Philosophical Rhetoric and the "Divine Embodiment" in Origen of Alexandria

Sergey Trostyanskiy, *Union Theological Seminary NYC, USA*

The subject of this article is the philosophical rhetoric of late Platonism and its significance for the development of the notion of "divine embodiment" within the cultural horizon of third-century Alexandria. I briefly review the role and significance of rhetoric in classical culture and in third-century Christian tradition. I submit that the origin of the "non-Incarnational" Christology and of double subjectivity in Christ in the third century can be best thought of as a result of Origen of Alexandria's—one of the most remarkable figures of third-century Christianity—appropriation of the philosophical rhetoric of late Platonism. I attempt to demonstrate here that a natural outflow of Plato's late-period metaphysics of the *Nous*, and of his philosophical rhetoric in third-century Christian discourse, was associated with the introduction of the concept of Jesus' pre-existing soul as a medium through which *Nous*/Logos could "come-to-be," the attribution of *kenosis* to the soul of Jesus, and the evocation of a participational model in Christology as the foundation of Christological thought at the time.

Rhetoric was defined by classical culture as an art of persuasion. In Plato, rhetoric refers to public speech and persuasion in a most general way.[1] One should note Plato himself had an ambivalent attitude to rhetoric. For example, in the early-period dialogues, Plato classified rhetoric as an "art" of flattery of the Sophists (the *Gorgias* is a perfect manifestation of such an attitude).[2] However, the middle-period dialogues, the *Phaedrus* in particular,

---

1. For instance: "You assert that rhetoric is a creator of persuasion, and that all its activity is concerned with this, and this is its sum and substance" [*Gorgias* 453a]. The qualification then follows: "The kind of persuasion employed in the law courts and other gatherings…" [454b]. All translated texts of Plato come from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
2. "What I mean by rhetoric is part of an activity that is not very reputable…the activity as a whole, it seems to me, is not an art, but the occupation of a shrewd and enterprising spirit, and of one naturally skilled in its dealings with men, and in sum and substance I call it 'flattery'" [*Gorgias* 463a-b].

introduced the notion of true rhetoric, which emerges out of dialectic and intends to educate those who are not properly trained in philosophy.[3] This ambivalent attitude can be interpreted in two ways: as reflecting the natural development of Plato's philosophy, which initially denied rhetoric its proper place in philosophy, and later reincorporated it into philosophical discourse; or, as pertaining to the polemical character of the dialogues characterized by the constant shifts of emphasis during the clashes with the Sophists. However, the common denominator of both interpretations is that for Plato, rhetoric was something significant, an extension of dialectic that should not be ignored. This attitude echoes later in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, where the link between philosophy and rhetoric is fully substantiated through the classification of persuasion as a sort of demonstration,[4] as a form of philosophical discourse utilized in the public domain. Thus, Aristotle tells us, "persuasion is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated [*Rhetoric* 1355a 5]." Rhetoric, therefore, is the counterpart of dialectic.

As Aristotle noted, there are three kinds or "modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word" [1356a1]. The first mode depends on the personal character of the speaker.[5] The second depends on the emotional response of the audience to the speech. The third depends on the speaker's proof, or apparent proof, of truth. It is the third mode of persuasion that is important in the scope of this article. It is here that "persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth

---

3. Thus, "but now by what means and from what source can not attain the art of the true rhetorician, the real master of persuasion? . . .Rhetoric is in the same case as medicine…In both cases there is a nature that we have to determine, the nature of body in the one, and of the soul in the other, if we mean to be scientific and not content with mere empirical routine when we apply medicine and diet to induce health and strength, or words and rules of conduct to implant such convictions and virtues as we desire" [*Phaedrus* 269d-270b]. Similar in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: "What makes a man a sophist is not his abilities but his choices" [1355b18].
4. Demonstration is defined in the *Posterior Analytics* as "a syllogism which produces scientific knowledge" [71b10-15]. All translated texts of Aristotle come from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. Vols. 1–2. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
5. The personal character of the speaker is determined by the allocation of virtues and vices in the soul. For instance, a virtuous person is such as to be trusted in all occasions, whereas a vicious soul is the source of deceit and, thus, not to be trusted. Hence, a virtuous character is a necessary and sufficient condition for the persuasiveness of the spoken word, in this mode of persuasion, i.e., in which the spoken word uttered by a virtuous person persuades the audience.

by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question" [1356a20]. What is important in this context is that "what is persuasive is persuasive to someone; and something is persuasive because it is directly self-evident or because it appears to be proved from other statements that are so" [1356b25-30]. We can easily infer from the last phrase that for an effort to persuade, the intellectual horizon of the audience is formative.

Another important feature of rhetoric to note relates to how the rhetorical argument is structured. Thus, "the duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us, in the hearing of persons who cannot take in at a glance a complicated argument, or follow a long chain of reasoning" [1357a1-3]. It is indeed "possible to form deductions and draw conclusions from the results of previous deductions" [1357a7]. However, this kind of reasoning "will necessarily be hard to follow owing to their length, for we assume an audience of untrained thinkers" [1357a12].[6] This situation necessitates a certain adjustment in the form of argumentation. Thus, instead of extensive stretches of reasoning— which characterize dialectical syllogisms—, an enthymeme, an incomplete syllogism, is used—which has a lesser degree of complexity and operates with fewer propositions, as one of the premises or a conclusion is missing and has to be supplied by the audience.[7] Yet, the argument runs from the general to the particular via a common middle term and thus follows the proper rules of inference.

Moreover, "there are few facts of the necessary type that can form the basis of rhetorical deductions. Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which we inquire, present us with alternative

---

6. If, on the contrary, one argues from the premises that have not been proved, the argument won't be persuasive, being established upon the premises that are not generally admitted or reputable.

7. Thus, "the enthymeme must consist of few propositions, fewer often than those which make up a primary deduction. For if any of these propositions is a familiar fact, there is no need even to mention it; the hearer adds it himself. Thus, to show that Dorieus has been victor in a contest for which the prize is a crown, it is enough to say 'For he has been victor in the Olympic Games,' without adding 'And in the Olympic Games the prize is a crown,' a fact which everybody knows" [1357a15-20]. Moreover, "dialectic deals with what is "the true," while rhetoric deals with what is "the approximately true." However, he insists, "the true" and "the approximately true" are apprehended by the same faculty, and usually do arrive at the truth. "Hence the man who makes a good guess at truth is likely to make a good guess at probabilities" [1355a15].

possibilities" [1357a25]. Thus, the materials of rhetorical deductions are probabilities (things that do not necessarily happen, but do for the most part, and thus can turn out otherwise)[8] and signs.[9] Thus, the premises of rhetorical deductions are mainly contingent (neither necessarily true nor necessarily false) premises commonly accepted by public opinion (by the "many").

