Origen of Alexandria on the Mystery of the Pre-existent Church

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Abstract
This article examines Origen’s ecclesiology, one of the keys to his system of thought. Visualising the Church as the pre-existent core of all creation, the heart of all theology of salvation, his conception is universal in scope and life-affirming. The intellectual background of Origen’s ground-breaking attempt at systematic correlation of Christian doctrine with its biblical heritage is reviewed alongside his immediate environment, another active context of thought. Origen emerges as par excellence a theologian of resistance in a persecuted church, wrestling with the fundamental question of the One and the Many, searching in the fragmentation of world order for the providential touch of God upon history. He was an exponent of an understanding of mysticism as the ‘depth meaning’ of texts and life and of a soteriology that influenced all patristic tradition after him, though his ideas of pre-existent lapsed souls were not widely accepted. In conclusion, the article focuses on Origen’s ecclesiology as an important alternative to the rather more anxious and rigid ecclesiology of North Africa and suggests some possible lines of ‘interpretation’ and ‘translation’, for the modern reader.

Almost everyone knows two facts about Origen: one, that he was from Alexandria (no points for that!); and two, that he was so zealous to observe the letter of the law that he castrated himself in an attempt to fulfil Jesus’ words on becoming a ‘eunuch for the sake of the kingdom’.¹ With regard to the first, Alexandria was, in his day, the veritable world capital of Jewish thought, especially Wisdom reflection, which makes for interesting correspondences between Origen’s ideas and those of nascent rabbinic Judaism.² As for the spectacular second, it is almost certainly incorrect.³ We need not be too sad, however, to lose such a weird and wonderful story from our repertoire, for when we begin to consider the thought world of this teeming ancient thinker we find more than enough elsewhere to lead us into wonder; and not least when we consider his doctrine of the Church, which he sees as the pre-existent core of all creation, and the heart of all theology of salvation. Amazingly, some scholars have, in times past, suggested that there is little ecclesiology visible in Origen. On the contrary it can be seen as one of the keys to his entire system.
An Intellectual in a Suffering Church

Origen was one of the first thinkers of the Great Church to attempt a systematic correlation of Christian doctrine with its biblical heritage. To us the presumption that doctrine must be related to Scripture is often taken for granted; but the establishment of it in a reasoned way was a monumental endeavour in the age in which he was writing when, as yet, there was no fixed canon of Scripture and the Church’s preferred way of using the biblical heritage was mainly as illustrative sermon hooks (more or less continuing the way one finds the Old Testament being used in the pages of the New). So while there was an established tradition of referring to Scriptures for ‘types’ and ‘tropes’ (images that could be taken from a prophetic or other passage to illustrate Christian preaching) the elaborated principles of scriptural exegesis were not fully worked out. Origen’s efforts to correlate three primary things was to have a monumental impact on all later Christian tradition: first, that all Scripture (Old and New Testaments) needs to be read as a coherent whole, where the exegetical sense is given from the New looking back to the Old; second, that the latest scientific principles of literary interpretation should be employed to elucidate meaning in the text; and third, that the commentator needed the mystical insight of the divine, the sole source of all meaning in scriptural revelation. This mystical ‘communion’ was at one and the same moment the highest illumination a Christian soul could receive, and yet (far from the individualistic principles of gnostic exegesis) it bonded the inspired commentator into a community of identity with the Logos, linking him or her with the inspired tradition of all the previous ‘saints of the Logos’, that is, the prophets and the apostles. Origen himself is most careful, at almost every instance, to bring his exegetical notes in line with what he sees as the general tenor of the theology of the great apostles, Paul and John. This is a commonly witnessed mark of all of Origen’s style of theologising and his approach to the coherence of the ‘scriptural principle’. Although not many have seen this, it is also an outline of what I will call his immediate and germinal principle of (what we today would refer to as) a ‘theology of the Church’ (ecclesiology). The Church is that community bonded in spiritual communion with the Lord of history, and thereby with each other, which thus concurs in some real form of consensus in mind, and spirit, and purpose, resisting fragmentation, individualism and dissolution, as it is drawn together in a prophetic mission to name the origin and goal of the good and the true. It is not a bad definition of ‘Church’, even today.

The difficulty in getting to this more discretely, of course, is that Origen predates the scholastic division of Christian thought into categories which would have ‘ecclesiology’ among them. His is not so much a systematically clean cut ecclesiology, rather an exercise in the mode of gathering source materials required to construct one. To that extent he is the architect of patristic doctrines of the Church, rather than the jobbing builder who puts them up. Émile Mersch, who composed one of the great systematic treatments of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ in the early decades of the 20th century, lamented that he could not find an ecclesiological...
thread to follow in Origen. Others, more recently, have also found ecclesiology to be a difficult vein to quarry in the great Alexandrian. The task of producing a modern systematic account is made difficult by the fact that much of Origen’s writing was in the mode of what we would regard as an advanced seminar (a testing of ideas for a known and dedicated circle of readers interested in philosophy and theology). There is, surprisingly, only one dedicated critical study of Origen’s ecclesiology in German, a somewhat scattered secondary bibliography, and more recently an extensive analysis of the multitude of ‘images of the Church’ which Origen refers to throughout his large body of work.

