Philosophy and Early Christianity: Reflections on the Meaning of Patristic Philosophical Theology

Filosofía y Orígenes del Cristianismo: Reflexiones sobre el significado de la teología filosófica patrística

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Abstract: Christians had to structure their kerygma and teachings philosophically. It is on philosophy that they built the dogmatics of Christianity in the first ecumenical councils, which discussed Trinitarian theology and Christology. This was imperative, since Christ is the Logos and is the centre of all Christianity. So, Christianity must be logical/rational and informed philosophically. Many were the protagonists of Patristic Philosophical Theology, but Origen of Alexandria played a pivotal role in this strategic move.

Keywords: Philosophy, Early Christianity, Origen, Patristic Philosophy, Philosophical Theology.

Resumen: Los cristianos tuvieron que estructurar filosóficamente su kerigma y sus enseñanzas. Sobre la filosofía construyeron la dogmática del cristianismo en los primeros concilios ecuménicos, que discutieron la teología trinitaria y la christología. Esto era imperativo, ya que Cristo es el Logos y el centro de todo el cristianismo. Así pues, el cristianismo debe ser lógico-racional y estar informado filosóficamente. Muchos fueron los protagonistas de la teología filosófica patrística, pero Orígenes de Alejandría desempeñó un papel fundamental en este movimiento estratégico.

Palabras clave: Filosofía, Cristianismo primitivo, Orígenes, Filosofía patrística, Teología filosófica.
Christians from the beginning and especially in the Patristic period had to structure their kerygma and teachings philosophically. It is on philosophy that they built the dogmatics of Christianity in the first ecumenical councils, which discussed Trinitarian theology and Christology (particularly Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon, but also later councils). This was imperative, since Christ is the Logos and is the centre of all Christianity—or, following in Don Luigi Giussani’s footsteps, Christianity is Christ. As a consequence, Christianity must be logical/rational and informed philosophically. The philosophical structure of Christian theology rested on Platonism, along with Stoic and Aristotelian elements. Later on, with Scholasticism, in the Middle Ages, it would be mainly Aristotle’s thought to buttress Christian theology. But again, mutatis mutandis, it was philosophical theology.

1. PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AND THE CHRISTIANISATION OF PHILOSOPHY

Many were the protagonists of Patristic Philosophical Theology, but Origen of Alexandria played a pivotal role, along with the Cappadocian Fathers, Evagrius, Cyril of Alexandria, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, and others, and in the West mainly Ambrose and Augustine. Origen’s authentic philosophical theology was very

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1 This article is based upon, and extends, previous essays, particularly Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, “Origen’s Philosophical Theology, Allegoresis, and Connections to Platonism”, in Radka Fialova – Jiří Horák – Petr Krizler (eds.), Hellenism, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity: Transmission and Transformation of Ideas (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 155), Berlin, De Gruyter, 2023, 85-112: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110796285-007>. Warm thanks to Fr Álvaro Pereira for his invitation to contribute, and to the Journal staff for the formatting work.


3 My own textbook of theoretical philosophy, then taught by the late Rector Adriano Bausola, when I earned my second MA at the Catholic University in Milan in the 1990s, was a squarely Scholastic summa by Sofia Vanni Rovighi.
probably received in the *Dialogue of Adamantius on the Orthodox Faith in God*⁴ and absorbed by the Cappadocians, especially Gregory of Nyssa.⁵ Gregory intimately understood and developed Origen’s theology in an ‘orthodox’, Nicene-Constantinopolitan direction, and in a totally anti-subordinationistic way. But Origen himself was already moving in these directions. Accurate historico-theological research yields that Origen, far from being the precursor of ‘Arianism’, was the main inspirer of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan ‘orthodoxy’ and of the dogmas of Ephesus (and Chalcedon), as I shall argue. This is the outcome of informed and rigorous historical investigation and challenges the *communis opinio* concerning Origen, which sometimes proves questionable and is influenced more by the Origenistic controversy and old handbooks and preconceptions than by any meticulous reading of Origen and his most insightful followers.

Christianity in the time of Origen was beginning to represent itself as philosophy, as can be seen with Justin, Clement, and Origen himself. Even martyr Pionius is portrayed as assimilating Christians to philosophers, “who practiced philosophy, justice, and steadfastness” (*M.Pion.* 17.3). The Seneca-Paul correspondence, which might be roughly coeval, speaks of Christianity as a philosophy instead of a religion:⁶ Letter 9, attributed to Seneca and addressing Paul, names some member of the Jesus Movement in

Rome “followers of your philosophical orientation”, disciplinarum tuarum comites. Here Christianity is not called religio or superstition, but disciplinae, which, like secta (corresponding to αἵρεσις, Letter 5) designates the teachings of a philosophical school. Religio did not mean “religion” in our contemporary sense, but referred primarily to cult. Even so, Christianity at its very beginning is represented as philosophy. In the second century, there existed no intellectual discipline equivalent to the modern academic discipline of theology.\(^7\) Eusebius, an admirer of Origen, called Christianity “divine, true philosophy” (ἐνθεον καὶ ἀληθῆ φιλοσοφίαν, Mart.Pal. 4.1-15 short recension). Schools and “universities”, such as that of Origen, and “catechetical” schools were the principal form of Christian education.

Precisely as a form of philosophy, Christianity set out to respond to accusations of irrationalism, behaviour according to habit (ἔθος vs. λόγος), and fideism. Justin Martyr (Dial. 1), after attending several philosophical schools, which he left, finally found the Platonic school, which he does not criticise like the others, and described his conversion to Christianity (in the form of Christian Platonism) as a conversion to a “divine philosophy”: Φιλοσοφία θεία (Apol. 2.12.5). Justin continued to wear philosophical garb after this, just as Heraclas continued to wear philosophical garb even when he was an Alexandrian presbyter, according to Origen (ap. Eusebius, HE 6.19.12-14). He described philosophy as “the greatest and most honourable possession before God, to whom it leads us” (Dial. 2.1). Justin acknowledged that the Christians “say the same things as the Greeks say” (1 Apol. 24) and appreciates Plato for his theology, his criticism of polytheism, and his psychology: “the aim of Plato’s philosophy is the contemplation of God” (Dial. 2.6).

Philosophy, particularly Platonism, cannot but be excellent for Christians, since it leads to God. This was also the goal of Origen’s own philosophical theology. Justin represents Christ as a philosopher, not a sophist (1 Apol. 14.5), as Lucian had instead dubbed him.\(^8\) This


move of presenting Christianity as a philosophy was shared by Galen,9 who called Judaism and Christianity ‘the philosophical school (διατριβή) of Moses and Christ’ (Diff. Puls. 2.4). The Syriac apology to “Antoninus Caesar” (probably the emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius) ascribed to Melito reacted to accusations of irrationality by ascribing λόγος to Christianity, but behaviour based on a bad ἔθος to “paganism”; so did also Clement of Alexandria, one of the Christian intellectuals most committed to demonstrating Christianity’s rationality, based on the Logos, and therefore as philosophy.10

Indeed, in order for them to offer philosophical foundations to Christian theology, Christians had to develop a theology of the Logos, which identified Christ with God’s Logos (and Wisdom). This operation, anticipated by Philo and Hellenistic Judaism, started from the Johannine Prologue, and was continued by Justin, most of the Valentinians, Clement, and especially Origen, as well as by those patristic philosophers influenced by Origen.

The defense of Christianity from the accusation of irrationalism was largely due to Origen, who was deeply respected by “pagan” philosophers too, as Eusebius remarked. Origen used “Platonic ways of thinking about God and the soul [. . .] to give an intelligent account of his Christian beliefs”.11 Like Justin and Clement, he depicted Christianity as philosophy tout court and built it through philosophical structures, categories and arguments. Origen grounded his theology in Scripture, his main authority, which in his immense exegetical effort he read mainly in Platonic terms. He also interpreted


10 Arguments from Justin, Bardaisan, Ps.Melito, Clement, Epictetus, Musonius, Marcus Aurelius, Celsus, Galen and Lucian in Ramelli, “Ethos and Logos,” 123-156.

Plato and paralleled the exegesis of contemporary Platonists. Origen introduced the formula “there was no time when \( x \) was not” —never used by Christians beforehand—from the cosmological debates of Greek philosophy into Christology, where it entered anti-‘Arian’ polemics and became standard in Nicene theologians.\(^{12}\) Origen was inspired by imperial philosophical and medical literature, Scripture, and Philo in the theological construction his innovative Trinitarian notion of \( υπόστασις \) as individual substance of each divine Person as opposed to their common divine \( οὐσία \). His line was furthered by the Cappadocians in the dogmatic formula \( μία \) οὐσία τρεῖς υποστάσεις, “one common essence, three individual substances”, associated with the Council of Constantinople. With his innovative notion of hypostasis, Origen arguably even impacted “pagan” Platonism.\(^{13}\)

2. ORIGEN, THE LOGOS, AND PATRISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Origen prominently contributed to the process of philosophising Christianity and constructing it through philosophical structures, categories, and arguments. He emphasised the necessity of such a move: “The (Christian) philosopher (\( φιλοσοφοῦντα \)) will need to prove the theories (\( τὰ \) τοῦ λόγου κατασκευάζειν) by means of demonstrations (\( ἀποδείξεων \)) of all sorts, taken from the divine Scriptures and the consequentiality of rational arguments (\( τῆς \) ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἀκολουθίας)” (Cels. 4.9). Origen himself always based his arguments on both Scripture and philosophical reasoning. His theology is exegetical and philosophical together. Christianity without philosophy, grounded in authority alone, in Origen’s view is for the “simple-minded masses”; for “the few”, instead, namely the philosophically minded Christians, like Origen himself, it “depends on a rigorous examination of the evidence (\( βεβασανισμένως \) ἐξετασμένη)” (Cels. 3.38). Thus, Christianity for these “few” was truly philosophy. Christians cannot be separated from Christ by rational argument (Cels. pref. 3–4), since Christ is the Logos: they could never


be separated from the Logos (Christ, the Mind of God) by λόγος (human reason). Christians who follow Christ as the Logos cannot do anything irrational, while “heresy” and whatever is opposite to Christ-Logos is irrational; Christianity accords with the Stoic κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι, the “common notions” (Cels. 4.4; 3.40; cf. 1.4). A person, ideally, should not simply believe, but supply reasons for believing. Knowing that the philosophically minded were few —both among the Christians and in general— Origen exhorted the simple to just believe, but provided “rational arguments by questions and answers” to the intelligent (Cels. 6.10, quoting Plato’s Seventh Letter 344b). Origen wished to win the “simple” to the Christian faith, but also and especially build a Christian philosophy for philosophically demanding people.

