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Chapter

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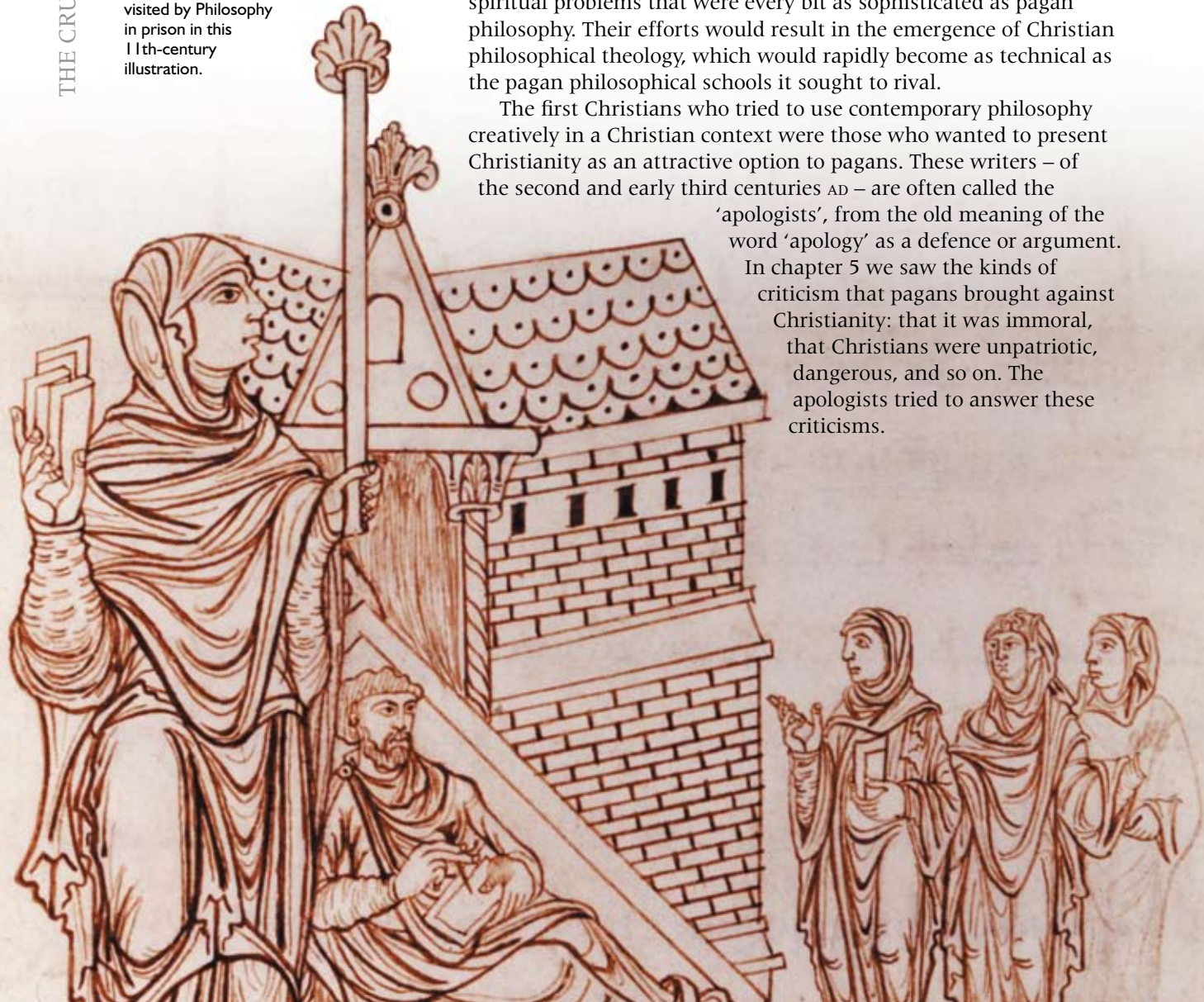
Boethius (c. AD 480–524) is seen to be visited by Philosophy in prison in this 11th-century illustration.