So much for a very brief outline of Origen’s intellectual style as a background context to our topic, but what is to be said of his immediate environment as another active context of thought? Origen was the son of a martyr, and the teacher of many other martyrs. He became known to the crowds in Alexandria in the opening years of the third century, as several times he defiantly accompanied his female pupils to the place of execution and stood by them there. The crowd hooted at him as a wicked man who had led his charges to destruction by his foolish myths about Christ. Why, one wonders, was he himself not seized? The reason for this is undoubtedly that he was not a Roman citizen, and while the persecutions in Egypt inspired by Emperor Septimius Severus were local and violent; they were solely directed against citizens, and thus mainly aimed at the middle classes (exactly those who could afford to study with Origen and to act as the leaders of the Christian community). As a child of a mixed marriage, and not inheriting citizenship, Origen was not eligible for arrest as a Christian, however much he may have provoked the persecuting authorities. These backgrounds are important, not only in establishing his character, but for reminding us that he was far from being a crazed philosopher in an ivory tower, in the way he is often caricatured. He knew he had sent his students to their deaths. He also knew, in all that he wrote, that his Church was a traumatised and wounded community anxiously feeling its way forward in one of the most violent cities in the ancient world, where one never knew when the next pogrom against Christians might start. His whole corpus of writing reflects his reality as dissident littérateur. He is, par excellence, a theologian of resistance. This has often been forgotten by modern commentators; but what he was writing about was essentially the reason and motive for his endurance and that of his troubled church in Alexandria (and later in Roman Palestine), where the threat of persecution was never far removed. In this light I would suggest that when we read of his ‘mystical’ understanding of texts and events in history (and especially his mystical understanding of the Church of Christ), we ought not to hear that primary word ‘mystical’ as if it were some form of effete and escapist spirituality. Mystical in his day meant ‘hidden’ or, better, the ‘depth meaning’: a meaning of texts and of life that was, like pearls, not going to be shared with persecuting swine (or even outsiders, whom he regarded as incapable of hearing the refined music he was interested in elucidating).

Biblicists up to the ’70s of the last century (when new studies began to elucidate Origen’s exegetical principles in greater depth and clarity) tended to dismiss Origen...
as someone who had little regard for the historical reality of texts and events. This too
is far from being the case when the context of Origen’s work is closely studied. What
he says is not that history does not matter, but that there lies behind it an even more
significant history, precisely because the trans-historical society of the Church
recognises universal relevance out of accidental event. Indeed for Origen this very
process of seeing the deeper signification (its universal import) of the raw data of
history and text is that ‘scriptural principle’ which is the Church’s perennial instinct
in ‘reading’ history in the light of providence – that we, in other words, are the
continuing ‘Bible of the day’. Without this process there can be no ‘Scripture’,
properly understood. Origen’s mystical sense may be a code, appealing only to fellow
Christians to share and appreciate his message, but it also claims to represent the
‘spirit-filled’ attitude to history and the contemporary world. It turns on a sense of
total loyalty to the call of Christ; a justification of history in and through Christ. It is
far from escapist, even though (of course) it may appear odd to our minds,
sensibilities of a different age that have been trained in other modes of reading.

Theology and Biblical Mysticism

All of Origen’s voluminous writings are extensions of one great principle extrapolated
outwards. It is the chief issue of the philosophical schools of Late Antiquity: the problem
of the relation of the One and the Many. How, that is, the supreme transcendence of
God can be related to the diffuse variety witnessed in the cosmic order. Does the
fragmentation of the present world order argue anything about the hand of its creator,
or not? How can an absolute God (absolutely good or kind, for example) be held to be
the author of this vale of tears? These were pressing concerns to all intelligent religious
thinkers of Origen’s day. In the generation before him, the Christian Gnostics had
provided the neatest of solutions for those who felt they were connected to some form of
‘biblical heritage’. They argued that the ‘God of the world’ was an evil deity (the ‘Lord’ of
the Old Testament accounts), concerned with the snaring of spiritual entities in a hostile
material environment so as to prevent their ascent to the higher realms of enlighten-
ment (salvation). The True God (the ‘Father’ of Jesus) was a God who was utterly
transcendent from this world order, which he cared about only in so far as he wished to
rescue spiritual creation (trapped souls) from its midst, and return them to heavenly
peace and freedom. The way he managed this was by soul-illumination (gnosis)
delivered by his supreme agent, who worked within history (the Demiurge or Logos, or
Sophia, or Christ – there were many variations on the name) that allowed the saved soul
to see its bondage and have the capacity and desire to flee.