Philosophy has noble origins and is helpful, Origen declares; a good philosopher explores various philosophical schools and follows the most convincing. This is what Justin and Clement did, before turning to Christian Platonism, and it is what Origen himself taught to his disciples, according to the Thanksgiving Oration by Gregory Thaumaturgus (Theodore). In order to dismantle charges of targeting the ignorant, which were levelled against Christianity, Origen argues (a) that the Bible itself requires people to be wise (Cels. 3.45); (b) that he endeavoured to call philosophers to Christianity and blessedness (Cels. 3.57); (c) that study, learning, and intelligence are not a hindrance, but a help for people to know God (Cels. 3.49), since the human λόγος has its principle (ἀρχή) in God’s Logos, the Son; as a consequence, no rational creature can be totally extraneous to the Divinity (Cels. 4.25). Indeed, all rational creatures are oίκειοι or familiar with God, and not alienated, extraneous or ἀλλότριοι, being creatures of God and logika, as Christ is Logos. 14 Only, degrees can vary. Some are less rational and others more. Christian who are best endowed with λόγος can thereby explore philosophically — exactly through the λόγος— the meanings of Scripture (Cels. 3.33). (d) Origen also adds that he would want all Christians to “devote all their time to philosophy”, but he is aware that “very few are keen on rational argument” (Cels. 1.9), since “the multitude of believers have not made such progress” (Cels. 8.22); hence the necessity of mere

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faith for the many. (e) Therefore, “those who teach the true doctrines ought to help as many people as possible” and “win everyone over to the truth by their love of humanity — not only the perspicacious, but also the obtuse” (Cels. 6.1).

All Christians should ideally be philosophers and practice philosophy all time through the exercise of rational argumentation. However, Origen was aware that many had no time to practice philosophy and meditate on Scripture, and there were a great many “dull people”. These would be saved by faith alone. Origen personally practiced Christian philosophy every day: ascetic life, teaching, preaching, exegesis, and philosophical theology.

“Perfect piety towards the Master of the Cosmos is impossible without philosophising” (Gregory/Theodore, Pan. 79). Thus, only Christian philosophers — not the adversaries of philosophy or the “simple” — can practice perfect piety towards God. Origen rejected the contrast between Christian faith and Greek philosophy by arguing (1) that perfect Christianity could be achieved only through philosophy and (2) that most philosophers adhered to a philosophical school through faith, not a rational choice (Cels. 1.10). This point retorted anti-Christian charges of fideism, but note that it was also made by virtually contemporary “pagans” such as Galen (Ord. libr. 1).

What Origen opposed was “paganism” qua polytheistic mythology and cult (Cels. 1.23), not philosophy or henotheistic philosophical theology. This is also because Origen’s (and Plotinus’) time was “before a priestly and consciously polytheistic brand of Platonism became the norm”.¹⁵ Thus, for Origen it was possible to value philosophy and especially Platonism, and even build up Christian Platonism, without subscribing to polytheism. Indeed, as mentioned above, Origen was the theoriser of the monotheistic view of a Trinity in three hypostases, instead of a tritheistic — and strongly hierarchical — perspective, thanks to his innovative, Trinitarian notion of “individual substance” or ὑπόστασις.¹⁶


Origen claims that Paul in his attack on human wisdom in 1 Cor 1:18-31 did not criticise philosophy *tout court*, but only materialistic philosophy, which taught that “all ultimate realities are corporeal” (*Cels*. 3.47) — as Epicureanism and Stoicism maintained. Origen, instead, interprets Paul’s description of Wisdom in a Platonic manner, thereby indicating, here as in many other cases, that his philosophical theology was what we can call Christian Platonism, or Patristic Platonism. Paul’s view of Wisdom, according to Origen, consists in doctrines that elevate souls to God and teach a contempt for sense-perceptible, visible things, which are but transitory (*ibid.*).

Origen also stresses that Paul testifies that some philosophers did know God (*ibid.*). This concept was so important to Origen that he hammers it home in *Cels*. 4.30: “some Greek philosophers did know God”. Plato was certainly among them in Origen’s view.

3. ORIGEN AND PLATO

Origen clearly admits that “the learned of this world (sapientes saeculi) thanks to the study of philosophy (per eruditionem philosophiae) were able to grasp many truths (multa ex ueritate)” (*H.Gen*. 14.3). He substantiates his claim in the same passage through some crucial doctrines that Greek philosophy had in common with Christian thought:

a) “Many philosophers write that God is one (unum esse Deum) and created everything (cuncta creauerit). In this respect they agree with God’s Law”, namely the Old Testament.

b) “Some philosophers also add that God both made and governs all things by means of his Logos, and it is God’s Logos that regulates everything. In this respect they write things that agree not only with the Law, but also with the Gospel” (*H.Gen*. 14.3). This represents a more profound convergence.

c) “Moral and natural philosophy in almost all respects (paene omnis) teaches the same as Christianity. It only disagrees when it claims that matter is coeternal with God, or when it denies that God takes care of mortals, but limits divine providence to the superlunar realm. Philosophers disagree with us also when they have the lives of those who are born depend on the courses of stars, and when they claim that this world is eternal and does not come to any end.”
Here, the only philosophical doctrines that are said to disagree with Christianity are doctrines of natural philosophy and ethics: the eternity of matter, the limitation of divine providence, astrological determinism, and the eternity of the world. Now, the coeternity of matter with God and the eternity of the world were tenets of most Greek philosophies; the absence of providence in the sublunar sphere was Aristotelian, and astral determinism was primarily Stoic (and “Gnostic”). It is remarkable that Origen mentions no specifically Platonic doctrine among those which disagree with Christian tenets. Instead, he lists Platonic doctrines among those which agree with Christian ideas, especially the “Middle-Platonic” theory of the divine Logos as creator (and here we find not only a general convergence with Philo and “Middle Platonism”, but also with Atticus), as well as henotheism. The theory of God the Logos as Creator agrees, as Origen remarks, not only with the Old Testament, but also with the New Testament, owing to the identification of the Logos with Christ. The Johannine Prologue started to identify Jesus Christ with the pre-existent divine Logos, and Origen commented on the Prologue in detail, as did Amelius, a “pagan” Platonist from Plotinus’ circle. Origen could indeed find in the Johannine Prologue virtually all the central concepts of Greek philosophy: beginning or principle (ἀρχή), word or reason (λόγος), God, relation (πρός), creation, life (ζωή), light vs. darkness (φῶς vs. σκότος), and more.

In the above locus (H.Gen. 14.3), Origen singles out physics and ethics, together with metaphysics. Shortly afterwards, in the same

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19 The label “Middle Platonism” for early imperial, pre-Plotinian Platonism is rejected or criticised by some, given the variety of “Middle Platonists” and their different orientations. As Harold Tarrant rightly remarks, “early imperial Platonism had many faces that are not easily categorised” (idem, “Platonism before Plotinus”, in L. Gerson [ed.], Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 1.63-99: 68). Here, “Middle Platonism” and “Middle Platonists” will be used as umbrella terms, not to suggest any doctrinal unity within “Middle Platonism”. See also George Boys-Stones, Platonist Philosophy 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 14, who discusses alternative designations.
passage, he mentions the traditional division of philosophy into logic, physics, and ethics (a division that comes up also elsewhere in his works), but it is notable that he attributes to logic the field of metaphysics and theology as well: “Logic is that part of philosophy which confesses God, the father of all”. I suspect that such a classification results from the fact that the tripartite division of philosophy was Stoic, and in Stoic immaneatism both metaphysics and theology were reduced to physics. This structure was in turn an important factor in Stoic allegoresis, which in this respect differed starkly from Platonic allegoresis. Origen, indeed, could not accept the reduction of metaphysics and theology to physics, since he adhered to a Platonist transcendent scheme. Origen also elsewhere disapproved of philosophical theories supported by Stoics, Aristotelians, and Epicureans, but not by Platonists alone. Indeed, the sole Platonic doctrines that Origen could not embrace owing to his adherence to Scripture were the eternity of the world, as seen above, and metensomatosis. However, the former was a widespread doctrine in Greek philosophy and certainly not only a Platonist tenet, and metensomatosis was not a doctrine by Plato, but a myth he alluded to, and which he attributed to others, presumably the Pythagoreans. Origen did not embrace Platonic metensomatosis, which, entailing the eternity of the world, was incompatible with Scripture, but Plato himself alluded to it only mythically and as a doctrine theorised by others, while “pagan” Platonists supported it theoretically. According to Olympiodorus,

20 Origen expounds the division of philosophy into ethics, physics, epoptics, and (optionally) logic, namely the Stoic tripartition plus _epoptica_. Especially in _C.Cant._ prol. 3.1-3, Origen posits epoptics/enoptics as the crowning part of philosophy: now, epoptics is theology (de divinis et caelestibus), which he thus deems part and parcel of philosophy, insisting that theology cannot be studied without philosophical bases. Origen insisted with his disciples that “the doctrine concerning God” is “the most essential of all”, since it deals with “the knowledge of the Cause of all” (Greg. Thaum., _Paneg._ 13). Indeed, “theology” was the culmination of Origen’s _cursus studiorum_ in his Caesarea university (13.150).

indeed, Plato did not prove metensomatosis; in the final argument of the *Phaedo* Olympiodorus finds the immortality of the rational soul to be proved (*In Phaed. 13.4.1-6*), but the *Phaedo* does not go on to answer the question of whether the world is eternal. If Plato had proved both points, then metensomatosis would also be proved (*In Phaed. 10.1.2-5*). But he did not. Ficino even claimed that Plato’s references to metensomatosis must be understood in the sense that a soul enters not different bodies, including animals, but different habits (*Theol.Plat. 17.4.7-10*), an “Origenising” interpretation. He listed Ammonius Saccas, Origen’s master and the head of the “Egyptian Platonic Academy”, as a supporter of a non-literal understanding of metensomatosis (*Theol.Plat. 17.4.1*). Origen followed in Ammonius’ footsteps. Porphyry traces metensomatosis back to Pythagoras: “the soul is immortal and transmigrates into other animated beings” (*VP 19*).

Plato represented metensomatosis as a doctrine that was not his own (it was indeed Pythagorean) and treated it in a mythical (not theoretical) way. This gave even rise to debatable interpretations within the Platonic tradition. Plutarch asks: “How is it that Plato avers that the soul is always more ancient than the body and is the cause and principle of the body, but at the same time he states that the soul could never have come into existence without the body, or the intellect without the soul, but the soul in the body and the intellect in the soul?” (*Q.Plat. 4EF*). The first assertion is found in *Tim. 34B10-35A1* and *Leg. 896A5-C8*; the second in *Tim. 30B3-5*. In the last passage, Plato maintains that the intellect cannot exist without the soul (something he also claims in *Tim. 46D5-6; Soph. 249A4-8; Philb. 30C9-10*), but nowhere does he state that the soul cannot exist without the body. The pre-existence of souls and metensomatosis actually point to the independent existence of souls. Origen, instead, seems to maintain that the soul is *always* joined to a body. Indeed, he supported neither the pre-existence of bare souls nor metensomatosis.

Origen rejected “the doctrine/dogma of metensomatosis” (*Cels. 3.75*), not the myth of metensomatosis, as Plato presented

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it. And he Christianised it in the form of ensomatosis. In C.Io. 6.85, Origen opposed metensomatosis or “transcorporation”—a soul enters different bodies—to ensomatosis or “incorporation/embodiment” (ἐνσωμάτωσις), his own, Christian doctrine. This posits that a soul uses one single body, which will be transformed according to the state of the soul itself and its free choices over the aeons. This is “the theory concerning souls wrapped in a body [εἰς σῶμα ἐνδομένων], but not as a result of metensomatosis” (οὐκ ἐκ μετενσωματώσεως, Cels. 5.29). In Cels. 1.20, Origen alludes to “the myth of metensomatosis” (ἡ μυθικὴ μετενσωμάτωσις). Within a response to Celsus’ criticism of the Incarnation, Origen alludes to ensomatosis in Cels. 4.17, calling it a “different and nobler doctrine” than metensomatosis or the transmigration of souls.

