

Heresy, Hermeneutics, and the Hellenization of Christianity:¹ A Reappraisal of Embodiment in Origen's *De Principiis*

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In a recent work,² I argued that the tendency to regard Origen as a Platonist while neglecting the all-important Aristotelian dimension of his thought has led to deeply entrenched misunderstandings with respect to Origen's philosophical theology. Despite compelling textual evidence in its favour, commentators continue to ignore the thoroughly hylomorphic, Aristotelian character of Origen's thought, interpreting it instead in terms of a "Platonic" soul/body dualism. As a result, Origen's views concerning the eternity of the world, and his repeated insistence upon the inseparability of soul and body, form and matter, which are crucial to a proper understanding of his philosophical and theological system, have been almost entirely overlooked.³ A contributing factor to this seemingly willful misreading of Origen, I argued, can be traced to what John Cavadini identifies as a "hermeneutic of suspicion."⁴ In this case, the latter refers to the pervasive mistrust within Origen scholarship towards Rufinus' Latin translations of the works of Origen – in particular the *De Principiis*. This hermeneutic of suspicion stems largely from the editorial work of Paul Koetschau (1913),⁵

1. I consciously echo here the title of Peter Martens' article, "Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity: The Descent of the Soul in Plato and Origen," *Harvard Theological Review* 108, no. 4 (2015): 594-620. It served as the initial inspiration for my own somewhat different treatment of this important problem in the study of Origen.

2. Cf. my "Aristotelian Teleology and Christian Eschatology in Origen's *De Principiis*" (MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 2016).

3. A notable exception is Robert Berchman, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1984).

4. John C. Cavadini, foreword to *On First Principles*, by Origen, trans. G. W. Butterworth, introduction by Henri De Lubac (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2013), vii; cf. viii.

5. *Origenes Werke - Fünfter Band: De Principiis*, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung, 1913).

who accused Rufinus of having systematically purged any allegedly ‘heretical’ elements from his translations of Origen’s Greek writings.⁶ In his critical edition of the *De Principiis*, Koetschau sets about “supplementing” the Latin text with Greek fragments taken from hostile sources, all the while treating them as unbiased, objective witnesses to Origen’s original meaning. G. W. Butterworth (1936), whose translation of the *De Principiis* remains the sole English language edition,⁷ both endorses and expands upon Koetschau’s flawed methodology.

While a critical attitude towards Rufinus is wholly justified – he openly admits to having modified Origen’s text – a correspondingly critical attitude towards hostile witnesses, such as Jerome and Justinian, seems peculiarly lacking. One ill-fated consequence of this imbalance has been to dismiss the centrality of embodiment for Origen as merely a Rufinian modification. Yet, as I hope to show, this corporealism is so fundamental to Origen’s worldview that attributing it to a few lines pencilled in by Rufinus is entirely untenable. The fact that commentators continue to do so can only be explained by their tendency to see Origen as a Platonist in the crudest sense; namely, as a thinker whose system is constructed upon a radical soul/body dualism. By ignoring the Aristotelian, hylomorphic character of Origen’s thought which, in the case of the soul/body relation is not incompatible with Christian orthodoxy,⁸ Origen is seen as much more heterodox than he in fact needs to be. The longstanding hermeneutic of suspicion with respect to Rufinus’ Latin translations of Origen embedded in Koetschau’s critical edition and Butterworth’s English translation of *De Principiis* has, thus, resulted in deeply entrenched (and deeply misleading) assumptions concerning Origen’s theological and philosophical views.

In what follows, I intend not only to demonstrate how distorting this hermeneutic of suspicion has been with respect to Origen’s worldview,

6. Due to the purge following Origen’s eventual condemnation, those works of his which managed to survive (with a few important exceptions) only do so in Latin translation.

7. Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (London: SPCK, 1936).

8. This assertion may strike the theologically informed reader as somewhat strange. Aristotle was often viewed with deep misgivings by ancient theists who regarded his thoroughgoing hylomorphism as potentially negating the immortality of the soul. Nonetheless, as Thomas Aquinas was later to show, Aristotle could be interpreted in a manner conformable to Christian dogma.

but further, to examine the roots of the hermeneutic of suspicion itself. I shall contend that the latter is in fact a unique expression of a much broader methodological bias that Peter Martens calls “the Hellenization of Christianity thesis”.⁹ This longstanding and notoriously contentious historiographical construct is most closely associated with Adolf von Harnack who regarded “the spirit of Hellenism” as a corrosive force upon an originally pristine Christianity. As such, Harnack subscribed to an all too familiar Protestant historical narrative of decline – a narrative which, as Wedemeyer demonstrates in the case of Tantric Buddhism, extends to the study of Eastern religions as well.¹⁰ Within Christianity, this narrative serves the Protestant polemic against Catholicism, in which the latter is seen as the (pagan) corruption of an original, Apostolic Christianity. As Jonathan Z. Smith puts it, “the pursuit of the origins of the question of Christian origins takes us back, persistently, to the same point: *Protestant anti-Catholic apologetics*” (italics in original).¹¹ Given that Origen is inextricably bound up with these origins, it comes as no surprise that the study of his work has been profoundly, and adversely, affected. By showing how the Hellenization of Christianity thesis informs the hermeneutic of suspicion, and how this has contributed to deeply misleading assumptions regarding Origen’s theology – particularly with respect to the soul/body relation – I hope to contribute to a much-needed reappraisal of one of the most important and controversial figures in the history of Christian dogma.

