 53-54.

⁴⁷ John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, p. 73.

⁴⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, p. xvi.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

According to Celsus, Christians are rebels who refused the demons and adopted Jesus' view that 'no man can serve two masters.' All that Christians did was to separate themselves from the rest of humankind. Even more, he sees the crucifixion of Christ as the verification of the fantastic element of Christianity, since they take their role in believing in one master very seriously.⁵⁰

Celsus asserts that there is a true doctrine which is that of the ancient tradition, which was supported by ancient races and men of wisdom. This is where the title of his treatise, *The True Word*, alludes. However, Christians misunderstood that and corrupted it.⁵¹ His God is entirely transcendent and has his demons as representatives who deal with the world. These demons are inferior to him and are worshiped as paganism dictates.⁵²

From his side, Origen in *Contra Celsum* attempts to reply to Celsus' accusations. Origen admits that he intended to adopt a contradictory method, refuting Celsus' claims point by point.⁵³ However, what Origen presents in his work is not something like this description.⁵⁴

In truth, the element which makes *Contra Celsum* a work of tremendous importance is mainly its character as a rich work for Christian apologetics, rather than the fact that it is apologetic in itself.⁵⁵ What Origen does is to take an argument of Celsus, and contradict it by adopting the opposite side. This is evident in the fourth book of Origen's work where he speaks about the relation of rational beings and animals:⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. xix.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. xxi.

⁵² Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, p. 53.

⁵³ John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, p. 73.

⁵⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, p. ix.

⁵⁵ John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, p. 73.

⁵⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, p. x.

To all this Celsus adds the following remark: “Accordingly, all things have not been made for a man any more than for the lion or the eagle or the dolphin (...) for this purpose all things have been proportioned, not for another except incidentally, but for the universe as a whole (...). I think I have shown by what has already been said how all things have been made for man... for all things have been created primarily on account of the rational creature”.⁵⁷

After submitting Celsus’ speech, Origen proceeds with his justification. Celsus attacks the opinion that the world exists primarily for men than any other irrational being. His argumentation derives from the Academic tradition, which contradicts the Stoic doctrine. On the other hand, Origen focuses on the Stoic tradition to justify his views.⁵⁸

In *Contra Celsum*, Origen demonstrates that Christians are not as illiterate and uneducated as Celsus claims. According to Origen, Christians not only show acquisition of knowledge regarding Greek philosophy, but they can also use it properly in interpreting the doctrines of the Church.

Also, Origen himself illustrates a whole learning of the traditional arguments of Stoa and Academy and makes efficient use of them, in such a way that he exceeds Celsus. Origen modified former arguments of the Academy against the anthropomorphism of the Epicurean meaning of the gods, to speak about the resurrection of the flesh.⁵⁹

Origen replies to the accusation that Christians seek the reanimation of their corpses, by alluding to the Scriptures and that we should listen to them speaking of the resurrection in a way worthy of God. He also says that no part in them asserts those who died will live again in the flesh, without any change for the better when they rise again from the earth.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 262.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. x-xi.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. xii.

⁶⁰ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, p. 56.

In Celsus' assertion that Jesus borrowed elements from Plato's Crito, Origen replies that even if Jesus came after Plato his opponent's accusation, Moses taught the same doctrine and came before him. Moses taught Platonic philosophy long before Plato did.⁶¹

Finally, Origen responds to Celsus' sarcastic comment about the fact that God will send a fire to the world. Celsus misunderstood this kind of fire; he took it to be destructive, while Origen claims that it would be purifying; it will burn away the dross and reveal the gold. So the punishment for sin is not destruction. On the contrary, sin is punished to save sinners from destruction.⁶²

3 Origen's condemnation

Origen's view about *apokatastasis*, which we looked at when analyzing *On First Principles*,⁶³ constituted a basic argument of his opponents, and it was certainly a specific reason for Origen's condemnation. Nonetheless, there are more elements in Origen's theology which caused controversy. We shall first deal with the other accusations against Origen and then proceed with the story of his rift with Demetrius.

Firstly, Origen's view of the pre-existence of souls, which is associated with *apokatastasis*, was a crucial point in his opponents' justification. According to Origen, all souls had been created by God, as clear minds,⁶⁴ and all rational beings had been created together and equal.⁶⁵

The theory of pre-existence could be seen as a hypothesis which is spread in Origen's view even if he does not speak

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

⁶² Jennifer L. Heckart, 'Sympathy for the Devil? Origen and the End', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 60. 3-4 (3/4, 2007), pp. 55-56.

⁶³ This is discussed on pages 7-8 of this essay.

⁶⁴ Δημητρίου Ηλ. Μακρυγιάννη, *Η αποκατάσταση του Ωριγένη*, p. 141.