Origen provided a philosophical foundation for Christian teaching, including creation, resurrection, restoration, Trinity, and Christology. Such a philosophical foundation was largely Platonic, but not without elements from Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and even other currents. As mentioned above, Origen likely intended to build an “orthodox” Christian Platonism, against “pagan” and “Gnostic” forms of Platonism, against materialistic and pantheistic Stoicism, and against “atheistic” Epicureanism and Aristotelianism— as well as against “heresies”.24 Aristotelianism could appear “atheistic” to Origen because he, like Porphyry,25 included among the “atheists” the philosophers who denied divine providence.26

As a result of his valuing of philosophy, and especially Platonism, and his practice of philosophical theology, some Christians suspicious of philosophy charged Origen with being a philosopher,


25 “The atheists, who have abandoned ordinary human common sense and claim that God or providence do not exist”: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Paneg. 13; Origen, Or. 5.1; Cels. 8.38; Porphyry, C.Tim. F28 (Sodano).

26 And Aristotle did so, at least in the sublunar realm.
and some “pagan” philosophers, such as Porphyry, with becoming a Christian. Both sides took it for granted that Christianity and philosophy were mutually exclusive. It is precisely because of this double opposition, that Origen, addressing his fellow Christians, felt the need to defend his identity as a Christian philosopher, especially in a programmatic letter reported by Eusebius and elsewhere.

Clement, like Origen, regarded philosophy as “the queen of the encyclopaedic disciplines (ἐγκύκλια μαθήματα), and theology, also called “wisdom”, as “the queen of philosophy” (Strom. 1.5.30.1). Origen also followed Philo, Aristobulus, Josephus, and Clement in his argument that Moses preceded Homer and Plato; this is how he could refute Celsus’ claim that Moses misunderstood Plato in Cels. 4.21; 6.7, and 4.11. Impressive convergences between Scripture and Plato depend, in Origen’s view, on Plato’s encounter with “Jewish philosophers” or on the shared inspiration of both the Bible and Plato by the Logos. This is also why Origen studied, and required his most brilliant students to study, all philosophical schools, apart from the atheistic ones, which provided Christian thought with no philosophical ground (Gregory-Theodore, Pan. 13-14), but mostly used and developed Plato’s thought.

In his apologetical polemic against a “Middle Platonist”, Celsus, Origen praised Plato, although he attacked his “pagan” follower, mostly arguing that Celsus was misinterpreting Plato. Origen claims here that Plato “was right” (Cels. 2.12); Aristotle abandoned Plato’s school and attacked Plato’s theory of Forms and that of the immortality of the soul, not because Plato was wrong, but because Aristotle became “ungrateful” to him. Aristotle’s ingratitude of ἀχαριστία to Plato is also attested by a number of Hellenistic and early imperial sources. Eusebius repeated this

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27 Analysis in RAMELLI, “Origen, Patristic Philosophy.”


29 Strom. 5.93-94; 5.89.1-2; 5.98.134; Aristobulus ap. Eusebius, PE 13.12.


31 Aristocles ap. Eusebius 15.2.12 (ἡχαρίστησε Πλάτωνι); Plutarch, Exil. 10; Diogenes Laertiis 5.11, and Aelian, V.Hist. 4.9, from Hermippus F45 ap. Diogenes Laertiis 5.2.
charge (ἡχαρίστησε Πλάτωνι, PE 15.2.13), criticising Aristotle’s divergences from Plato on the basis of Atticus, who, like Origen later, focused on Aristotle’s criticism of Plato’s Ideas as mere “twitter” (τερετίσματα, F9DP = PE 15.13.1). Aristotle’s charge was also cited by Strato, F35 = Plutarch (Colot. 14 = Moralia 1115b). The Byzantine historian George Hamartolos still accused “miserable Aristotle” with “insolently revolting against his master” (Chron. 83) and rejecting his teachings, especially the immortality of the soul and divine providence on earth.

Origen exclaimed that Plato “taught such a deep doctrine concerning the highest Good” (Cels. 6.56). Indeed, Origen expressly valued Plato for his protology, metaphysics, dialectics, ethics, and use of myths, which Origen explicitly lauded on the epistemological plane,32 and for much else. In Against Celsus, Origen is more eristic with Plato as interpreted by “pagan” imperial Platonists than with Plato himself. For instance, Origen attacks Celsus’ interpretation of Tim. 28c: “to find the Creator and Father of this universe is difficult, and impossible to declare him to all”. Origen here praises Plato’s expression of apophaticism: “Plato’s statement is noble and impressive”, and represents Christ’s incarnation not as a contradiction of Plato’s statement, but as perfectly in line with it; it is the consequence of God’s loftiness, so that the Logos, “the image of the invisible God […] might reach anybody” (Cels. 7.42-43).

The same Origen did with creatio ex nihilo, contending that his doctrine of creation out of nothing (supported especially in Princ. 2.9.2) interpreted Plato’s Timaeus better than contemporary “pagan” exegesis did. Origen’s argument is reported by Eusebius PE 7.20.1-9.33 Here Origen reduces the thesis of the pre-existence of matter ad absurdum (ἄλογον, 7.20.8) on philosophical bases, showing that it contradicts Plato’s Timaeus and its characterisation of God as “demiurge, Father, benefactor, and good” (7.20.3). In this way, Origen claims to be the one who best interpreted Plato. Origen differentiates between God, who can create all “without pre-existent matter” (χωρὶς ὕλης), and an artisan (τεχνίτης), who cannot. This argument

33 GCS 402.6–403.17 = C.Gen. D3 Metzler, with a doctrine going back to Ammonius Saccas and Pantaenus (see Ramelli, “Divine Power”).
was already used to the same end —the denial of the pre-existence of matter in God’s creation— by Athenagoras of Athens, *Leg.* 19.2: God created everything, since, according to Plato, God is non-originated, while “matter needs an artisan, and an artisan needs matter”. Athenagoras of Athens, an earlier Patristic Platonist, was already endeavouring to argue that his doctrine was in agreement with Plato. Origen may also have had Philo in mind, who insisted that God “created beings which earlier did not exist (ἐποίησεν ἃ πρῶτον οὐκ ἦν), not merely handling matter as a craftsman (δημιουργός), but being the very creator (κτίστης) of matter” (*Somn.* 1.76). This difference between the craftsman and the Creator is the core of Origen’s argument. Origen, however, uses τεχνίτης instead of δημιουργός, lest he give the impression of criticising Plato’s *Timaeus*, since he is claiming that his interpretation of Plato’s creation account is the best founded.

Regarding creation, in the argument at stake Origen observes: “With respect to this problem, it is necessary to make an investigation into the power of God (ζητητέον περὶ δυνάμεως θεοῦ), whether the Godhead, wanting to found whatever it likes (θελήσας ὑποστῆσαι ὅτι βούλεται), if its will is not aporetic or enfeebled, cannot found whatever it wants (οὐ δύναται ὑποστῆσαι ὃ βούλεται)” (7.20.1). The full argument follows in 7.20.1-9. Origen’s claim that his theory of creation interpreted Plato better than that which posited pre-existent matter is not just an apologetic move aimed to defend a Christian doctrine. It is surely also this, but there is more to that. Origen’s exegesis, indeed, paralleled that of “pagan” Platonists who interpreted the *Timaeus* in the sense that the Demiurge produced matter, namely Plato’s Receptacle (ὑποδοχή). Such an exegesis was supported by Origen’s and Plotinus’ master Ammonius Saccas (who was the “Socrates of Neoplatonism” but whose religious identity is difficult to pin down).

Just as *creatio ex nihilo* and even the Incarnation, as Origen puts it, paradoxically complete Plato’s message rather than overturning it, so does also Christian Platonism complete Plato’s thought rather than rejecting it — like Jesus, who fulfilled the Law instead of abolishing it. Origen, having posited God’s incorruptibility and indivisibility as a Platonic principle, against Epicurean and Stoic materialistic views of God, from the beginning of *First Principles* onwards, is quick to assure his readers that God’s Incarnation (or “In-humanation”,

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ἐνανθρώπωσις, as Origen and his followers had it) did not entail a change from good to bad, since it was not a consequence of evil choices, as in the case of the fall of a soul, but of charity-love (Cels. 4.14-15). God descended into human life and the Logos came to us, without ceasing to be God (Cels. 4.5).

The Christians, Origen assures, will not ridicule Plato, “so great” a philosopher as he is; likewise, “pagan” Platonists should not ridicule Scripture, but both Plato and Scripture should be read allegorically, which was instrumental to interpreting it philosophically (Cels. 4.39). Origen assimilates Plato’s myths to Scriptural “myths” or allegorical stories in Cels. 4.37-39: for instance, Origen draws a parallel between Plato’s myth of Poros and Penia, the parents of the δαίμων Eros, and the biblical myth of the proplasts in Eden; in his Commentary on Genesis, as he himself attests (ibidem), Origen further developed this assimilation. Another comparison—a technique already deployed by Clement—is found in Cels. 2.16: Origen compares Jesus’ resurrection to the reviving of Er in the relevant myth in Plato’s Republic (614B–621B). Likewise, in Cels. 3.80 Origen compares Christian beliefs in immortality, blessedness, and communion with God to Plato’s conception of the ascent of the soul, which contemplates the Ideas or Forms in the ὑπερουράνιος (Phaedr. 247–250). Interestingly, Origen Christianised Plato’s ὑπερουράνιος: Plato’s “ὑπερουράνιος place” is that to which Christian prayers elevate minds (Cels. 7.44). Origen thought that the noetic cosmos is Christ-Logos-Wisdom, the Mind of God, containing all the paradigms- Ideas-Forms-logoi of all beings. Origen, then, concludes that Celsus, by rejecting Christian immortality, also denies Platonic immortality.

Again, he argues for a continuity between Plato’s and Christian tenets (ibidem). Origen agrees with Celsus that Plato’s Socrates taught the same as Jesus did about turning the other cheek to wrongdoers (Cels. 7.58 and 61, with reference to Crito 49BE). Moreover, Origen expressed deep respect for Plato’s style and his noble and useful philosophy in Cels. 6.2 and elsewhere. Origen also

34 For a comparison between classical and Jewish Christian notions of “resurrection” see John Granger Cook, Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis (WUNT 410), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2018 (https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-156584-7).
assimilates Plato’s notion of the purification of the earth through water by the gods to the Christian tenet of the purification of the world on the part of Christ (Cels. 4.20; 62). He corrects Celsus’ misinterpretation of Plato, rather than Plato himself. Celsus thought that Plato maintained in Theaet. 176A that evil will never lessen. To disprove Celsus’ distortion of Plato, Origen adduces Tim. 22D, concerning the purification of the earth by the deities, which, as Origen remarks, is an enterprise that is “worthy of God” (Cels. 4.20). The conformity to what is “worthy of God” —a widespread principle in Origen’s exegesis and theology— surfaces again in Origen’s appreciation of Plato’s criticism of polytheistic mythology exactly as unworthy of the divine (Cels. 4.48, with reference to Philb. 12B).