1. The Hellenization of Christianity Thesis

Most scholars, as Peter Martens points out, associate the contentious “Hellenization of Christianity” thesis with the work of Adolf von Harnack. According to Harnack, the so-called “Hellenic spirit” – a notion he never clearly defines – “constituted a threat to the undogmatic gospel of Jesus. Whenever this adversarial Hellenic spirit triumphed, as it inevitably did, it corroded an authentic living Christianity into an institutionalized, dogmatic

9. Martens, “Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity,” 596.

10. Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions* (New York: Columbia UP, 2013), 43-44.

11. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1990), 34.

religion.”¹² Following Harnack’s lead, Edwin Hatch envisions an originally pristine Christianity governed by ethical behaviour rather than rational beliefs. As such, he sees the transformation of Christianity from a living faith centred upon the Sermon on the Mount to a rigid belief system rooted in the Nicene Creed as resulting from the corrosive influence of Greek ideas. For him, the emergence of this new “Arian Christianity” marks the beginning of a long decline into dogmatism, an uprooting of Christianity from its native Semitic soil.¹³ While both Harnack and Hatch understand Christianity as an important departure from Judaism, they regard its subsequent Hellenization as leading to an inevitable ossification of an originally vital spirituality. The “original” Christianity, then, would seem to be precariously poised somewhere between its Judaic origins and its subsequent Hellenization.¹⁴

The Hellenization of Christianity thesis, as Martens rightly remarks,¹⁵ has a long history. Its roots can be traced back to the ancient polemic between paganism and Christianity, to the (creative) tension between Greek philosophy and scriptural revelation. While some early thinkers, such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, openly sought to assimilate the riches of Hellenism to their revealed religion, others, such as Tertullian, aggressively repudiated the validity of pagan learning.¹⁶ Origen, whose *De Principiis* remains one of the greatest works of Christian philosophy, also composed the *Contra Celsum*, a magnificent work of Christian apologetic *against* philosophy (or at least against a philosopher). In Book 7 of the *Confessions*, too, we find Augustine railing against “the pride of the philosophers” while openly acknowledging his debt to “the books of the Platonists.” This tension, or one might even say anxiety, concerning the right relation between philosophy and Scripture at times erupted into

12. Martens, “Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity,” 595. Cf. Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, trans. Neil Buchanan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905), 45-49; 56; 318-321; 357.

13. Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957), 2-5.

14. Needless to say, the suggestion that there are two distinct, monolithic entities one called “Christianity” and the other “Hellenism”, and that they are in conflict with each other is an absurd caricature of history.

15. Martens, “Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity,” 596.

16. I refer here to the famous question: “what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 7). Of course, Tertullian himself was steeped in pagan learning, and his corporeal views are undeniably Stoic.

outright hostility and accusations of heresy. Thus, the emperor Justinian links the “insanity” of Origen’s doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul to the teachings of “Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, and their followers.”¹⁷ For Justinian, Origen’s understanding of the relation between soul and body is contrary to Scripture and thus represents “a worrisome Hellenic perversion of Christianity.”¹⁸ Origen’s eventual, posthumous condemnation at the fifth ecumenical council convoked by Justinian “is inextricably linked to the Hellenization of Christianity thesis.”¹⁹ Already in antiquity, then, we find a tendency to identify Hellenism with heresy. It is a common view to this day that Origen’s heterodoxy was the result of excessive Platonising.²⁰

These ancient origins, however, are insufficient to account for the ideologically laden views of scholars such as Harnack and Hatch. For these thinkers, the corrosive force of Hellenism is not limited to a handful of heretics, but pervades the *whole* of Christianity *including* the very markers of orthodoxy, such as the Ecumenical Councils and Creeds. In a sense, the birth of orthodoxy for these radical moderns marks the death of the original, authentic Christianity. In other words, what we find with these thinkers is a distinctly Protestant narrative of decline in which “Hellenism” is merely a code word for Catholicism, and is seen as a corruption of an originally pristine Christianity.²¹ This narrative of decline, as Wedemeyer demonstrates in his study of Tantric Buddhism, has its own ancient genealogy. According to Wedemeyer, countless historical narratives – both ancient and modern – have been constructed upon a single ubiquitous metaphor: that of organic development.²² The basic idea is that, just as plants and animals are seen to undergo a process of growth, maturity, decay and death, so nonorganic

17. Justinian, *Letter of Justinian to the Holy Council about Origen and those Like-minded*, in Martens, “Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity,” 596.

18. Martens, “Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity,” 596.

19. Martens, “Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity,” 596.

20. Psychologically speaking, this strikes one as a massive case of collective projection on the part of the Christian theological tradition! *All* ancient theologians are arguably Platonists (in the broadest sense of that term) – one need only glance at the philosophical terminology of *ousia* and *hypostases* without which the central dogma of the Trinity is quite literally unthinkable. In many ways, Origen becomes the scapegoat for this collective guilt, this unconscious anxiety of the Christian tradition concerning its dependence upon Hellenism.

