PROPHETS WITHOUT HONOUR?

A philosopher and his disciples; a 4th-century fresco from the Via Latina Hypogeum.

ASCETIC ENTHUSIASM: ORIGEN AND THE EARLY CHURCH

Rowan Williams examines the career of the 2nd-century theologian whose powerful and idiosyncratic vision illuminates the tensions and development of the early Church.

In 199/200 AD, the Emperor Septimius Severus, visiting the eastern regions of the empire, found cause for alarm in the state of religion in these territories. It was a time of more than usually volatile relations with the Parthians, and a decline in public piety was politically dangerous — at the pragmatic level of morale, and at the remoter but more significant level of what could be expected of the gods by way of support. What is more, Severus had a perfectly genuine enthusiasm for the historic cults of Egypt in particular, and seems to have been shocked by the degree to which they were no longer taken very seriously. A law was passed enforcing the preservation of the traditional seccesies surrounding the rites of Egypt; and it looks as though some further action was taken to protect the decencies of public religion by prohibiting conversion to the two most resolutely un-public religious groups of the day — the Jewish synagogue and the Christian Church.

Opinions differ as to whether a specific law was passed about this (the probabilities are against it); what we do know is that, in the years immediately following Severus' eastern progress, a number of Christians were executed in Alexandria, and pressure on the
Church intensified elsewhere in the Middle East. It is most likely that Severus instructed the prefect of Egypt to set an example of prominent Christian converts, and that other provincial authorities in the vicinity followed suit to some extent. Christians were an obvious target in any drive to restore civic piety, as they notoriously tried to avoid the burdens of military service and public office (which would normally include some ceremonial religious duties), and were thus a clear menace at a time of political anxiety: converts from the higher social classes represented a drain on resources, a shrinking of the field from which magistrates and other functionaries could be drawn.

It was the first time that the Christian community in Alexandria had faced anything like persecution, and the experience was traumatic. Although the earliest executions were followed by a few years' peace, the arrival in Egypt of a new prefect, Aquila, in 206 marked the beginning of a further period of bloodshed. Those responsible for instructing and receiving converts, those who more or less publicly defended Christianity as freelance lecturers, and no doubt others as well, fled the city. For nearly five years, the churches in Alexandria were without 'official' leadership; and when the situation changed after 210, and the clergy and teachers returned, the shape and style of Christianity in Alexandria was set to become markedly different from what it had been before the persecutions.

Without this background, it is impossible to understand Origen. As recent scholars have more and more emphasised, his sense of Christian identity and of the nature and duties of Christian community is moulded by this experience of extremity. Origen was about seventeen when his father Leonides was executed in the first wave of persecution following Severus' visit (probably in 202), and, according to a story which almost certainly derives from references in Origen's now lost correspondence, he was eager to die with his father, and would have given himself up to the authorities had not his mother kept him at home by hiding his clothes. Later tradition represented the household as being solidly Christian, with Origen being brought up in knowledge of the Scriptures — as well as receiving a good secular literary education; but it is possible that the family were relatively recent converts, if Leonides suffered under the strict terms of Severus' instruction. If so, it would add some force to Origen's abiding conviction that Christian baptism was a pretty direct calling to one or another sort of martyrdom.

Leonides' execution had serious practical as well as psychological consequences. The estate of a condemned man was forfeit; Origen, the eldest of seven children, had to acquire the means of earning a living. Thanks to the generosity of a wealthy Christian patron, he was enabled to carry on his literary studies, to the point where he could set up his sign as a grammaticus and begin to take pupils. For a short period, he was part of the household of his patron, along with a number of other Christian intellectuals from Alexandria and elsewhere. The atmosphere was evidently one of lively debate; by no means all the frequenters of this little salon were adherents of the 'catholic' bishop of Alexandria, whose theology was to become dominant in the city in the decades that followed, and this fact would be remembered and used against Origen.

It is important to bear in mind that Christianity before 200 AD or thereabouts was anything but monolithic, and in Alexandria seems to have been even more pluralist than elsewhere. There was a broad and growing consensus amongst the international network of groups that used the Jewish Scriptures, the four gospels as we know them and the collection of Paul's letters (with a few other texts in most places) as texts of right belief; it was a
texts read by catholics.

There was no one movement or 'sect' of gnosticism, and the very difficulty of identifying where it started and stopped was one of the greatest sources of catholic frustration and anxiety. Certainly the boundaries were drawn in different ways and with varying degrees of sharpness in different places. The rhetoric and imagery of gnosis was widely used in churches that had no particular commitment to the more controversial and exotic cosmologies and myths popular with most of the clearly identifiable gnostic groups. Clement, one of the teachers who had fled Alexandria in the persecution, had been happy to describe the true believer as a 'gnostic'; yet he was on good terms with catholic leaders in Alexandria and Palestine.