By Origen’s day the Great Church had definitively turned its back on this simplistic
dualistic agenda. It committed itself, therefore, to the harder task of asserting that the
Gods of the Old Testament and the New were one and the same God. The Creative
power of God, however, was seen to be mediated solely through the energy of the
Divine Logos. For almost all early patristic thought, and especially for Origen and
those who came after him, the Logos was first and foremost the Transcendent Father’s
energy of the creation. Because he made the world, and the human race for which this cosmos was set in being, he too was the only fitting saviour. In a nutshell, this is the theology that pervades Origen’s system of thought. From him it ran on to become a classical macro-structure in all later patristic theology. The Logos is, above all else, God’s Pedagogue. His chief role both outside and inside Time is to educate and enlighten; to transmit the light of God the Father’s Being to the creation which he himself has issued forth at God’s command, and which cannot see the Unapproachable and Invisible Divine Father except through that Logos-Mediation. How this role is related to the doctrine of Creation and the immediately related concept of the ‘Church’ is necessary now to explain; for from this hook all else in Origen’s ecclesiology hangs.

The Pre-Temporal Creation of the Church as Heavenly Bride

According to Origen, around the Logos the first creation was assembled. It came out of God’s Word (the Divine Logos) and took its being as a grace dependent on him. This was the assembly of God’s saints; that is, the Pre-existent Church. Most people, according to Origen, make the mistake of identifying this present world order with the creation. Origen insists, however, that we should take notice of the ‘two creation accounts’ in Genesis. Where modern exegesis says this is merely a doublet, Origen argues that it is a clear indication that this cosmos is the ‘second creation’. The first is a purely spiritual one. Such an explanation, he argues accounts for the perfection of creation, as it originally comes from God; as well as the defective nature of the cosmos, as we now see and experience it. We ought to distinguish these things by referring to the Pre-existent Church as the Creation, and to the material world made later for the fallen spirits as the Cosmos. The first creation concerns the bringing into being of the angelic orders. When God first called this creation into being, therefore, it was in a pre-temporal context. The Father issued the command, and the Divine Logos – the perfect image of the Father – whose vision and contemplation held the angels in being, energised the command by calling into existence likenesses of himself. So while the Logos is the ‘Image of God’, par excellence, the Spirituals are the ‘Likeness’, thus fulfilling the text of the Genesis account: ‘Let us make them in our own image and likeness’. This first creation was marked by all one might expect of a direct work of the Perfect and Beautiful. It was absolutely in harmony, held in being by its act of contemplation of the Source of Being, perfectly equal in glory and power and immortality. In short it was a perennial ‘choir of praise’, and as such was the archetype of the Heavenly Church. The Church was thus not only the cause of the later material creation, but the pre-temporal Church (born before time itself) was the Telos, or end-goal of Creation. Created being was thus constituted and explained as an act of rejoicing in the gift of the presence of God. The vision of God was its ontological source and sustenance; and the reason for its endurance was the celebration of the divine Love that was exchanged between the Heavenly Church and the Father, through the mediation of the Image of God.
Origen has this as the master theme of all his theology. He describes the gift of being, that was made to the Spirituals, in terms of the relation of the Bridegroom to the Bride. To support this analogy of the nuptial, mystical, union of life, he develops heavily on Paul and also on the Song of Songs which describes the Bride restlessly seeking her Beloved, and the Beloved chasing through the garden in search of her. In one of the foundational texts of Christian mysticism (and the root of all his most mystical thought about the Church) Origen read the bride as signifying the Souls or the Spirituals, seeking the Logos throughout time and space, after their fall from the bliss of the pre-mundane nuptial chamber. The Heavenly Church is the lost wedding chamber; we can never be happy until we have rediscovered it.

The Church as the Communion of the Repentant

For some inexplicable reason (Origen admits he cannot give a rational account of this perversion of the springs of being – which could be summed up as ‘The Pre-Mundane Fall’) some of the angelic and co-equal choir of Spirituals began to weary of the beauty of contemplating God and in re-directing their energies to self-scrutiny they fell away from the springs of existence, and were diminished. This process of the break up of the original harmony happened across aeons of time before the creation of the material cosmos, but had come to such a state of corruption of the original harmony of the divine order, that some spirits had so ‘cooled down’ (so he describes the process like molten metal losing its fluidity as it cools and turns rigid) that they had lost their original and instinctive capacity for the vision of God (a drastic turn of affairs because it was the reason and principle of their being). To repair this pre-mundane Fall, the Logos initiates ‘Second Creation’ (the making of a material cosmic order) to serve as a holding place for demons (angelicals who have fallen so far and so violently that they are now aliens to the divine plan and have to be contained ‘under the earth’) and as a correction ground for humans. Humans are no more, or less, than the original Spiritual Angelicals who have lapsed so far from their pre-mundane psychic status that they need some form of radical rehabilitation, but have not fallen as far as the demons. Origen sees the earthly world as a ‘short sharp prison shock’ to bring (us) Spirituals to a dead halt, and to call out to us the necessity of the long haul back to the heavenly regions, where one day, we may be restored to angelical glory in the spiritual rank and immortal status we once lost. Embodiment in fleshly form is, in short, part of the discipline imposed upon lapsed Angelicals, to serve as their new mode of penitential return to the task of divine ascent. At this juncture Origen presents the Incarnation of the Logos as the logical end of the divine mercy that has always wished to stand before the gaze of the ‘Creation’. As the Logos was the Teacher, Chorus Leader, and source of being of the Heavenly Church, so now he comes himself in earthly form, to focus the eyes of us, his wandering spirits who have been embodied. As we are in the flesh, now with only limited capacities to understand heavenly truths, he comes among us as one of our number: Divine Spirit in the pedagogic medium of flesh. In his incarnate life, the Divine demonstrates the
pattern of the perfect life,\textsuperscript{35} so as to summon and gather the ‘Church’ back together once more, and prepare them for the long ascent to the vision of God.