21. Cf. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 43. The whole of Chapter I, “On the Origins of Origins,” of this work is worth reading.

22. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 43.

phenomena, be they cities, nations, schools of thought, or religions, are subject to cycles of flourishing and inevitable decline. While providing the foundation for much of the modern practice of history, Wedemeyer points out that this organic metaphor of growth and decline is “merely a refinement of the ancient mythopoeic vision of the successive ages of civilization: The Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages, in which the nature of humanity progressively declines.” It is a trope equally operative in India in terms of the Four *Yugas*, the last being the *Kali Yuga*, or Dark Age.²³

This narrative of decline, which perhaps finds its clearest modern expression in Hegel’s construal of history in terms of the four phases of birth, maturity, old age, and death,²⁴ has been enormously influential in the European study of religions. The crucial question that Wedemeyer poses for the critical historiographer of religion is: “how, with a variety of narrative forms available, did this one so quickly become dominant?”²⁵ Why, for example, assume that Tantric Buddhism with its elaborate spiritual technologies, its colourful rites, and priestly hierarchies marks a degeneration of an originally pristine Buddhism, rather than, say, an enrichment or creative development of the tradition? The latter, after all, is precisely how the Tantric tradition conceives of itself. Unlike the foundational teachings of Buddhism, which only lead to enlightenment after many lifetimes of practice, the tantric technologies of Vajrayana Buddhism claim to produce liberation within a single lifetime. From the perspective of the Tantric tradition, the narrative of decline would be like arguing that the automobile is somehow a corruption of the horse and buggy!²⁶ What, then, accounts for the overwhelming preference for the narrative of decline in the study of religion as opposed to, say, a narrative of progress? The latter, after all, is perfectly familiar to us from the historical rhetoric of science and technology.

The answer, Wedemeyer, argues, may “be found by attending to patterns observable in the use of historical narrative and historical

23. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 44.

24. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 45.

25. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 47.

26. There are, admittedly, those who would argue this! The wisdom of the Amish aside (a wisdom that seems increasingly compelling in our age of environmental crisis), it is manifest nonsense to insist that the automobile marks a decline in the efficiency of transportation.

explanation in European literature.”²⁷ The narrative of civilizational decline – often linked to moral and sexual degeneracy – is well-established in classical literature. Both Greek and Roman writers, for example, attributed the decline of the once mighty Etruscans to moral depravity. This trope, in turn, was applied by Christian historians to the fall of Rome (one needs look no further than Edward Gibbons’ *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*).²⁸ Such historical narratives, Wedemeyer remarks, were readily available to “the historical imaginations of early scholars of Buddhism (and religions generally), whose education was founded in large part on the study of classical literature.”²⁹ In addition to these ancient historiographical models, we encounter a further, uniquely modern narrative of decline stemming from the Reformation and Enlightenment. In this case, the narrative fixates upon the problem of “empty ritual”, and an oppressive and corrupt ecclesiastical hierarchy. Needless to say, Tantric Buddhism with its sexual yogas and elaborate priesthood makes for an all too easy, if not irresistible, target. In short, as Wedemeyer argues, Tantric Buddhism becomes the Buddhist analogue to a dogmatic Catholicism centred upon ossified creeds rather than the Sermon on the Mount.³⁰

It is precisely this narrative of decline, based upon an organic metaphor of growth and decay deeply rooted (to use another organic metaphor) in the European historical imagination, which provides the impetus for the Hellenization of Christianity thesis. As we saw in the case of Tantric Buddhism, its ideological underpinnings are indebted to a uniquely Protestant narrative of religious degeneration. In the case of Christianity (or rather, *Catholicism*), it is not moral degeneracy or even ritual or a corrupt priestly hierarchy per se that are the central focus, but the dogmatizing tendencies of the “Hellenic spirit”. The application of Greek philosophy to the teachings of Jesus led to ossification, a dead religion centred upon intellectually constructed creeds as opposed to a living spirituality. Once Hellenism had, as it were, stifled the vital spirit of Apostolic Christianity, an ever-deeper decline into the sterile and self-serving constructions of intellectual, liturgical, and ecclesiastical edifices became inevitable. All of

27. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 47.

28. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 47.

29. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 47.

30. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 49.

this stemmed from the unholy alliance of Hellenism and Christianity.

If one were to propose a single individual as the personification of a thoroughly Hellenised Christianity, it would undoubtedly be Origen: a towering intellectual of the early church whose Platonising tendencies (or so the story goes) led him into heresy. Harnack cites Porphyry's estimation of Origen with approval: "The outer life of Origen was that of a Christian and opposed to the Law; but, in regard to his views of things and of the Deity, he thought like the Greeks, inasmuch as he introduced their ideas into the myths of other peoples."³¹ For Harnack, Origen is basically a Hellenist in disguise, a wolf in sheep's clothing who surreptitiously smuggled Greek philosophy into the revealed narratives of Sacred Scripture.³² Beyond contributing to the progressive dogmatization of Christianity, the greatest triumph of the Hellenic spirit, according to Harnack, was that "it introduced into the Church its entire mysticism, its mystic exercises, and even the magical ceremonies as expounded by Iamblicus."³³ It is not difficult to see the thinly veiled Protestant polemic here against Catholicism with its monastic rules, its religious works, and its liturgical rites. If Origen, the great arch-heretic of antiquity, stands at the beginning of this historical narrative of decline, Catholicism undoubtedly represents its collective culmination.