Moreover, instead of induction, rhetoric utilizes examples. Thus, "a rhetorical induction [is] an example" [1356b 4-5]. Here, the argument runs from the particular via particular to the general, and the premises are justified *a posteriori*. Yet, the criterion for choosing premises is not necessarily their plausibility but their familiarity to the audience. Finally, the use of allegory, which Aristotle defined as an extended metaphor and whose rhetorical utility later scholars significantly amplified (especially those in Alexandria), is important in our context. As A. Juthe argued, "analogical reasoning is about solving problems, describing something, learning or explaining things by extending our thought from things we do understand to things we do not, at the time, comprehend."[10] In rhetorical argument, analogy allows the speaker to argue from particular to particular; hence, no universal premise is involved in such reasoning. The assignment of a particular predicate to the subject at stake takes place in virtue of an analogical relation between two particulars (i.e. certain similarly or isomorphism). This type of reasoning can perhaps accommodate all kinds of audience (of any educational and social background). It is easy to follow and thus serves the purposes of persuading a general and diverse audience in the best possible way.

It is clear also that public speech necessitates a certain type of reasoning that takes into account the audience as being capable of an immediate grasp

8. "The enthymeme and the example must deal with what is for the most part capable of being otherwise" [1357a15]; "For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity" [1357a25].

9. "Of signs, one kind bears the same relation as the particular bears to the universal, the other the same as the universal bears to the particular. A necessary sign is an evidence, a non-necessary sign has no specific name" [1357b1-5]. "Suppose…it were said, 'The fact that he has a fever is a sign that he is ill'…Here we have the necessary kind of sign, the only kind that constitutes an evidence, since it is the only kind that, if true, is irrefutable. The other kind of sign, that which bears the relation of universal to particular, might be illustrated by saying, 'The fact that he breathes fast is a sign that he has a fever.' This argument also is refutable, even if true, since a man may breathe hard without having a fever" [1357b15-20].

10. A. Juthe, "Argument by Analogy," *Argumentation* 19 (2005): 3.

of underlying assumptions and of supplying the missing premises in the process of argumentation in which some inferences are made. Moreover, the use of examples and various rhetorical figures (especially an array of analogies) familiar to the audience is a solid foundation for persuading people, and so should be taken into account.[11] Thus, the question of to whom a particular speech is addressed is important in this context, as the audience, to a large extent, determines the argument's content and structure, and the premises used in constructing such arguments represent common opinions, i.e. *doxa*.[12]

It should be noted in this context that the use of rhetoric, at the time, was not limited to the sphere of public speech but extended to written treatises intended for the general public. In a sense, means of persuasion had various forms of expression, including both spoken and written communication.

Rhetoric, as has been indicated above, is an art of persuasion. Early church apologists were in the business of persuading their audiences of the truth of Christianity. I think, therefore, almost all third-century Christian theology/philosophy was rhetorical. Did third-century Christian discourse ever move to the so-called "scientific" ways of reasoning, at the time associated with the notion of demonstrative syllogism? This question is not an easy one to answer. But it is clear that reasoning, in the context of third-century Christian apologetics, was not based on necessary, immediate, and self-evident premises.[13] Moreover, there is no apparent evidence that any early Christian apologists aimed at running common opinions (taken as premises for their arguments) though the *logoi* in order to reduce them to necessary, immediate premises. The fact that the truth of Christian faith, at the time, was hardly thought of as capable of being deduced from a few simple premises partially explains this situation. Thus, the role of

---

11. Aristotle defined "example" in the following way: "The example is a kind of induction. Its relation to the proposition it supports is not that of part to whole, nor whole to part, nor whole to whole, but of part to part, or like to like. When two statements are of the same order, but one is more familiar than the other, the former is an example" [1357b27-30].

12. Cf. L.C. Montefusco, "Aristotle's Rhetoric: the Speaker and his Audience," in *Papers on Rhetoric II*, ed. Lucia C. Montefusco (Bologna: Clueb, 1999), 74ff.

13. The criteria for the premises of demonstrative syllogism presented in the *Posterior Analytics*: "Now if knowledge is such as we have assumed, demonstrative knowledge must proceed from the premises which are true, primary, immediate, better known than, prior to, and causative of the conclusion" [71b20-22].

"demonstration" in third-century Christian discourse was perhaps quite limited. An example of Aphrahat's so-called "demonstrations"[14] clearly shows that scriptural examples and various rhetorical tropes, rather than demonstrative syllogisms, laid the ground for the arguments made at the time.

The third-century Alexandrian tradition of rhetoric seemed largely founded upon the tradition of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. As we learn from R. Smith:

> It may be true that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was known in Alexandria—though no papyri attest to this—and that, on the other hand, no peripaticist in Alexandria authored a techne of rhetoric. Further, perhaps no rhetorical work as important as the *Rhetoric* was authored or even used there . . .[15]

The rhetorical manual of Theon, *Progymnasmata*, apparently followed the same tradition, though it lacked "the kind of originality or depth of understanding one finds in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*."[16] This manual, "despite any lack of imagination. . .constitutes the best theoretical treatise of any Alexandrian which has survived."[17] The conceptual link between Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the Alexandrian rhetorical curriculum here represented by Theon is important in this context. This same tradition can be traced in the works of Philo and later in that of the Catechetical School of Alexandria to which Origen belonged.

Classical culture entered Christian discourse from the time of Jesus and had immense implications for newly emerging Christian theology. The categorical taxonomies and rhetorical tropes of the time determined the structure of such discourse. Christian apologists successfully used many of the rhetorical devices. However, the use of certain rhetorical tools had significant implications for the newly constructed theological framework. Origen of Alexandria was one of the most learned Christians of the time, and, in a sense, gives us a perfect example of the elite appropriation of late antique philosophy and rhetoric into Christian discourse, thus perfectly

14. See E. Lisorkin, *Aphrahat's Demonstrations*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 2012).
15. W. R. Smith, *The Art of Rhetoric in Alexandria* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 136.
16. Smith, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 135.
17. Smith, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 136.

manifesting the intrinsic third-century Alexandria connection between Christian thought and classical heritage.

M. Duncan recently gave a very enlightening account of Origen's rhetoric on the basis of the studies of *Contra Celsum*. Duncan argued that Origen's philosophical rhetoric "combats Celsus's charge of deceptive Christian rhetoric by claiming that the Christian message is not rhetorical in nature and is therefore truthful, as well as self-evident."[18] Moreover, Duncan suggested that Origen's Jesus himself is essentially a rhetorician, i.e. "someone who knows the limitations of his audience and constructs an audience-based message."[19] Duncan also highlighted "a repeated emphasis on this 'accommodation to the capacity of the hearers' and 'what may be appropriately addressed to each individual according to his fundamental character'"[20] in Jesus' speaking. It followed that, despite some random passages in which Origen scorns rhetoric and rhetoricians, he nevertheless fully internalized rhetorical *techne*, to the extent of ascribing them to Jesus. Duncan also elaborated on the theme of Origen's allegory as the most vivid manifestation of rhetorical devices in Origen.

