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The Human Embryo and the Problem of Evil. Some Reflections on the Teaching of Tertullian and Origen

Abstract

The human embryo and the problem of evil. Some reflections on the teaching of Tertullian and Origen¹. This paper investigates how Christian discourse about the human embryo intersects with the answer to the question: How can God be absolved from the evil that exists in the world? Until finding the middle way in this issue, Christian theology in the early Church goes through two extremes: traducianism (represented by Tertullian) and pre-existentialism (represented by Origen



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and gnostics). Even if both theories can be suspected of an influence of the ancient philosophy (the first of Stoicism, the second of Platonism), they have their source rather in a certain interpretation of the texts of Holy Scripture (for example, Gen. 25, 21-26 - the rivalry between Jacob and Esau in their mother's womb). In those times, the problem of evil had an acute form due to the Gnostic teachings, and the interactions of Christian authors with this current of ideas also left their mark on the status of the human embryo. And in this matter, we refer to two essential questions: when exactly does the soul come? And where does it come from? The purpose of this study is to reassess the place of prenatal anthropology in the first three Christian centuries.

Keywords

human embryo, theodicy, traducianism, pre-existence, early Christianity

1 Introduction

The status of the human embryo and the problem of evil in the world (or theodicy) were two great challenges for Christian theologians and throughout human thought. The questions about the human embryo are over 2500 years old and go back in time to the first physicians of Hippocratic tradition. Over time, physicians, philosophers, theologians, lawyers, and embryologists have contributed to the ethical debates regarding the human embryo and its identity.

Theodicy proposes the following formulation: if there is an almighty and good God, then how is evil explained? The present study aims to analyze how the answer to this question intersects

with the status of the human embryo in the writings of two Christian authors, the Latin Tertullian († 220), and the Greek Origen († 254).

The purpose of this approach invites to reflection: can we learn anything from the doctrinal mistakes of the two authors on the two topics? Does Orthodox theology have a coherent and reasoned discourse on the human embryo and its status? And if it has a coherent speech now, has it always been that way?

2 God and the problem of evil in Tertullian

How can man be the image of his Creator and commit sin? This is the nuance of the problem of evil in Christianity. Tertullian is aware in the first place that it is precise because of this question that all heresies arose, which is not insignificant for an intellectual whose essential work is the fight against deviations from faith. For example, Marcion was compromised because of the proud scrutiny of the origin of evil².

Before moving on, a prerequisite must be mentioned: explaining the origin of evil is beyond the capacity of human reason³ and can lead to heresy if it is a too confident step that does not seek the truth based on Christian Revelation and, therefore, cannot be contradicted. However, Tertullian intends to show his opponents that what is impossible for man, inconceivable for his reason, can be possible for God (cf. Mk 10:27). Therefore, what

² TERTULLIANUS, *Adversus Marcionem*, I, 2, 2 [introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par René Braun, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 365, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1990, pp. 108-109].

³ TERTULLIANUS, *Adversus Marcionem*, I, 3, 2 [cited edition, pp. 112-113].

seems foolish to man may be wise to God⁴. Behind these paradoxes inspired by the Holy Apostle Paul, we must not see the “option” of an anti-rationalist, supporting the faith for no other reason whenever an intellectual difficulty arises. The famous “credibile est, quia ineptum est”⁵ (it is to be believed, even if it is absurd) is rather the indication for the believer subject to God’s will and discernment, a suitable expression where human intelligence feels outdated. Unlike a challenge, the absurdity (ineptum) in question becomes, in a way, a spiritual condition for access to faith. God captures and disturbs the habits of human thought, but He does not mock reason⁶.

The solution proposed by Tertullian refers neither to the pre-existence of a matter, which God necessarily used in the creation of the world (solution proposed by Hermogenes⁷, who denies God’s

⁴ “But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;” – I Cor. 1, 27.