2. The Hermeneutic of Suspicion

Having explored the Hellenization of Christianity thesis in some detail, I would like now to shift our attention to a problem of hermeneutics; namely, what Cavadini identifies (borrowing Ricoeur's phrase) as a deep seated "hermeneutic of suspicion" with respect to the Latin translations of Origen's surviving works. I shall begin with a brief examination of this hermeneutical problem, and then conclude with reflections as to how this relates to the Hellenization of Christianity thesis. What may initially seem like somewhat of a digression will be seen, or so it is hoped, to be merely a variation upon a single theme.

31. Eusebius, *H.E.* VI. 19, quoted in Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 357.

32. Anders Nygren, whose notorious work *Agape and Eros* juxtaposes Christian *agape* and Platonic *eros*, echoes the same idea with respect to the topic of Christian love. Nygren singles out Origen as the chief culprit responsible for assimilating Platonic *eros* to Christian *agape* to the great detriment of the latter (*Agape and Eros* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953], 30).

33. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 359.

In his recent redaction of Butterworth's English translation of Origen's *De Principiis*, Cavadini draws attention to a peculiar methodological bias that penetrates to the very core of Origen scholarship; namely, a deep-seated suspicion regarding Rufinus' Latin translations of Origen's Greek writings, coupled with an uncritical acceptance of hostile Greek sources claiming to represent Origen's true meaning.³⁴ This methodological bias is not merely limited to secondary scholarship, but is embedded in Koetschau's longstanding critical edition of the *De Principiis* (1913), as well as Butterworth's English translation (1936, 1966, 1973) of Koetschau's Latin text. While Henri Crouzel and Manlio Simonetti offer an important corrective to Koetschau with their own critical edition accompanied by French translation,³⁵ Butterworth's text remains the sole English language version of the *De Principiis*.³⁶ In his translation, Butterworth fully embraces, and even extends, Koetschau's hermeneutic of thoroughgoing suspicion regarding Rufinus' Latin rendering of Origen's Greek text. In essence, both Koetschau and Butterworth accuse Rufinus of having systematically purged Origen's *De Principiis* of any potentially heterodox opinions.³⁷ As a corrective, Koetschau followed by Butterworth "supplemented" Rufinus' Latin text with Greek fragments and excerpts largely taken "from sources as hostile as the anathemata of Justinian as though they were unbiased, objective witnesses to the original Greek."³⁸

Needless to say, a critical attitude towards Rufinus as translator and editor of Origen's Greek works is fully justified, indeed, incumbent upon any serious scholar of Origen. As Butterworth rightly remarks, Rufinus openly admits to modifying Origen's work. In his preface to Book III of *De Principiis*, Rufinus makes the following frank admission: "But this I must needs mention, that, as I did in the former books, so in these also I have taken care not to translate such passages as appeared to be contrary to the rest of Origen's teaching and to our own faith, but to omit them as forgeries

34. Cavadini, foreword to *On First Principles*, vii-viii.

35. *Origène: Traité des principes* (Sources Chrétiennes; Paris: Cerf, 1980).

36. Cavadini's redaction of Butterworth's text marks a recent and long overdue improvement. Yet, even Cavadini at times unwittingly falls prey to the editorial interpolations of Butterworth.

37. By Rufinus' time (4th – 5th century CE), Origen was already a controversial figure whose *De Principiis* was increasingly coming under attack for its bold speculations and its imperfect Trinitarian theology.

38. Cavadini, foreword to *On First Principles*, viii.

interpolated by others.”³⁹ In essence, Rufinus admits to having taken certain liberties with Origen’s text. While Rufinus’ candour is commendable, given the controversy surrounding Origen, it is admittedly difficult *not* to instinctively share Butterworth’s view that Rufinus is incriminating himself, and that the omitted “forgeries” are none other than the heterodox opinions of the great Alexandrian himself.

And yet one might pause here and ask oneself *why* it seems like such a forgone conclusion? Why assume that Rufinus is being disingenuous? After all, one frequently hears of the wild excesses of the so-called “Origenists” of the Palestinian desert, of heretical monks such as the Syrian mystic Stephen Bar Sudhaili, whose pantheistic and isochristic musings went far beyond anything Origen is generally believed to have taught.⁴⁰ Given that the growing scholarly consensus is that Origen’s condemnation had more to do with the exaggerations of the so-called “Origenists” of the 5th-6th centuries than Origen himself, is it not at least plausible that Rufinus really was doing what he claims to have done; namely, restoring Origen’s text by ridding it of heretical interpolations? At the very least, we must acknowledge that Butterworth’s conclusion is, and in the absence of the original Greek manuscripts, can only ever be, an unverifiable hypothesis. It is by no means a forgone conclusion. The fact that it almost instinctively seems so to us, I would like to suggest, is because we too have unconsciously ascribed to the Hellenization of Christianity thesis. The sheer familiarity of the narrative of decline prevents us from seeing Origen in a more positive, and arguably more accurate, light: as in fact a *champion* of orthodoxy and a pioneer of Trinitarian theology.⁴¹

Whatever the case may be, it must be acknowledged that Rufinus is

39. Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth, foreword by J. C. Cavadini, introduction by Henri De Lubac (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2013), 194.