Christian Philosophy

As we saw in the last chapter, many intellectuals in the second and third centuries thought that Christianity was a stupid religion for the simple-minded. But a new breed of thinker was emerging who sought to answer this criticism – indeed, whose very existence was itself an eloquent answer. These were Christian philosophers, who believed that their religion offered answers to intellectual and spiritual problems that were every bit as sophisticated as pagan philosophy. Their efforts would result in the emergence of Christian philosophical theology, which would rapidly become as technical as the pagan philosophical schools it sought to rival.

The first Christians who tried to use contemporary philosophy creatively in a Christian context were those who wanted to present Christianity as an attractive option to pagans. These writers – of the second and early third centuries AD – are often called the ‘apologists’, from the old meaning of the word ‘apology’ as a defence or argument. In chapter 5 we saw the kinds of criticism that pagans brought against Christianity: that it was immoral, that Christians were unpatriotic, dangerous, and so on. The apologists tried to answer these criticisms.



The earliest apologists that we know of were Quadratus and Aristides of Athens, who in around AD 125 presented the emperor Hadrian with books they had written defending Christianity. Quadratus' book is lost. At least parts of Aristides' survive, incorporated into an early medieval story known as *Barlaam and Joasaph*. He seems to have devoted most of his energies to denouncing the errors of paganism and describing the virtuous lives lived by Christians.

However, new apologists soon appeared who took the argument further. These writers also tried to answer the charge that Christianity was a stupid religion, that it was a sort of debased version of philosophy. Indeed, they took the attack to their opponents. They argued that Christianity was actually the truest kind of philosophy. What the philosophers had perceived dimly, the Christians had had revealed to them by God himself. In their eyes, Christianity addressed precisely the same concerns as pagan philosophy and pagan religion, but it did so more successfully.

Justin Martyr

The first, and most important, of these apologists was Justin Martyr, who was born in Palestine in around AD 100 and grew up as a pagan. He became a Platonist philosopher and moved to Rome. According to his own testimony, however, he was inspired to read the Old Testament prophets after an encounter on the beach with a mysterious old man who insisted that they had taught the truth about God. Justin converted to Christianity, but he remained a philosopher – he always wore the distinctive cloak sported by professional philosophers – and regarded Christianity as another school of philosophy, the one that happened to be true.

In AD 155, Justin wrote his *First Apology*, addressed to the emperor Antoninus. In this he covered the same ground as Aristides, arguing that Christians were innocent of the charges laid against them. But Justin also offered arguments for the reasonableness and truth of Christianity. He pointed out that there were parallels between Christian doctrines and pagan ones. For example, Jesus was said to have done miracles, but so were many characters from traditional mythology. Christians believed in a judgment after death, but so did Plato. He concluded that it was unfair of pagan intellectuals to brand Christian doctrines as absurd when they believed similar things themselves.

Indeed, Justin believed that the pagans had got many things right. As a Platonist philosopher he venerated Plato above all, but he also believed that the truth could be found in other philosophers such as Socrates or Heraclitus, as well as in the poets such as Homer and Hesiod. He had two main explanations for this. The first was historical: the Old Testament was older than Plato and Homer, and they had read it and taken many of its ideas. This argument reflects

the common belief in late antiquity that the older an idea is, the better. People liked to trace their beliefs as far back as possible, often identifying some shadowy figure of the past as a great sage who had been privy to special information.

Despite the common belief that Romans and Greeks were the only truly civilized people, and that everyone else were 'barbarians', these ancient sages were usually foreign – mysterious figures from the exotic east or south, such as Zoroaster or Hermes Trismegistus. In late antiquity, the orient – meaning the Middle East, Persia, and India – was often regarded as the home of the most profound religious and philosophical teachings.

In fact, many philosophers took it almost for granted that the great wisdom of the Greek philosophers and poets was itself ultimately derived from oriental peoples such as the Egyptians, the Indians, the Persians, and the Babylonians. Those who sought the truth often travelled to the East to find it. Both Clement of Alexandria and Plotinus are said to have done this – although perhaps this reflects the belief of later writers that great philosophers *should* have done so, rather than any journeys they may really have made.