⁵ TERTULLIANUS, *De carne Christi*, V, 4 [bilingual edition, introductory study, translation and notes by Dionisie Pîrvuloiu, in TERTULIAN, *Tratate dogmatice și apologetice/ Dogmatic and Apologetic Treatises*, col. *Tradiția creștină/ The Christian Tradition*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2007, pp. 250-251].

⁶ Jérôme ALEXANDRE, *Une chair pour la gloire. L’anthropologie réaliste et mystique de Tertullien*, Paris, Editions Beauchesne, 2001, p. 167.

⁷ Hermogenes could not admit that God could have created the world *ex nihilo*. He had to assume the creation of the world from a pre-existing matter, without beginning, in order to avoid attributing to God, even indirectly, the responsibility of evil. By this means, in fact, he saved the goodness of the Creator, but, on the other hand, he sacrificed His freedom, God being put in front of a necessity, independent of His will. “Liberty, not necessity is appropriate to God” [*Adversus Hermogenem*, XVI, 4 [bilingual edition, introductory study, translation and notes by Dionisie Pîrvuloiu, in TERTULIAN, *Tratate dogmatice și apologetice/ Dogmatic and Apologetic Treatises*, col. *Tradiția creștină/ The Christian Tradition*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2007, p. 373] answers Tertullian, who does not hesitate to prefer a God who would possibly be good only to a

freedom), nor to the dualism applied to the divine sphere preached by Marcion⁸, who denies the goodness of the Creator. The African advocate saves divine freedom to measure the full sphere of human freedom: it is the most essential feature of the resemblance between the Creator and his favourite creature. Created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), man has as a seal planted in the soul, i.e., free will (“arbitrium libertas”) and autonomy (“potestas”), replica in the created plan of divine features⁹.

When Tertullian tries to link the existence of evil to the misuse of freedom (either that of fallen angels or of man), he is countered that God, if he was good and omniscient, could only know that freedom could be misused. The answer of the Christian author capitalizes on the “emancipation” (Lat. “emancipio”) that God grants to man, called to be master over creation and over himself. This “emancipation” implies a certain “withdrawal” from God, in order for man to be good also by choice, not only by creation: “Total freedom of choice has been granted to him in both directions, so that, master of himself, he constantly faces good to keep it and evil to choose to avoid it”¹⁰.

God who would not be free: “It is more worthy to believe that God is free, even as the Author of evil, than that He is a slave.” (*Adversus Hermodem*, XIV, 2 [cited edition, p. 367]).

⁸ He claimed that there are two gods: one creative, the lowest (assimilated to the God of the Old Testament), and a “foreign” one to what is happening in the world, called the Most High, that is revealed in the New Testament through Jesus Christ – Cf. Stylianos G. PAPADOPOULOS, *Patrologie/ Patrology*, vol. I (Introduction, Second and Third Centuries), translated by Adrian Marinescu, Bucharest, Byzantine Publishing House, 2006, pp. 223-224.

⁹ TERTULLIANUS, *Adversus Marcionem*, II, 6, 3 [texte critique, traduction et notes par René Braun, în *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 368, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991, p. 48].

¹⁰ TERTULLIANUS, *Adversus Marcionem*, II, 6, 6 [cited edition, p. 53].

Here the *raison d'être* of the law given by God takes shape, appreciated not as a prohibition meant to test human fragility, but as a means for man to prove his freedom "through voluntary obedience"¹¹. If God had not imposed a law on man, how could he have exercised his freedom?¹² Moreover, man did not undertake, by the mere fact of the existence of the law, not to obey; he was tempted to do so by an angel. The role of the tempting angel is not in fact used to diminish the responsibility of a man now seen as a victim, but to assert the full measure of his freedom; it serves to reveal to man the strength and not the weakness in the face of evil. If man has yielded, while he was, on the contrary, able to remain strong in the face of adversity, is this not the proof of his whole liberty, and therefore of his full responsibility¹³?