It is remarkable that Origen describes Plato as the best among all philosophers, the closest to the doctrine of the Bible (Cels. 1.10), as Augustine would do later. Plato taught the same truths as the Bible (Cels. 4.39), because he came into contact with “Jewish philosophy” and/or was inspired by God (Cels. 6.3). Origen here explicitly concurs with Plato on the inexpressibility of the supreme Good in the Seventh Letter (Origen identifies Plato’s Good with God, as most Neoplatonists did). 36 Indeed, Plato was inspired by God and the divine Logos since all good results in philosophy depend on inspiration by the Logos (C.Cant. prol. 3). Philosophy itself stems from the divine Logos: This is why Origen can represent its three traditional branches through a Biblical patriarch: theology—epoptics37 through Jacob, physics through Isaac, and ethics through Abraham. And this is why Origen can associate a Biblical book to the same branches of philosophy: Proverbs to ethics, Ecclesiastes to physics, and the Song of Songs, which describes the mystical marriage between soul and the divine Logos, to theology—epoptics (ibidem).

4. GREEK PHILOSOPHY IN SUPPORT OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: SOME NEGLECTED CASE STUDIES

Origen’s philosophical theology is shaped by the application of philosophy to Christian theology and exegesis. He imported allegoresis, namely allegorical exegesis, from philosophy (Stoic and Platonist) to Christian exegesis: Philo was the model for the use of philosophical allegoresis in Scriptural exegesis. Origen also imported the “zetetic” method, a typically philosophical approach, into his own Biblical exegesis and theology. Origen programmatically declares such a zetetic method: a believer who uses reason/argument (λόγῳ) in theology discovers proofs (ἀπόδειξις) “through a thorough investigation” (τοῦ πάνυ ζητεῖν, Cels. 1.11). The main authority for Origen is obviously Scripture, but interpreted by and large in Platonic terms and teaching the same truths as Plato did, when read through the lens of philosophical exegesis. Origen also interpreted Plato’s dialogues and myths, as contemporary Platonists did. The binary of Christians interpreting Scripture and “pagans” interpreting non-Christian texts is in fact blurred. There were “pagan” imperial Platonists, like Numenius of Apamea and Amelius, who allegorised Biblical texts, and Christian Platonists who allegorised “pagan” texts, such as Origen and later Calcidius (if he was a Christian), who both interpreted and allegorised Plato. In this way, they also attached an authoritative status to texts that did not belong to their own religious tradition.

Origen first imported the formula “there was a/no time when X did not exist”, (οὐκ) ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, from imperial Greek philosophical cosmological debates (“pagan”, but also Philonic) into Christology. His defence of the dogmatic formula ‘there was

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39 A specific work will be devoted to Origen’s “zetetic” methodology and some of its applications in his philosophical theology.
41 See Ramelli, “Revelation’ for Christians and Pagans and their Philosophical Allegoresis.”
42 Philo, Decal. 58: “There was a time when the world was not”; Prov. 1.7: “There was never a time when God did not create”.

no time when Christ did not exist’ further supports his anti-
subordinationism. Origen and Alexander of Aphrodisias both have
this formula; Origen didn’t take it from Christian texts. In Origen,
“there was a time when (Christ) did not exist” (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν)
defines his adversaries’ Christologically subordinationist position,
later attributed to Arius.43 The idea of eternity was a central concern
in Origen’s philosophy and theology:44 he attached absolute eternity,
transcending time (all times and all aeons), exclusively to God, so
that the Son’s coeternity with the Father45 implied the Son’s divinity.
Origen warns that the formula (οὐκ) ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν (“there
was no time when he did not exist”) must be understood correctly,
since the meanings of “when” and “no time” refers to time, while
the statements concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit46
must be understood as transcending all time, aeons and eternity.
For the Trinity alone surpasses the comprehension not only of
temporal, but even of eternal intelligence, whereas all other beings,
not included in it, are measured by times and aeons (Princ. 4.1.28).
Only God is absolutely eternal, adiastematic or non-dimensional,
therefore transcending time. Anticipating Nicaea (which, as we shall
see, anathematised the opposite view), Origen used οὐκ ἦν ποτε ὅτε
οὐκ ἦν twice in Princ. 4.4.1, a tenet which he defended against
unnamed “heretics”. Rufinus translated fuit aliquando quando non
fuit (“there was a time when the Son was not”, in the positive,
referred to “heretics”) and Nunquam fuit quando non fuit (“there

43  Its presence in Nicaea’s anathemas, according to Mark Edwards, either is “a
caricature of Arius’ thought or addressed someone else”: Idem, “The First
Council of Nicaea,” in M. Mitchell – F. Young (eds.), Cambridge History of
note that it is not only ascribed to Arius by Alexander and other hostile sources
who report his thought (such as Athanasius and Socrates), but it is also the
formula that Origen already attributed to the subordinationists of his day. It is
impossible to establish whether they used it, or it is Origen’s own formulation.
Arius might have overturned Origen’s Christological formula.
44  See Ilaria L.E. Ramelli – David Konstan, Terms for Eternity: Aiônios and Aïdios in
Classical and Christian Texts, Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias, 2007; Berlin, De Gruyter,
45  Supported in C.Io. 2.19.130, H.Ier. 9.4, Princ. 1.2.2; 1.2.11, the Athanasian
fragment, and elsewhere.
46  For Origen’s and his followers’ reception of the Holy Spirit, especially Johannine,
see Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, “The Spirit as Paraclete,” in Jörg Frey (ed.), Receptions of
the Fourth Gospel in Antiquity, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming.
was no time when the Son was not”), which was Origen’s position. Origen’s polemic against those who posited the Son’s temporal beginning is still reflected in C.Rom. 1.7.15-19: “This we said against those who utter impieties against God’s only-begotten Son, who always was, like the Father (semper fuit sicut et Pater)”. In C.Rom. 1.7.4-5, non erat quando non erat, and in Princ. 1.2.9, non est quando non fuerit, both in reference to the Son, translate οὐκ ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν (“There was no time when the Son was not”). The former is also reported by Pamphilus, and Rufinus’ translation is the same: “in spirit, the Son was before (Jesus’ birth) and there was no time when He was not” (non erat quando non erat, Apol. 52). Princ. 1.2.9, too, is reproduced by Pamphilus and rendered by Rufinus likewise: non est autem quando non fuerit (Apol. 58).

Rufinus arguably did not forge Origen’s formula for the eternity of the Son, since there are at least three attestations in his extant Greek works, the first stemming from direct textual transmission and not fragmentary: C.Io. 2.19.130 is adamant about the Logos’ coeternity with the Father: “there was no time when the First Principle was without Logos” and therefore irrational (οὐκ ἦν γὰρ ὅτε ἡ ἀρχὴ ἄλογος ἦν). Further Greek sources are F31 from Marcellus of Ancyra (ap. Eusebius C.Marc. 1.34), and Origen’s fragment quoted literally by Athanasius, Decr. 27.1-2, on the Son:

If it is an image (εἰκών) of the invisible God, it is an invisible image. I would even dare add that, being also the Father’s likeness (ὁμοιότης), there is no time when it was not (οὐκ ἔστιν ὅτε οὐκ ἦν). For when is it that (πότε) the Godhead . . . had not the effulgence of its own glory (ἀπαύγασμα τῆς ἰδιάς δόξης), so that one could dare ascribe a beginning (ἀρχήν) to the Son, who purportedly earlier was not (πρότερον οὐκ ὄντος)? When is it that the image of the Father’s individual substance (ὕποστάσεως), the expression, the Logos that knows the Father, was not (πότε . . . οὐκ ἦν)? Whoever dares say, “There was a time when the Son was not” (ἡν ποτὲ ὅτε οὐκ ἦν) should consider that he will also say: “At a certain time Wisdom was not (ποτὲ οὐκ ἦν), the Logos was not (οὐκ ἦν), Life was not (οὐκ ἦν)”. The eternity formula is here attested repeatedly, within the affirmation of the Son’s coeternity with the Father, as in C.Io. 2.19.130. The coeternity of Christ-Logos-Wisdom with God, affirmed by Origen at the end of the block quote, is probably the source of Alexander of Alexandria’s Letter to All Bishops 13: “How is it possible
that there was a time when the Son of God, Logos and Wisdom, was not (ἦν ποτε οὐκ ἦν)? For this is tantamount to stating that God was at some point without Logos and Wisdom, that is, irrational and stupid (ἄλογον καὶ ἄσοφον ποτέ)”.47 This is an absurd hypothesis. Origen had already warned that “There was a time when the Son was not” is tantamount to declaring: “At some point Wisdom was not, the Logos was not”. Alexander affirms the same, likely inspired by Origen, in his Letter to Alexander of Constantinople: “Is it not impious to state that there was a time when God’s Wisdom did not exist (μὴ εἶναι ποτε τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ Θεοῦ) . . . God’s power was not (τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ Θεοῦ ποτε μὴ ὑπάρχειν), God’s Logos was missing? . . . If the image of God had not existed eternally (ἀεί), clearly God, whose image is the Son, would not exist eternally”.48 This is the same reductio ad absurdum applied by Origen.

The sentence, “there was no time when the Son was not” (οὐκ ἦν ποτε οὐκ ἦν), became a catchphrase of the Nicene line against the “Arian” motto, “there was a time when (the Son) was not” (ἦν ποτε οὐκ ἦν). Alexander of Alexandria ascribed to Arius the sentence ἦν ποτε οὐκ ἦν.49 These opposite sentences are largely attested in Christianity from the Arian controversy onwards, but before Origen, these formulae are never found in Christian authors, only in two “pagan” philosophers who lived immediately before him: (a) the early imperial Platonist Alcinous, who argued that the cosmos has a cause, but not a temporal beginning: “When it is said that the cosmos is originated (γενητόν), it should not be understood that there was a time when the cosmos was not” (ἐν ᾧ οὐκ ἦν κόσμος, Didask. 14.3), and (b) especially Alexander of Aphrodisias, who repeatedly used exactly the same expression as Origen (and Nicaea) did, ἦν ποτε οὐκ ἦν, within his reflection on eternity/perpetuity (ἀϊδιότης).50 This expression, indeed, arose within philosophical discussions of eternity, about the definition of what is perpetual (ἀϊδιον), as is clear from Alcinous and Alexander. The imperial Platonist Calvenus Taurus also discussed the eternity of the world

48 Ap. Theodoret, HE 1.3.  
49 Socrates, HE 1.16.15.  
(In Tim. 28AC); the same problem was debated by Atticus, known to Origen, who, on the basis of his exegesis of Plato, thought that the world was created within time (κατὰ χρόνον). This was a widely debated issue in imperial Platonism: interpreters discussed what Plato meant by saying that the cosmos γέγονεν (Tim. 28B7).51 Determining whether the cosmos began in time and “there was a time when it was not” was crucial in relation to the “perishability axiom”; this was amply used in “pagan” and Christian Platonism and claims that whatever had a temporal beginning must also have a temporal end. If “there was a time when (the cosmos) was not” (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν), then “there will be a time when it will no longer be” (ἔσται ὅτε οὐκ ἔσται).