In this context, it was perhaps only natural for Christians and Jews to identify characters from the Old Testament (all suitably ancient and exotically barbarian) as ancient sages. In Philo's works, Abraham and Moses both play this role; we are told that Plato based his account of the creation of the world in the *Timaeus* upon the biblical version in Genesis. The Christians agreed with this assessment and usually identified Moses (universally accepted as the author of the Pentateuch, including Genesis) as their great ancient sage. Justin, for one, insisted that Moses was older than Plato. As we saw in chapter 5, some pagans argued that Christian doctrines were a garbled version of pagan ones; that Jesus had simply repeated what Plato had already said better. Justin turned the argument on its head by making Plato simply the interpreter of Moses, which meant that he could accept Plato as a teacher of the truth, but a lesser one than Moses. Strikingly, some pagans seem to have accepted this argument. One philosopher named Numenius of Apamea said that Plato was nothing but 'Moses speaking Greek' – a remarkable statement given that Numenius was a pagan, not a Christian or a Jew. Others, however, were unconvinced. For example, the second-century physician Galen compared Genesis to Plato and concluded that Plato was preferable, because he gave reasons for why things are the way they are, while Moses simply appeals to the will of God.

Justin's second explanation for the agreement of the pagans and the Christians was based upon the basic philosophical belief that the world is fundamentally rational. Many Platonists in Justin's day believed that below the highest God there was a lesser God, the world-soul, which actually ran the universe. The Stoics believed that the universe is run by the divine Reason – Logos – which is immanent

throughout the world like fire. Justin approved of these ideas. He too spoke of a second God below the highest God, and he called it the Logos, the Reason of God. But, following the opening chapter of John's Gospel, he identified this Logos with Christ. Christ is thus the divine Reason, intimately associated with the supreme God and yet also distinct from him, and he is the explanation for the rationality of the world. It is through Christ that God created and maintains the universe, and it is through Christ that human beings are rational. The Stoics believed that the rational ability of each individual person is a fragment of the universal Reason of God, and Justin agreed with this. He spoke of the 'seed of the Logos' existing in all people. Whenever anyone acts or thinks rationally, he or she is actually following Christ, even without knowing it. This was how both the pagan philosophers and the Jewish prophets could speak truth about God despite not knowing Christ: they did know Christ, but were unaware of it. As Justin put it:

I confess that I both boast and with all my strength strive to be found a Christian; not because the teachings of Plato are different from those of Christ, but because they are not in all respects similar. And neither are those of the others, Stoics, and poets, and historians. For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the seed of the Logos, seeing what was related to it.¹

Still, the seed of the Logos is not as impressive as the full Logos. As Justin sees it, Christians have received the full revelation of which that seen by the philosophers and poets is only a part. So there is fundamental agreement between paganism and Christianity, but Christianity is the real thing, the original truth, and paganism is a sort of blurry reflection of it.

Justin's *First Apology* seems to have made little impression upon the Roman authorities. He followed it up with a *Second Apology*, which restated the same ideas, and also a *Dialogue with Trypho*, an apologetic work aimed at Jews rather than pagans. Justin apparently wrote many other books intended for a Christian readership, but these have been lost. This is unfortunate, as it is difficult to reconstruct his theology properly from just these apologetic works alone. For example, his theology of the Logos appears only in passing; Justin makes occasional references to it but never gives a proper systematic treatment. We know that he thinks that Christ is the Logos, which he explains like this:

We call him the Logos, because he carries tidings from the Father to men: but maintain that this power is indivisible and inseparable from the Father. It is just as we say that the light of the sun on earth is indivisible and inseparable from the sun in the heavens. When it sinks, the light sinks along with it. In the same way, we say, the Father, when he chooses, causes his power to spring forth, and when he chooses, he