40. F. Prat, “Origen and Origenism,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911) online: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11306b.htm>.

41. Far from being a corrupting influence, Origen’s use of philosophy in fact enabled him to effectively combat the greatest challenges to the early Church; namely, Gnostic determinism and Marcionite ditheism – a task for which Origen receives little thanks. Origen also made important contributions to Trinitarian theology, something which has been overshadowed by (anachronistic) accusations of subordinationism. Cf. Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture, A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea*, vol. 2, trans. John Austin Baker (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 375-386.

not above criticism. We simply have no way of knowing for certain what he omitted from Origen's *De Principiis*, nor what his actual editorial motives were. In regarding Rufinus with a sharply critical eye, scholars, such as Koetschau and Butterworth, are in accord with the rigorous principles of academic scholarship. What makes their hermeneutic one of *suspicion* is that this critical attitude is peculiarly one-sided.

In the introduction to his English translation of the *De Principiis*, Butterworth lists four main sources which served as the basis for his and Koetschau's "reconstruction" of Origen's text:

- i. The *Philokalia*, a compilation of Origen's works made by the Cappadocian Fathers Basil and Gregory Nazianzus.
- ii. A letter by Emperor Justinian to Mennas Patriarch of Constantinople containing numerous extracts from the *De Principiis*, which subsequently formed the basis for Origen's eventual condemnation.
- iii. The fifteen Anathemas against Origen decreed at the Council of Constantinople in AD 553.
- iv. Various fragments taken from Antipater of Bostra, Leontius of Byzantium, Theophilus of Alexandria, Epiphanius, (Jerome) and others.⁴²

Of these four sources, only the first is a potentially neutral or favourable witness. The remaining three are all sources openly hostile to Origen – a fact that did not stop Koetschau from using them to "reconstruct" the alleged lacunae in his critical edition.

What is most striking about Butterworth's discussion of these controversial sources is the sheer *lack of criticism* with which he addresses them. He simply assumes their veracity *tout court*. For example, he tells us without reservation that Koetschau inserted anathemas II to VI directly into his critical text. Anathema II claims that Origen taught an incorporeal, purely intelligible original creation, while Anathema VI accuses Origen of teaching that a demiurgic *nous* created the world rather than the Trinity.⁴³ Both of these anathemas gloss over the subtlety of Origen's actual position

42. G. W. Butterworth, translator's introduction in *On First Principles*, by Origen, foreword by J. C. Cavadini, introduction by Henri De Lubac (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2013), lxiv-lxv.

43. Butterworth, *On First Principles*, 2013, lxiv-lxv. Why Koetschau felt it imperative to insert these two anathemas into his text as authentically Origenian and not, say, the absurd accusation of anathema X which accuses Origen of teaching that the resurrected body of Christ was, and of the saints will be, spherical (!) is unclear.

on these matters. In truth, they are exaggerations that echo preconceived notions of Origen as a “Platonist”. These anathemas conform to the ancient roots of the Hellenization of Christianity thesis, already encountered with Justinian, which regards Hellenism as a source of heresy. When it comes to Jerome, one of Origen’s most vociferous opponents, Butterworth fares no better: “No arguments,” he asserts, “will alter the fact that Rufinus has left many gaps which *without Jerome’s help* (emphasis added) we could not fill at all, and that time after time he deliberately transforms, abbreviates or renders inaccurately his original.”⁴⁴ Upon what does Butterworth base his negative appraisal of Rufinus’ translation? The fact that it differs from several passages translated by Jerome! At best, it is a case of one person’s word against another. And yet, of Jerome’s presentation of Origen, Butterworth confidently asserts that “though blunt, [it] is full and fair.” For him, Jerome’s translations have a “genuine Origenistic ring about them,” and “there is *no evidence whatever* of hardening or exaggeration.”⁴⁵ Leaving aside the meaningless assertion of a “genuine Origenist ring about them,” (their distinctly heretical tone, perhaps?) the confidence with which Butterworth claims that there is no evidence of exaggeration *whatsoever* in Jerome’s presentation of Origen is, to say the least, mindboggling. Anyone who has studied the history of philosophy knows how rare it is for opponents to treat each other’s positions fairly. The notoriously irascible Jerome is no exception.⁴⁶

How does one account for such a blatantly biased methodology? How does one explain this peculiar “hermeneutic of suspicion” in which Rufinus, as a defender of Origen is regarded as inherently unreliable,

44. Butterworth, *On First Principles*, 2013, lxvii.

45. Butterworth, *On First Principles*, 2013, lxvii.

46. A particularly illuminating example of Jerome’s “full and fair” treatment of Origen can be found in his *Ep. ad Avitum* 5. Here, Jerome “faithfully” and quite literally reproduces Origen’s own words (*De Princ.* II.III.3) concerning the eventual destruction of bodily nature at the end of time – conveniently leaving out the fact that Origen presents this view with the sole purpose of refuting it! The reason Origen gives for the preservation of bodies at this particular junction of the text is that, given the possibility of repeated falls from paradise, bodies retain a perennial importance. Insofar as Origen’s justification here is itself a heretical notion (i.e., finite salvation, infinite reincarnations), it is unlikely to be a Rufinian interpolation. The tricky thing about Jerome is that, while some of his accusations are undoubtedly justified, others are blatant misrepresentations. Butterworth, meanwhile, uncritically accepts the view of Jerome as authoritative. Cf. Cavadini, *De Principiis*, 446-7, notes.