Thus, the significance of rhetoric for Origen's apologetic endeavour and exegetical efforts (i.e. commentaries, homilies, etc.) was quite extraordinary. Yet, it is also apparent to any reader of Origen that the use of rhetorical *techne* extended beyond the boundaries of his apologetics and homiletics. The Christology of Origen, i.e. his "science of Christ," is also characterized by multiple rhetorical utilities. As A. Cameron rightly pointed out:

> What we might call the "rhetoric" of early Christianity is not, then, rhetoric in the technical sense; rather, the word is used in its wider sense, denoting the manner and circumstances that promote persuasion.[21]

Its traces, therefore, can be found in various genera actualized in speeches and treatises that aimed at persuading the audience. Therefore, its relevance to Christology should not surprise. Yet, the philosophical novelty of Christological ideas required a special and very careful elucidation. The

18. M. Duncan, "The New Christian Rhetoric of Origen," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 46 (2013), 91.
19. Duncan, "The New Christian Rhetoric of Origen," 92.
20. Duncan, "The New Christian Rhetoric of Origen," 92–93.
21. A. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 20.

audience could not easily absorb them. Origen seemed to run some of his ideas through the *logoi*, thus attempting to discursively substantiate them and hence persuade his audience by giving them some sort of "demonstrative" account. Another way, in order to arrive at conclusions substantiating matters of Christology, i.e. the truth of the Incarnational narrative, was to assume the most foundational *doxa* in which the audience puts its faith as the premises. Here, again, Cameron's notes seem to grasp the very essence of the subject at stake, stating:

> Christian discourse too made its way in the wider world less by revolutionary novelty than by the procedure of working through the familiar, by appealing from the known to the unknown.[22]

Hence, he continues, the apologetic grip of early Christian thinkers and their discourses "were designed explicitly to persuade, and to explain and justify Christian belief and practice."[23] And indeed the best way of constructing such discourses, in order to conclude that which represents the core of Christian kerugma, was to assume the premises well known to the audience.

Origen's thought was, in a sense, formative for the development of Christology; he introduced various schemas and notions into Christian discourse. Origen's peculiar non-Incarnational Christology found in *On First Principles* is the natural outflow of his Platonism, which itself emerged from Plato's late metaphysics of *Nous* and of the rhetoric of the late Academy that used philosophical premises from Plato's metaphysics and cosmology for the sake of educating people. It should not surprise to learn that Origen composed *Periachon* (*On First Principles*) according to the rules and theorems of rhetoric[24] and that he "utilized the art of rhetorical logic to argue his first principles as well."[25]

The notion of the Incarnation, of God becoming human, was the agenda of the third-century apologists and necessitated a coherent account of how the immutable Word of God could experience self-emptying

---

22. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 25.

23. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 79.

24. R. M. Berchman, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 230.

25. Berchman, *From Philo to Origen*.

(*kenosis*) and assume human conditions.[26] The categorical taxonomies and rhetorical tropes were to be found to substantiate the truth of Christian faith discursively. Here, a critical appropriation of Plato's cosmology and of his late-period metaphysics was not unexpected. By that time, Platonism had canonized Plato's *Timaeus*, *Philebus*, and *Laws* as orthodox treatises on metaphysics, cosmology, and philosophical anthropology (and thus became a part of a standard curriculum in Alexandria).[27] However, the appropriation and creative rethinking of classical heritage was not meant to reinforce classical culture but to make a newly emerging religion comprehensible for contemporaries. Thus, in the scope of the third-century Alexandrian classroom, the role of *didaskalos* was to find proper taxonomies and tropes to persuade a largely pagan *intelligentsia* of the truth of Christian faith. It is from this perspective that Origen of Alexandria and his heritage should be analyzed. It is, in turn, this audience educated in the philosophical tradition of late Platonism that determined Origen's ways of reasoning and his choice of categorical taxonomies.

What is important to the scope of this article is not as much the technical means of persuasion and the rules of inference associated with Origen's discourse, as his reliance on the premises the audience commonly accepted in the process of persuading such an audience (i.e. mainly pagan at the time) in the truth of Christian faith. As R. Smith rightly points out, Origen's concern "with his immediate audience…is abundantly clear,"[28] even in the treatises that were not intended for the general public.[29] Hence, the philosophical currents used for the sake of persuading the audience were essential elements of Origen's discourse in general. It was the overriding power of commonplaces of third-century Alexandria that in many instances

---

26. In this case, we need to take into account that "self-emptying" is associated with change and mutation, and that the phrase "God becoming man" might be easily taken as signifying a mythical intervention of the divine into the realm of becoming, a way of thinking which is utterly alien to an educated Platonist as it fails to distinguish between the realms of being and becoming.

27. For instance, L.G. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Prometheus Trust, 2010) provides the reader with an insight into the educational curriculum of Platonism in Alexandria.

28. Smith, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 94.

29. Hence, "…he simply accommodated himself to the realities of the speaking situation" (Smith, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 94).

determined Origen's choices in his theology and homiletics. One of the most vivid manifestations of such power can be found in Origen's exegetical preaching, in which, according to K. Trojesen, "it is the presence of the hearer that dominates the hermeneutical process, not the historical past of the scriptural text."[30] The same thing is equally applicable to Origen's Christology.

It is quite obvious that Plato's philosophical heritage was formative for Origen, who allegedly studied under Ammonius Saccas, a prominent representative of third-century Alexandrian Platonism and also a teacher of Plotinus.[31] Thus, the philosophical rhetoric of the third century's Alexandrian Platonism constituted an intellectual horizon of Origen. One of the key notions of Platonist cosmology and metaphysics at the time was the notion of soul as the medium that bridges two dissimilar realms: on the one hand, the realm of *eide* or forms and of their eternal contemplator, *Nous*; on the other hand, the realm of created realities that are subject to change and mutation, realities that come-to-be and cease-to-exist.

The distinction between the two realms is well introduced in the commencing paragraphs of Plato's *Timaeus*:

> First then, in my judgment, we must make a distinction and ask, What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state, but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is [27d-28a].

This argument is followed by the identification of the world of becoming with created realities. Now "everything that becomes or is created must of necessity be created by some cause" [28a-b]. Thus, there is a single creative or efficient cause of the universe, the *demiugros* of the universe, and there is an unchangeable pattern after which the universe is fashioned.

It is *Nous* in Plato's late metaphysics that is the *diakekosmekos* of all things, the *demiurgos* of the universe. As Stephen Menn notes:

30. K. J. Trojesen, "Influence of Rhetoric on Origen's Old Testament Homilies," *Origeniana Sexta* (Leuven University Press, 1995), 15.