Later apologists

In AD 165, Justin was arrested – together with some companions – and tried for his Christian faith. He was beheaded, which is why he has always been known as ‘Martyr’ almost as a kind of surname. However, his ideas remained very much alive. A host of apologists appeared, all attempting to present Christianity as a school of philosophy, and all using the same basic idea of Christ as the divine and universal Logos. One was Tatian the Syrian, a former student of Justin’s, whose *Oration to the Greeks* took a much more critical stance towards pagan philosophers than Justin had. For Tatian, the philosophers had failed to embody in their lives the moral ideals that Christians achieved every day. Another was Athenagoras of Athens, who was apparently a pagan philosopher who studied Christianity in order to attack it, like Celsus, but ended up converting to the religion instead. Finally, we must mention Theophilus, bishop of Antioch. His *To Autolytus* is written to a pagan friend, attempting to convince him of the truth of Christianity, much like Justin. But unlike Justin, Theophilus has a strong sense of both the Logos and the Holy Spirit as divine agents. Indeed, he is the first Christian writer to use the word ‘Trinity’ to refer to all three of them. This was an important step from the Logos theology of the second century towards the Trinitarianism of the third and fourth.

The work of the apologists often seems rather strange to readers familiar with later Christian literature. In it, Christianity comes across as little more than a combination of monotheism and the doctrine of the future resurrection of all humanity. Those, at least, are the main doctrines these writers focus on. Christians themselves are presented as incredibly virtuous monotheists, living up to pagan ideals even better than the pagans. There is surprisingly little attempt to deal with distinctively Christian doctrines other than the resurrection, or with any distinctively

Christian understanding of how to live a moral life. Jesus, in particular, is conspicuous by his absence. We hear a lot about the Logos, and its role in mediating between God and the world, but very little about the incarnation. It is as if the Logos is *already* a mediator, even before it becomes a human being. Both Tatian and Athenagoras are capable of writing entire defences of Christianity without once mentioning the names ‘Jesus’ or ‘Christ’. To some degree, this must be explained by the fact that they were writing for non-Christian audiences and trying to find common ground with their readers. Tatian certainly knew all about Jesus: he wrote a book called the *Diatessaron*, a harmony of all four canonical Gospel accounts into a single story of Jesus’ life. This proved so popular in the Syriac-speaking churches that it displaced the canonical Gospels there for some centuries. Stranger, however, is the case of Marcus Minucius Felix, one of the first Christians to write in Latin, who wrote an apology called the *Octavius* at the end of the second century. In one passage, he denies that Christians worship a crucified criminal at all – a passage that has puzzled readers ever since.



A 19th-century reconstruction of Alexandria, showing Cleopatra's Needle.

*makes it return to himself.*²

But scholars disagree over how to interpret such passages. Is Justin taking this idea from Greek philosophy? Or is he taking it from the Wisdom literature of the Bible, where the divine Wisdom is also presented as a semi-independent entity? Had Justin read Philo? Scholars are uncertain.

Clement of Alexandria

We know little of Clement's life. He was apparently born to a pagan family in the middle of the second century AD, perhaps in Athens, but later converted to Christianity, travelled around the empire studying various philosophies, and eventually settled in Alexandria, where he became a student of Pantaenus, the first non-gnostic Christian philosopher in the city. In around AD 200, he took over the leadership of Pantaenus' school, but not long afterwards he fled from persecution there. He had apparently died by AD 215, but we do not know how or where.

Like Justin, Clement regarded himself as a philosopher all his life: he was simply a philosopher who taught the Christian philosophy. In fact, more than any other Christian figure of this period, Clement was extremely enthusiastic about philosophy in general. He believed that the pagan philosophers had come close to the truth – Plato being the best of them all – and he criticized other Christians who thought philosophy to be the work of the devil. Clement believed that God had inspired the pagan philosophers just as he had inspired the Jewish prophets, and for the same reason – to prepare the ground for the coming of Christianity. Like Justin, he believed that the philosophers got their best ideas from reading the Old Testament. Clement's works are packed full of quotations not only from philosophers but from all kinds of pagan sources, such as Homer and other poets; it is as if he were desperate to refute the popular image of Christians as uneducated idiots. His interests were not confined to the classical tradition, either; he is the first western author to mention the Buddha, although he says disappointingly little about him.