while Justinian, Jerome, and other opponents of Origen are assumed to be impeccable witnesses? A plausible means of explaining this peculiar bias, I suggest, is none other than the Hellenization of Christianity thesis. It is precisely because Koetschau and Butterworth subscribe – be it consciously or otherwise – not merely to the ancient view of Hellenism as a corrosive force upon Christianity but, above all, to the modern Protestant narrative of decline, that the incriminating exaggerations of Origen’s accusers have for them the irresistible ring of truth that they do. Simply put, they are already convinced *a priori* that Origen was both a Hellenist and a heretic, and that these two things are somehow inextricably bound together. The “genuinely Origenistic ring” that Jerome’s account has for Butterworth is merely the familiar echo of the latter’s own preconceptions bouncing back at him. Given that Origen is so closely bound up with the origins of Christianity, the narrative of decline becomes doubly compelling. From the time of his condemnation, Origen has been consistently portrayed as the arch-heretic, the scapegoat and tragic exemplar of the dangers of philosophy. His life represents a cautionary tale of how the errors of Hellenism inevitably lead to heresy. While rooted in the ancient tension between pagan philosophy and Christian Scripture, this view of Origen takes on a heightened ideological significance for prominent Protestant scholars of religion, such as Harnack, Hatch, Nygren, Koetschau, and Butterworth. For them, Origen is the Hellenization of Christianity thesis personified. As the arch-heretic of antiquity, Origen stands at the beginning of the historical decline from the Golden Age of Apostolic Christianity to the Dark Age of Catholicism with its pagan rites, its dogmatism, and above all its mysticism.

3. A New Look at Origen’s Understanding of Embodiment

Having dealt with some of the methodological and hermeneutical problems surrounding the study of Origen, particularly with respect to his most philosophical and controversial work, the *De Principiis*, I will conclude with a brief exploration of what Origen’s thought might look like when viewed apart from the hermeneutic of suspicion. For the sake of brevity, I will focus upon a single, contentious issue; namely, Origen’s understanding of the soul/body relation. It is widely accepted that Origen taught there was an original, noetic creation which only later became embodied as a

consequence of sin.⁴⁷ This view, as we noted above, is found in the second anathema subsequently enshrined in Koetschau's critical text of the *De Principiis*. This alleged doctrine, often referred to as the teaching on the pre-existence of souls,⁴⁸ has as its counterpart the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, or universal restoration. Given that creatures were originally incorporeal spirits, so the common view of Origen goes, at the time of restoration bodies will once again be cast aside in favour of a purely noetic existence.⁴⁹ This position is problematic in that it denies a central dogma of the Christian faith; namely, the resurrection of the body. This view, which casts Origen's teaching into the mold of a quasi-Platonic mind/body dualism, conforms to the Hellenization of Christianity thesis, and is duly confirmed by Koetschau and Butterworth's hermeneutic of suspicion. Yet is this in fact the correct, or even the most plausible, interpretation of Origen?

While many ancient and modern critics of Origen accuse him of teaching a radical soul/body dualism, his position is in fact far subtler than this. For Origen, there is a direct and crucial correlation between the moral state of the soul and its physical condition, so that the *kind* of bodies that beings possess are a direct reflection of their spiritual condition. Thus, the most spiritually refined beings possess ethereal angelic bodies, while less refined beings possess coarser bodies, such as fleshly human bodies, or murky demonic bodies. For Origen, freewill and providence coincide in the constitution of a cosmic hierarchy which is not fixed, but fluid. God's "original" creation⁵⁰ consists of free and indeterminate beings who, in a sense, constitute themselves by their own moral choices: the diversity of bodies is the result of the diversity of wills. Depending upon one's moral

47. Jean Daniélou uncritically accepts this view remarking that with respect to Origen's conception of the fall of Man, "the influence of philosophy had a seriously distorting effect on Christian tradition" (*Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, 415).

48. Henri Crouzel, the great defender of Origen, remarks that this idea "comes from Platonism" and consequently that it is among "the most vulnerable parts of Origen's thought" (*Origen* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989], 207, 217).

49. Origen is accused of this in anathema XI: "If anyone shall say that the future judgment signifies the destruction of the body and that the end of the story will be an immaterial φύσις, and that thereafter there will no longer be any matter, but only spirit (νοῦς): let him be anathema" (Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, NPNF2-14 [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900], 319. Online: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.xii.ix.html>).

50. The original creation is not a temporal one, but an *ontological* one. Cf. my "Aristotelian Teleology and Christian Eschatology in Origen's *De Principiis*," esp. 60-69.

state, God providentially provides the appropriate body.⁵¹ This embodiment is not a punishment, as Origen's opponents often claim, but a means of purgation; it is not so much punitive as pedagogical.⁵² Consequently, while some incarnations are undoubtedly superior to others, Origen never rejects the body *per se* as evil, as something which needs to be transcended or abandoned. To the contrary, Origen repeatedly *affirms* the goodness of the body and of matter generally as a creation of the divine.

