

Origen and the Incorporation of Platonic/Apophatic Theology into the Christian System¹

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March 10, 2005

Introduction

It has long been recognized that the theological formulations of the early church fathers were influenced by their external philosophical milieu. In fact, the earliest post-biblical Christian writers were apologists who, like the Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria, sought explicitly to re-frame their religion in terms that would be acceptable to Pagan intellectuals (with the aim of convincing them that Christianity was superior to the Pagan systems). This was not only an evangelistic maneuver, but also an appeal to avoid persecution by the Roman authorities.

But what specific ideas were borrowed from Greek philosophy? And did these ideas alter the church's teaching to the point that her theology became corrupt and unbiblical? To address these questions, this essay will center on Origen's concept of God and the Trinity.² Origen serves as a hinge figure between Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism – philosophical schools whose concepts and terminologies were utilized by a young Christianity struggling to communicate its identity to the Roman world.

¹This paper is written in light of Case Study 1.8 from Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) 86-93.

²An influential aspect of Origen not covered in this paper is his allegorical method (carried over from Philo) of interpreting Scripture to make it agree with Platonic philosophy. See James Feibleman, *Religious Platonism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959) 106-108. According to Fan Mingson, long before Philo, "Early Greek philosophers had insisted there was a "hidden meaning" behind ancient Mythology. Stoicism [sought] philosophical meaning in the epics of Homer and Hesiod" – "Later Greek Philosophy and Christian Theology" (http://www.crvp.org/book/Series03/III-10/chapter_vi.htm) 4.

Part 1: Middle-Platonic Theology, the New Testament, and Origen³

Overview

Platonism, of course, began with Plato (ca. 428-348 B.C.E.), who established his Academy at Athens. The period of his first three successors there is called the Old Academy, followed by the New Academy. Middle Platonism began with Antiochus of Ascalon (ca. 130-68 B.C.E.), who wanted to steer away from the New Academy's skepticism and back toward the Old Academy's metaphysical speculation and the interpretation of Plato.

The period of Middle Platonism continues until the rise of Plotinus (Origen's younger contemporary) in the third century C.E. The period includes not only the beginning of Christianity, but also the Gnostics, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the *Chaldean Oracles* – all esoteric teachings characterized by an “astral piety” of cosmic intermediaries between humanity and the highest gods.

Origen (185-254 C.E.), along with Justin Martyr and Clement, is a key figure of the Alexandrian school of theology, known for its integration of Greek and Christian thought.⁴ Known as the first philosopher of the Christian church, Origen's *On First Principles* is the first work of Christian systematic theology.⁵ Though raised a Christian (Origen's father was a martyr), Origen was tutored by the Middle Platonic philosopher Ammonius Saccas, who also taught Plotinus.⁶

Origen is known for his contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity, and for his use of “apophatic” or negative theology, which describes God by saying what he is not. Origen envisions

³Much of the material on Middle Platonism in this section is condensed from Edward Moore, “Middle Platonism,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/midplato/htm>).

⁴For the three major schools and their influence on subsequent Christian thought, see Justo Gonzalez, *Christian Thought Revisited* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

⁵Edward Moore, “Origen of Alexandria,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/o/origen.htm>) 3.

⁶G.A. Oshitelu, “Origen of Alexandria,” *The African Fathers of the Early Church*. Http://www.gospelcom.net/dacb/stories/egypt/origen_.html.

human souls as rational beings who fell from God's presence by lapsing from their endless contemplation of the Creator. Souls are re-incarnated until, through contemplation, they re-ascend to heaven. All souls, including Satan, will eventually be redeemed, and thus the end will be like the beginning.⁷

The Development of Middle Platonic Theology

The foundation of Platonic theology is related to Plato's "horror of transience."⁸ To Plato, that which was abstract and unchanging must be the most real. God, therefore, had to be unmovable and unchangeable. If God is to be the ultimate being, he must not change, for any change would be a change for the worse.

In Plato's *Timaeus* and his "unwritten doctrines," the great teacher posits the universe as coming forth from the interaction between the One and the Dyad. Below this divine duality comes the World-Soul or Demiurge, which mediates between the ideal world of ideas and the material realm. Plato's second successor Xenocrates (ca. 396-314 B.C.E.) describes the One as *Nous*, or *pure intellect* and names him "Father." True reality, according to Xenocrates, consists of Ideas, which are thoughts in the mind of the One/Nous/Intellect/Father. Antiochus re-imagines the World-Soul/Demiurge as a rational force which holds the material world together. He calls this force the Logos.