Again like Justin, Clement identifies Christ with God's Logos or Reason. It is through this Logos that God creates and runs the world. Clement also reproduces the Platonist idea that God transcends human understanding, so that he can be known only as what he is not rather than what he is. He argues that we know God by the method of abstraction, a method which is also found in pagan philosophers of the period, such as Alcinous or Maximus of Tyre. Think of an ordinary physical object, and then mentally remove (or 'abstract') from it all the qualities that make it physical, and you end up with the notion of pure existence. That is what

God is – he is quite unlike anything physical. But unlike the pagan philosophers, Clement believes that one can know this only through Christ, the Logos. There is a personal, experiential element to knowing God; Clement is the first Christian to speak of ‘the vision of God’, a notion that would become central to later mysticism.

Clement calls the enlightened Christian a ‘gnostic’. But unlike those we call gnostics (whom we shall look at in chapter 7), Clement does not believe in any kind of esoteric knowledge which is passed down secretly and made available to only a few. Rather, it is publicly available in the teachings of the church and, above all, in the Bible. Yet not everyone can understand the Bible properly. Most Christians just read it and absorb the obvious sense of the words. But there is a deeper, spiritual sense, which must be gleaned from it by the use of allegory. In theory anyone can do this, but in practice only a few do. These are the ‘gnostics’ in Clement’s sense of the word, and they are at the second stage of a three-stage spiritual journey. This journey begins with faith, progresses to ‘gnosis’, and finally reaches love – but all three stages are characterized as knowledge of some kind. ‘Faith’ is when you know the basic teachings of Christianity. ‘Knowledge’ is real understanding of those teachings. And ‘love’ is direct, personal knowledge of God.

Clement tried to reflect this spiritual journey in his own writing. He wrote three major works: the *Exhortation to the Greeks*, *The Instructor*, and the *Stromateis*. The *Exhortation* is an apology similar to those of Justin Martyr and his imitators, so it is a call to faith. *The Instructor* sets out Clement’s vision of the ideal Christian lifestyle, as a prerequisite for the spiritual journey. The *Stromateis* – literally ‘patchwork’ or ‘miscellanies’ – tackles a vast range of subjects in no apparent order. It is here that we find Clement’s most important ideas, but he does not make things easy for the reader: it is up to us to use our powers of spiritual discernment to read between the lines. The advanced Christian philosophy is there, but we must work hard to get at it – just as we must when reading the Bible itself. So Clement’s work is designed not simply as instructions for the ‘gnostic’ but as training: by reading it we learn how to think spiritually for ourselves.

Origen

In the last chapter we met Celsus, the second-century pagan philosopher who wrote a book attacking the Christians as feeble-minded fools who mangled philosophical doctrines to suit themselves and preyed upon the vulnerable. It is possible that he wrote partly as a response to Justin Martyr. He had probably died before he had a chance to read anything by Clement of Alexandria, even assuming that he would have wanted to. But a century after he wrote his book, it was finally answered by a man whose entire

Christian scholar, Origen (c. AD 185–254).



life and career was itself a sort of response to Celsus. That man was Origen 'Adamantios', the most brilliant and influential Christian writer of the pre-Constantinian era.

Origen's life

Despite his pagan name (it means 'born of Horus'), Origen was born to Christian parents in Alexandria in around AD 185. He studied under a number of teachers in Alexandria, probably including Clement and also Ammonias Sacchas, a mysterious philosopher who also taught Plotinus.