Surely one can move the imputation of evil from man to the devil in his capacity as instigator of sin, so that the blame may also fall on the Creator, in His capacity as creator of the fallen angel. Without forcing the limits of any philosophy, Tertullian presents the authority of Scripture as a definitive answer. Through the prophetic voice, this shows that the angel, however blessed he may have been (including free will), was filled with iniquity and sinned (*cf.* Ezekiel 28: 11-19)¹⁴.

Tertullian's most significant endeavor was to absolve God of responsibility for the existence of evil. We can see that Tertullian, apart from this defense of the goodness of the Creator, does not try to venture into in-depth explanations. Did he not declare from the beginning that the subject was beyond the power of the human mind? Man's freedom and, before him, the freedom of the angel, remain the essential source of argument, along with the

¹¹ TERTULLIANUS, *Adversus Marcionem*, II, 6, 7 [cited edition, p. 55].

¹² J. ALEXANDRE, *Une chair pour la gloire...*, p. 169.

¹³ TERTULLIANUS, *Adversus Marcionem*, II, 8, 2-3 [cited edition, pp. 61-63].

¹⁴ TERTULLIANUS, *Adversus Marcionem*, II, 10, 2-4 [cited edition, pp. 73-77].

Scripture that supports his thesis: man and all creation, works of an absolutely good and just God, are fundamentally good. The most important manifestation of this goodness towards man is the gift of freedom, through which man is able to actualize the good planted in creation. If man misused this freedom, it is precise because he was completely free and not because he was weak or irresponsible¹⁵.

3 The life of the human embryo in Tertullian

How does the vision discussed above intersect with the issue of the human embryo? Where the soul comes from in the embryo and when it comes (the moment of life) can be points of a possible answer. God is neither responsible for the rise of evil nor does He contribute to its spread throughout human history. With this teaching in mind, Tertullian fights against the Gnostics, who professed the preexistence of the soul and the descent into bodies as a result of a mistake, a conception closely related to the dualism of the divine sphere that tried to explain the rise of evil¹⁶ which I mentioned earlier.

Thus, Tertullian comes to understand the act of conception, i.e., bringing a new human being on the world stage, and at the same time, the motive for the transmission of ancestral sin, as an exclusive fact of the human being:

“How, then, is a living being conceived? Is the substance of both body and soul formed together at one and the same time? Or

¹⁵ J. ALEXANDRE, *Une chair pour la gloire...*, p. 172.

¹⁶ For more details, see Roelof van den BROEK, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 168-184; Simone PÉTRÉMENT, *A Separate God. The Christian Origin of Gnosticism*, translated by Carol Harrison, New York, HarperCollins Publisher, 1990, pp.171-180.

does one of them precede the other in natural formation? We indeed maintain that both are conceived, and formed, and perfectly simultaneously, as well as born together; and that not a moment's interval occurs in their conception so that a prior place can be assigned to either. Judge, in fact, of the incidents of man's earliest existence by those which occur to him at the very last. As death is defined to be nothing else than the separation of body and soul, life, which is the opposite of death, is susceptible to no other definition than the conjunction of body and soul. If the severance happens at one and the same time to both substances by means of death, so the law of their combination ought to assure us that it occurs simultaneously to the two substances by means of life. Now we allow that life begins with conception; life taking its commencement at the same moment and place that the soul does. Thus, then, the processes which act together to produce separation by death, also combine in a simultaneous action to produce life."¹⁷.

This text is historically fundamental since the authorship of the principle that derives from it (the original coexistence of body and soul) is classically attributed to St. Gregory of Nyssa¹⁸. However, our analysis reveals that this principle goes back not to the

¹⁷ TERTULLIANUS, *De anima*, XXVII, 1-3, [translated into Romanian by Rev. David Popescu, introduction, notes and indexes by Prof. Nicolae Chițescu, in P.S.B. vol. 3, Bucharest, IBMBOR Publishing House, 1981, p. 297]. For the English version, *A Treatise on the Soul*, translated by Peter Holmes, D.D., https://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-22.htm#P2853_978337, retrieved on June 28th, 2021.