Already here, in the fourth century before Christ, one can see the seed ideas that led Origen to describe the Creator as *simplex intellectualis natura* – a singular mind who "needs no physical space, nor sensible magnitude, nor bodily shape, nor color, nor any other of those adjuncts which are the

⁷This is similar to the Stoic idea of *apokatastasis*, a doctrine which teaches that the universe is cyclically destroyed and then re-created by Zeus (each universe being identical to the one that preceded it) – Moore, "Origen of Alexandria," 2-3; Scott Rubarth "Stoicism," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/stoicism>). Origen likewise teaches this idea of recurring worlds (for example, *De Principiis* 2.1.3; 2.3.5), for which he was condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council. Cf. Gonzalez 39.

⁸This is Oshitelu's term. See note 6.

properties of body or matter.”⁹

Furthermore, the idea of the Logos is already taking shape. Similar to Xenocrates, the New Testament (John 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15-17) pictures Christ as the Logos through whom the Father created the material universe, and in whom “all things hold together.”

Another important philosopher in the Middle Platonic stream is Eudorus of Alexandria (active around 25 B.C.E.), who defined the goal of ethics as “likeness to god as far as possible,” and taught that true happiness was purely intellectual. He also introduced a supreme being/principle above Plato’s One and Dyad, further developing Middle Platonism’s trinitarian theology.

Philo of Alexandria (ca. 30 B.C.E. - 45 C.E.) is also a major philosopher in the Middle Platonic tradition, especially due to his influence on the Christian Fathers of Alexandria, such as Justin Martyr and Origen (and perhaps the New Testament writers themselves). Philo suggested that Greek Philosophy was an outgrowth of Judaism, with Moses as the first teacher in the ancient Greek tradition. Philo’s God is an incorporeal, ineffable, eternal, changeless, self-sufficient transcendent being who willed the universe into existence through his agent the Logos (the wisdom-principle of Proverbs 8:22). The Logos is God’s thoughts hypostasized/personified in order to create the cosmos. Thus, the Logos was a Demiurge-like mediating figure, whose thoughts were the *logoi spermatikoi* that produced the cosmos.¹⁰

Plutarch of Chaeronea (ca. 45-125 C.E.) also described the Logos in terms that will ring familiar to Christians. His Logos (both transcendent and immanent) is allegorized as the Egyptian god Osiris, a dying-resurrecting god whose body is torn apart by Typhon and later reassembled by his bride Isis.

Albinus (who flourished around 149-157) articulated the idea of divine emanation. For him,

⁹Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.1.6, (ANF 4:243). After acknowledging that the question of God’s corporeality “is not clearly indicated in our teaching” (i.e., Christian scripture), Origen proceeds to use intellectual reasoning to arrive at an incorporeal God described largely in apophatic terms.

¹⁰Moore, “Middle Platonism” 11.

the Second and Third Gods (Universal Intellect and World-Soul) were not created, but they were generated by the mind of the First God (who resembles Aristotle's Unmoved Mover and is described by Albinus using apophatic language). Origen, similarly, is comfortable speaking of Christ's divine begetting as being "like an act of His will proceeding from the mind."¹¹

Numenius of Apamea (who was active around 150-176 C.E.) is believed to have influenced Origen's concept of the Trinity.¹² The First God of Numenius' triad is "eternal, immutable, and at rest, concerned only with the intellectual realm."¹³ The Second God, the Demiurge (or Mind/World-Soul) translates the First God's thoughts into matter. Upon contact with corrupting matter, the Demiurge becomes divided into a rational and irrational part. Origen actually refers to Christ as Demiurge in his Commentary on John.¹⁴

For Numenius, human souls are fragments of the Demiurge. The soul that leads a life of contemplation can re-ascend to heaven. The soul that fails will enter Hades and be punished until it is re-incarnated. Eventually, all souls would find their way back to the Divine. Numenius' doctrine of transmigration of souls (or *metempsychosis*) is identical in many points to Origen's, the major exception being that Numenius (like Albinus after him) taught that some especially corrupt souls may be re-born as animals.¹⁵

After Origen: Neoplatonism and Apophatic Orthodoxy

¹¹*De Principiis* 1.2.6 (ANF 4:248): "...as an act of the will proceeds from the understanding, and neither cuts off any part nor is separated or divided from it, so after some such fashion is the Father to be supposed as having begotten the Son."

¹²Moore, "Origen of Alexandria" 2.

¹³Moore, "Middle Platonism" 12.

¹⁴*Commentary on John* 1.22 (ANF 9:307): "For Christ is, in a manner, the demiurge, to whom the Father says, "Let there be light," and "Let there be a firmament." But Christ is demiurge as a beginning (arche) inasmuch as He is wisdom."

¹⁵Moore "Middle Platonism" 13.