31. Cf. J. W. Trigg, *Origen: the Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church* (SCM Press LTD, 1983), 66ff.

> Nous is the orderer of the world. The god of the *Timaeus* is described as acting "for the best" [and] decides for this reason to bring the world "into order (*taxis*) out of disorder (*ataxia*)…" the gods of the *Timaeus* and *Statesman*, like the nous of the *Philebus*, *Phaedo*, and *Laws*, all introduce limits, and thus some degree of intelligibility, into a sensible totality, which without their causality would not reflect the intelligible forms in any orderly way.[32]

An unchangeable pattern is comprised of forms or *eide*, ontologically foundational, unchangeable, and apprehended by reason *archai* of the universe. Thus, "the world has been framed in the likeness of that which is apprehended by reason and mind and is unchangeable" [29b] and manifests order and intelligibility. The problem of how the creation is accomplished or how the two worlds are bridged is of primary importance. *Nous* is the orderer of the world, of the world of becoming that needs to be organized based on the eternal and unchangeable pattern; however, it is utterly impossible for the immutable *Nous* to interfere directly in the realm of sensible multitude in order to make it good, beautiful and rational. The *Timaeus* clearly affirms, "it is impossible for *Nous* to come-to-be in anything apart from soul" [30b3]. Thus, the soul, through its intellectual (noetic) phase, brings order to the realm of sensible particulars.

The soul is described in the *Timaeus* as an intermediate kind of being made by the *demiurgos* out of the following elements: from the eternal being "which is indivisible and unchangeable and from that kind of being which is distributed among bodies" [35a]. Thus, this type of being is composed of both.[33] Being made in this way, the soul mediates the work of *Nous* (as being

---

32. S. Menn, *Plato on God as Nous* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 8.
33. Cornford classified this complicated sentence (part of which I have just quoted) as one of the most obscure in the whole dialogue. He divided the argument into three parts and presented it in the following way: "The things of which he [the *demiurgos*] composed soul and the manner of its composition were as follows: (I) Between the indivisible Existence that is ever in the same state and the divisible Existence that becomes in bodies, he compounded a third form of Existence composed of both. (2) Again, in the case of Sameness and in that of Difference, he also on the same principle made a compound intermediate between that kind of them which is indivisible and the kind that is divisible in bodies. (3) Then, taking the three, he blended them all into a unity, forcing the nature of Difference, hard as it was to mingle, into union with Sameness, and mixing them together with Existence" (Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* [Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997], 59–60). Cornford marked off Proclus' interpretation of the passage regarding the composition of the world-soul as the most fitting.

akin to eternal and indivisible) and facilitates the process of bringing order and intelligibility into "this" worldly realm (to which it is not alien either).[34] The role of the noetic, i.e. intellectual phase of the soul, is important in this regard as it participates in *Nous*, through the participation possesses intelligibility, and consequently, introduces order and intelligibility into the corporeal motions.

It should be noted that individual souls could not perfectly manifest intelligibility and order on their own in the created universe and thus needed a certain coordinating principle. As Menn notes, "it is crucial for Plato that there should be a one-over-the many, a single supreme nous with the power to coordinate the actions of the many rational souls, and so to impose a single master plan on the universe."[35]

Plato's cosmological commitment can be well expressed in the words of Francis Cornford:

> Reason (*nous*)…as Plato says here and elsewhere, "cannot be present in anything apart from soul"; *if it is "present" in the body of the universe, in man's body, that body must be alive, endowed with soul*, which is defined in the *Laws* and the *Phaedrus* as the self-moving source of all motion.[36]

Thus, if *Nous*, the *demiurgos* of the universe, is to be present in the body, that body should be necessarily endowed with the soul, especially with its highest, noetic phase. However, it should be noted, that the meaning of "presence" is purely participational in this context. Thus, it is "present"

---

34. Menn rightly pointed out certain ambiguities of the creation account in the *Timaeus*. Thus, the medium of the soul is required for nous to reach bodily motions and make them orderly. Thus, the mythical intervention of Nous into the corporeal realities is denied and the "range of situation where nous must accomplish its work by violence" (Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, 50) is either significantly diminished or eliminated. However, "The criterion of non-violence does imply that the causal relations between nous, soul, and body cannot be the same on the ideal account as they are in the speech of Timaeus. In the first place, it seems that nous can act on bodies without violence only if its action is mediated by soul, and Plato seems to commit himself to accounting for the rationalization of bodies purely through the presence of a soul that participates in nous, moves itself in a rational way, and so imparts rational movement to bodies" (Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*). However, it appears that "Timaeus' speech falls short of this ideal" (Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*). Nevertheless, late Platonism unequivocally affirmed this principle of non-violence as one of the most foundational for the Platonist cosmology.
35. Menn, *Plato on God as Nous*, 24.
36. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, 39.

through the medium of the soul by being "participated-in" by the soul that, upon the event of descent and incarnation, becomes part of the world of becoming and through its intellectual phase organizes its own motions and the motions of other bodies in rational and orderly manner. This is the way *Nous* can be "present" in or to the body.

As J.N. Rowe rightly points out, Origen's cosmology is deeply rooted in the tradition of the *Timaeus* (i.e. of the commentaries to the *Timaeus*). Thus, he argues:

> When Origen describes the method of creation, he seems to regard the Son of God as performing the role of the Demiurge or Craftsman described in Plato's *Timaeus*, in so far as He implants form upon chaotic matter in accordance with the archetypes residing in Him as the Wisdom of God.[37]

It follows that the Word of God is the *demiurgos* of the *kosmos*, i.e. that which the ancients thought of as *Nous*.[38] This is one immediate ramification of Origen's appropriation of the metaphysics of the *Nous* to his theology. Yet, there is another Christological ramification of Origen's creative appropriation of the tradition associated with the theory of the Incarnation. It is deeply rooted in Christian faith in the Word of God as the savior of the world. This tradition of St. John affirmed the self-same Word through whom all things were made (John 1:3) as the subject of descent and self-emptying, who in the last days came down from heaven and was incarnate.[39] Origen's Christology represented one of the first coherent accounts of Christological discourse. The core of Origen's Christology was associated with the notion of God the Word "becoming" man. Origen indeed argued that it was the self-same God the Word who performed the demiurgic functions "in the beginning" and was the creator of the universe, and who also took part "in the last days" in the restoration of humanity. The point of concern for Origen was the mode of such "becoming" and "partaking in flesh," i.e. the theory of the Incarnation. How did Origen proceed?