However, when Origen was a teenager, his father was executed for his faith and Origen had to support the family by teaching. But before the age of twenty he replaced Clement as head of the Christian school in Alexandria, and promptly renounced all studies of pagan philosophy and literature. He sold his books and took up an extremely ascetic lifestyle, sleeping on the floor; it was for this reason that he acquired the nickname Adamantios – 'unbreakable' – a word which also gives us the English words 'adamant' and 'diamond'. It is during this stage of his life that he is supposed to have read Matthew 19:12 – where Jesus talks about 'eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' – and unwisely interpreted this as a direct command. In fact the evidence is rather conflicting. Self-castration as an ascetic act was uncommon, but by no means unknown among more fervent Christians at this time; it was frowned upon by the church, though, and eunuchs were not allowed to become priests. The only hint in Origen's surviving writings comes in his commentary on Matthew. When he deals with the fateful verse, he tells his readers that some people take the verse literally, but this is a very bad idea. This is sometimes taken as evidence that Origen himself had never taken it literally – although one might equally think it evidence that he *had*!

Despite giving up his secular studies, Origen continued his theological ones and soon became one of the most prominent Christian scholars in the world. He attended a lecture given by Hippolytus of Rome – at that time a far more famous figure – and the great man not only recognized him in the audience but pointed him out and applauded him.

A turning point in Origen's career came when he converted a wealthy man named Ambrosius from gnosticism to mainstream Christianity, and Ambrosius showed his gratitude by funding Origen's work. He paid for seven secretaries to write down in shorthand everything Origen said; another seven to write out the notes longhand so that Origen could check them over (something he loathed doing); and another seven to copy out the final versions in calligraphy. As a result, Origen became enormously prolific. A

century later Epiphanius of Salamis would estimate his output at 6,000 volumes; Jerome reckoned it at the more modest but still incredible 2,000. Eight hundred actual titles are known to us now. These works included immense commentaries on books of the Bible, devotional treatises, dogmatic works, and letters. Many were left incomplete; Origen seems to have been one of those people who begin a new and very ambitious project with great enthusiasm but later get tired of it. His commentary on John's Gospel, for example, runs into at least thirty-two volumes but only covers two-thirds of the Gospel. He also had to deal with requests from fans and supporters, especially Ambrosius; it was Ambrosius who came across Celsus' *True Doctrine* and commissioned Origen to write an eight-volume refutation of it.

Like Philo and Clement before him, Origen believed firmly that the truth was to be found in the letter of Scripture, and he recognized that if this was so then it was essential to establish what that letter was. Origen collected several different Greek translations of the Old Testament and copied them out next to the original Hebrew. Like all Christians of this period, Origen believed that the inspired text was not the original Hebrew but the Septuagint Greek translation, and his aim in comparing these various versions was to establish the true text of the Septuagint. He saw, however, that study of the Hebrew original might help with this, and to this end he learned the Hebrew language and consulted Jewish rabbis. The result was the *Hexapla*, so called because it combined six versions of the Old Testament in parallel columns (more, for some books); a study Bible so immense that in those days of papyrus scrolls it occupied a whole room.

The *Hexapla* was housed in Caesarea in Palestine, where Origen relocated in the 230s after falling out with the bishop of Alexandria, Demetrius. One of Origen's books, *On First Principles*, had been leaked to the public – something that annoyed Origen since it had been written only for private circulation. This book was the first attempt at systematic Christian theology ever written. In it, Origen sought to provide a philosophically rigorous overview of the Christian faith, taking in the nature of God, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the role of the church and the function of Scripture. Some passages, however, caused outrage, especially one where Origen apparently argued that the devil might ultimately be saved. Unable to satisfy the concerns of either Demetrius or his successor at Alexandria, Heraclas (a former student of Origen's who seems to have had no love for his former master), Origen remained in Caesarea. He also seems to have worked as a sort of spiritual troubleshooter, being called in to help deal with doctrinal disputes – even though he was only a priest, not a bishop. The record of one such dispute exists – the *Dialogue with Heraclides*, a transcript of a meeting at which Origen discusses the nature of the soul with

a bishop suspected of heresy before taking questions on related matters from the other bishops present. The questions he is asked are quite revealing of the sorts of problems that worried intelligent, but not philosophically trained, Christians of the time. They include: 'If the body dies and is placed in a tomb, how will the spirit find it again and how will the dead be raised?' 'Is the soul the blood?' 'Is the soul immortal?'