Furthermore, I have argued that, among else, Origen was inspired by imperial philosophical and medical literature, the Bible, and Philo for his innovative Trinitarian notion of υπόστασις, the individual substance of each divine Person as opposed to their common divinity. Origen thus anticipated the formula “one common essence, three individual substances” (μία οὐσία τρεῖς υποστάσεις), which was supported by the Cappadocians, who were well acquainted with Origen’s theology, and was issued by the Council of Constantinople. Origen’s novel concept of hypostasis might even have influenced “pagan” Platonism.52 Indeed, Origen’s thought arguably represented a novel, foundational theory with respect to the individuality of the Trinity’s υποστάσεις, whom he conceived as three different individual substances within the common divine essence of one God.53 On the basis of early Imperial philosophical and medical debates, Origen maintains that the Father is endowed with his own hypostasis or individual substance and the Son with his own, different from the Father’s. For example, in Cels. 8.12, Origen criticises those who denied that the Father and the Son were “two different hypostases” (δύο υποστάσεις). Origen was closely influenced by philosophical and medical authors of the early Imperial age, and by Scripture, especially

51 On this Platonic interpretive controversy concerning the Timaeus, see Boys – Stones, Platonist Philosophy, Chs 6–7; Christina Hoenig, Plato’s Timaeus and the Latin Tradition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 22–29 (https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108235211).
52 Demonstration in Ramelli, “Origen, Greek Philosophy.”
53 In Ramelli, “Hypostasis”; further in “Dynamic Unity.”
Heb 1:3.54 Mainly under the impact of the Cappadocians, the Trinitarian terminology was clarified through the aforementioned formula “one common essence, three individual substances” (μία οὐσία, τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις), which continued to be used and was still ascribed to them by the Christin Platonist Eriugena, an admirer of Origen (Periph. 2.34).55 Now, the Cappadocians, and especially Nyssen, depended on Origen. The role of Origen in the construction of the Trinitarian notion of hypostasis was so remarkable that he may have influenced the interpretation of the Neoplatonic Triad (against Plotinus’ own use) as three Hypostases: αἱ τρεῖς ἀρχαί ὑποστάσεις, “the three hypostases that are the first principles” (ἀρχαί) of all, precisely as the three divine Hypostases theorised by Origen, which were conceived as the first principles (ἀρχαί) of all.56

Origen’s philosophico-theological masterpiece, Περὶ ἀρχῶν, is the first Christian treatise of systematic theology and theoretical philosophy, entirely based on Biblical exegesis and rational argument. Origen planned it as a Christian philosopher, to “confirm by reason our faith” (Princ. 4.1.1). There are no examples of Περὶ ἀρχῶν among Christian writings before Origen, but there are many treatises Περὶ ἀρχῶν in the Greek philosophical tradition — and after Origen, only Eriugena’s Periphyseon presents a comparably comprehensive exposition of systematic theology and theoretical philosophy. Eriugena’s masterpiece, in Latin, but with a Greek title, was indeed inspired, probably even in its title, by Origen’s Περὶ ἀρχῶν, the only available model.58

In the preface to his translation of Books 1–2, Rufinus renders ἀρχαί in the title Περὶ ἀρχῶν as both principia (“principles”) and

56 Argument in Ramelli, “Hypostasis.”
57 Argument in Ramelli, “Origen, Patristic Philosophy.”
principatus (“powers”). The ἀρχαί of the homonymous treatise, indeed, are primarily the Trinity’s three hypostases, which are indeed the first principles of all and have power over all — like Plotinus’ One as δύναμις πάντων. The three divine hypostases open the whole of the First Principles, which begins with the treatment of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and appear again in the phrase archike Trinitas in Princ. 1.4.3: Rufinus here simply transliterated ἀρχική. The expression conveys the idea that the three Hypostases of the Trinity are the three ἀρχαί, the three first Principles of all. The idea underlying Origen’s title Περὶ ἀρχῶν as referring to the three ἀρχαί of the Trinity returns in Eusebius and in Porphyry’s title of Plotinus’ treatises: τρεῖς ἀρχικαὶ ὑποστάσεις, “three principal hypostases” or the three hypostases that are the ἀρχαί. Porphyry may well have been influenced by his knowledge of Origen’s notion of ὑπόστασις in the choice of the title of Plotinus’ treatise on the three ἀρχικαὶ ὑποστάσεις, as Eusebius was probably aware.59 (Of course, Porphyry would never have admitted such an influence from a Christian, although a Christian Platonist, as he admitted in F39).

Origen rejected μοναρχία, that is, the positing of one Hypostasis, the Father, as one ἀρχή, instead of three (Heracl. 3.20–4.9); his elaboration of the Trinitarian doctrine of Hypostasis owes much to his anti-Monarchian efforts.60 This is also why he was repeatedly accused of positing two Gods or two innate principle (δύο θεοί, duo innata), focussing on the Father and the Son. Instead of one, Origen postulates three ἀρχαί as one God. According to Origen, God, who is one but is a Trinity of three Hypostases that are three ἀρχαί, replaces the three ἀρχαί of so-called Middle Platonism, God, matter, and forms. Origen’s triune God, indeed, absorbs matter and forms, since God creates matter — and I have pointed out earlier that Origen claimed his doctrine of creatio ex nihilo as more consistent with Plato’s Timaeus than competing “pagan” interpretations— and thinks all Forms, which are (in an exemplaristic manner) in the Mind of God, Christ-Logos-Wisdom.

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59 See Ramelli, “Hypostasis.”
5. PATRISTIC PHILOSOPHY ATTRACTED INTELLECTUALLY DEMANDING PEOPLE

Against “Gnostic” ideas, which he (like Clement, Plotinus and others) deemed deterministic and predestinationistic, Origen built up his doctrine of the origin, fall, and restoration of rational creatures.⁶¹ Origen’s philosophical theology was indeed in competition with “Gnostic” theories, which were often attractive to intellectually demanding people; Origen, thus, had to construct an intellectually strong doctrine—that is, philosophically strong, particularly with respect to theology and theodicy—in order to be on a par with these and other competitors.

An example of a competitor that Origen could win over to his philosophical theology and to the Church was Ambrose, a Valentinian, whom Origen converted to the “orthodox” faith.⁶² Origen remarked that Ambrose initially stuck to “Gnosticism” out of aversion to the faith of the “catholic” church, which he deemed an ordinary faith, an “irrational and vulgar faith”, ἄλογος καὶ ἰδιωτικὴ πίστις, that of the “simple”. Unlike them, “gluttonous souls” (λίχνοι) such as Ambrose himself and “heterodox” (ἑτεροδόξων) Christians—Origen observed—if they lack the salvific food, greedily turn to “prohibited foods” (C.Io. 5.8).⁶³ This is a metaphor used by Origen here to mean “heresies”.

The metaphor involving gluttony and foods that can be salvific or prohibited appears again in the homilies on the Psalms discovered in Munich. Here Origen remembers that in his youth heresies attracted many “gluttons” (λίχνοι), who were “hungry for Christ’s teaching” but had no “adequate teachers in the Church”; therefore, they left the mainstream, “orthodox” church and became, in Origen’s own words, “heretics” (H.Ps. 77 f. 233r). Indeed, against allegations that later in his life Origen’s “anti-Gnostic” polemic abated,⁶⁴ in fact Valentinians

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⁶² Epiphanius depicted him as “Marcionite or Sabellian” in AH 64.3.
⁶³ Origen describes as “heterodox” Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus (C.Matth. 2.12) and the Marcionites, without naming them, in C.Io. 13.17.106.
⁶⁴ For example, in an otherwise excellent study, Ronald Heine claimed that the focus of Origen’s thought shifted from his concern with “Gnostic” issues in Alexandria to the church-synagogue relationship and the salvation of the Jews in Caesarea (Ronald Heine, Origen. Scholarship in the Service of the Church, Oxford, OUP,
and Marcionites seem to have still represented a significant target of the late Munich homilies. Origen was familiar with Valentinian ideas, but combated them all his life long, especially what he perceived as “Gnostic” determinism and predestinationism.

Within such a competing landscape, it was essential to supply the “orthodox” faith with philosophical structures, in order not only to defend Christianity from charges of irrationality and to convert people to Christianity, but also to keep the most philosophically demanding Christians within the Church, by which Origen meant the “orthodox” Church he recognised, as opposed to “heretic” trends. By applying philosophy to Biblical exegesis and theology, Origen could win for the Church not only Ambrose, but also other learned, culturally demanding, and philosophically educated people, who were often attracted by “Gnosticism” (but also by “pagan” culture and philosophy, as in the case of Gregory-Theodore, his disciple who is probably identifiable with Gregory Thaumaturgus, who brought (an Origenian form of) Christianity to Cappadocia and formed a trait d’union between Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa.

6. THE ROLE OF PATRISTIC PHILOSOPHY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF DOGMATICS: HINTS

Patristic philosophical theology played a pivotal role in the construction of Christian doctrines, as expressed primarily in the first ecumenical councils, which belong to the Patristic era. Most of the dogmatic discussion and definition at the council of Nicaea (325) depends on previous theologians, among whom Origen is paramount. His “anti-subordinationism”, although not yet that of the Cappadocians, is nevertheless different from the middle-
neoplatonic triadic hierarchy and is connected with his discourse on the Son as divine Principle (ἀρχή) and divine Hypostasis. Origen was so convinced of the Son’s divinity and coeternity with the Father that, as mentioned at the beginning, he first applied to him the formula “there was no time when he was not”, which later became a catchphrase of anti-“Arian” polemics. Origen may have been the main inspirer of the Nicene definition of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, deriving from their coeternity and common divinity (which he supported), and of the Cappadocians’ Trinitarian formula μια οὐσία τρεῖς υποστάσεις, “one essence, three individual substances”, which developed the Nicene formula at the council of Constantinople (381). Other scholars concur with me about Origen’s essential anti-subordinationism, his theology developed over time in this direction.

It is significant that the strongly anti-subordinationistic argument built up by Gregory of Nyssa in In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius arguably depends on Origen heavily, in scriptural and verbal echoes and in its general argument. The latter is that the Son’s submission to the Father in 1 Cor 15:28 does not denote the divine Son’s inferiority, but the

68 As argued by Ramelli, “Alexander of Aphrodisias.”

submission and salvation of the body of Christ, that is, humanity. Gregory in fact followed Origen’s *Princ.* 3.5.6-7, which he read in the original Greek and which already contrasted a “heretical” (in Origen’s own words) subordinationistic interpretation of 1 Cor 15:28. The same anti-subordinationistic argument was in Origen’s *H.Lev.* 7.2 and *C.Rom.* 7.3.60-68. Both Origen and Gregory interpreted 1 Cor 15.28 as a declaration, not of the Son’s subordination to the Father, but of universal restoration or apokatastasis. The Son “has nobody over him”, not even the Father: “for he is not after (*post*) the Father, but from (*de*) Him”, which implies that the derivation (filiation) of the Son does not entail the Son’s inferiority to the Father; it is “heretics” who state that Father and Son have “different natures”, whereas Origen avers that they have the same divine “essence” (*substantia vel natura*) but different “properties” (*proprietates*), which corresponds to their different ὑποστάσεις (*C.Rom.* 7.12.146-147).