This is a startlingly original recasting of the great biblical scheme and genre of eschatology. It is a vision that sees the whole cosmic creation as a soteriological act, designed for the healing of the Heavenly Church, or rather that part of it which had lapsed from beatitude, by turning away from the source of Being, God, and becoming obsessed with self. It was, however, a scheme that was not able to command the allegiance of the later Church in all its aspects. Most of the Greek Fathers retained something of the grandeur of the soteriology, but it was commonly felt that the ideas of pre-existent lapsed souls had to go; and as this was an integral element of the Origenian system, though his ideas had a foundational impact on patristic soteriology, they did so only in a very fragmented way. Origen’s view of the origin and meaning of the Cosmos as a call to healing and ascent is a profoundly ethical and mystical ‘myth-making’. It is at least ‘akin’ to the great scriptural schemes of salvation found in the Bible as a whole, such as the prophetic visions of world history as call to repentance, or the eschatological narratives of end-time judgement. What Origen has attempted is a putting of it all together in a Christo-centric metaphysic that gives a teleological coherence to the whole.

At the centre of this endeavour stands his doctrine of the Church as primeval chorus of the glory and joy of the vision of God; now lamenting in its earthly pilgrimage back to some higher vision of the truth. In one sense, then, we can say that Origen is one of the first to comprehend and teach the concept of Church as the ‘Pilgrim People’. For him the parameters of the journey start from eternity, wander through the earthly ‘vale of tears’ and return to triumphant glory with the Logos in heaven.\textsuperscript{36} He is the first of all the Fathers to teach explicitly that the fate of elect souls after death will be a return to paradise, not a languishing in some shadowy ‘Hades of the Blessed’.\textsuperscript{37} He is also the first to teach that (because of the love the Spirituals still bear for us, their lapsed colleagues in the cosmos) each of us has an attendant ‘Guardian Angel’ – demonstrating concretely that the Church is One and Holy.\textsuperscript{38}

**The Church as the Resurrectional Body of Christ**

It is clear that Origen’s is an ecclesiology which sees the notion of the Church as the Body of Christ in a profoundly cosmic way.\textsuperscript{39} The idea began as a useful analogy in the hands of Paul, to describe the necessity of various gifts among the corps of believers. In the later Pauline literature it has already assumed an extended sense of what later catholic thought would, rightly, call the ‘Mystical Body of Christ’. Origen adds to this notion the ontological explanation of why this communion with the Logos is the believer’s discovery of true identity and meaning on earth. The Cosmic Ecclesiology, for him, is simply the rediscovery of the original ontological order of creation (pre-mundane being) when the springs of our existence poured out directly from an immediate contemplation of the light of the divine Logos. God’s being was our own existence in a gift of participation (methexis). The heavenly Church, therefore, lived
out of the modality of the Logos’ own being. Accordingly it was able to perceive the
Unapproachable Father in an authentic image. And in addition it enjoyed perfection
of beatitude and immortal life of almost inconceivable power and extension (such as
the unfallen archangelic beings still know). For Origen, this is not merely a wondrous
myth, but the very promise of our anthropological condition on earth: a vision that the
human being is a transcendent creature with unlimited potential. For him, therefore,
the concept of ‘Church’ when applied to humanity not only means the highest and
most elect of all creatures (those who respond to the calling of the Logos – and here he
has also in mind the non-Christian philosophers whom he also sees as ‘souls on the
path of ascent’), or what we might call an ‘ethical’ approach to anthropology; but also
the aspect of human life as divine mystery on earth. The human being is part of the
Heavenly Church in exile, and returning back (in the process of becoming more fully
‘Church’ on earth) to the very fountain of immortal life and beatitude. The use he
makes of the Church as the Body relates it in a primary way to the concept of the
Resurrection of the Lord, whereby Life was given back to the cosmos. The Church ‘is’
the Resurrection body of Christ as Origen understands it. The Church has Christ
animating it, not merely symbolically, or analogously, but the Logos supplies its life
and being, in exactly the same way as the soul animates a human body on earth. To a
real extent, therefore, Origen’s understanding of Church is that society of human
beings which demonstrates the springs of life and beatitude within it. In short, Church,
for Origen, is not primarily a sociological concept, but an ontological one related to
the issue of the telos and energeia of our life: a divine anthropology.