In AD 250, the Decian persecution broke out, and Origen was arrested and tortured for several days. The 'unbreakable' ascetic held out until finally they released him rather than make him a martyr. But that was the end of Origen's career; he seems to have never recovered his health or his spirit. He wrote nothing more, and he died in obscurity in Tyre in AD 254. Perhaps it was being released, rather than the torture itself, that crushed the old man's spirit: he had always shared the common Christian veneration of martyrdom and perhaps hoped to emulate his father's death.

Origen's philosophy

Perhaps the central notion in Origen's thought, and the one which shows most clearly his Platonist heritage, is the distinction between the physical and the spiritual. Origen agrees with pagan Platonists that there exists a spiritual realm above and beyond the physical one, and that this spiritual realm is fundamentally intellectual and comprehensible – indeed, the physical world is itself rational because it is a reflection of that spiritual realm. He agrees that there is a God who is a supreme mind, and that the human mind is basically the same sort of thing as this God. In fact, Origen extends the physical/spiritual distinction to every aspect of the human person. It is not simply that we have physical bodies and spiritual minds – there is a spiritual body too, a whole spiritual person, corresponding to the physical one, with spiritual arms and legs and spiritual senses. It is because we have these spiritual senses that we can come to know God. The Bible, too, is both physical and spiritual. There is an 'obvious' meaning to every text (usually, although not always, a literal meaning); but there is also a 'spiritual' meaning, which must be extracted through the use of allegory. In *On First Principles*, Origen famously argues that Scripture has a body, a soul, and a spirit, just as human beings do, and he suggests that each text has three meanings to correspond to them. But in practice, like most exegetes of the period such as Clement, he offers only two interpretations of most texts – an 'obvious' one and an 'allegorical' one.

Despite this, Origen does not praise pagan philosophy as Clement did. Clement was keen to find common ground with pagan philosophers; Origen prefers to find differences. This was a man who, at an impressionable age, had seen his father killed by a pagan

state for his Christian faith, and who sometimes wished to see the persecutions return so that younger, more carefree Christians could be tested as his father had been. He agrees with Clement and Justin that philosophers such as Plato had grasped some parts of the truth, but not that this makes them Christians before the fact. On the contrary, it just makes them more blameworthy for not realizing the rest of the truth.

Origen's theology is at once less rationalist, and more so, than that of the pagan philosophers he criticized. He stresses that knowledge of God can come only through acquaintance with Christ, not through the exercising of human rational powers. It must be given by grace. But like Justin and Clement, he characterizes Christ as God's Logos, his Reason. It was common among philosophers of this time to emphasize the unknowability of God, a tendency we see reflected in Clement. Origen largely rejects this view. For him, God is intrinsically quite knowable. He states that in practice we generally cannot know him, but this is simply because God is so great and our minds so small; it is like being dazzled by a bright light, so that we effectively cannot see it. There is too much information, not too little.

Origen believes that, originally, all created souls had perfect knowledge of God. They were united to God perfectly and understood him perfectly. But for some reason, the souls fell away; Origen is prepared to entertain the supposition that perhaps they actually got bored with God! The story of the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis is an allegory of this great event. The souls fell to varying degrees, and God created the physical world for them to become incarnate in. Those that fell far became demons, those that fell only a bit became angels, and those in between became human beings. For Origen, the physical world is a sort of arena created by God to allow these souls to struggle and overcome problems, to grow morally, and gradually to come closer to God. This may take many lifetimes. The Stoics believed that when the world ends, another world will begin, which will be identical to the old world, and we will all live our lives again in exactly the same way. In fact there is an infinite succession of these identical worlds. Origen also believes that there will be a new world after this one, and that we will live in it once again, but that it will be different: each individual's place in life will be determined by how well they did the last time. This will continue for a vast number of worlds, but eventually everyone will find their way back to God: evil and sin are inherently limited and unsatisfying. In Origen's eyes, punishment – both in the physical world and after death – is inflicted only as a sort of extreme cure, like an unpleasant medicine or surgery. It can only be temporary. It is uncertain whether Origen really taught explicitly that all souls – even those of demons – would eventually find their way back to God, but the logic of his theology certainly seems to suggest it.