⁶⁵ Crouzel, *Origen*, p. 206.

about it. And although one could say that it derives from Plato, there is a distinct difference. Origen mentions ideas of pre-existence very rarely, as opposed to Plato.⁶⁶

Origen claims that the condition in which someone comes to this world is the result of an original fault committed in the pre-existence and he describes a preliminary divine judgement preceding birth. In addition, he uses the story of Jacob and Esau from the Scriptures in order to support his view. The former was loved by God, as opposed to the latter that was hated by Him at birth.⁶⁷

Also, Origen's view about the transmigration of souls, or incarnation as it is mostly known, was another charge against him. According to Origen's opponents, his theory of incarnation taught the transmigration of humans' souls to animals,⁶⁸ which was a punishment for sins.⁶⁹ However, we should bear in mind that at some high point Origen was misunderstood, especially if we concentrate on other sources like Rufinus, who maintains that Origen rejects the transmigration because it is contrary to Christian faith. Rufinus also said that Origen saw animals as secondary creatures and it would be impossible for sinners to receive an animal body.⁷⁰

Even Jerome, who confronted Origen with hostility, admitted that Origen rejected such a theory. So, we should consider that the incarnation is under dispute as it is presented by anti-Origenists, since Origen rejects even the transmigration of human souls to other people.⁷¹ There are two possible reasons why Origen had been accused of teaching such a theory: first, the misunderstanding of his view on the pre-existence of

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 207.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 209.

⁶⁸ Δημητρίου Ηλ. Μακρυγιάννη, *Η αποκατάσταση του Ωριγένη*, p. 151.

⁶⁹ Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. Butterworth, p. xv.

⁷⁰ John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, p. 206.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 206.

rational creatures; second, the fact that in his interpretation of the Scriptures, God created all rational beings with free will.⁷²

His view about spiritual and material bodies was another element which was used by his accusers. For Origen, the body is a kind of cover for the soul to adopt and live in our material world. The soul, according to Origen, is made of a substance that differs than anything in world, and the body is needed to be its garment. However, when the soul is in Heaven, it will need a different body which is suitable for its new conditions.⁷³ Bodies must be appropriate to the sphere in which they have to live and in another spiritual world humans will need spiritual bodies. As a result, there are two kinds of bodies: spiritual and material.⁷⁴

Again, we should note the misunderstanding which prevailed in this charge. In his translation, Rufinus did not succeed in giving the correct meaning, since he omitted the phrase 'spiritual bodies' on purpose.⁷⁵

We shall now deal with Origen's demonology. Origen asserts that Satan, who was first an angel, had been created by the same substance as all other human beings. He fell because he sinned, but he kept his substance. So, he is effective in tempting human beings and evoking tensions and obstacles in their lives, and a single person without divine help will never be able to defeat evil.⁷⁶

In Origen's mind Satan, and his followers, demons, are given some power and freedom, but are not allowed to do whatever they want because they are prevented by divine powers.⁷⁷ Their role is to test human beings and give human souls the opportunity to choose between the return to God and

⁷² Ibid., p. 206.

⁷³ Δημητρίου Ηλ. Μακρυγιάννη, *Η αποκατάσταση του Ωριγένη*, p. 168.

⁷⁴ Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. Butterworth, p. xiv.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. xv.

⁷⁶ Δημητρίου Ηλ. Μακρυγιάννη, *Η αποκατάσταση του Ωριγένη*, p. 179.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 176-8.

proceeding further away. And this is for Origen the function that they have to play in their cosmic presence.⁷⁸

Origen lived when people were not of a high education level; the circumstances were entirely different from nowadays. He described Satan's actions to trap humans, because his times demanded it. It was an ideal means to convince faithful people about the salvation of their souls. However, today's conditions are changed; all we have to do to avoid Satan is just avoid speaking about him. We shall teach the route of wisdom and virtue.⁷⁹

A last accusation is if hell is endless; something which was stated by Origen, according to his opponents. However there also lies a misunderstanding in that, which is attributed to the wrong notion of the word 'eternal'. For Origen, the word eternal lasts not forever, but only for the current century. This does not include other centuries.⁸⁰

We shall now turn to Origen's rift with Demetrius and the condemnation which could be seen as one of the saddest episodes in the history of the Christian Church.⁸¹ Around 215, Alexander, bishop of Jerusalem, and Theoctistus, bishop of Caesarea, invited Origen to preach in the church. He accepted their proposal and went, but Demetrius disapproved. According to him, Origen was a layman and could not teach; so, he requested Origen's return to Alexandria.⁸²

In the meantime, Theoctistus and Alexander ordained Origen, presbyter; an event which caused the final rift with Demetrius, who considered this ordination noncanonical. Demetrius summoned a synod of Egyptian bishops, in which they commonly decided to prohibit Origen to teach in Alexandria.⁸³

⁷⁸ John A. McGuckin, *A-Z of Origen*, p. 86.