The situation was still in some important respects fluid; and the young Origen found himself in a milieu where formal boundaries were rather vague. There was no authority to appeal to. We do not know what congregation his family had belonged to, though it is overwhelmingly likely that it was one associated with Bishop Demetrius; but in the leaderless and teacherless years of persecution, there can have been little sense of clear institutional loyalties. Authority had to establish itself by manifest purity and holiness, and the power emanating from this. The young Origen very rapidly emerged as a figure possessed of such authority. The promisingly brilliant teacher of literature also undertook the dangerous task of instructing would-be converts — some of them, it seems, people who had been 'secular' students of his, others more informal contacts. Seven of them were executed in the years before the bishop's return; Origen escaped arrest, but took constant risks in attending the trials of these and other martyrs, ministering to them in prison, even exchanging the kiss of peace with them as they were led out to execution. His lodgings were under police surveillance, and he was eventually driven to an 'underground' existence, moving from house to house like a sixteenth-century recusant, and giving instruction in secret.

Presumably what attracted his pupils and led them to seek from him something more than a purely literary formation was his increasingly ascetic way of life he lived as a 'philosopher' going barefoot, living simply, fasting, maintaining celibacy (tradition recorded that he had himself castrated). And a 'philosopher' in that culture was someone who was presumed to have found a way of salvation, and might be asked to communicate it. Increasingly, as a result of both internal and external press-
suggests that Origen acquired and kept up a solid knowledge of the main contemporary options in ethics and cosmology.

Ammonius was later to be the teacher of the great Plotinus; and it is reasonable to conclude that Ammonius' (unwritten) doctrine laid heavy stress on what was fundamental to the thought of both Plotinus and Origen—the unity of the divine. The meaning of the cosmos was a matter of fundamental harmony: apparent discontinuities were ultimately part of a single movement of reality, from and back to oneness. The logical and metaphysical problems of an ultimate dualism—whether of good and evil or of form and matter—were insurmountable. Thus nothing lay outside the scope of the divine: important as it was to distinguish spirit from matter and to liberate spirit from matter's power, perception of the material world was a necessary induction into the higher life—not an embarrassing and degrading thing in itself, but only when treated as a substitute for the spiritual.

This ultimate monism of Ammonius' pupils, combined with a powerful sense of universal providence, made it impossible for Origen, as for Plotinus, to take gnostic dualism seriously as a philosophical option: both attacked it vigorously. Even the most extreme asceticism, in this context, issued not from a conviction of the wickedness of the material as such, but from the desire to bring matter into harmony with the aspirations of the soul to a state of maximal liberty, the condition of unfeathered contemplation of eternal truth. On this general basis, Origen, borrowing boldly from some of the less extreme gnostics, as well as from the great Jewish exegete, Philo, developed the theory of biblical interpretation which was to be his major contribution to the evolution of Christian theology. The text, the 'matter', of the Scriptures was an immense code: the history related (mostly, but not entirely, a factual record in Origen's eyes) symbolised the history of the soul, the one significant story. The events of God's dealings with Noah, Abraham, Moses and so on, or even of the earthly life of Jesus, were there to provide the framework upon which hung the sacred text—an enormous tapestry of image, allusion, wordplay, a crossword puzzle and a romanaclef, in which every word contributed to the communication to us of the soul's nature and destiny and the mystery of God's character.

Origen was a firm believer in the verbal inspiration of Scripture, but light years away from the modern fundamentalist: what the Bible communicated was not primarily the 'plain' meaning on the surface. This literal sense was as far as some readers ever got; and no doubt they had some benefit from it (Origen took pride in the fact that this sacred text was accessible to the simplest reader, in contrast to the writings of pagan philosophy); but at least some readers, some more adventurous souls, were duty-bound to go further and to find the deeper moral and spiritual senses—what the Christian should do, and what was the nature of the reality he or she was summoned to contemplate. Some gnostics had divided the human race into three classes—'bodily', 'psychic' and 'spiritual' types, the hopelessly and irredeemably ignorant, the dimly enlightened who had some sense of further reality, and the elect. Origen accepted the distinction (and the theory implied of the threefold structure of the human self), but vehemently rejected the corollary that all except the 'spirituals' were just so much human ballast. Scripture could communicate far more than the literal sense, but even this, speaking as it did to the literal-minded, the philistines of the Christian life, conveyed something of God. And for some at least, it would be the first step in an endless pilgrimage into spiritual and intellectual delight. God's providence extended to the 'body'—to history, to the apparently unediifying stories of the Old Testament, to the slow-witted or unimaginative believer; and what was done there, in the body, was the context in which began the process whereby soul (the inner life in general, the processes of decision-making, the emotions and instincts, and so on) and spirit (the contemplative, intuitive core of the self) were set free. Under God, the body was shot through with significance, by being made to point away from itself and subvert its own apparent interests.