It would take too long to unpack the logical significances of all the implications in
this, but it is worth pointing out one immediate ramification of such an ecclesiology;
namely, that it is universal in scope, and life-affirming. For Origen, Church means the
human family called to a transcendent glory, called, that is, to rise out of its animal
culture, and to strive to attain the glories of an intellectual–spiritual culture in which
it discovers its true identity. Previous (and subsequent) patristic ecclesiologies are
lamentably parochial by contrast with this. After Cyprian (panicked by the dissidence
he saw in the African Church of the third century when it had to face persecution),
western Christianity in particular has been saddled with the narrowest perspectives of
‘Outside the Church – no salvation’ (extra ecclesiam nulla salus). For Origen, this is
an impossibility. Just as the Heavenly Church is those who are in perfect union with
the Lord (the Bride without ‘spot or wrinkle’) the whole chorus of spiritual beings
on earth is the Church in purgation, and all, one way or another, are subject to the
Logos’ pedagogy. It is impossible to be outside the Church because the Church is
synonymous with the story of salvation. Such a view (shied away from quickly by
later patristic writers) is a magnanimous and pluralistically open view of the gift
of salvation to the whole world. It does not sideline the visible Christian community,
of course, at least as Origen understands that, since he sees the Christians as the
elect of the elect; those most able to guide and assist others in the apprehension of
truth, since the universal pedagogy of the Logos involves all sentient beings in a chain
of mutual initiation.
A New Temple and a New Priesthood

A closely related aspect in Origen’s ecclesiological thought is his use of the image of the Church as the Heavenly Temple. This is the true destiny and calling of all sentient life. The heavenly Temple is the same as the original creation where all Spirituals stood in close harmony around the Logos bonded by the beauty of the contemplation of God, and secured in immortal stasis by this vision. He teaches that on earth the Jerusalem Temple, and the human heart (as the temple of prayer), are all ‘types’ and symbols of the same spiritual ascent which believers feel to be taking place within themselves day by day. The spiritual life and the illumined life of the mind, he sees as two aspects of the same thing. Throughout his work, and especially in his extensive commentaries on Leviticus, which held a fascination for him, he constantly refers to all Christians as the ‘priests of the Lord’. Priesthood means one thing, first and foremost, and that is the quality of a believer’s illumination in the ways of God, and thus the quality of their ethical life and prophetic insight. Such priests are able to teach others and sanctify their fellows. Now Origen was no naïf. He sought and achieved presbyteral office for himself, and was many times in conflict with bishops, as well as being called on at least two occasions to correct errant bishops at local Church councils in Arabia. He is well aware that the Church has a visible hierarchy. What he means to say, however, is that ‘priesthood’ is not the same as clerical office. The true leadership of the true Church is that circle of believers whose sacral priestly illumination is clearly demonstrated to be higher than that of others: manifested in the clarity of their voice, and the purity of their witness. Martyrs, confessors and prophets among the Church are his preferred hierarchy; and in his writings he has many, and often harsh, things to say about the growing venality of the episcopate (which in his day was just beginning to emerge as a real power structure of governance of the Church through an aping of the civic structure, which aligned Church organisation with imperial ordinances for city government). The definition of ‘priesthood of the heavenly temple’ as a collective vision of what the Church essentially is was a deliberate attempt of Origen’s to remind one and all that the Church was first and foremost an eschatological society, whose high priests are the seers among us. For Origen, unless the clerical officers of the Church are able to command public respect as being self-evidently its leaders in quality of life and prophetic vision, their ‘office’ is worthless. In our time, when the bureaucracy that Origen suspected was on its way has become all too visible, this is not a bad theme to revisit in the essential definition of Church. Origen’s understanding of the Temple in Jerusalem as a true type of the Heavenly Church is also instructive. In an appreciative consideration of the rituals of the Temple, he once avowed that it was necessary for the Temple to be burned by the Romans, or the Israel of God would never have been able freely to abandon the beauty of the cult of the Lord, for the next stage of their journey of ascent, which was the worship of God ‘in spirit and in truth’ in the moral and intellectual life. This was a highly appreciative understanding of Israelite cult which was not often found in the other Fathers who tended to dismiss it as a ‘shadow’
superseded by the Eucharist. Origen’s understanding of the Church embraces Judaism within it in a very special way. At the ‘End’ Christ will take back his errant spouse. This is not to say Origen is a model of Jewish-Christian dialogue; for like many of the ancients his apologetic is too robust for our tastes today. But in the wider scope of things he sees a seamless bonding together of ‘Israel as the primary type of Church’ where later Christian thinkers were too quick to set up oppositions of Synagogue and Ecclesia. It is a lesson we could do well to learn from today.

