
The Doctrine of the Ascension in Irenaeus and Origen^{*}

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The doctrine of the ascension of Jesus Christ is little discussed today, though the ascent of man in general is still a topic of interest in some quarters. There are various reasons for this, including no doubt a certain sense of embarrassment about a doctrine that appears to belong to an outmoded cosmology, not to mention a triumphalist form of Christianity. But of course it was not always so. "By common consent, great is the mystery of godliness," says 1 Timothy 3:16:

He was made known in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
beheld by angels,
preached among the nations
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

Ανελημφοθη εν δοξη—this was, and in the divine liturgy still is, a statement of faith and a cause for great celebration.

We have not the space here to discuss the background to the doctrine of the ascension in the leading theologians of the New Testament, specifically in Paul and Luke, in Hebrews and in John. Nor indeed can we discuss it properly even in the two early Christian thinkers I have chosen as interlocutors, namely, Irenaeus and Origen. For these two men, who by way of their competing methods can be said to have established theology as a systematic discipline, have each

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woven a doctrine of the ascension into the very fabric of their thought. To get at that doctrine we must therefore try to say rather more than is prudent about their respective theological constructs. That is, we must look at the whole as well as the part.

Irenaeus was bishop of Lyons in the latter part of the second century. Succeeding Pothinus in 177 after the latter's martyrdom, he went on in spite of heavy opposition to organize the further evangelism of France, to become a theological and liturgical mediator among the bishops throughout the empire, and to mount a comprehensive counter-attack on the docetic and gnostic heresies which were beginning to make serious incursions into the church. His *Refutation and Subversion of Knowledge Falsely So-called*, commonly known as *Against Heresies*, continues to reward our close attention. I am of the opinion that few of his interpreters, ancient or modern, actually manage to keep up with this "provincial" bishop theologically.

Origen, of course, was no provincial. Living in Alexandria he was trained in the school of Ammonius Saccas (said to have been a lapsed Christian but better known as a pioneer of the new Platonism). He took over Clement's theological mission to the city's cultured classes when Clement fled under persecution. Origen was a man of prodigious intellect and learning whom *the* theologian, Gregory Nazianzen, speaking for theologians universally, once called "the whetstone of us all." One of his most famous works, *On First Principles*, remains a basic textbook in theology. I myself would contend that if we understand Irenaeus and Origen, and the alternative theological models they offer, we are in a position to understand the whole history of Christian thought, but I can hardly hope to mount a proper defence of that claim here. What I want to do is to show how Irenaeus and Origen offer two very different approaches to the doctrine of the ascension, and how in doing so they direct theological thought down two very different paths. Obviously it will be necessary to use broad brushstrokes, so to speak, but I argue these things in more detail elsewhere.¹

Irenaeus: Ascension "in the flesh"

That Irenaeus understood the doctrine of the ascension to be in some sense a decisive one in his struggle with gnosticism, and with dualist modes of thought generally, is apparent from a number of key passages in *Adversus Haereses*. In 1.10.1, where he lays out the arsenal of orthodoxy—that is, the baptismal confession or rule of faith, with its trinitarian structure and christological focus—he makes a pointed reference to "the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved

Jesus Christ our Lord, and his manifestation from heaven in the glory of his Father to gather all things into one.”² Again, in 5.36.3, where in the final paragraph of his work he sums up the Christian mysteries he has been propounding, there is reference to our subject, or rather to its ontological implications. He speaks of the marvel of the fact that the Word “should descend to the creature,” and that “the creature should contain the Word, and ascend to him, passing beyond the angels, and be made after the image and likeness of God.” And in between these two passages we may mention one other in particular, where the bishop takes up in earnest his dispute with the heretics on this very issue of the ascension, a dispute which brings into sharp focus their competing christologies and competing world views:

But there are some who say that Jesus was merely a receptacle of Christ, upon whom the Christ, as a dove, descended from above, and that when he had declared the unnameable Father he entered into the Pleroma in an incomprehensible and invisible manner... (*Against Heresies* 3.16.1).