¹⁸ At least this was the conclusion of an article, E. STÉPANOU, „La coexistence initiale du corps et de l'âme d'après saint Grégoire de Nysse et saint Maxime l'Homologète”, in *Echos d'Orient*, tome 31, 167/1932, pp. 304-315, which brought into play the teachings of Saints Gregory of Nyssa and of Maximus the Confessor. This is also the perspective adopted by Marie-Hélène CONGOURDEAU, „L'embryon est-il une personne?”, in *Communio. Revue Catholique Internationale*, Vol. IX, 6/1984, pp. 103-116; IDEM,

Cappadocians, but to Tertullian and, through it, to the apologists of the second Christian century¹⁹. Indeed, he first proposed a symmetrical definition of conception and death, showing that if death is the separation of the soul from the body, then its opposite, life, can only be the union between soul and body. Birth and death are strictly symmetrical.

Speaking of a seed of the soul and one of the body, Tertullian tackles the terms of controversy of that time. Doctors wondered about the origin of sex: is it determined by the male or female seed, the earliest or the most abundant? In *De anima*, the couple (the male seed - the female seed) is transposed into the hylemorphic scheme²⁰ and becomes the couple (the seed of the soul - the seed of the body). In this way, Tertullian exposes one of the main metaphysical difficulties of mediated life. If there is a distance between the coming into existence of the soul and that of the body, the substances - this expresses the different stages of the embryo - will be different (from the original point of view). In other words, the embryo will first be a body, then an animated body. In this context, what is striking in the mediated animation

„L'animation de l'embryon humain chez Maxime le Confesseur”, in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, vol. 111, 5/1989, pp. 693-709. See the same conclusions in Marie-Hélène CONGOURDEAU, „L'embryon dans les premiers siècles chrétiens”, in: *L'enfant à naître. Tertullien, Grégoire, Augustin, Maxime, Cassiodore, Pseudo-Augustin*, introduction, notes, guide thématique par Marie-Hélène CONGOURDEAU, col. *Les pères dans la foi*, vol. 78, Paris, Jean-Paul Migne Edition, 2000, p. 30.

¹⁹ Philippe CASPAR, *L'embryon au II^{ème} siècle*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002, p. 98.

²⁰ Hylomorphism: everything that exists is made up of matter (passive principle) and form (active principle) - Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, 194a, [translated with introduction, commentary and notes by William Charlton, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 27].

is the inexplicable change in the nature of the embryo. Why must there be a body first, then an animated body?²¹

It should be noted that the male seed, being the active principle in the above hylemorphic scheme, produces the seed of the embryo's body and soul alone, which implies a materialist view of the soul²²:

“Through this natural function of the sexes, through which the man and the woman unite, we speak of the common bed, we know that at the same time the soul and the flesh are fulfilled by each other, the soul by impulse, the flesh by act. Therefore, man being entirely conceived by the only impulse of both, consumes the act of mating, the seed of man having the liquid of the corporeal substance, and the warmth of that of the soul.”²³.

Sexual union is, therefore, the moment when the seed of the body and that of the soul begin a process of development in the woman's womb²⁴. This simultaneity is discussed in the following paragraph:

„But the truth is the seminations of the two substances are inseparable in point of time, and their effusion is also one and the

²¹ P. CASPAR, *L'embryon au II^{ème} siècle*, pp. 115-116.

²² This theory has been called „traducianism” and means that the soul comes from the parents, more precisely from the father; all human souls are pre-contained in Adam.

²³ TERTULLIANUS, *De anima*, XXVII, 5, [cited edition p. 297-298].