Origen’s core concept that the Church on earth is the Heavenly Church on repentant pilgrimage makes him a fiercely ethical ecclesiologist. He is one of the most severe writers from the ancient Church (although most before him were even stricter); and has little time for priests who seem to have been instituting early forms of the ritual of confession in their churches in the third century. He is scandalised by their teaching that confession can be followed by laying-on of hands and the forgiveness (aphesin) of sins. He argues that post-baptismal sin can never be forgiven, not even the minor sins one commits – forgiven in the sense that we received a definitive aphasis or ‘taking away’ of our sin in the redemptive work of Christ passed to us in our baptism. However the grace of the Lord will nonetheless ‘cover up’ our sins. God, that is, will choose not to see them, because of our subsequent repentance. Origen insists to his readers that sin must never be cloaked over, and never tolerated within the ecclesial community. It can only be confessed, rejected and turned away from. This attitude to sin in the midst of the community results from his understanding of the Church as the Spotless Bride of Christ. If the Bride sins, he says, she starts ‘to whore around’, as she has done many times in history (he has in mind Hosea’s lament over errant Israel). Sin and defectibility are not compatible with the existence of Church. To us this might seem a harsh and unrealistic view of the Church community. In the fifth century Augustine’s reflections turned, it seemed, on a different axis, that the Church was a mixed society of saints and sinners and would only be ‘sorted out’ at the eschaton, when God would separate the ‘true church’ from the ‘visible church’ like wheat from tares. Origen is not devoid of a lively pastoral sense, but he sets his face against the solution represented in Augustine. There can be no distinction between the pure heavenly Church, and a more fallible earthly Church. The Church is only the Heavenly Church. When it stands on earth it is the heavenly Church under penance. If members on earth sin again, they have renounced penance and stood against their true being as Church. For Origen, there can be no other recourse except a strengthening of the call to penance. Sin and Church are not possible co-existents. All of this does not negate his pastoral sensitivity to the fact of the Church as the place of healing and ascent for fallen souls – but he is a rigorous moralist and understands Church as a vision of purity and fullness that challenges and calls out to all to repent and prioritise the mimesis of Christ as a life’s pattern. This, for him, follows from the radical identity of Church as the ‘communion of love’. It is not just that one individual soul (considered solipsistically) is the Bride of Christ, but that collectively the communion of the Church constitutes that coherence of love which manifests the Logos’ presence as the Bridegroom of the world. From this it follows, that the Church has a primary calling to
keep faith in love, both with the Lord, and with one another. Indeed a life lived in, and as, the communion of love seems to be the primary mark manifesting the authenticity of the Church. It is the dynamic of love which drives on the Church’s desire to evangelise the world (to share the pedagogy of love the Logos has given it) and also to alleviate the sufferings of the lost. From this we might deduce an interesting realignment of the traditional ‘marks of the church’ in Origen which emphasises the call to unity in love as the root of the Church’s mission and identity in the world. It makes the ecclesiology strongly bonded with an ethical imperative: love and purity within, mercy and compassion without.

Epilogue

What can we moderns make of all this? Origen is certainly a strange read. Exhilarating too, of course, but is any of it applicable to the present? Let me by way of conclusion suggest possible lines of ‘interpretation’ and ‘translation’, in respect to his doctrine of the Church. This is important, however bewildering its premises appear to be at first sight, because it is the only serious patristic alternative to the ecclesiology of North Africa (Cyprian of Carthage) which gained centre stage in the ancient era and still causes great difficulties today: that was a rigid and anxious ecclesiology that was all concerned with drawing the boundaries between ‘us’, as Church, and ‘them’, as persecuting pagans or heretics. Such an ecclesiology was useful in time of crisis (and may still have important aspects in this present time of crisis for the Church’s identity) but it is not the last word, and can lead to a profound ‘dumbness’ of the Church in the face of world religions, and their religious quests (on the Cyprianic model to be dismissed as entirely ‘demonic’) and also in terms of whether or not dissident groups are ‘in’ the Church or not (one thinks of the monks of Mount Athos insisting on the rebaptism of converts who come to Orthodoxy from all other forms of Christian church communion, protestant or catholic). An ecclesiology which takes its beginnings not from the liminal defence of boundaries, but from a cosmic vision of the eros of God for his world, and from the hope that all humans are called to rise into the spiritual apprehension (and ultimately – love) of the One God who comes to all of them through his descent as Incarnate pedagogue, to teach the path of virtue, humility, love, and hope – surely this is a mystical Christo-centric universalism whose spirit we could do well to recapture in our own various ways? For Origen it was an important aspect of his teaching that the Church was heavenly and pre-existent, characters which stayed with it even on its penitential pilgrimage through this cosmos. This tells me, for one thing, that it might be a good move in the modern age to bring back ecclesiology from the lumber room, where it has languished as a Cinderella of theological topics for far too long. Origen’s central insight that ecclesiology is one of the engines of Christian soteriology demands a fresh hearing.