⁷⁹ Δημητρίου Ηλ. Μακρυγιάννη, *Η αποκατάσταση του Ωριγένη*, p. 179.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁸¹ Cyril C. Richardson, 'The Condemnation of Origen', *Church History* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Mar 1937), p. 50.

⁸² Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. Butterworth, pp. i-ii.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

Demetrius possibly used the fact of the uncanonical ordination and the doctrines of Origen described above, as basic reasons of his excommunication. However, Demetrius' motives should be detected elsewhere.⁸⁴ Origen's reputation was becoming greater and greater. Prominent people wanted Origen to visit their place and teach. His fame was spread beyond the Christian community.⁸⁵ Inevitably, Demetrius should do something to prevent Origen's reputation from surpassing his own. Origen's excommunication seemed to be an ideal solution.

Finally, his condemnation acquired the power of an Ecumenical Council: that of the Fifth in 553.⁸⁶ After the condemnation, the Emperor Justinian ordered the destruction of all Origen's books.⁸⁷

4 Origen's followers

Origen influenced a broad range of theologians. They had not just been influenced by Origen, but they also modified some elements in their theology by their beliefs. The three writers who will be discussed here are Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius Ponticus and Maximus the Confessor.

Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs in the form of fifteen homilies similarly to Origen.⁸⁸ In his writings, darkness seems to be an allegory of the darkness of Exodus in combination with the image of night in the Song of Songs. For Origen, darkness is an obstacle which keeps us distant from the light of the Trinity, whereas for Gregory the

⁸⁴ Cyril C. Richardson, 'The Condemnation of Origen', p. 50.

⁸⁵ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, p. 15.

⁸⁶ Δημητρίου Ηλ. Μακρυγιάννη, *Η αποκατάσταση του Ωριγένη*, p. 225.

⁸⁷ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, pp. 65-66.

⁸⁸ Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, p. 13.

cloud of Sinai is a means of communion with God.⁸⁹ In addition, the fact that God appears first as light and then as darkness denotes that there is no vision of the divine essence and that union with God is a way of surpassing vision.⁹⁰

Although Gregory is an Origenist, he adds in his theology some elements which distinguish him from Origen. Initially, Gregory states that God is creator of all; this is something which makes him differ from the principles of Platonism and the Bible. Also, Gregory argued that since the divine nature was infinite, it could not be fully controlled by the human mind.⁹¹

Origen insists that freedom is the condition of the possibility of all virtue. Also, he maintains that the final stage of humanity will return to its initial state. Nonetheless, Gregory takes over this pattern and freedom appears to be more strongly emphasized than Origen. Yet, according to Gregory, the image of God in man belongs to his free will rather than in his intellectuality.⁹²

Gregory added to Origen's term *apokatastasis* the term *epectasis*. For Gregory the goal of life is the imitation of God. He states that since God is infinite, there is no point of rest or end.⁹³

Although Gregory accepts that human progress returns back to the beginning, he rejects the pre-existence of souls that Origen supported. Also, whereas Origen believes that a fall always remains a possibility for the human soul, Gregory says that it is possible to reach a condition of spirit, where the unique perspective is the upward movement.⁹⁴ Sin for Gregory derives from the devil's envy of humanity and the devil's attempt to corrupt human free will and turn us to sin. Origen maintains

⁸⁹ Vladimir Lossky, 'Darkness and Light in the Knowledge of God', *In the Image and Likeness of God* (New York, 1974), p. 37.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁹¹ Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (Routledge, 1999), p. 18.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

that even after death, there is always the possibility of change and sin. But according to Gregory, instability is the permanent status of the created spirit; and after some time upward mobility becomes the only possibility.⁹⁵

A common element is that both Origen and Gregory maintain that the combination of human and divine nature in Christ is to be found gradually and in stages; and that this nature of Christ proceeded from a divisive model to a unitary one.⁹⁶ A further common element between Origen and Gregory appears in the latter's treatise *De Fato*, where he illustrates a close relation to fatalists and sound knowledge of the response to fatalism. So, his approach to pagan positions is reminiscent of Origen's in *Contra Celsum*. In language, theme, and ideas, Gregory demonstrates influences from Plato similarly to Origen.⁹⁷

Regarding the book of Exodus, Origen considers it to be a kind of evidence of future promise. As opposed to him, Gregory sees it as proof of God's inaccessibility. For Origen, the back parts of God (*posterior*) signify things that are done in later days. Gregory gives Exodus an apophatic sense.⁹⁸

The next writer who was influenced by Origen was Evagrius Ponticus. Evagrius (345-379) organized the ascetical teaching of the Desert Fathers into a systematic theology with Origen being the basis. Evagrius considered that theology consists of three interdependent stages: first, the ascetical life, in which the soul has to confront passions in order to acquire virtue and reach tranquillity. Then, monk is prepared of two stages of the contemplative life, which are the created universe and the endless contemplation of the Trinity and its mystery.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 100-101.