Origen's Christology, as we have already noted, is rooted in his exegeses of the prologue of John, where it is said that *kai o Logos sarx egeneto*. This

---

37. J.N. Rowe, *Origen's Doctrine of Subordination. A Study in Origen' Christology* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1987), 9.
38. Cf. Trigg, *Origen*, 77ff.
39. Cf. the *ekthesis* of Nicaea.

passage, in harmony with the notion of *kenosis* found in the Pauline epistles, was a major stumbling block for the third-century apologists, as well as for the subsequent generations of Christian philosophers and rhetoricians. This phrase, if understood literally, would have necessarily led a third-century intellectual to the conclusion that Christianity attempted to justify the divine intervention into the realm of created realities, a notion utterly unthinkable at the time. Origen's predominantly pagan and philosophically trained audience could not accept the mythical intervention of the divine *Nous* into "this" realm.

It is important to keep in mind that the development of dogma does not take place in a vacuum. Thus, a discursive account of God becoming man was to a large extent determined by the philosophical clichés found in the popular manuals on Platonism circulating in Alexandria at the time.[40] Moreover, for the third-century Christian apologists, persuasion of the pagan contemporaries to the truth of Christian faith as found in Scripture (which facilitated the subsequent conversion of pagans into Christians) was certainly the most foundational goal. Thus, all interpretative efforts to make Scripture intelligible were subordinated to the primary evangelical mission to spread the word of God and convert the nations to Christianity. As a consequence, theologians seemed to feel free in choosing whatever means to persuade their audience. Thus, we may be unsurprised to find certain notions from Platonism in Origen's writings, for instance, the introduction of soul as a medium of incarnation. The metaphysical assumptions of Platonism were formative for the thought of third-century Alexandrians, and thus should have been premised upon any Christian discursive efforts at the time.

Now in the third century, the question to ask was how *Nous*/Logos is present in the flesh? What is the mode of presence? It is clear that, on the one hand, the Word of God is omnipresent, filling all things; on the other hand, the principle of divine omnipresence should not violate the divine transcendence. Thus, God is everywhere and nowhere. No one can catch God (either partially or as a whole) in the net. Therefore, while being present to the world of sensible particulars, God is not separated from self and is not divided. It is precisely in the same way that the late Platonists'

---

40. In particular those of Numenius of Apamia and perhaps Albinus, some of which are extant, having been preserved either in their original form or in the commentaries of later scholars.

Nous and its intellectual objects (*noeta*) are "present" in all things, things that manifest intelligible pattern in the realm of becoming. In this case, "all things" participate in the order and rationality of the intelligible realm, or in "wisdom and truth." This meaning of *Nous*/Logos' "being present-in" has, therefore, a clear participational significance. However, the notion of God becoming man in Christianity goes beyond a mere positing of the omnipresence of the Word of God.

This notion was rather meant to express that God is, in a sense, "present-in" the flesh; that God the Word is somehow in a mysterious way "made" visible; and that the Word, in a sense, "descended" from heaven and was incarnate. According to the classical account of the Incarnation, developed in the fourth to fifth centuries, the "descent" and "human conditions" are the real properties of the Word as being in *pros ta alla* (i.e. to the other) relation;[41] the Word of God displayed these features while emptying himself out in order to take care of his household, which was in disarray. Yet, as far as his divinity is concerned, i.e. in relation to self (*pros heauto*), he remained what he was, thus displaying just a different set of features that define his deity, immutability, ontological stability, etc.. We can thus conclude that the Word/*Nous*/Logos is simple, immutable, immovable, etc. as far as its inner structure is concerned. Yet, as far as it is in the *pros ta alla* relation, it exhibits a host of properties that it does not exhibit in relation to itself and which may appear as contradictory to the former set of properties. Hence, when the Word of God/Intellect/*Nous* reaches out to the world, it is other than itself and other than other while remaining same-self and being other than self in relation to itself. The *pros* qualifications explain the possibility for the Word of God to be in self and other and exhibit sameness and otherness, etc. in relation to self and other. This was the meaning of the "Word becoming human" that received a Christian ecumenical endorsement in the fifth century.

The "classical" account of the Incarnation as Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, etc. presented it took on the tradition of the commentaries on the *Parmenides*, following the theological core of the Athenian and Alexandrian Academies of the time. Origen chose a different pass and aimed at harmonizing the conception of the Incarnation with the tradition of the *Timaeus*. For him, the main accent of the theory of

---

41. Cf. C. Meinwald, *Plato's Parmenides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 46ff.

the Incarnation was an imposition of a mediating entity, which can happily resolve the *aporia* of the compresence of opposite properties attributed to the Word of God in Scripture. Thus, for instance, the Word is impassionate being immutable; yet, he suffered on the cross. Thus, he suffered and did not suffer. How is it possible to affirm both conflicting properties to the same entity?

It seems to me that Origen's reasoning on this matter was something like the following: since the divine intervention in the realm of becoming was utterly unthinkable at the time, the passage from the prologue of the Gospel of John the Divine could not be understood literarily or taken at face value. Moreover, even if we assume the possibility of such an intervention, we will posit the subject of the Incarnation as mutable, and thus deprive it of its divine properties, jeopardizing its divinity. On the other hand, a mere allegorical account of the Incarnation would not do the job either (though at times Origen used allegories to substantiate his case, i.e. those of a doctor and his patient, etc.).[42] Thus, the allegorical accounts of the Incarnation used by Origen clearly demonstrated that no essential theory could be mounted upon them. I side with N. Rowe who notes allegorical accounts of Origen exhibit certain inconsistencies in their exposition of the subject. At times, Origen presents the Word as the subject of descent and self-emptying, whereas some other passages "seem to indicate that in Origen's view the self-emptying of the Divine Word was only apparent."[43] Thus, from a doctrinal perspective, the use of analogical reasoning was simply insufficient for building up the theory of the Incarnation.[44] Can the same thought be extended to Origen's discourse in general?

There was a heated debate in the second half of the twentieth century over the meaning of descent in Origen, which aimed at testing a general coherence of Origen's thought along with its possible ramifications. This debate has not actualized in the offering of an account upon which scholars

---

42. See *Hom. in Cant*. II.3.

43. Rowe, *Origen's Doctrine of Subordination*, 119.

44. These inconsistencies lead Rowe to think, "here as much as anywhere that Origen reveals himself as not being a systematic theologian, because he does not really attempt to reconcile the disparate elements of His thinking" (Rowe, *Origen's Doctrine of Subordination*, 119*)*. Rowe argues against M. Harl's proposal that there existed in Origen's discourse primary and secondary hypotheses, the secondary ones in no way affecting the coherence of the entire discourse. Thus, Rowe admits a certain lack of coherence in Origen's thought.

could reach a mutual agreement. As J. W. Trigg and N. Rowe rightly indicate, an admission of the ideas of descent, self-emptying into theological discourse implied an admission of a subordinationist schema into theology, a novelty that was not appreciated by future generations of theologians, since it, in a sense, precipitated the fourth-century controversy over the nature of the Word.[45] However, as far as *On First Principles* is concerned, it seems Origen offers a not altogether incoherent account, the question of its orthodoxy being irrelevant in this case. So, we may ask, what had Origen to offer to solve the puzzle of the Incarnation?