²⁴ In *De anima*, XXV, 9, Tertullian keeps the idea of an inheritance of psychological characters, speaking of the “soul resemblance between parents and children”. But only the father alone transmits the soul. However, Tertullian retains the idea of a maternal psychic legacy that he uses as a valuable argument against animation at birth. So what would it be like to have an embryo animated only at birth, if it is inherited from its mother? Moreover, it is difficult to observe how Tertullian articulates the statement according to which the father alone ensures the transmission of the soul with the assertion of a psychic inheritance of maternal origin. – Cf. P. CASPAR, *L'embryon au II^{ème} siècle*, p. 114.

same, in consequence of which a community of gender is secured to them; so that the course of nature, whatever that be, shall draw the line (for the distinct sexes). Certainly in this view we have an attestation of the method of the first two formations, when the male was moulded and tempered in a completer way, for Adam was first formed; and the woman came far behind him, for Eve was the later formed. So that her flesh was for a long time without specific form (such as she afterwards assumed when taken out of Adam's side); but she was even then herself a living being, because I should regard her at that time in soul as even a portion of Adam. Besides, God's *afflatus* would have animated her too, if there had not been in the woman a transmission from Adam of his soul as well as of his flesh"²⁵.

Here Tertullian says two things. First, the soul and body are sown at the same time in the womb. Then the body and the soul have a different temporality of development. The idea is bright and fundamental. This allows Tertullian to host an aspect of Greek embryology, the slower development of girls. For, even if their bodies grow more slowly than that of boys, female embryos are animated from the first moment, just like male embryos. What is found here is a reversal of the Aristotelian doctrine of ontogeny. Enthusiasm no longer depends on the organization of matter but is given from the very beginning, in the first act, independent of the biological contingencies of development²⁶.

²⁵ TERTULLIANUS, *De anima*, XXXVI, 4-5, [cited edition, pp. 310-311]. For the English version, *A Treatise on the Soul*, translated by Peter Holmes, D.D., https://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-22.htm#P2853_978337, retrieved on June 28th, 2021.

²⁶ P. CASPAR, *L'embryon au II^{ème} siècle*, p. 123.

4 Origen, preexistence and human embryo

The issue of the human embryo at Origen meets with the preexistence of the soul or at least with the *aporia* related to this subject. In an allegorical interpretation of the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20: 1-15), Origen assumes in the verses of the eleventh hour that they were inactive, without work (“ἀργοί”), the existence of a teaching, ineffable, hidden (“ἀπόρητον λόγον”), about the soul. He wonders how inactive workers can be almost all day if the soul has been “sown” (συσπειρω²⁷) with the body. Then follows the decisive question about the place (“market” – Matt. 20: 3) outside the vineyard where the workers were found. Origen considers that perhaps (“μήποτε”) the place outside the vineyard is “ἡ χώρα τῶν πρὸ τοῦ σώματος ψυχῶν” (“the region of souls before [their sending into] the body”)²⁸. And the vine symbolizes not only the places in earthly life, but also those places where souls go after separation from the body, places where souls “do not spend in idleness”²⁹ (“οὐ γὰρ ἐν ἀργίᾳ εἰσὶν”). Instead, the souls in the “market” stood

²⁷ In original it appears in the passive aorist indicative, the third person, singular - συνεσπάρη.

²⁸ Following Origen’s argument, the preposition πρὸ in “πρὸ τοῦ σώματος” should be taken, it seems, in a more nuanced sense than in terms of temporal priority. Those (souls) who are “of the vine”, so to speak, can be both in the body and outside the body and can still be “of the vine”. Thus, ‘πρὸ τοῦ σώματος’ could also be translated as “outside the body”.

²⁹ Origen argues this by the example of Samuel, who performs the work of a prophet both outside the body (I Sam. 28, 12-19), and that of Jeremiah, who prayed for the people and the holy city even after death (II Mac. 15, 14-16).

patiently (“μακροθύμως ἔστηκένας”) all day and waited (“περιμένειν”) until evening for the one who had bargained³⁰.

What determines Origen to clarify his thinking are therefore matters of exegesis. Scripture raises a number of aporias that deserve to be confronted. We will refer to one of them, which interferes with the issue of the human embryo.