The determinative article that distinguishes the Father (ὁ θεός) from the Son (θεός) is an explanation of John 1:1, which keeps this distinction (*C.Io.* 2.12.14-15), and is influenced by Philo. Origen was well aware that Greek grammar in John 1:1 required the article for the Logos, being the subject, and no article for the predicative, “God” (θεός ἦν ὁ Λόγος); the article is used for the Father, being no predicative (ὁ Λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν). The Father is the source (πηγή) of the Son, as the divine Logos (with article: ὁ Λόγος) is the source (πηγή) of human creatural reason (λόγος without article, *C.Io.* 2.13.15). The distinction is grammatical and, conceptually, depends on derivation; moreover, it derives from Philo. Commenting on Gen 31:13, “I am the God who appeared to you in the place of God”, Philo distinguished between θεός with article and θεός without article:

> Do not fail to note the language employed, but carefully inquire whether there are two Gods, since we read: “I am the God who appeared to you” not “in my place” but “in the place of God”, as though there were another. Therefore, what should we say? The true God is one, but those who are improperly called “God” are more than one. Consequently, the Holy Word here has indicated the One who is truly God through articles, saying “I am the God” while omitting the article when mentioning the one who is

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called “God” improperly, saying: “who appeared to you in the place” not “of the God” but simply “of God” (Somn. 1.[39].228-229).

Origen does not think that the Son is called God improperly and is clear that those who are called God “improperly” are creatures, not the Father or Son (Cels. 5.4-5; Princ. 1.2.13; C.Cant. prol. 2.34: *abusive, καταχρηστικῶς*). Ignatius likewise used the article for God (Ep.Smirm. 1.1; 6.1) but referred the expression “the God” to Christ; Origen cited a passage from Ep.Smirm. 3 in the middle recension, but attributed it to the *Doctrina Petri* (Princ. Pr. 8).

The Father, thus, is the source (πηγή) of the divinity, and the Son—Autologos or Logos Itself—is the source of the logos in all rational creatures (C.Io. 2.20.1-9). Therefore, “the source (πηγή) of rationality [λόγου] in all rational creatures is the Logos’, ὁ Λόγος (C.Io. 2.2.15). Thus, the principle, source or font of the divinity or of the logos is marked by the article, while the derivatives are not, but both the Father and the Son are divine; only, the Son derives from the Father by filiation. We must be careful in distinguishing the filiation of the Son from the Son’s inferiority to the Father. Some scholars seem to confound filiation and subordinationism when they argue for the subordination of the Son according to Origen: e.g., Micah Miller, “The Auto-X Attributes of the Father and the Son in Origen”, *Journal of Theological Studies* 73.1 (2022) 132-166 (https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flac019). However, Miller agrees that “Origen would not have considered himself to be formulating a subordinationist theology” (166).
Cappadocians and Augustine certainly posited the filiation of the Son, but not his subordination to the Father, both being the eternal God. The Father is the fountainhead (πηγὴ) of the divinity (θεότητος), and the Son is divine by filiation; the Son-Logos, who is the Logos Itself (αὐτόλογος) or the Form/Idea of Logos in which all rational creatures participate, is the fountainhead of rationality/reason/word (λόγου, C.Io. 2.3.20).

The Father and the Son have the same honour (C.Rom. 8.4.25-26). The accuracy of Rufinus’ translation of the ὁμοτιμία between the Father and the Son according to Origen is confirmed by the following texts:

— Nyssen’s In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius, which is based on Origen’s anti-subordinationist argument;
— a fragment by Marcellus of Ancyra (F31 ap. Eusebius, C.Marc. 1.34);
— an admittedly dubious scholion attributed to Origen (Sch.Matth. PG 17.309.47), which quotes the Nicene and Constantinopolitan dogmatic formulae (ὁμοούσιος and μία οὐσία τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις), probably either by Origen or by someone who read such formulae in Origen’s Greek, since τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις is attested in Origen C.Io. 2.10.75 in Greek;
— C.Io. 2.10.74;23.149, where Father and Son are defined as one in their essence (οὐσία) and substratum (ὑποκειμένω),
— and especially the later C.Io. 32.324-325: “God the Logos was not susceptible of being raised/exalted” (ὁ θεὸς λόγος οὐκ ἐπεδέχετο τὸ ὑπερυψωτῆναι), because it is already God like the Father, so it cannot become loftier; only the human nature of Christ could be raised, not the divinity of the Son, which is from eternity equal to the divinity of the Father,
— and the late Cels. 8.12, which details that God’s essence (οὐσία) is one, but Father and Son are distinct in their individual substances (τῇ υποστάσει). Here Origen is speaking of Christ’s divine nature.

God the Logos assumed body and soul (C.Cant. 2.6.8); the Saviour, Christ, is “a compound” (σύνθετος) of humanity and divinity. Christ is not God in his human body or soul, but in the divine Logos, God’s Son (Cels. 2.9); this is why Paul taught a higher Christology to the perfect, revealing Christ as God’s Wisdom, namely the Son, and a lower one to the imperfect, preaching Christ crucified (H.Ex. 12.4). The Son-Logos-Wisdom is only God, while Christ is a compound of
God and creature, but Origen sometimes calls Christ the Son, divine Logos and divine Wisdom (e.g. Com. Rom. 7.5.41-51), availing himself of communicatio idiomatum (ante litteram). In reference to Christ’s divine nature, in C.Matth. 17.14 and C.Io. 10.37.246, Origen criticises those who do not distinguish Father and Son according to their individual substance (κατὰ ὑπόστασιν), although they are right in deeming them one in their common divine essence (ἐν οὐσίᾳ).

Origen had the concept, and the terminology, of ὁμοούσιος. He employed this term in C.Io. 13.25.149-150 to criticise the Valentinian view that “spiritual/pneumatic” humans are consubstantial (ὁμοούσιοι) with the divine, whose nature or essence (οὐσία) is rather “non-generated and supremely blessed”: humans are not consubstantial with God; only the Trinity’s Hypostases are consubstantial with one another. There is a gulf between the essence of God and that of creatures. Clement, also attacking some “Gnostics”, had already rejected the hypothesis that “we are a part of God and consubstantial with God” (μέρος αὐτοῦ καὶ ὁμοούσίους τῷ θεῷ).75

Origen might have used ὁμοούσιος in Fr.Ps. 54.3-4 in reference to the Son. Commenting on Heb 1:3, Origen described Christ-emancipation-vapour (ἀπόρροια) from God as ὁμοούσιος, a noun kept by Rufinus and glossed “of the same essence” (unius substantiae): the vapour must come from the same substance as its origin, the Father.76 Christ as ἀπόρροια from the Father is close to Plotinus’s model of derivation of the hypostasis Nous from the hypostasis One (e.g. Enn. 5.2.1).

Rufinus, who read and translated Origen’s Greek in Adult. 1, states that Origen applied ὁμοούσιος to the Father and Son (unius substantiae, quod grece homoousion dicitur, designavit). We cannot be sure, but, if this be the case, in Apol. 99 Rufinus was not inserting a term that Origen did not use. Here Origen employed ὁμοούσιος within the exegesis of Heb 1:3 and Wis 7:25-26, the same passages he quotes in Princ. 1.2.6, stating that they expressed the “unity of nature and essence” between Father and Son: naturae ac substantiae [. . .] unitatem.

75 Strom. 2.16.73.4–74.3.1, SC 38.92. Cf. 2.16.75.1, SC 38.93: “we are neither parts of God (μορίων αὐτοῦ) nor children of God by nature (φύσει τέκνων).”

76 Pamphilus, Apol. 99. Pamphilus’ conclusion (100) summarises: “Origen declared the Son born of God’s substance, that is, ὁμοούσιον — of the same substance as the Father,” Rufinus glosses.
Origen established the identity of substance between Father and Son also through their shared essence as ἁγάπη or “charity-love”: since the Father is ἁγάπη and the Son is ἁγάπη, they are “one” (unum est) and “differ in nothing” (C.Cant. prol. 2.26). In Dial. Adam. 1.2, which reflects Origen’s ideas, the Greek includes ὁμοούσιος in Adamantius’ words: “God the Logos, from the Father, consubstantial with the Father” (τὸν ἐξ αὐτοῦ Θεόν Λόγον ὁμοούσιον). Rufinus renders ὁμοούσιον as consubstantivum, attributing again this catchword to Origen. Plotinus and Porphyry, who both knew Origen’s work, used ὁμοούσιος as “sharing the same substance/nature”.

Athenasius read Origen in Greek and, in Decr. 27.1-2, represented him as a supporter of the Son’s coeternity (αἰ δίως συνεῖναι) and consubstantiality (μὴ ἑτέρας οὐσίας) with the Father and as a critic of his days’ subordinationists. Athenasius also praised Theognostus, Origen’s follower, for declaring the Son born “from the Father’s essence” (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας, Decr. 25.1). The anonymous apologist preserved by Photius (Bibl.117.91b-92a) and Socrates (HE 6.13) also read Origen in Greek and defended him from accusations of forerunning “Arianism” and therefore subordinationism.

Constantine at Nicaea promoted the introduction of “consubstantial” (ὁμοούσιος) into the profession of faith, according to Eusebius’ Letter to His Church (§7). Nicaea added that the Son arose “from the Father’s essence” (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας), “begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father” (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί). The Nicene fathers anathematised (§8) those who claimed that “there was a time when the Son was not (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν); before being born he was not; he arose from nonbeing; or is from another substance, or created (κτιστόν), or mutable (τρεπτόν), or alterable (ἀλλοιωτόν)”.

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78 Enn. 4.4.28. 56.4.7.10.19; Abst. 1.19; Sent. 33.
79 Analysed in RAMELLI, “Anti-Subordinationism” and “Dynamic Unity.”
80 Socrates, HE 1.8; Athenasius, Decr. 33.
81 Ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων, like a creature.
82 Ἐξ ἐτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας: Origen’s distinction between οὐσία and ὑποστάσις is not yet received.
Origen did not reserve the terms κτίζω and κτιστόν to creatures, but also used it for God’s “foundation” of Wisdom/Son (Com. Joh. 1.19.114-115): however, he definitely separated the Son—divine, immutable, coeternal and consubstantial with God—from creatures and thereby grounded the Nicene dogma. As I have pointed out earlier, ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν was imported by Origen himself from Greek philosophy (cosmology) to Christian Trinitarian theology.