In order to solve the puzzle, Origen, in *On First Principles*, following Plato's *Timaeus*, posits the soul as a medium between the two realms that gives way to *Nous* in the realm of becoming. The introduction of soul, thus, was premised on the assumption that *Nous* cannot "come-to-be" apart from the soul. The soul mediates between the two realms, as *Nous* cannot "come-to-be" or "descend" from one realm to other, apart from soul. What is the meaning of "descent" in this context? Does it mean that the Word of God had, in some way or another, mingled with the *sarx* and thus actually descended into the realm of becoming? The answer was negative. On the other hand, Origen does not go as far as to say that the "descent" is mere metaphor. It is a "real" thing. Yet, the meaning of "descent" in Origen's discourse seemed to have purely participational significance. Thus, *Nous/ Logos* can be "participated in" by the highest phase of the soul, its noetic phase. Through the participation, the soul acquires virtues and becomes an active mediator between the two realms, thus bringing order and rationality to the created *kosmos*. This is precisely the reasoning that one would find in Platonism's philosophical manuals.

However, Origen argues, because of the original sin of pre-existent souls (which resulted in the fall or descent to the lower realms) and the consequent corruption of their nature, their capacity to see or contemplate (*theorein*) *Nous*/Logos and the intelligible entities (*noeta*) was significantly diminished, as the eye of the soul became incapable of contemplating pure beings.[46] Consequently, it could not be just any soul. It was the pure,

---

45. Trigg, *Origen*, 98ff; Rowe, *Origen's Doctrine of Subordination*, 37ff.

46. Thus, "by some inclination towards evil these souls lose their wings [the image taken from Plato's *Phaedrus*] and come into bodies…" (Origen of Alexandria, *On First Principles*. ed. Henri De Lubac [Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1973], 73). However, "The only-begotten

uncorrupted soul of Jesus that had not experienced the original fall and was thus a perfect medium for *Nous*/Logos to restore order and rationality in the *kosmos* slipping into chaos.

In the second book of *On First Principles* we read the following passage:

> That soul of which Jesus said, "No man taketh from me my soul," clinging to God from the beginning of the creation and ever after in a union inseparable and indissoluble, as being the soul of the wisdom and word of God and of the truth and the true light, and receiving him wholly, and itself entering into his light and splendor, was made with him in a pre-eminent degree one spirit, just as the apostle promises to them whose duty it is to imitate Jesus, that "he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit." This soul, then, acting as a medium between God and the flesh (for it was not possible for the nature of God to mingle with a body apart from some medium), there is born, as we said, the God-man, the medium being that existence to whose nature it was not contrary to assume body. Yet neither, on the other hand, was it contrary to nature for that soul, being as it was a rational [noetic] existence, to receive God, into whom, as we said above, it had already completely entered by entering into the word and wisdom and truth.[47]

Origen seems to think that it is utterly impossible for *Nous*/Logos to "come-to-be" on its own, so to say, or, in other words, to "descend" from one realm to the other. However, even if he was convinced that the truth of Christianity is founded upon the kenotic account of the Incarnation, taken at its face value, he would have been incapable of convincing his fellow students that the notion of self-emptying of the deity is anything more that the product of primitive religious piety. One of the reasons for such an attitude was that the descent of *Nous*/Logos into the realm of sensible particulars necessarily makes *Nous* susceptible to mutation and change, and thus immediately deprives *Nous*/Logos of its divine status, re-classifying the

---

Son of God…since he is the invisible 'image' of the 'invisible' God, he granted invisibly to all rational creatures whatsoever a participation in himself, in such a way that each obtained a degree of participation proportionate to the loving affection with which he had clung to him. But…by reason of the faculty of free will, variety and diversity had taken hold of individual souls, so that one was attached to its author with a warmer and another with a feebler and weaker love…" (Origen, *On First Principles*, 110). Thus, the weakness and imperfection in participating capacities are attributed to the original sin.

47. Origen, *On First Principles*, 110.

Word of God as *ktisma*, a created being capable of change and mutation.[48] Nevertheless, the notion of *kenosis* or self-emptying of *Nous*/Logos was crucial for Christian discourse and had to be explained in one-way or another.[49]

Origen attempts to work out this issue by attributing *kenosis* to the pre-existent soul of Jesus rather than to *Nous*/Logos.[50] Though the text is quite ambiguous in this respect, what is clear is that the impossibility of self-emptying is affirmed for the immutable Logos, who is not a subject of change and alteration. Origen's insistence on the participational model supports such a conclusion. Thus, the attribution of *kenosis* to the pre-existent soul of Jesus can be easily inferred from the text. It is the pre-existing soul of Jesus that is the subject of the Incarnation. It is the soul of Jesus that experiences self-emptying and descends from heaven. As H. Crouzel rightly argues, "le Christ-homme existe donc des le préexistence, bien avant l'Incarnation; et jusqu'à elle il a déjà toute une histoire."[51] It is this pre-existing soul that is the subject of the Incarnation *per se*. Yet, the Incarnation is also attributed to the Word through the exchange of names.

There seems to be two entities that are at work during the "divine embodiment," namely, the soul of Jesus (the subject of self-emptying) and the Word of God. Both entities are, in a sense, self-subsisting (i.e. hypostatic), and thus represent two centres of operations (two centres of volition and rationality) in one Christ, though the reality of each entity "exists in one and the same person."[52] Thus, a kind of personal or prosopic union[53] is posited

---

48. The implications of divine mutability were fully explicated in the following century during the Arian crisis.

49. Origen notes elsewhere, "When, therefore, we consider these great and marvelous truths about the nature of the Son of God, we are lost in the deepest amazement that such a being, towering high above all, should have 'emptied himself' of his majestic condition and become man and dwelt among men" (Origen, *On First Principles*, 109).

50. Thus, "It was this soul which Origen in one passage declares to have emptied itself and to have taken the form of a servant" (Rowe, *Origen's Doctrine of Subordination*, 130). Hence, it is the soul of Jesus that is the proper subject of the Incarnation.

51. H. Crouzel, *Origène* (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1984), 252.

52. Origen, *On First Principles*, 109.

53. The word "personal" comes from the Latin *persona* and the Greek *prosopon*. Their original meaning was "mask" or "face," the Latin term also connoting the notion of amplification of the actor's voice on stage (*personare*—lit. to sing through). Both terms had a similar significance in the third century, namely an appearance, a mode of presentation, etc. One important

to unite two ontologically dissimilar self-subsisting entities. Yet, this union is established upon another union, that of the soul of Jesus with the Word of God, which pre-existed the descent and self-emptying of the Word. As A. Grillmeier rightly points out:

---

ramification of this application for a third-century thinker was that these notions were not ontologically grounded, pertaining to the mode of appearance rather than denoting being *per se*. We can better apprehend the difference by contrasting the notion of "nature" with that of appearance. Nature, in the mind of a third-century thinker, stood for the inner constitution of a thing, i.e. its very being.