According to Origen, the indeterminacy of matter is such that it is capable of undergoing any kind of transformation in accordance with the freely willed choices of individuals. When it is drawn down to lower, more sinful existences, matter takes on a coarser and heavier quality, whereas when it ministers to more exalted, saintlier beings, it adopts a more refined, ethereal character. Consequently, while bodily matter may be infinitely *transformed*, it is never destroyed. Origen affirms this position in a number of places in the *De Principiis*. At II.I.4, he states that the diversity of the world "cannot exist apart from bodies" and that bodily nature "admits of diverse and various changes." In short, it is capable of undergoing every kind of transformation. As such, Origen asks whether it is possible that bodies will someday be resolved back into nonexistence. His answer is no: "In whatever form it is found, be it carnal as now or as hereafter in the subtler and purer form which is called spiritual, the soul always makes use of [the body]" (*DePrinc.* II.III.2; cf. IV.III.15, IV.IV.8).

In a way, this is not unlike Aristotle; Origen regards the body as the

51. According to Origen's "myth of pre-existence," the original created intellects (*logika*) abided in blissful union with the divine. At some point, however, they fell away from God and their originally ethereal bodies suffered alteration in keeping with their diminished ethical/ontological condition. Those who fell only a little ways acquired subtle angelic bodies; those who fell further acquired coarser human bodies; those who fell furthest of all acquired murky demonic bodies. Origen's cosmology, thus, resembles a kind of theistic doctrine of 'karma,' in which the cosmos reflects the ethical choices of the beings which inhabit it. Given that Origen posits no temporal beginning to the universe, this interplay of providence and freewill is itself beginningless (though not endless). Cf. Origen, *DePrinc.*, I.IV.1-5; II.I.1-5.

52. The diverse embodiments of beings with their inherent limitations is not punitive, but pedagogical; beings are meant to *learn* from their suffering and to be purged from their errors so that they will all eventually be restored to their original perfection and union in God. Embodiment is not so much "corporal punishment" as "physical therapy." Cf. Origen, *DePrinc.*, I.VI. 1-4; II.IX.1-8.

organon, or instrument of the soul.⁵³ Unlike Aristotle, perhaps, the body is capable of undergoing infinite transmutations in service to an infinitely changeable soul; the body is the timeless externalization of the soul, the material projection of the individual's spiritual condition. Thus, in response to the Pauline statement that "the form of this world shall pass away" (1 Cor 7:31), Origen argues that "it is not by any means an annihilation or destruction of the material substance that is indicated, but the occurrence of a certain change of quality (*inmutatio quaedam fit qualitatis*) and an alteration (*transformatio*) of the outward form" (*DePrinc.* I.VI.4). Citing Isaiah 65:17, Origen further maintains that the final *apokatastasis* will not involve the *destruction* of the material world, but its renewal (*innovatio*) and its transmutation (*transmutatio*). Contra his accusers, Origen never claims that the body will be destroyed – nor does he deny the reality of the resurrection-body. Instead, he argues that the latter will consist of an exceedingly pure, and subtle matter such as is appropriate to the deified soul. In this, Origen is being faithful to Paul who proclaims that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven", and that "it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1Cor 15:44, 50). This is in direct contradiction to anathema XI which claims that Origen denies the survival of the body.⁵⁴

If Origen is being faithful to Paul, he is also being faithful to Aristotle. This is evident in Origen's insistence upon the inseparability of soul and body, form and matter. Thus, while Origen concedes that matter (*hyle*, *hypokeimenon*) has its own existence apart from qualities, yet, he insists, "*it is never found actually existing apart from them*" (*DePrinc.* II.I.4). At IV.IV.7, Origen reiterates that "it is by intellect alone" that matter can be conceived of as separate. In other words, for Origen, like Aristotle, matter is always *informed* matter. In fact, in terms of his understanding of the soul/body relation, Origen's Hellenism is seen to be not so much Platonic as *Aristotelian*. Far from being a soul/body dualist, Origen ascribes to a deeply *hylomorphic* conception of reality – a fact which the hermeneutic of

53. At IV.III.15, Origen declares that, though souls are not themselves corporeal, they "yet make use of bodies, though they themselves are superior to bodily substance." At IV.IV.8, Origen insists that "this [bodily] nature must needs endure so long as those endure who need it for a covering; and there will always be rational natures who need this bodily covering."

54. For the text, cf. fn. 49. Also, cf. Anathema XIV in fn. 58.

suspicion has largely obscured. As such, Origen's use of philosophy here,⁵⁵ in fact, *conforms* to and *affirms* the revealed truth of the Gospel. Rather than distorting the meaning of Scripture, Origen skillfully draws upon and modifies Aristotle in a way that harmonizes him with Paul.