The work of Plotinus, Origen's younger contemporary, initiated the period of "mystical" philosophy known as Neoplatonism,¹⁶ which ended in 529 C.E. when Emperor Justinian closed Plato's Academy.¹⁷ There was much cross-pollination between Christianity and Greek philosophy during this period. Two developments important to this study are the strengthening of negative theology¹⁸ and the emphasis upon the intermediaries between the transcendent God and corrupt, fleshly man, which took the forms of daemons in Greek thought, and led to the Medieval angelic hierarchy and the idea of Mary and the Saints as intermediaries.

Perhaps the most compelling description of the apophatic God is found in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius. Pseudonymously claiming to be Dionysius the Areopagite of Acts 17:34, this mystical theologian wrote a series of treatises around 500 C.E., including *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, and *The Celestial Hierarchy*.¹⁹ Though mystical in nature, Dionysius' writings were not unorthodox, and the apophatic descriptions of God they contain made their way into the works of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and became the "classical" doctrine of God. Here is an example:

We therefore maintain that the universal and transcendent Cause of all things is neither without being nor without life, nor without reason or intelligence; nor is it a body, nor has it form or shape, quality, quantity or weight; nor has it any localized, visible or tangible

¹⁶James Feibleman identifies Philo, not Plotinus, as "the chief founder of Neoplatonism" (*Religious Platonism* 96). To Feibleman, Philo exemplifies the six main differences between Neoplatonism and Platonism: Neoplatonism subordinates philosophy to religion, utilizes allegory, prizes absolute beliefs, seeks to contemplate the infinite, has a diminished interest in nature, and prescribes the contemplation of the divine for barbarians as well as Greeks (97-99).

¹⁷Edward Moore, "Neo-Platonism" *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/n/neoplato.htm>) 1.

¹⁸It was the fifth-century Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus who first used the term "via negativa" – Jonah Winters, "Saying Nothing About No-Thing" (<http://bahai-library.com/personal/jw/my.papers/apophatic.html>) 8. Plotinus taught that the One (from whom the Nous proceeded) was completely incomprehensible (*ibid.*, 9-10).

¹⁹Mark Lamarre, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/p/pseudodi.htm>).

existence; it is not sensible or perceptible; nor is it subject to any disorder or inordination nor influenced by any earthly passion; neither is it rendered impotent through the effects of material causes and events; it needs no light; it suffers no change, corruption, division, privation or flux; none of these things can either be identified or attributed unto it.²⁰

Later theologians have summed up this classic/Thomistic description of God under headings such as pure actuality (i.e., pure form with no potentiality to change), incorporeality, immutability, impassibility, timelessness, simplicity, necessity, omniscience, and omnipotence.²¹

Part 2: Analysis

Origen may have been the first Christian philosopher, but he was not the last. And many later theologians found his ideas so unacceptable he was posthumously anathematized as a heretic at the Fifth Ecumenical council.²² Particularly his concepts of the pre-existence and transmigration of souls and his cyclical cosmological *apokatastasis* were troublesome. Nevertheless, some of his trinitarian formulations (e.g. emanation), as well as his apophatic description of God, made their way into the established creeds and formulas of the church.

²⁰Pseudo Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* Chapter 4 (<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html>) 6. Dionysius goes even further in chapter 5, saying that God “is neither soul nor intellect... neither has it power nor is power, nor is light; neither does it live nor is it life... neither one nor oneness, nor godhead nor goodness; nor is it spirit... nor paternity; nor anything else known to us or to any other beings...” The view of Pseudo-Dionysius can be summed up in the statement of an anonymous Neoplatonic philosopher, who wished to abide in a “non-comprehensive comprehension and an intellection that intuits nothing” when it comes to contemplating the indescribable God (Winters 12).

²¹This list of attributes is adapted from Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 20. See also Charles Hodge’s classic *Systematic Theology Volume 1* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1871). Cf. also Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God: Systematic Theology Volume 1* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987), and the especially thoughtful discussion in Thomas V. Morris, *The Concept of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²²For the 15 “Anathemas Against Origen,” see Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Volume 14* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004) 318-320.

But is this a good thing? It has been demonstrated that several key terms and concepts of Christian theology were borrowed from Greek Philosophy. But does this constitute a corruption of the biblical faith?