Origen’s ecclesiology also teaches us that being Church is about healing and about striving for perfection. Thus, a Church that compromises with standards, that settles for bourgeois respectability instead of prophetic courage, or is self-absorbed in the
power plays of its official clergy, or worried about accumulating money and political power, is a Church that has lost its way. Origen’s vision of the days when the Soul ran eagerly, like a young lover, looking for the Beloved in the garden is a call to the traumatised Church of his own day to come alive again, and find its heart’s delight in the search for the beauty of God. It is a perennial prophetic need to challenge the Church (oneself) in this way, especially in times when it (one) has grown tired and respectable. Paul once put this in his dictum: ‘Here we have no abiding city’. Origen reminds us forcefully that Church (and that means us hum-drum folk in the daily routine of our discipleship) are eschatological mysteries, unseen angels, the eternally chosen and elect prophets of God. With such a perspective it would be difficult to contain the excitement into which being ‘Church’ inducts us. Origen’s understanding of the Church as Heavenly Temple with a true priesthood of the highest initiates among us strikes a radical blow to suffocating forms of clericalism that can paralyse Church initiatives today, and yet does not denigrate the clerical offices, but merely calls out to the clergy to fulfil their charismatic calling dramatically as witnesses, and not to take refuge in ‘administrative overload’ as an excuse for ‘settling down’ for a quiet life. Such a vision of ascension to priestly status as a programme for Church development would set an answer to the pressing needs of the churches today: the need to recognise the great unused talent of women disciples; to move beyond ecclesial power structures that too often seem to be reminiscent of the army, or a fat corporation, rather than a mystical assembly of prophets; and not least the need to address immense problems of evangelisation in countries which were once thought (wrongly) to be permanently evangelised (Europe chief among them) as well as in countries where the Church is setting down energetic new seeds and witnessing extraordinary growth (China chief among them).

Some decades ago, Thomas Merton wrote a fine poem entitled ‘Origen’ in which he describes our author, tellingly, as someone whose ‘sin was to speak first among mutes’; someone who ‘thought he heard all beings / From stars to stones, angels to elements, alive / Crying for the Redeemer with a live grief’. Merton paints him as a source who, for all his faults, still became a ‘mad lighthouse, beatus/Ignis amoris, for the whole West’. This ‘blessed fire of love’ of which Merton speaks of course had a foundational impact on all the Church, not simply the West. Despite condemnations, Origen’s work has never ceased to be read and developed (corrected when necessary) by the greatest minds of the Church in all ages: from Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century, to Hans Urs von Balthasar in the 20th. The old man may yet have things to teach us, not least in his ecclesiology, which remains a jewel still to be completely dug out of the clay.

Notes

1 Matt. 19.12. The editors of the NIV biblical version seem to be worried that yet more readers may take the strange words literally, and so have rendered the pertinent phrase ‘made themselves eunuchs’ as ‘have renounced marriage’. 
2 See De Lange, *Origen and the Jews* and also McGuckin, “Origen on the Jews.” The rabbincic idea of the pre-existent Torah is a case in point.

3 See McGuckin, *Westminster Handbook*, 6–7. That this ‘least of all literalists’ should have been so caricatured as a literalist ought to have alerted scholars much earlier to the ‘smoke-blowing’ this tale represented.

4 A term used to differentiate from the gnostic élite schools. The idea of biblical commentary first appeared among the gnostic sages, who relied on the principle of the individual inspiration (or ‘illumined gnosis’) of the commentator to guarantee the spiritual acumen and veracity of the comment. Origen wishes to wrest back the genre from them, by writing his own; and also to subject the idea of individual ‘enthusiasm’ (divine élan) to the more measured consensus of church tradition and literary interpretative common sense. It is a sad irony that he has often been read (usually by those who have not read his works for themselves) as a wild allegorist with little regard for textual meaning.

5 Such as Jonah as a type of resurrection, or the Crossing of the Red Sea as a type of baptism.

6 In other words, the New Testament is the exegetical ‘key’ to interpreting the Old Testament (especially in a Christo-centric way).

7 He himself applied the literary techniques that had been developed at the Great Library of Alexandria, for establishing the critical readings of texts, and for elaborating a checkable system of analysis and explanation that did not depend wholly on the whims of individual ‘readers’. This led him to his ‘three levels of meaning’ to be sought for in a text: the literal, the moral and the spiritual significance of a reading. For more on his ideas of scientific literary theory, see McGuckin, “Origen as Literary Critic.”