After spelling out the variations on this theme to be found among the various gnostic sects, he continues by offering “to take into account the entire mind of the apostles regarding our Lord Jesus Christ” in order to show how mistaken these sects are. Their attempt to separate between Jesus and the Christ must fail, he argues, for the scriptures teach but one Jesus Christ who descended and ascended.

From each of these passages we may identify an important aspect of Irenaeus’s thinking about the ascension, and indeed a major plank in his anti-gnostic platform. What is more, we can gain some insight into his constructive alternative. For Irenaeus, like Origen, was never content with a merely defensive posture.

The first passage, 1.10, introduces his stress on the involvement of the whole person, body and soul, in the scheme of salvation. The qualifying phrase “in the flesh” belongs to the tradition as represented by Acts 1:9, where Jesus is said to have been taken up “before their very eyes” (as the *New International Version* rightly translates βλεπόντων αὐτῶν ἐπὶ ᾧ). I am not alone in thinking that literary and exegetical indicators point to the fact that Luke intends his account of the departure to be taken more or less at face value, though how we are to interpret the act itself is another question. Perhaps we might do so in the manner suggested by Luke 24:51, and by the entire book of Hebrews, by seeing it as a liturgical one.³ That is not what concerns us here, however. What does concern us is that Irenaeus is quite deliberate in emphasizing this feature of the tradi-

tion, unlike Justin before him (who shared his view) and Origen after him (who did not). His reason for doing so hardly needs explanation, but a few general comments on gnosticism may help to clarify things a little for the uninitiated.

A primary feature of the various heresies with which the bishop was confronted—heresies which differed more in detail than in basic principle—was the pessimistic worldview to which they gave expression, and their denial of the sort of continuity between creation and redemption which belonged, *mutatis mutandis*, to mainstream Jewish and to Christian faith. This pessimism arose from a non-covenantal view of creation, which naturally entailed a denial of Christianity's Jewish roots, the Jewish scriptures, and indeed the Jewish God.⁴ It also arose from a dislocation of the doctrine of the fall, which was transferred from the sphere of human history into that of divine history. The creaturely world, with all its ills, was thought to stem from a disruption in God. Arguably that is the standard Gentile view, though today we may be more familiar with it as a denial, or a strict privatization, of the fall. At all events, Irenaeus would have none of it. The consequence of such a move is to set redemption at odds with creation, the new covenant at odds with the old, God at odds with God.⁵ Redemption inevitably becomes redemption *from* creation not of it, important dimensions of our humanity—especially the somatic dimensions—being exempted and excluded, handed over to the devil.

Now the issue was to be joined christologically, if at all, and for Irenaeus that meant by reference to Jesus-history, that is, to his descent and ascent in the flesh. Without this qualifying phrase the Christian scheme must capitulate to the gnostic, or so it seemed to him. Here was the guarantee that creation and redemption are continuous, not discontinuous, being the work of but one God.⁶ Here was the basis for the expectation that "this same Jesus" (Acts 1:11) will eventually be manifested from heaven to the glory of God the Father, reconfirming the goodness of creation by gathering all things into the harmony for which they were originally designed. For in the salvation and triumph of this particular human being Christians see the triumph of the whole world of particulars which the creator once blessed, and declared good.⁷

This is the place to turn to our second passage, 3.16ff., in which Irenaeus seeks to protect Christian optimism by systematically rejecting the heretics' mythological treatment of the ascension, and what we may call their *alter christus*. Again, let me explain with some background information.