The problem is that the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, upon which Christianity is supposedly based, contains very little to suggest Christo-Platonic concepts of deity and salvation. The God of the Old Testament is truly the all-powerful creator and source of all wisdom, but he also comes down to earth, has dinner with Abraham, and wrestles in the dirt with Jacob. The Hebrew God has a distinct personality, and is intimately involved in the lives of his creatures. Feelings of compassion, sorrow, anger, and jealousy characterize his holy psyche. Does the God who “walks in the cool of the garden” bear any resemblance to the “uncompounded intellectual nature” described by Origen? Or have the Greeks (and the Christians who followed their lead) simply re-designed God into their own image of who he is supposed to be? Numerous recent theologians (including, in Evangelical circles, the Open Theists) have made just this accusation.²³

One possible resolution to this issue is found in the writings of the second-century apologist Justin Martyr. He believed that God had given knowledge to the Greeks to prepare the way for Christianity. Other theologians, such as Tertullian, questioned the capacity of Pagans to teach the truth.²⁴ Yet, Justin said that Socrates had partial knowledge of Christ,²⁵ and that Plato and the Stoics

²³See, for example, John Sanders’ chapter on “Historical Considerations” in Pinnock, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 59-100. Pinnock continues this discussion in his *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), especially in the chapter “Overcoming a Pagan Inheritance” (66-111). The title of his book is an attack on the doctrine of impassibility, similar to Willaim Placher’s *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), which seeks to free Christianity from its oppressive elements by moving away from a God characterized by power and impassibility.

²⁴Hence Tertullian’s famous quote in chapter 7 of his *Prescription Against Heresies*: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?” (ANF 3:246). Though he castigated philosophy as the mother of heresies, Tertullian was not immune to using philosophy when it suited his purposes.

²⁵*Second Apology* ch. 10 (ANF 1:191).

each had their share of the word,²⁶ which God had scattered like seeds²⁷ throughout the intellectual Pagan world. Could the Platonic stream of thought really be the hand of God at work?

To this question, Francis Beckwith might respond that

truth is truth regardless of where it is found. To dismiss an idea simply because it has affinities with a pagan system is to commit the genetic fallacy (and/or guilt by association fallacy)... So, whether one's theology is "Platonic" or not is irrelevant; the question is whether or not it is true.²⁸

And yet the classical view of God does seem to rest on an unbiblical foundation -- Plato's fatal assumption that God cannot change. This doctrine leads logically to God's being incapable of emotion (impassibility) and basically incapable of action – a stark contrast to the biblical God who feels, who acts in history, and who becomes a human baby to live among mankind. The "emerging church" theologians and others are correct in admonishing Christians to return to their Hebrew roots and become acquainted with the playful, personal God of the Pentateuch.²⁹

Is there a place for apophatic theology? Certainly. As Justin Winters points out, this method of speaking of divinity can be found in texts as old as the *Rig Veda* and in Egyptian

²⁶*Second Apology* ch. 13 (ANF 1:193).

²⁷*Ibid.* *Logos spermatikos*, the same term found in Philo, only with a different meaning in Justin.

²⁸Francis J. Beckwith, "Mormon Theism, The Traditional Christian Concept of God, and Greek Philosophy: A Critical Analysis," *JETS* 44:4 (Dec. 2001) 688.

²⁹For example, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch suggest that theology can be reinvigorated by approaching the scriptures with "a renewed post-Jesus Jewish mysticism perspective" – *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003) 111-133. John Sanders, an Openness Theologian, calls for a revived emphasis on Hebrew-type anthropomorphism in his *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998) esp. 19-23. He, like others, points out that biblically speaking, God is not anthropomorphic, but man is theo-morphic (21).

descriptions of the gods Aton and Amen (“the Hidden One”).³⁰ So it is not that aphophatic theology began with the Greeks.³¹ Aphophatic theology serves to prevent the misunderstandings that could result from taking biblical anthropomorphisms too literally.³² Primarily, though, “the Christian theologians spoke of God with negations because they felt that they were forced to...”³³

And yet, for a religion that ostensibly is doctrinally anchored in the twain Testaments, it seems odd to describe God in terms that are disharmonious with the incarnational deity of the Bible. Perhaps the answer is that God’s revelation is directed to the common person who needs to feel the warmth of the divine presence, rather than to the philosopher who needs a coherent definition of the Deity.³⁴ And the recent criticism of classical theology can also be seen as a missional maneuver – an attempt to capture the essence of a God who is more delightful to the heart of a 21st-century civilian than compelling to the mind of a philosopher steeped in the Greeks.

³⁰“Saying Nothing About No-Thing” 8.

³¹One might also add that the Muslims use the *via negativa* when describing God as “unbegotten” – a criticism of orthodox christology.

³²Ibid. 4.

³³Ibid. 5.

³⁴As Michael Horton has pointed out, “*all* of God’s self-revelation is anagogical” (“Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theology and Reformed Theological Methods” *JETS* 45:2 [June 2002] 324). Though not univocal in nature, there must be some conceptual similarity between the Bible’s anthropomorphic language and the reality of God. Otherwise, such metaphors would communicate nothing. We are free to talk about God in anthropomorphic terms (realizing their limitation) because God chose such terms to communicate about himself.

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