As Eusebius’s letter reports, Constantine’s addition of ὀμοούσιον was “thoroughly debated in questions and answers and put to the test” by the Nicene fathers (§9). As Origen had done, they also clarified that “from the substance” (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας) did not indicate that the Son is a part or fragment of the Father’s essence, in a material sense (μέρος αὐτοῦ τῆς οὐσίας, §§10-11). This concern was already expressed by Origen twice: the Son is not a part or fragment of the Father’s substance that has been divided (διαίρετος); his generation is not “similar to the birth of animals” (Princ. 4.4.1 in Greek = Marcellus F31 ap. Eusebius, C.Marc. 1.4). Against a materialistic notion of the Son’s eternal generation, Origen argued that, “if the Son was born from the Father’s substance (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας) as though God were diminished and deprived of a part of his substance (μειουμένου καὶ λείποντος τῆ οὐσία) after his birth, . . . then one should deem Father and Son corporeal (σῶμα) and the Father divided . . . they will reduce the Father to a body” (C.Io. 20.18.157). Origen, indeed, countered contemporary “heretics”, as he calls them, who deemed “a part of God’s essence transformed into the Son” (partem aliquam substantiae Dei in Filium versam), or the Son “created from no substance” (ex nullis substantibus) and outside God (Princ. 4.4.1 in Latin).

Origen’s argument emerged clearly in the discussion about the insertion of ὀμοούσιον in the dogma at Nicaea. The Nicene fathers, according to Eusebius’s letter, raised the same objection as Origen, which Eusebius emphasised also in DE 4.3.13, 5.1.4-14: the Son’s generation is unlike any physical generation by separation of a part of a substance (οὐσία). He is consubstantial and coeternal with the Father; therefore, as Eusebius claims after Origen, it is impossible to state that “there was a time in which He was not” (4.3.3; 5.1.15). The Son was generated by the Father “without deprivation, diminution, severance, or division” (οὔτι πω κατὰ στέρησιν ἢ μείωσιν ἢ τομήν ἢ διαίρεσιν: 4.3.11). This is what both Origen and the Nicene fathers stressed too. Eusebius of Nicomedia reported the same concern when
he observed that if the Son derives “from the Father, in the sense that the Son is a part of the Father or an emanation of the Father’s essence/substance (μέρος αὐτοῦ ἢ ἐξ ἀπορροίας τῆς οὐσίας), it could not be claimed that he was created or established” (κτιστόν, θεμελιωτόν, Letter to Paulinus of Tyre, ap. Theodoret, HE. 1.5). That the Son is a part or fragment (μέρος) of the Father was denied by Origen and the Nicene fathers, who ruled out that ὁμοούσιος could be understood materialistically. Once established that ὁμοούσιος (a non-biblical word, as at Nicaea was observed83) did not entail any corporeal generation, through Origen’s assurance that the Son “is not a part/fragment of the Father’s essence” (οὐ μὴν μέρος αὐτοῦ τῆς οὐσίας), Eusebius gave his assent to the creedal formula that included ὁμοούσιος, adhering to its “correct meaning” (τῆς ὀρθῆς διανοίας, §10). This is the same meaning defended by Origen. This cleared away misunderstandings of ὁμοούσιος as implying the Son’s material separation from the Father. Origen had already contested such misunderstandings. Eusebius seems to think with Origen’s definition of “ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας” in mind, describing the Son’s generation not “by division of material substance” (κατὰ διαίρεσιν τῆς οὐσίας) nor “by alteration of the Father’s substance” (κατ’ ἀλλοίωσιν τῆς τοῦ Πατρὸς οὐσίας); the Son does not stem “from another substance (ἐξ ἑτέρας οὐσίας), but from that of the Father (ἐκ τοῦ Πατρός)”.

The Nicene fathers declared, according to Eusebius’ report, that the noun ὁμοούσιος is found, if not in Scripture, in the oeuvre of “learned and illustrious (λογίους καὶ ἐπιφανεῖς) ancient bishops and writers”. Eusebius probably refers to “bishops” such as Irenaeus and to the “writer” Origen, who had already rejected the formulae later anathematised at Nicaea, namely, that the Son was generated “from non-being” (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων, perceived as reducing the Son to a creature) and “there was a time when (the Son) did not exist” (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, later used by Arius, whose subordinationism was condemned at Nicaea).84 From Origen, such a rejection passed on to Nicaea’s dogmatic definitions, formally through Constantine, who,

84 In an Athanasian fragment, in Princ., 4.4.1, and elsewhere. Argument on ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν in Ramelli, “Alexander of Aphrodisias.” Arius’ dogmatic statements are reported by his opponents, especially Athanasius and the historians Socrates and Sozomen.
however, was no learned theologian, knew very little Greek, and required a translator (even at Nicaea) to have his speech rendered into Greek (V.Const. 3.13.1); he also read Eusebius’ works in a Latin translation (ibid. 4.35.2-3). As a consequence, he probably had to rely on theological advisers for the doctrine and terminology of ὁμοούσιος and the relevant literature. He accessed Origen probably through his Eusebius, who was very well acquainted with his thought and overtly defended it. Eusebius, V.Const. 2.48, reports Constantine’s letter to Alexander of Alexandria and Arius, where he states that their division was of no importance: “I find the cause to be really insignificant, quite unworthy of such a fierce contention”. Constantine proves to have had little perception of the theological issues at stake with ὁμοούσιος and its corollaries and could hardly have introduced it entirely by himself.85 “Arianism”, moreover, was not the cause of the convocation of Nicaea by Constantine.86

Eusebius in his Theophania, preserved in a Syriac version and Greek fragments, a late work, seems to have entirely embraced the Nicene dogma about the Son as “God from God” and “unique image of the light of the Father’s essence”, and both as “one in essence” (ὁμοούσιος). Constantine’s argument for the introduction of homoousios is also explained in Oratio ad sanctorum coetum (appended to Eusebius’ Vita Constantini in the manuscript tradition), where the Nicene faith is declared to be consistent with Plato’s theology as interpreted by “Middle Platonism” and early Neoplatonism (9): a God above every essence, and a second God; these two possess one perfection; the second comes from the first and is the agent of creation. God the Logos ordered everything


86 Constantine’s post-synodal letters to the Church of Alexandria and of the Council to the Alexandrian Church were forged: Piętras, Nicaea; see also Mark Smith, The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church Councils, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, and also on the complex legacy of Nicaea, Carlos Galvão Sobrinho, Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Late Roman Empire, Oakland, University of California, 2013.
and is God and God’s Son. The Oratio ad sanctorum coetum reflects Eusebius’ Origenian ideas about the convergence between Plato and Christianity, the reasons for it, the opposition to fatalism and casualism, the importance given to free will against the objection that God could create human beings docile (this is the same objection to which both Origen and Bardaisan responded in the same way: stressing the value of free will87), the use of δεύτερος θεός (“second God”) but in reference to Plato, Christ as Physician and his anti-materialistic generation, discussed above, and more. Constantine’s self-depiction as ἐπίσκοπος τῶν ἐκτός or “bishop of those outside” (V.Const. 4.24.1; cf. 1.44.1) corresponds to Eusebius’ definition of the emperor: he viewed Constantine as “bishop”, supervisor, teaching virtue and faith to his subjects and liberating them from demons; Eusebius used ἐπισκοπή and ἐπισκοπέω of Christ’s government.88 The emperor’s government corresponds to that of Christ, which Origen had already assimilated to the world soul of the Greek philosophical tradition (Princ. 2.1.3).89

Also, Constantine stressed the identification of the Son as the Father’s consubstantial “will” (βουλή/βούλησις, “will/intention”, in an ethical intellectualistic framework) and as creator of all; this characterisation reminds me of Origen and his teachers, Pantaenus and Ammonius, who posited the Logos as God’s βουλή which established all creation. Eusebius maintained that the Son-Logos subsisted by the Father’s βούλησις and God’s will created the universe.90 Eusebius depends on Origen, who assimilated God’s Logos-Nous-Wisdom to God’s Will91 and regarded the world as created by God’s will: sufficere voluntas Patris ad subsistendum hoc quod vult Pater (“the Father’s will is sufficient to the subsistence of what the Father wants”, Princ. 1.2.6).

90 Eusebius, C.Marc. 95-96 (Logan).
91 Princ. 4.4.1: voluntas a mente “will from the mind”; 1.2.6=1.2.9: voluntas ex mente.
In Origen’s perspective, the unity between the Father and the Son is a sharing of both essence and will: “God’s will (θέλημα) is in the Son’s will, which is indistinguishable from that of the Father, so they are not two wills (δύο θελήματα), but one”. Origen is speaking of the Son’s divine will — different from Jesus’ human will, although the dispute between mono- and ditheletism were still far from breaking out. God’s Wisdom is “the immaculate mirror of God’s activity (ἐνεργείας = inoperationis), and the Son’s activity does not differ from that of the Father, their act of will (motus) being the same in all . . . without any dissimilarity between Son and Father” (Princ. 1.2.12). Gregory of Nyssa built on this, arguing that from the equality of essence (οὐσία) between the Hypostases of the Trinity comes their equality of power (δύναμις) and operation (ἐνέργεια); he was also drawing on Origen when establishing Christ’s two wills, depending on his two natures.93

Origen seems to have been a major, although probably mediated,94 inspirer of the Nicene notion of the Son’s coeternity and consubstantiality with the Father, both by positing the identity of divine nature between Father and Son and through his above-analysed formula, “there was no time when the Son was not”, as Athanasius, Nyssen and other theologians were aware. Moreover, by claiming that the Trinity has one common divinity but three individual substances (ὑποστάσει), he inspired the dogmatic definition μία οὐσία τρεῖς υποστάσεις through Nyssen and (from a certain point onwards) Basil and Nazianzen.95 Origen’s assertion of the Son’s divinity, coeternity with the Father, and consubstantiality, along with his anti-subordinationistic reading of 1 Cor 15:28 (absorbed and proposed again by Gregory of Nyssa in In illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius), confirm Origen’s role in paving the way for the Nicene and Constantinopolitan dogmatic lines. Even Origen’s supposed exhortation to pray to God but not to Christ —usually deemed a proof of “subordinationism”— is countered by his assertion that both God and God’s Logos, the High Priest, must be prayed (Cels. 8.26; cf. 5.4). It is not the case that Origen wants only God the Father to be the

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92 C.Io. 13.36.228; cf. 13.36.231.
93 Antirrh. GNO III/1.181.18-23.
94 Possibly mediated by Eusebius, Constantine, and maybe Alexander.
95 On this definition in Nyssen and later theologians, literature in Ramelli, “Hypostasis.”
addressee of prayers; the Son is “the image of God’s goodness”; this is why humans must pray the Logos, who can heal them, and the Father, who sent the Logos (Cels. 5.11). Origen recommends praying God and the divine Logos, either together or individually.