Hellenic theology has always had a bias against the particular; otherwise put, a preference for the one over the many. Gnosticism represents an intense form of that bias, teaching as it does the eventual demise of the particular. For the gnostics ascension was by definition a movement away from the world of temporal and material existence, a separation of the spiritual from the unspiritual, a return of the divine to itself after the disruption already mentioned. They had no time for talk of a human redeemer, since humanity as we know it was irredeemable. Certainly the Logos itself could never be made known in the flesh, as the church taught; much less could a man of flesh ascend into heaven. The descending and ascending saviour was not a particular man, then, but rather the primal or universal man, the idea of Man.⁸ In the gnostic redemption stories, which were told not as history but as an antidote to history, the saviour was not Jesus himself but an invisible emissary of the "unnameable Father" (who was not the creator of the world). For this emissary the Nazarene was merely a passive receptacle, an instrument taken up for tutorial purposes only, a medium exhausted and discarded at the cross.

These "perverse mythologists," as Irenaeus called them, were so intent on tearing apart the creation to liberate what is divine in man that they were willing to tear apart the creative Word himself. In rejecting Jesus of Nazareth as that Word, in looking for a saviour *behind* Jesus who descended and ascended only in an invisible and incomprehensible way—in deliberately substituting myth for history—they were searching for a false unity, a unity of negation not of affirmation. They were also performing, theologically, a re-crucifixion of our Lord.⁹ This sundering of the vertical from the horizontal, the eternal from the temporal, the Christ from the Nazarene, was necessary, of course, if they were to avoid the challenge posed to their worldview by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Indeed, it was necessary if they were to avoid the challenge posed by the cross on Golgotha. For the cross was the Word's gracious but devastating answer to the accusation that the problem with man lies in fact with God.¹⁰

Now if we follow Irenaeus in his rejection of a mythological treatment of Christ's descending and ascending—this is a live issue in the age of Schleiermacher and Hegel, or of Bultmann and Tillich—we must qualify what has already been said about the relation between creation and redemption. The bishop did recognize a certain discontinuity between these two works of God. It was not that taught by the gnostics, of course, who saw in redemption the reversal of creation. Rather it was the discontinuity introduced by pride and disobedience, the discontinuity generated by the fact that humankind has become

disoriented, that it is "turned backwards" and away from God. It was the discontinuity therefore of the cross, and of what I sometimes call the ascension-parousia differential: that is, of the present *absence* of Jesus, an absence that bespeaks a coming judgment as well as a coming salvation. In the final chapters of his work Irenaeus makes clear that the implications of the cross for the history of human society are far from exhausted. They do not lie behind us but ahead of us. Irenaeus knows no general ascent of man.

That said, our third passage (5.36) points us more positively to what we can only describe as an *ascension anthropology*, which is one of the most interesting and fundamental features of Irenaeus thought. Gustaf Wingren (1959, ix) is quite right to remind us that if we want to understand what the bishop is really concerned with in *Against Heresies* we must ask especially what concept of man he has,¹¹ pursuing this much further than the simple observation that a human being is a somatic as well as a spiritual creature. Yet Wingren is somewhat remiss, I think, in not expounding that anthropology by way of recourse to the doctrine of the ascension, which gives it substance and direction. Once more I will elaborate briefly, though not quite so briefly.

Irenaeus's main aim as a theologian is to mount an urgent protest against the "homicidal" nature of the gnostic heresies (3.16.8). Though it comes to a head in their Christology that tendency is already evident—dare I make the point in this seemingly anachronistic way?—in their sexist cosmogonies, which are briefly laid out by Irenaeus in book one. In their despair about the human situation, about the burdens of man's finitude, suffering and death, the gnostics suggested that the source and stuff of this world of ours was something which God had rejected. According to certain of their myths, it was originally the product of a hopeless and unrequited female passion, the shapeless discharge of a womb without any seed having been implanted. Or to change the analogy somewhat, without leaving the realm of the gnostic imagination, the temporal-material world we know, and the humanity that now belongs to us, is something like an unwanted pregnancy, a pregnancy which must lead to an abortion. The aim of the would-be gnostic is to anticipate that abortion and to seek a higher and better creation, by receiving the seed of the secret $\gamma\omega\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$ said to have been passed on through Jesus.¹²