This aporia concerns the rivalry between Jacob and Esau (Esau) from the womb of their mother and the choice of the former by God even before birth. The Gnostics used this text to confirm the doctrine of predestination: there are different natures of people, some are good by nature (Jacob), and others are bad by nature (Esau). Against this reading, Origen defends at the same time the justice of God (Who could not unjustly free Esau) and the freedom of man (who is responsible for what happens to him³¹): if Jacob is chosen and Esau is rejected even before they have the opportunity to act, it means that this judgment corresponds to an act performed before their coming into the world.³² In fact, there are places in the New Testament that seem to speak of the

³⁰ ORIGEN, *Commentaria in Evangelium secundum Matthaeum*, XV, 34-35, in *Origenes Werke*, vol. 10, edited by Erich Klostermann, col. „Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte”, vol. 40, J. C. Hinrichs, Leipzig, 1935, pp. 448-453. The *Commentary on Matthew* is one of the last works of the Alexandrian author, along with *Contra Celsum*, both offering the highest degree of maturity of Origen’s thinking about the Christian faith.— Cf. Ronald E. HEINE, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 222.

³¹ ORIGEN, *Despre principii/ On First Principles*, III, 1, 22; III, 1, 1 [introduction, translation and notes by Teodor Bodogae, in P.S.B. vol. 8, Bucharest, IBMBOR Publishing House, 1982, p. 212 and pp. 188-189]; Freedom presupposes responsibility, for without it the moral fact is not possible – Cf. ORIGEN, *Contra Iulium Celsus/ Contra Celsum*, IV, 3 [introductory study, translation and notes by Teodor Bodogae, in P.S.B. vol. 9, Bucharest, IBMBOR Publishing House, 1984, p. 232].

³² ORIGEN, *Despre principii/ On First Principles*, I, 7, 4 [cited edition, p. 100] și II, 9, 7 [cited edition, pp. 166-167].

coming of the soul into the flesh: "He was a man sent from God, his name was John" (Jn 1: 6) is explained by the fact that "the soul of John is older than his body, that he existed before, and that he was sent to bear witness of the Light."³³

It can be seen from the above aporia that exegesis encounters two related problems that constantly recur: the problem of evil and the diversity of the world.

The problem of evil (a central problem in Gnosticism) brings into question the fact of apologizing to God for the existence of evil. The Gnostics approach this discussion by assuming the occurrence of an accident within the divinity, which leads to a doubling of the image of God: the transcendent God remains inaccessible, and the demiurge bears the responsibility for evil. Origen, also in this chapter, follows Philo, who also implies the existence of an accident, but outside the divinity and after creation: God makes a perfect creation; an accident occurs in it; God is trying to repair the damage through a second creation.

As for the diversity of the world, it can be perceived as an injustice. Gnostics approach the problem by postulating the existence of two different natures of souls: good souls receive a good condition, and bad ones receive a bad condition³⁴. The dilemma arises: either God is unjust because He imposes different conditions on His creatures or people are determined by their nature, and there is no free will. Adopting the hypothesis of a pre-existence, from which would flow the current condition of the incarnate soul, Origen can reject both the injustice of God and Gnostic

³³ ORIGEN, *Comentariu la Evanghelia după Ioan/ Commentary on the Gospel of John*, II, 181, [introductory study, translation and notes by Teodor Boddogae, in P.S.B. vol. 7, Bucharest, IBMBOR Publishing House, 1982, p. 165].

³⁴ ORIGEN, *Despre principii/ On First Principles*, II, 5, 1-3 [cited edition, pp. 134-137].

determinism. The diversity of human conditions stems from free conduct, prior to coming into this world. The theme of the accident is reunited: the first creation being damaged by accident (the wandering and “coldness” of some souls), God organizes a second creation according to the behavior of the souls in their previous condition³⁵.

When Origen enters into these disputes, the issue of the soul is still an open question. He himself states it several times. In the *preface* to the treatise *On Principles*, he states: “The question of whether the soul is born through a seed, in the sense that its being or substance would be contained in its own bodily seed, or whether it has another origin, and in this case, whether it is born or not, if it comes somehow out of the body or not, – the church teaching³⁶ did not give a clear enough answer”³⁷. It is important to emphasize here that, probing topics such as the status of the embryo and its soul, Christian authors of this period are in a sensitive field, and because Scripture does not offer too many clues in this regard, so they have to resort to the intellectual instruments of their time.