The theology of Origen and the Cappadocians, especially Gregory Nyssen, prepared the Nicene-Constantinopolitan developments. The Cappadocians emphasised the concept of equality, bringing the Trinitarian Hypostases to the level of Plotinus’ One, but the premises were in Origen’s theology and his concept of the divinity and coeternity of the three Hypostases. Nyssen —like Athanasius in Decr. 27— used Origen’s arguments in his own anti-“Arian” and therefore anti-subordinationistic polemic. Gregory of Nyssa through his anti-subordinationistic argument in In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius interpreted 1 Cor 15:28 (which propped up Origen’s theory of apokatastasis) in an anti-subordinationistic sense. Gregory claimed that the Son is not subordinate to the Father in his divinity, but in his “body”, which corresponds to all humanity. Gregory’s anti-subordinationistic demonstration derives from Origen, whose influence is clear everywhere, from the main arguments to the most subtle and tiniest exegetical details. Gregory closely took up Origen’s argument against subordinationism and its connection to the doctrine of apokatastasis (the link between anti-subordinationism and apokatastasis was already established by Origen, in Princ. 3.5.6-7 and elsewhere). Gregory’s dependence on Origen in his polemic against subordinationism confirms that Origen was not seen as a precursor of “Arianism” by theologians such as Gregory, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Eusebius (who did subscribe to the Nicene Creed), but as a forerunner of their own Nicene-Constantinopolitan dogmatic line. Athanasius, who construed himself as the champion of anti-Arianism, cited Origen, against the “Arians”, as an authority on the Son’s coeternity with the Father, being aware that the Son’s coeternity entailed the sharing of the same divine nature with the Father.

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96 Demonstration in Ramelli, “Dynamic Unity.”
Origen impacted the Nicene-Cappadocian line, which was represented above all by Nyssen, and held that God is “one and the same nature or essence (μία οὐσία) in three individual substances (τρεῖς υποστάσεις)” and the Son is consubstantial (ὁμοούσιος) with the Father. The three Hypostases of the Trinity share in the same divine nature (οὐσία). Origen maintained that they have the same divine, eternal nature but are three different individual substances (ὑποστάσεις). Gregory of Nyssa followed him and in Against Eunomius refuted the argument of Eunomius, who entertained a subordinationistic view of the Son. Gregory here used σχέσις often, to describe the equality of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Eunomius denied the egalitarian relation between these two Hypostases. Relying on Origen’s innovative notion of Hypostasis as individual substance, Gregory claimed that the Father and the Son are in a reciprocal relation, on a par. According to Gregory, all the three Hypostases of the Trinity, and not only the Father, correspond to the highest principle, Plotinus’ One, as is clear, for instance, from Ad Graecos. From the ontological equality of the three Hypostases derived the equality of their powers (δυνάμεις) and activities (ἐνέργειαι): Nyssen made this point on the basis of Origen’s premises.98 On the same grounds, Gregory’s doctrine of “social analogy” maintained that the same egalitarian relationship that obtains within the Trinity also obtains within all humanity. This “social analogy” principle, which stressed the equal dignity of all human beings, was also applied by Gregory to the rejection of social injustice and slavery.99 Gregory was one of the few Patristic authors who condemned slavery and social injustice most strongly.

Origen’s theology proved seminal for Ephesus and Chalcedon as well. Origen was among the very first theologians to use Θεοτόκος,


“Mother of God”, a term established at Ephesus, in reference to Mary, and the first to explain its meaning theologically. In the first book of his *Commentary on Romans* he “extensively examined how/ in what sense Mary is called Θεοτόκος” or “what is the meaning of Θεοτόκος” (Πῶς Θεοτόκος λέγεται πλατέως ἐξήτασεν, Socrates, *HE* 7.32.17). It would be very interesting to have this passage, which is lost; this Commentary is extant, in an abridged form, only in Latin. Nevertheless, Θεοτόκος also occurs in Origen’s Greek fragments in reference to Mary, so it is not an invention of Socrates that the Commentary on Romans included this key-term and explained it. Θεοτόκος was later used by Origen’s admirers Eusebius, Nyssen, Nazianzen, and Athanasius, who, as seen, quoted Origen as an authority, in support of Nicene orthodoxy.

That Origen was the precursor of the Θεοτόκος dogma in Ephesus is supported by the fact that Pierius, a close, immediate follower of Origen, wrote *On the Theotokos*, thereby suggesting that this was a theological concern of Origen. This is confirmed by the De Boor fragments attributed to Philip of Side, but probably coming from scholia to Eusebius’s *Church History*, and an epitome (fragment around *HE* 7.32.26): Pierius, besides composing a *Pascha* (Περὶ Πάσχα), again like Origen, wrote “many other needed works, especially that *On the Theotokos* (καὶ μάλιστα τὸ Περὶ τῆς Θεοτόκου”).

Origen used the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*, which was developed at length in subsequent theological discussions, for example in *Princ.* 2.6.3. Therefore, he could both affirm the death of the Son of God and declare Mary Θεοτόκος or “God’s Mother”, not merely “mother of Jesus” or “of Christ”, as Nestorius would prefer. In this way, Origen anticipated both Ephesus’ *Theotokos* dogma, and Chalcedon’s definition of Christ’s two natures and their interconnections. Origen

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100 Fr.Luc., 41b.1; 80.4; Schol Luc. PG 17.321; Fr.Ps. 21.21; Fr.Deut. PG 12.813.
101 V.Const. 3.43.2; C.Marc. 2.1.4; InCant. vol.3 533.11; C.Ps. PG 23.1344.11, etc.
102 Ep. 3.24.3; Virg. 14.1; 19.1, etc.
103 Or. 29 De Filio 4; 23 occurrences in *Christus patiens*, of dubious attribution.
insisted on Christ’s two natures, for example, in Princ. 2.6.2, in C.Io. 10.23, which describes Christ as “human”, because he died, and “not human”, as more divine than human, and in C.Matt. 12.37 (and everywhere), on the divine nature, “in the form of God”, which appeared to the disciples at the Transfiguration on the mountain, and the human nature, “in the form of a servant”, visible to those who waited at the foot of the mountain (representing closeness to God). But the human and the divine nature belong to one Trinitarian Hypostasis, that of the Son.

Indeed, the Council of Chalcedon, the third ecumenical council (451),\textsuperscript{106} theologically rests on Origen, the Cappadocians, Evagrius, and other theologians, including Cyril of Alexandria. It has, as mentioned, close relations to Ephesus, since the choice between Θεοτόκος and Χριστοτόκος—which made the object of Cyril’s and Nestorius’ controversy—depends on the way Christ is conceived: one Hypostasis with two Natures or two Hypostases. The latter alternative marked a big divergence that led to the Chalcedonian settlement (at least a settlement was the hope, although in fact Chalcedon brought about a great deal of confusion and disagreement among the Churches).

The Chalcedonian confession focussed on the crucial issue of the relationship between the human and the divine nature of Christ, in continuity with the earlier councils, and on the basis of four adverbs: “in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation” (ἐν δύο φύσεσιν ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαιρέτως, ἀχωρίστως). In spite of accusations of subordinationism and a dichotomic Christology levelled against him, Evagrius, who followed Origen, the Cappadocians, and especially Nyssen,\textsuperscript{107} anticipated Chalcedon’s adverbs on the unconfused unity


of the two natures in Christ. My reading of the first sentence of his KG 6.14 confirms that Christ is ὁμοούσιος with the Father, as is supported by KG 3.1. In Skemmata 1, Evagrius treats Christ as a compound of creatural and divine nature: he claims that Christ qua Christ possesses “the essential knowledge”, that is, God, who constitutes his own divine nature. Consistently, Palladius in his biography of Evagrius depicts him as opposing “heretics” such as “Arians” and Eunomians and supporting the full divinity of Christ-Logos, the Son of God, who also assumed a human body, soul and intellect, as the Chalcedonian definition has.

Evagrius’ alleged dichotomic Christology is accused of failing to point in the direction of Chalcedon. However, in addition to the problematic stance of judging Evagrius from the perspective of posterior theological developments, it must be noted that in KG 6.14 Christ is said to possess “inseparably” the “substantial knowledge” that is God. This adverb at Chalcedon describes the inseparability of the two natures of Christ (ἀχωρίστως, ἀδιαιρέτως). Here, Evagrius uses “inseparable” to describe the union of the divine and human natures in Christ (as Chalcedon would do): “Christ is the only one who always and inseparably possesses substantial knowledge in himself.” Here, “always” also anticipates Chalcedon’s ἀτρέπτως. “Always and inseparably”, Christ is both God and human, as Chalcedon then described.


7. **BY WAY OF CONCLUSION**

This article has investigated the ways Christians in the Patristic period structured their *kerygma* and teachings philosophically. I explained that this move was of vital importance, since Christ is the Logos and Christianity must be logical/rational and informed philosophically. I have pointed out that in Patristics the philosophical structure of Christian theology rested mainly on Platonism. Patristic philosophical theology can be seen as a Christianisation of philosophy and I pointed out its main protagonists, the most prominent of whom was Origen. I showed how Christianity began to represent itself as philosophy from its start and certainly from the second century onwards, in a number of instances. I investigated how Christians responded to accusations of irrationalism and fideism, precisely through the construction of Christianity as philosophy.

I examined the development of the Christian theology of the Logos and focussed on Origen’s theology of the Logos and how he built up Patristic philosophy in the form of Patristic Platonism, always basing his arguments on both Scripture and philosophical reasoning. His appreciation of philosophy and use of philosophy in his thought and teaching have been thus pointed out. Origen, I argued, rejected polytheistic mythology and cult but not philosophy or henotheistic philosophical theology. I delved into Origen’s attitude to, and interaction with, Plato, and observed, among else, that in his lists of philosophical doctrines that disagree with Christianity no specifically Platonic doctrine is ever included. The eternity of the world was widespread in Greek philosophy, and metensomatosis was not a theoretical doctrine by Plato, but a myth he alluded to, and which he attributed to others, presumably the (Orphic-)Pythagoreans. Origen refuted “the doctrine/*dogma* of metensomatosis”, not the *myth* of metensomatosis, as Plato presented it. And he Christianised it in the form of “ensomatosis”.

I pointed out the philosophico-theological importance of John and the Johannine Prologue, also commented on by “pagan” Platonists such as Amelius, and addressed *Contra Celsum* as a significant case study of Origen’s attitude towards Plato (positive) and contemporary “pagan” Platonism (mostly critical). I examined Origen’s defence of his identity as a Christian philosopher and of his own exegesis of Plato’s *Timaeus* as more consistent with Plato’s thought than some contemporary “pagan” (Platonist) interpretations, and I argued
for Athenagoras’ (and Philo’s) influence on Origen in this respect. I showed that, just as creatio ex nihilo and even the Incarnation, as Origen puts it, paradoxically complete Plato’s message rather than overturning it, so does also Christian Platonism complete Plato’s thought rather than rejecting it. Origen’s appreciation and interpretation of Plato’s myths has been investigated as highly significant with respect to his depiction of Plato as the best among all philosophers and the closest to Scriptural doctrines. Origen’s representation of the three traditional branches of philosophy through a Biblical patriarch and a Biblical book is explained by means of his notion of Scripture as an incarnation of Christ-Logos and as inspired by Christ-Logos.

In the next section I pointed out several instances (some of which often neglected) of the way in which Origen applied philosophy to Christian theology and exegesis, such as allegoresis, the zetetic method, the eternity formula, which Origen introduced into Christian Trinitarian debate from ancient philosophy, his Trinitarian concept of ὑπόστασις, and the genre περὶ ἀρχῶν. In the penultimate section of this essay I have argued that Patristic philosophy attracted intellectually demanding people, including from “Gnosticism” and “paganism”. In the last section I have substantiated, albeit briefly, my claim that Patristic philosophy (and Origen prominently) built up Christian dogmatics.