Thus Origen's developed view of Scripture grew out of a remarkable fusion of cosmology, anthroplogy, sharp sensitivity to the moral and spiritual ambiguities of biblical literalism, and the ascetic impulse. Martyrdom was the most complete illustration possible of Origen's hermeneutic: the body wholly surrendered to the job of signifying God and the spiritual world, dying to its particular identity as body so as to become part of God's gift of himself to the inner understanding.

This is the synthesis that was taking shape in Origen's mind during and after the harrowing years of persecution; it was to inform everything he said and wrote. In intention, it was 'catholic' teaching. Origen took for granted that the corpus of catholic Scripture was the authoritative norm and source for
Christian teaching, and never allowed that independent philosophical conclusions could overturn what it said. He also accepted the rough outline of correct interpretation, the ‘rule of faith’, widely used around the Mediterranean as a test of catholic acceptability— one God, the creator, at work in Old and New Testaments alike, one divine mediator, the Son or logos of God, the personalised mind of God, as it were, made human in Jesus Christ to enlighten and save us, undergoing the suffering of the cross and raised from the dead, one Spirit, working through prophets and apostles: the beginnings of a creed, in fact.

The problem was that, while the text of Scripture was a norm of some sort for Origen, its true, authoritative significance could not be established by strictly traditional or institutional criteria. As we have seen, authority in exegesis as in other affairs depended on interior qualities as manifested in the ascetic lifestyle. In Origen’s understanding, indeed, the holy person reproduced the distinctive character of the sacred text, as a body subordinated to the spirit. The Greek nous (‘mind’, ‘sense’ or ‘understanding’) is used both for the spiritual core of the human personality and for the hidden sense of Scripture. But this view of authority was bound to be in tension with the belief that authority was properly vested in the president of the liturgical assembly, the bishop, who represented a supposedly unbroken succession of teacher-pupil transmission from the time of the apostles. This tension was to cloud the whole of Origen’s career.

When Bishop Demetrius returned to Alexandria in 210 or 211, he found Origen established as a teacher, an ascetic, a man closely associated with the martyrs, a man who had risked his life for the faith. He had little alternative to recognising the fait accompli, and licensed Origen as an official instructor of converts. Demetrius, however, had a clear programme in mind, the securing of a new level of visible unity in the Alexandrian Church, and he took a firm line on where the source of authority lay. He seems also to have attracted new adherents from the older gnostic communities, now in some disarray. Origen’s effective anti-gnostic polemic was useful in this process: influential persons such as Ambrosius, a well-known public figure in Alexandria, were won over (and Ambrosius himself became Origen’s most faithful and generous patron). The churches in the city were coalescing into a far more cohesive body. But this did not necessarily mean a universal acceptance of the bishop as supreme teaching authority. Not surprisingly, relations between Origen and the bishop became more and more strained.

Origen’s reputation was spreading beyond Egypt. By the early 220s, he was working at his greatest scholarly project, a critical text of the Greek versions of the Old Testament: he was eventually to publish this as the Hexapla, six parallel columns collating the different Greek translations, and a transliterated Hebrew text. The Greek versions were carefully edited, and variants from sources other than the major translations were also noted (including some from a ‘Dead Sea Scroll’ of the day, a manuscript ‘found at Jericho in a jar’). He was consulted on theological issues by an astonishing variety of people—a trans-Jordanian Roman governor (who arranged the visit through the prefect of Egypt, a strange reversal of fortunes!), bishops in Palestine, trans-Jordan and elsewhere, even the mother of the Emperor Alexander Severus. He visited Rome (probably around 217), and his name was well-known in Greece and Asia Minor. Back in Alexandria, he abandoned some of his more directly philosophical teaching to concentrate on his textual researches and his detailed allegorical commentaries. By the late 220s, he was working on a monumental commentary on St John’s Gospel, and had also produced a systematic account of his theological presuppositions and methods, the peri archón — On First Principles, a familiar title for philo-

Hippolytus, the Greek-speaking philosopher who had preached to Origen in his youth—his rigour on discipline and theology led to his being set up as an anti-pope between 217 and 235.

(Below) The philosopher Plotinus, founder of neo-Platonism—his teaching on body and spirit had some affinities with Origen’s own thought.
A sophistical textbook. It has rightly been called the first programmatic exposition of Christian doctrine.