⁹⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, pp. 55-56.

Evagrius' system is a pedagogic one which comprises of the threefold division: ascetic practice, natural contemplation and theology. Evagrius could be characterized as unsystematic when he presents the sacred Mysteries of Christianity.¹⁰⁰ Also, Evagrius' *Gnostic Chapters* should not be seen as a theological system, because of the fact that the six centuries are incomplete.¹⁰¹

Evagrius' three-part system suggests a spiritual procedure in which one proceeds from ethical and ascetic practices to the vision of God. It could be seen as a kind of complex journey with a different destination for each one.¹⁰²

Even if Evagrius' view on *isochristos* is under dispute,¹⁰³ it is still worth noting, due to its closeness to Origen's *apokatastasis*. As we have seen, what Origen said is that all rational beings will have a second chance and they can pursue their salvation through punishment, in accordance with their sins. So, even the devil could pursue his salvation. Evagrius goes even further, by equalizing Christ with all other rational beings; even Satan. When all creation is reconciled to God, all these differences between rational beings (including Satan) and Christ will be eliminated. Consequently, all rational beings will be equal to Christ.¹⁰⁴

Origen was certainly a clear precedent for Evagrius. Nonetheless, while Origen draws attention to the implications of public worship, Evagrius focuses on ascetic practices.¹⁰⁵

Finally, the next writer in whom we can see Origen's influence is Maximus the Confessor. Maximus (580-662) is a major writer who successfully associated the patristic heritage, later Greek theology and mystical teaching.¹⁰⁶ Commonly to Origen,

¹⁰⁰ A. M. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (Routledge, 2006), p. 27.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁶ Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, p. 408.

Maximus had a profound knowledge of classical philosophy, especially Plato. So, many of his ideas derive from the classical tradition.¹⁰⁷

Maximus shows familiarity with the Evagrius view of *isochristos*, which as we have seen, is a kind of progression of Origen's *apokatastasis*. Nonetheless, Maximus did not only deal with and sustain Evagrius' spirituality, but he sought the more questionable metaphysics of the soul and the cosmos to replace it.¹⁰⁸

What Maximus takes from Evagrius does not appear in his work without changes. Evagrius was firmly attached to the Origenist tradition, with which Maximus not only disagreed, but of which he was a great critic.¹⁰⁹

In regard to Origen's cosmic theology, Maximus tries to expand it, adopting a more adequate cosmic theology with technical and philosophical strands. For Maximus, Origenism is wrong because of its inaccuracy. But he corrects it gently, because similarly to Origenist monks, Maximus shares many of their views. They commonly confront the world as a place of God's love and providence. Also, we should fulfil the nature of rational beings in order to return to unity. And lastly, he agrees with Origenist monks in adopting an understanding of the world, where the prominent element is the Incarnate Word.¹¹⁰

Maximus understands Origen's cosmology as a triad; this is becoming-rest-movement. He replaces it with a new one which is becoming-movement-rest. According to him, it represents more accurately the condition of created beings.¹¹¹

Finally, the doctrine of *logoi*, which is of high importance in Origen's theology (they constitute a basic object for natural contemplation) in Maximus, they appear to have anti-Origenist

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (Routledge, 1996), p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-38.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

turn. This happens because his opinion of the accuracy of the *logoi* does not match with Origen's view that the world is necessarily fallen.¹¹²

5 Conclusions

Origen was a unique figure in the Church's history, and his contribution is indubitably high. Although he is not included in the calendar of Christian saints, he maintains an obvious place. There is no Father of the Church whose work is more fruitful and beneficial for study.¹¹³ The beauty of his writings derives from their creativity and not in their dogmatic nature.¹¹⁴ Origen lived in a period when political and spiritual challenges came to the surface. Together with his pastoral work, Origen sought to denote dogmatic formulations of the new religion. Paganism was still a significant threat to Christianity, while Greek philosophy and different schools of thought were developing.¹¹⁵ Despite his condemnation, Origen remains a great writer whose work influenced later authors. He was a pioneer, and his work stands as a landmark in the Christian religion.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹¹³ Origen, *On First Principles*, tr. and intr. Butterworth, p. vi.

¹¹⁴ Celia E. Rabinowitz, 'Personal and Cosmic Salvation in Origen', p. 328.

¹¹⁵ Panayiotis Tzamalikos, 'Origen and the Stoic View of Time', *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 52, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1991), p. 560.

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