³⁵ Marie-Hélène CONGOURDEAU, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți și în izvoarele filozofice și medicale grecești (secolele VI î.Hr. – V d.Hr.)/ The Embryo and Its Soul in the Holy Fathers and in the Greek Philosophical and Medical Sources (6th Century BC - 5th Century AD)*, translation by Maria-Cornelia Ică jr., Sibiu, Deisis Publishing House, 2014, p. 125.

³⁶ Lat. “ecclesiastica praedicatio”, rendering the Greek expression “ἐκκλησιαστικὸν κήρυγμα”.

³⁷ ORIGEN, *Despre principii/ On First Principles*, Preface, 5, [cited edition, p. 40].

Origen's thinking is a thought in search³⁸, which leaves to posterity³⁹ the following questions about the life of the human embryo: Is the soul created or is it eternal? Is it a bodily or incorporeal substance? Is the soul transmitted through seed? Is it coming from outside? And in this case, is it created at this moment to animate the body? Is it created beforehand? In this case, why does it come into the body? Do you wear the body only once? Does it return to the body after death? Will it undress the body a second time? Is it reincarnating? If he rejects metempsychosis and the final intangibility, he confesses that he cannot resolve the other doubts.⁴⁰ This is also confirmed by Pamphilus († 309), who writes an apology in favor of Origen, and who reiterates that the Alexandrian author explored and analyzed the clues to the doctrine of the soul in the Holy Scripture and brought it to the attention of his readers. to test the veracity of their interpretation, not as if the interpretation had already been a dogmatic decree⁴¹.

³⁸ Hence a "theology in search" – Cf. Henri CROUZEL, *Origène*, Paris, Editions Lethielleux, 1985, pp. 216-223.

³⁹ For the influence of Origen's anthropology on patristic posterity see Benjamin P. BLOSSER, *Become like the Angels. Origen's doctrine of the Soul*, Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2012, pp. 269-274.

⁴⁰ ORIGEN, *Comentariu la Cântarea Cântărilor/ Commentary on the Song of Songs*, II, 5, 21-24, in ORIGÈNE, *Commentaire sur Le Cantique des Cantiques*, Tome I, texte de la version latine de Rufin, introduction, traduction et notes par Luc Brésard et Henri Crouzel, col. *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 375, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991, pp. 366-369.

⁴¹ PAMFIL DE CEZAREEA, *Apologie în favoarea lui Origen*, 160, in PAMPHILUS, *Apology for Origen. With the letter of Rufinus on the falsification of the books of Origen*, translated by Thomas P. Scheck. col. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 120, Washington D.C, The Catholic University of America Press, 2010, p. 110.

5 Conclusion

The present study was not intended to excuse the doctrinal errors of Tertullian and Origen. Instead, the study examines how the Christian response to the problem of theodicy influences the status of the prenatal man at a time when the teaching of the Church had not yet been established.

Out of the desire to save the goodness, freedom, and omnipotence of God, Tertullian, and Origen, in a fierce conflict with the Gnostic systems, adopt a theory that will have an important impact on their anthropology. Tertullian will come to speak of a soul received from his parents, a corporeal soul that is transmitted through the paternal seed. This vision will lead to two conclusions. The first refers to the fact that the act of conception is a purely human act in which God does not participate, at least not directly: that being the case, God does not share in the spread of sin and evil in the world. Today, the official teaching of the Church testifies to the creation of each individual soul by God at birth. The second conclusion has a perennial validity: from the beginning, from the rooting in the mother's womb, man is body and soul.

Origen comes to give credit to the pre-existence of the soul, confessing that the church teaching has not yet fully clarified things. He also leaves open the issue of the life of the embryo because there is no sharp answer in Scripture, and it seems to invite us once again to reflect: is the church sermon of the 21st century quite clear about the status of the human embryo?

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