Here we can find the fundamental metaphysics of unity, theories on the origin of the soul and how the body is provided as a shelter and a training ground for spirits who have fallen from their pre-existent state of contemplation, a distinctive and ingenious treatment of the incarnation, and a full statement of the principles of allegorical exegesis. It is not clear that any of this was immediately thought heretical (much uncertainty arises from the fact that we possess only a Latin translation of the work, made by someone determined to show the acceptability of Origen's ideas at a time when his reputation was under scrutiny), though many must have been wary of its more speculative flights. Origen, however, was feeling increasingly isolated in Alexandria. He may have left the city some years earlier (215?) for a spell in the more sympathetic atmosphere of Palestine; or this trip may have occurred around 230. In any case, he knew that the bishops of Palestine were welcoming, and in 232, he took advantage of an invitation from Greece to leave Alexandria, traveling by way of the friendly Churches of Jerusalem and Caesarea. He was never to return to his native city.

At Caesarea he was persuaded to accept priestly ordination, and this sealed his fate with the aged and already hostile Demetrius. It was bad enough having a brilliant and holy lay person in the city as a teacher, believed to have charismatic authority; worse to have to cope with such a man as a priest owing no direct allegiance to the local hierarchy. Origen must have known that he was now committed to exile; and by now he probably did not greatly mind. But he needed to answer the abuse showered on him by Demetrius, and wrote a long autobiographical letter, no longer extant in entirety, but used as a source by his earliest biographer. His episcopal sponsors joined in writing to Demetrius on his behalf; it is interesting to see how they—with their smaller and less fissiparous communities—vigorously defend the practice of inviting learned and saintly lay people to preach, even in the presence of the hierarchy.

At Caesarea, Origen continued to teach and, for a couple of years, to preach daily (the bulk of his surviving sermons comes from the Caesarean period). Pupils flocked to him, and we possess a moving tribute to him (and a full account of his teaching programme) from an ex-student, drawn by Origen to the study of philosophy and theology from his earlier ambitions in the law. Tradition identified this man with Gregory 'the Wonderworker', one of the major saints of the remote missionary territories of Pontus, near the Black Sea. Even Porphyry, the disciple and biographer of Plotinus, had some contact with him. He was not won over, but could only marvel that such an intelligent man should waste his time trying to harmonize barbarian superstition with decent philosophy.

But Origen had already by then completed his great work in defence of just such a project, a long refutation of similar complaints from an anti-Christian Platonist of the previous century, Celsus.

He remained a traveller and a stormy petrel. His intellectual rigour upset some, and his theological views puzzled and annoyed others. His belief in providence and in ultimate harmony led him to suggest that the devil might repent and be saved. It was just this blurring of fixed boundaries (as it was seen) that touched the most vulnerable spots in the popular Christian consciousness, and he had to endure a further burst of criticism. His sermons show an increasing bitterness about the intellectual and spiritual idleness of the clergy. In 251, persecution broke
out afresh, far more systematically than before: Origen – in effect – disappeared. He was arrested, but there was no public execution. He was known to have been tortured (letters from prison survived). A new bishop in Alexandria, a former pupil of his, wrote a letter of encouragement. Origen must have recalled the words he himself had written and spoken, to his father, his friends, his students, about martyrdom. Whatever happened (an anonymous corpse carted out from a prison infirmary? release for a couple of years of pain and exhaustion?), the end of his life is – appropriately – at one with its early years.

In his lifetime, Origen was the victim of the Church’s confusions about where authority lay. He stood unashamedly for a ‘charismatic’ and inspirational understanding, even if he was also prepared to grant some legitimate power to a formal hierarchy. As always, the appeal to interiority was politically subversive for the Church, and he was rightly seen as a threat by his Alexandrian bishop. Only with the evolution of monasticism in the century and a half following his death did there begin to develop an uneasy fusion of hierarchical and charismatic authority, as bishops came to be drawn increasingly from the ranks of profess-

A female orans, with her outstretched palms in the form of early Christian worship beside the dove symbol - individual, as opposed to institutional, enlightenment was to be one of the vigorous debates Origen took part in.

friends, his students, about martyrdom. Whatever happened (an anonymous corpse carted out from a prison infirmary? release for a couple of years of pain and exhaustion?), the end of his life is – appropriately – at one with its early years.

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factory in the light of later doctrinal definitions, and his exegetical method was as widely criticised as it was imitated (sometimes by the same people). But the Leitmotiv of much of the criticism was his relentless disjunction between body and spirit: at the end of the day, it was still too much like gnosticism for the theology of catholic Christianity. The final unity of all things, so eloquently depicted by Origen, could only mean a final cancellation of the experience of the historical and vulnerable flesh, and, for a religion of incarnation, community and sacrament, this could not be the last word. There was a sense that some fundamentally necessary tension was being swept away in the intense simplicities of Origen’s cosmology.

Yet when all that is said, he remains the most powerful (and often the most moving) of the early Greek Christian writers. Practically all his major critics were smaller men, with visions more distorted by pettiness or legalism. The greatest theologians of East and West have consistently recognised him as a master, a dangerous but a real one. He has never been wholly without honour; only without respectability – an irony which this perpetually ‘displaced person’ might have understood and appreciated.

FOR FURTHER READING:

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