8 He meant that the Logos was the sole ‘voice’ behind every significant and timeless message in the text. The literal meaning often did not survive the passage of time (war stories in the OT, for example) but its wider spiritual significance was the original main ‘intent’ of the speaking to the contemporary Church (for example, the ‘entry to the promised land’ signified a return to communion with God, not a licence to dispossess ethnic peoples).

9 For us the word often has weak associations, but for Origen it meant the essence of being; and the deepest level of meaning possible for human culture to attain or human values to envisage – the ‘noetic’ level of being.

10 Mersch, *The Whole Christ*, 249. His work underlay the great centrality that the concept of ‘Ecclesia’ had for Vatican II and the ecclesiological renewal movement in modern Catholicism.

11 Cf. Jay, *The Church*, 64; one recent encyclopaedia of Origen (Monaci-Castagno) has no article on Church in it at all.

12 Only his *Homilies* have a more popular audience in mind, and generally treat simpler, less controversial ideas.

13 Vogt, *Kirchenverständnis*. As Ledegang (*Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 2–3) points out, this is not so much a systematic analysis of Origen as a systematic theologian’s attempt to come to terms with him. It thus puts him into contemporary ‘ecclesiological categories’ which do not always reflect his original context, and gives too much space to issues of ‘hierarchical authority’.


15 Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*. This gives almost every image of the *Ecclesia* Origen applies throughout his work (an extended study of ancient patristic typology) and offers a very useful synopsis of the system of ecclesiology, 649–692.

16 The story is given in Eusebius of Caesarea who devotes Book 5 of his *Ecclesiastical History* to recounting the exploits of Origen.

17 Only as an old man, in a different time and under a different emperor (Decius), was he arrested and tortured as a Christian.
His father Leonides was a citizen, but his mother was probably not. His own name is Egyptian, 'Son of Horus', and he refers to his mother in ways that may indicate she was Jewish. For more on his Vita, see McGuckin, *Westminster Handbook*.

The *Cambridge History of the Bible* section on Origen's exegesis was an unfortunate example. For the new work on Origen, see especially: Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*.


*Commentary on Canticles*, 2.8.

The 'second' account (Gen. 2.7) speaks of this present cosmos as coming from 'the dust of the ground' which Origen takes to refer to material cosmic creation.

The Noetic intelligences (*noes*): the first *stasis* of the pre-temporal angelic order – Spirituals, Souls, or Noetics.


*On First Principles*, 1.8; *ibid.*, 1.3.8; *ibid.*, 1.4.1; *ibid.*, 2.8.3.

*Commentary on Canticles*, 2.8.3. The 'animal skins' which Adam and Eve clothed themselves in are interpreted by Origen (in the lost *Commentary on Genesis*, according to Procopius of Gaza) as the mortal flesh we received in place of our spiritual immortality. Gregory of Nyssa follows him in this and introduces it as a general theme in patristics. Origen also is conscious of how Paul had connected sin with the experience of death: Rom 7.24; Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah*, 20.7.

In a multiplicity of forms, tailored to different needs and levels of capacity of fallen Noes. These Origen calls the *epinoiai* (aspects) of the Logos’ self-revelation in history: seeing him appear in myriads of expressions and modes throughout time and space. Cf. *Homilies on Jeremiah*, 8.2; *Commentary on John*, 1.125–136; Crouzel, *Origen*, 189–192.

*Commentary on Ephesians*, 34.36–42 (JTS. 3. 1902, 573–574); *Homily on Numbers*, 26.4.


Origen develops this thought in his *Commentary on John*, 10.35–37 (on Jn. 5.21). It is closely related to his conception of the Heavenly Church as the Temple of God.

*Commentary on John*, 10.35.

*Against Celsus*, 6.48; *Commentary on Matthew*, 14.17.

*Commentary on Matthew*, 12.12; *Series Commentary on Matthew*, 139.


Origen teaches that the joy of the Heavenly Church is now not wholly complete since (like the Logos) they yearn for reunion with the fallen Church, their own beloved, and are never content until that union is effected (*Homily on Leviticus*, 7.2). At the end of days Origen envisions an *apocatastasis* (universal restoration) when the union will be complete and creation’s purpose
fulfilled. *Homilies on Leviticus*, 7.2; *On First Principles*, 2.3.7; ibid., 3.5.7; see Crouzel, *Origen*, 257–266.

45 *Commentary on John*, 10.24. (16); *Homily on Exodus*, 8.4; *Homily on Numbers*, 23.2; *Commentary on Romans*, 6.13; further see Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 318–352.

46 *Homily on Leviticus*, 15.3.8–12; ibid., 6.5.18–36.


48 *Homily on Numbers*, 23.1; *Against Celsus*, 5.44.

49 *Commentary on Matthew*, 14.20.


52 Hos. 1.2 – 3.5.

53 ‘One, holy, catholic, and apostolic’, which the *Regula Fidei* (the early credal structures of the second century) had already elevated.


57 von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* and *Origen*.

References