The handful of passages I have presented as evidence for Origen's hylomorphism, his insistence upon the inseparability of soul and body, and consequently, his affirmation of the dogma of the bodily resurrection, is far from comprehensive.⁵⁶ The eternal inseparability of soul and body is in fact a foundational, ontological principle for Origen's *De Principiis*. The soul/body union marks the fundamental divide between creature and Creator. In a passage frequently dismissed by commentators as a Rufinian interpolation,⁵⁷ Origen declares that it is impossible for any being, except for the Trinity, to live apart from a body. Such a disincarnate, purely noetic existence can only be found in the simplicity of the Godhead, in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*De Princ.* II.II.2; IV.III.15). This distinction between composite, corporeal creatures, and the simple, incorporeal reality of the Trinity represents the fundamental ontological divide in Origen's cosmos between Creator and creature, absolute Being and contingent beings. To deny this basic distinction leads inevitably to pantheism – a fact not lost upon those eager to condemn Origen.⁵⁸

55. This is not to say that Origen's philosophizing does not get him into trouble on other points of doctrine – it most certainly *does*. Yet, it is important to see that the converse is also true. In fact, even when Origen's philosophical views conflict with what will *subsequently* come to be recognized as orthodoxy, these views are always in service to orthodoxy insofar as they represent an attempt on Origen's part to overcome early Gnostic and Marcionite heresies – something for which Origen ought to be congratulated rather than condemned!

56. In addition to the many other passages in the *De Principiis* that illustrate this, there exists a crucial passage in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, in the original uncorrupted Greek, which affirms precisely, in Origen's own words, this alleged Rufinian modification. Cf. *CCels* III.41-42 (*Origène: Contre Celse* [Sources Chrétiennes; Paris: Cerf, 1967]).

57. Even Cavadini, despite his keen grasp of the problems surrounding the hermeneutic of suspicion, concedes in a footnote that "Rufinus has probably modified this passage" (*On First Principles*, 446).

58. Anathema XIV: "If anyone shall say that all reasonable beings will one day be united in one, when the hypostases as well as the numbers and the bodies shall have disappeared, and that the knowledge of the world to come will carry with it the ruin of the worlds, and the rejection of bodies as also the abolition of [all] names, and that there shall be finally an identity of the γῶσις and of the hypostasis; moreover, that in this pretended apocatastasis, spirits only

Conclusion

What I hope to have shown in my brief excursus into the intricacies of Origen's *De Principiis* is that a close and careful reading of the actual text does not support the hermeneutic of suspicion. Far from amounting to a few passages surreptitiously penciled in by Rufinus, the notion of embodiment is in fact central to the very foundation of Origen's metaphysic – and can be confirmed by a mere glance at the *Contra Celsum* where this same idea is enshrined in the original Greek (*CCels* III.41-42).⁵⁹ While Rufinus is not above criticism, to claim that the timeless union of soul and body is an interpolation amounts to the claim that the entire *De Principiis* has been hopelessly corrupted. It would mean that Rufinus had not merely modified, or omitted, passages, as he himself admits to doing; it would mean, rather, that he had thoroughly *rewritten* the *De Principiis* in accordance with his own views concerning the relation of soul and body. In other words, we would have to conclude that the Latin *De Principiis* represents, at best, a work of philosophical collaboration between Origen *and* Rufinus. However, there is nothing to suggest that Rufinus was remotely capable of accomplishing such a feat.

The fact that such a paranoid position (for this *is* the inevitable conclusion of the hermeneutic of suspicion) has, and continues to be, maintained can only be explained by the pervasive, often unconscious, influence of the Hellenization of Christianity thesis. The ancient anxiety concerning the right relation between Greek philosophy and revealed religion, exacerbated by the modern Protestant narrative of decline with its anti-Catholic polemic, creates an intellectual atmosphere in which Origen, Hellenism, and heresy become virtually synonymous. As such, it becomes all too easy to embrace the distorted claims of Origen's accusers as legitimate, conforming as they do to our own preconceived notions of Origen as the arch-heretic of Christian history, and the personification of Hellenized Christianity. While it would be going too far to claim that Origen

will continue to exist, as it was in the feigned pre-existence: let him be anathema" (Schaff and Wallace, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 319. Online: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.xii.ix.html>).

59. While a single Greek passage may seem like scant evidence, given the sorry state of Origen's surviving writings it acquires a heightened value. It is a welcome affirmation in Origen's own words of an idea often discounted as a Rufinian modification.

was *not* profoundly influenced by Hellenism, or that some of his bold speculations *do not* challenge Christian orthodoxy, what the Hellenization of Christianity thesis blinds us to is the extent to which Origen's Hellenism in fact *supports*, and *is in service to*, Christian doctrine. Origen is indeed a Hellenized Christian (or a Christian Hellenist); yet not quite the sort that he is typically accused of being. He is not merely a "Platonist,"⁶⁰ but equally an Aristotelian. In the case of the soul/body relation, this Aristotelianism in fact *accords* with, and *affirms*, the Christian view of embodiment. Only the deeply engrained prejudices stemming from the hermeneutic of suspicion, embedded in the *very critical edition* and subsequent English translation of the *De Principiis*, prevents us from seeing this. What else has it prevented us from seeing?

60. The juxtaposition of Platonism and Aristotelianism here cannot be pushed too far; by Origen's time, "Platonism" already contained a great deal of "Aristotelianism" and vice versa. Indeed, "Platonism" often serves as a general term for the Greek philosophical tradition as a whole. I use these terms merely as indicators of philosophical positions that tend to be associated more strongly with one than the other, in this case the soul/body relation.