Despite all intricacies associated with the notion of nature or being, we can also detect some commonsense applications of the word. For instance, the nature of a particular human being can be associated with animality, rationality, etc.; yet, it could also be connected with the social status or title of a concrete individual, indicating something lasting and distinguishing one human being from another. In this context, "this" particular human being is a king. And kingship is his "nature." Yet, when he puts on the soldier's robe, he appears in the *prosopon* of a soldier. For someone not familiar with the real "nature" of this human being, he is indeed a soldier. But this is a temporary appearance, which won't last for long. A king is still king even when he puts on a different "personality" or *prosopon*. Similarly, God is God by nature; God retains his proper nature even when he appears as a human being. The Antiochian thinkers very often utilized these imageries.

An immediate offshoot of this illustration is that *prosopon* is not what a thing is. Further, it is something that can be deceitful. Thus, if a kind appears in king's robes (his proper vestment), his appearance corresponds well with his "being"; whereas, his appearance in soldier's robes does not.

Another application of the terms person or *prosopon* has to do with the notion of unity. A good example here is a family in which two beings create a relational unity while retaining their subsistence. Hence, the two are united, but the unity does not affect their beings, rather indicates a certain relation that they enter. Hence, here the notion of relationality is accentuated.

The fifth-century Christological development made certain amendments to the notion of person/*prosopon*. The council of Chalcedon equated the notion of person with that of hypostasis, a more ontologically grounded notion, which was used extensively in the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century. Hence, from then on the notion of person or *prosopon* acquired a new significance, i.e. standing for a particular being that instantiates its nature/*ousia* (a general set of properties). Hence, the hypostasis or person of Christ is a particular instantiation of divine nature; yet, a peculiar feature of the person of Christ is that his hypostasis/person/*prosopon* also instantiates human nature by allowing it to subsist in himself (his own hypostasis).

As far, however, as Origen's use of the notion is concerned, it is purely relational, having to do with an appearance or mode of presentation rather than with being or nature.

> Unity in Christ is achieved through the mediacy of the soul of Christ between *sarx* and Logos, which the Platonic dualism of Origen is otherwise unable to unite. This soul, however, has already been united from eternity with the divine Logos in complete understanding and love.[54]

And once again, the union spoken of in both cases is relational, so to say, since "the two are directly conjoined through direct vision in love,"[55] while differing in nature, as it were. Hence, they appear to be one, since they share "direct vision in love" (whatever this vision may consist in), while in reality retaining their subsistence.

Later on in Book II, Chapter VI of *On First Principles*, Origen proposed an account of Christology in which the notion of double subjectivity in Christ is even more intensified. Here, the personal subject of Christ is a man, an incarnate soul, and an emphasis is made on the perfect participation of the Word of God (or in wisdom and truth) and acquisition of virtues. Thus:

> It was on this account also that *the man* became Christ, for he obtained this lot by reason of his goodness…(II.VI.4)…it was the perfection of his love and the sincerity of his true affection which gained for him this inseparable unity with God, so that the taking up of his soul was neither accidental nor the result of personal preference, but was a privilege conferred upon it as a reward for its virtues…As a reward for its love, therefore, it is anointed with the "oil of gladness," that is the soul with the word of God is made Christ…[56]

The last phrase of the paragraph, "it was appropriate that he who had never been separated from the Only-begotten should be called by the name of the Only-begotten and glorified together with him,"[57] clearly delineates the two hypostatic entities, two subjects in Christ. The meaning of separation here is again participational.

In Platonism, the higher principle of the composite of soul and body constitutes the principle of human identity; thus, it is soul that constitutes the identity of a human being; moreover, it is the highest phase of the soul, its

---

54. A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*. Vol. I (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 146.
55. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 146.
56. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 111.
57. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 112–113.

noetic phase, that is the ultimate seat of personal identity.[58] This principle of human identity has been unequivocally stated in the *Alcibiades* [129e 5ff.] of Plato, and since then became a commonplace in Platonist philosophical rhetoric. This is also Origen's understanding of the subject. Therefore, it is the soul of Jesus that primarily constitutes the identity of Christ. The purity of this soul gave it a special capacity for creating a conjuncture with the Word of God through its noetic phase, and thus, for becoming Christ. However, in the union, two self-subsisting realities, as it were, are present: the one of the man Jesus (of the incarnate soul of Jesus) and the other of the Word of God, the Second Hypostasis of the Trinity. Their relation seems to be the relation of participation. One can clearly see in this account an emerging "theology of two sons," which Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia later introduced (though the reason for Diodore's introduction of double-subjectivity in Christ was different, emerging out of the post-Arian theological development).[59]

To sum up, Origen's philosophical rhetoric, represented by various sets of assumptions and premises and used for the purposes of persuasion of Alexandrian audiences, brought a major change in the Christological thought of the third to fourth centuries and was responsible for the introduction of what can be designated a non-Incarnational Christology (in which the subject of self-emptying and Incarnation is someone other than the Word of God), as well as of the notion of double subjectivity in Christ. Origen thus evoked the participational model of Plato and denied the *kenosis* of the Word of God. This *kenosis* is attributed to the soul of Jesus.

It is worthwhile noting that, in Christological discourse, the unity or duality of subject/s in Christ is normally tested against the use of the so-called *communicatio idiomatum*. A discourse characterized by the use of such *communicatio* posits one subject of attributions and actions in Christ. On the contrary, the absence of the principle of *communicatio idiomatum* is considered to be a sign of the affirmation of double subjectivity in Christ,

---

58. Cf. Rowe, *Origen's Doctrine of Subordination*, 131: "The highest element in human nature is in fact called by Origen indifferently *pneuma* or *nous*."