Origen takes it as a fundamental axiom that the end must be like the beginning. The universe began with all created souls existing in perfect union with God; it must therefore end like that too.

The spiritual life

The process of coming closer to God is one of learning. The mind is the part of us most like God; it is therefore through the use of the mind that we come close to him, above all by studying the Bible and seeking to understand it. Origen argues that spiritual progression comes in three stages, which reflect the three books of the Old Testament attributed to Solomon. The book of Proverbs shows us how to lead a good life. When we have mastered that, the book of Ecclesiastes shows us how to study the world around us, both the seen and the unseen objects of science and



This 17th-century painting by an unknown artist shows Teresa of Avila (1515–82), a Carmelite nun and mystic, sheltering a community of Carmelite nuns under her cloak.

philosophy. And finally, the book called the Song of Songs describes how we learn of God himself. Origen's commentary on Song of Songs is one of his most famous and remarkable works, the first real Christian mystical treatise. He takes the Song of Songs to be an allegory of two things: Christ's relationship with the church, and his relationship with the soul of the individual Christian. On the latter (and dominant) interpretation, the character of the Bridegroom in the book represents Christ, and the Bride is the soul. Origen explains that the erotic imagery in this poem should not be taken literally (God is not really male, and the soul is not really female), but it is still appropriate because erotic love in the physical person is the closest analogy there is to the love of God in the spiritual person. Just as, in physical love, we greet a lover with a kiss, so too Christ greets the soul with a kiss when he grants it knowledge of God.

In two famous passages, Origen expands upon the experience of God. In the first, he offers his thoughts on the passage of Song of Songs that speaks of a wound of love:

If there is anyone anywhere who has at some time burned with this faithful love of the Word of God; if there is anyone who has received the sweet wound of him who is the chosen dart, as the prophet says; if there is anyone who has been pierced with the lovable spear of his knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for him by day and night, can speak of nought but him, would hear of nought but him, can think of nothing else, and is disposed to no desire nor longing nor yet hope, except for him alone – if such there be, that soul then says in truth: ‘I have been wounded by love.’³

This erotically charged language would be enormously influential on later Christian mystics, such as the sixteenth-century Teresa of Avila. Yet Origen also speaks of what happens when the soul cannot find Christ:

The Bride then beholds the Bridegroom; and he, as soon as she has seen him, goes away. He does this frequently throughout the Song; and that is something nobody can understand who has not suffered it himself. God is my witness that I have often perceived the Bridegroom drawing near me and being most intently present with me; then suddenly he has withdrawn and I could not find him, though I sought to do so. I long, therefore, for him to come again, and sometimes he does so. Then, when he has appeared and I lay hold of him, he slips away once more; and, when he has so slipped away, my search for him begins anew.⁴

Origen’s work was a watershed in intellectual history. It was the first real attempt to use ideas and categories drawn from contemporary philosophy to set out a systematic Christian theology. It puzzled pagan philosophers; the fifth-century Neoplatonist Proclus commented on how strange it was that a man as brilliant as Origen should have got mixed up with Christian nonsense. And it inspired later generations of Christians to continue the attempt. But Origen had tried to pull the rug from under the feet of philosophy; he had tried to use the philosophers’ own tricks against them. He agreed that Plato said many profound things – but that just showed how guilty Plato was in God’s eyes, because he saw the truth yet remained a pagan. He agreed that there was a spiritual realm of beauty and intellect – but insisted that it could be found only through study of the Bible, granted by the direct inspiration of Christ. Later Christian philosophers would not, as a rule, share his antagonism to pagan philosophy. Raised in a Christian empire, never knowing the fear of persecution, they would treat classical philosophy and the Christian religion as parts of an organic and mutually supporting whole.