59. A very lucid explanation of the subject matter can be found in Francis Sullivan's *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Romae: Apud Aedes Universitatis Gregorianae, 1956), where the post-Arian Christological development is presented as definitive for the development of Theodore's account of Christ.

where two ontologically dissimilar entities (natures) manifest themselves in two centres of operations in Christ; hence, attributes and actions of each nature are predicated of their proper personal subjects (Word and Jesus). What, then, can we find in Origen? The following passage gives us some clues on the subject under consideration:

> It was therefore right that this soul, either because it was wholly in the Son of God, or because it received the Son of God wholly into itself, should itself be called, along with that flesh which it has taken, the Son of God and the power of God, Christ and the wisdom of God; and on the other hand that the Son of God, 'through whom all things were created,' should be termed Jesus and the Son of man. Moreover, the Son of God is said to have died, in virtue of that nature which could certainly admit death, while he of whom it is proclaimed that 'he shall come in the glory of the Father with the holy angels', is called the Son of man. And for this reason, throughout the whole scripture, while the divine nature is spoken of in human terms the human nature is in its turn adorned with marks that belong to the divine prerogative.[60]

G.W. Butterworth classifies this passage as an example of *communicatio idiomatum*. It should be noted, however, that *communicatio idiomatum* can mean either an exchange of attributes/properties or an exchange of names—the notion of exchange of properties entails an exchange of names, whereas the notion of exchange of names does not necessarily contain the idea of mutual interpenetration of properties. Unfortunately, the Latin expression does not distinguish between these meanings and leaves them indiscriminate;[61] this, in turn, causes some confusion about the precise meaning of what is "communicated." A Greek *idion*, from which *idioma* is derived, signifies "property"; however, in Latin, *idioma* also means name. Thus, this expression has a dual significance and can be used equivocally. However, it also hints that the use of *communicatio idiomatum* may not necessarily function as a suitable test for the conception of unity of personal subject of Christ. What is the import of this distinction in our case?

It seems to me that the difference in meaning, in this context, is associated with different conceptions of the union of natures in Christ. Thus, a conception of prosopic union, in which two ontologically dissimilar entities (in Origen's case, divine and psychic) create a union of appearance,

---

60. Origen, *On First Principles*, 111.
61. The Greek term was *antidosis idiomaton*.

affirms *communicatio* or exchange of names in the single *prosopon*; hence, two self-subsisting entities give the names of their properties to the single *prosopon*, which can be thus designated by both sets of names, or by their combination. However, an ontologically grounded conception of hypostatic or natural union entails *communicatio* or mutual exchange of properties, in which case two natures joined in one hypostasis exchange their properties; hence, the human nature (without ceasing to be human) which is mutable and mortal acquires the property of immutability and becomes immortal (which is a theological justification of the notion of *theiosis* or *theopoiesis*, "deification"). In the case of Origen's use of *communicatio idiomatum*, the "exchange" concerns predication and names; no traces of mutual interpenetration of properties of two dissimilar natures can be found in this passage.

There seems to be no necessity for the exchange of properties, as the soul of Jesus was already pure and incorrupt, its nature being unsusceptible to sin, etc.[62] Thus, it was already immutable. Taking into account that "the nature of his soul was the same as that of all souls,"[63] each soul seems to have an equal capacity to acquire virtues and become a christ through the participation in the Word of God. This is an exemplarist model of salvation. The sinless and immutable soul of Jesus makes the invisible Word of God manifest to the other souls that fell and lost their capacity for seeing God. It enables them once more to contemplate God in Christ, and thus, following the same pattern, creates a conjuncture of the souls with the Word of God, in order to permit their re-ascent.

---

62. The following quote I think supports well my conclusion: "But if the above argument, that there exists in Christ a rational soul, should seem to anyone to constitute a difficulty, on the ground that…souls are by their nature capable of good and evil, we shall resolve the difficulty in the following manner…since the ability to choose good and evil is within the immediate reach of all, this soul which belongs to Christ so chose to love righteousness as to cling to it unchangeably and inseparably in accordance with the immensity of its love; the result being that by firmness of purpose, immensity of affection and an inextinguishable warmth of love all susceptibility to change or alteration was destroyed, and what formerly depended upon the will was by the influence of long custom changed into nature. Thus we must believe that there did exist in Christ a human and rational soul, and yet not suppose that it had any susceptibility to or possibility of sin" (Origen, *On First Principles*, 112–113).
63. Origen, *On First Principles*, 112.

It is of no surprise that Origen concludes the paragraph quoted above by saying, "for to this more than to anything else can the passage of Scripture be applied, '[t]hey shall both be in one flesh, and they are no longer two, but one flesh.' For the Word of God is to be thought of as being more 'in one flesh' with his soul than a man is with his wife,"[64] which sounds very much like the prosopic union of God the Word with "those with whom he is pleased by reason of their zealous devotion to Him,"[65] which, in the following century, Theodore of Mopsuestia propagated. Thus, two self-subsisting entities create a prosopic union (in which two hypostatic realities share one external manifestation or a form of appearance) that is similar to the one of wife and husband.

In light of what has been said so far, I should argue that diverging accounts of the scholars of our time regarding Origen's essential rationale for the introduction of the soul of Jesus as a medium between the Word and flesh and as the subject of descent, indeed, in one way or another explain the "why" of Origen's imposition of the soul of Jesus. The references to the inner logic of Origen's Logos Christology, his mid-Platonist mysticism of the ascent of the soul to God, his Trinitarian schema, anthropological concerns, etc. do not appear superficial, as far as the subject at stake is concerned. Thus, the question why Origen chose to construct his account of the Incarnation through the imposition of the soul of Jesus may have more than one legitimate answer; and Origen's diverging *theologoumena* can perhaps accommodate all of them. Yet, it seems to me that an explicit heterodoxy of the account of the Incarnation offered in *On First Principles* makes the "why" of Origen's imposition really pressing. One way to proceed will be, once again, to accentuate Origen's Platonism. Hence, "Origen spoke above all as a Platonist in his explanation of the mediacy of the soul of Christ."[66] Yet, one may also question why Origen chose the tradition of the *Timaues* (i.e. of the middle-Platonist commentaries on the *Timaeus*) and not that of, say, the *Parmenides*. Moreover, the extent of the utility of the *Timaeus* for Origen seems not to extend beyond the commonplace of the mediacy of the soul. Thus, perhaps the reference to "Origen's Platonism" without qualifications does not have its intended explanatory value. It is

---

64. Origen, *On First Principles*, 111.
65. Sullivan, *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 245.
66. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 147.

the conjecture of this article, thus, that Origen's account of the Incarnation, as it was presented in *On First Principles,* came about as the result of his creative appropriation of Platonism's philosophical rhetoric for the sake of persuading his audience of the truth of God's descent and self-emptying. Yet, Origen was quite flexible in terms of his philosophical commitments and could pick and choose whatever means were available at the time to fulfill his apologetic ends.

Finally, it should be noted that Origen's appropriation of Platonism's philosophical rhetoric had immense theological implications; Origen, in a sense, opened a Pandora's box of double subjectivity in Christ (probably unintentionally). It took at least three centuries for Christian thinkers to work out the issue of double subjectivity in Christ. The ecumenically accepted notion of Christ being "one and the same" as the Word of God hypostatically united with flesh endowed with rational soul was developed to a large degree as a response to the Christological schema that Origen of Alexandria introduced. The model of Origen, nevertheless, was successfully purposed to evangelical missionary persuasion by the theologians of the third and fourth centuries, until the time it became unacceptable to subsequent generations of theologians due to its theological flaws.