Against all of this Irenaeus sets his own patient and ultimately exuberant vision of humanity, a vision which can be articulated in terms of the gestation, birth and growth of a child:

[We] should exercise ourselves in the investigation of the mystery and administration of the living God, and should increase in the love of him who has done, and still does, so great things for us; but never should fall from the belief...that this Being alone is truly God and Father, who both formed this world, fashioned man, and bestowed the faculty of increase on his own creation, and called him upwards from lesser things to those greater ones which are in his own presence, just as he brings an infant which has been conceived in the womb into the light of the sun....¹³

Man is still in the making, in other words. It is not his *un*making that is wanted, but his finishing; not the liberation of the spirit from the body sought by the gnostics, but the life of communion opened up in Christ. The problem with man is not the stuff of which he is made, or the inadequacy of the one who made him, but that from the very beginning he has been pushing away the Word and the Spirit, the hands of God through which he receives his formation. Adam himself was a provisional creature with a provisional sort of existence, an infant so to speak. Having received but the beginning of his creation, he was merely "a creature of today."¹⁴ This condition the fall made over into something it was not, namely, the law of death, for it put the becoming of man into reverse. A true human being, one who is more than a creature of today, did not appear in our history until the hands of God laid hold of our fallen race to raise us up into the presence of the Father. Only then did a man appear who would yield to God a proper increase. For "the wages of Christ are human beings," says Irenaeus.¹⁵

In spite of everything which threatens the child's health and viability, then—the deception of the evil one, the deformity of sin, the turning away backwards with all its negative consequences in life and in death—there is to be no abortion here! Rather the Father's loving plans for it are to be realized through the gracious descent of his Son, who became what we are (not merely a man, but a man subject to death) so that we might become what he is, people in union and communion with God (*Against Heresies* 5, preface). And what are those plans? Taking his cue from Jesus' own ascension and from its pentecostal consequences, which he interpreted as the true fulfillment of the fruitfulness motif in Genesis 1 and 2, Irenaeus argued that it belongs to humanity in Christ to receive increase of being by means of a perpetual advance towards God. In the resurrection, man shall no longer be *curvatus in se*, to use the Reformers' expression. "Always holding fresh converse with God," he shall grow up but never grow old. He shall come to maturity but never to stagnation, for the inexhaustible self-giving of God is such that he shall "always have some-

thing in which to advance." Flourishing thus, and causing the rest of creation to flourish, he shall "forget to die."

Parenthetically, I want to observe that what Irenaeus is saying here cannot be articulated adequately by the aphorism often associated with him, *viz.*, God became man that man might become God. That aphorism may represent well enough the teaching of his contemporary, Clement, who lived in far-off Alexandria—indeed, it is he who first said it, or something like it¹⁶—but it comes too near to the static, self-cancelling symmetry of the gnostic scheme. For Irenaeus, God becomes man that men and women might become the image of God, "gods" in that sense, and this image is never anything other or less concrete than what is already revealed to us in the person of Jesus, who ascended bodily into the Father's presence, there to receive "the increase of God" in the form of the church. This has implications for the new creation. For since there are to be real human beings, says the bishop, "so must there also be a real establishment (*plantationem*), that they vanish not away among non-existent things, but progress among those which have an actual existence" (*Against Heresies* 5.36.1).

Just here, of course, we might easily be enticed into a lengthy discussion about Irenaeus's conception of the real. By now it will be obvious that he does not share the Hellenic view that the real is that which is not compromised by temporal and material particularity, by change, motion, activity, etc. The real does not mean the ideal. Man's eternal life is not timeless but authentically temporal, not immaterial but properly material. Flesh and blood, he says, may not inherit the kingdom of God, but through a sort of *conversio* may *be* inherited by it; and he points out that those who do not believe this should certainly cease offering the eucharist!¹⁷ But what is it that actually makes humans real? What is it that authenticates their existence, allowing them to break out of the confines both of their childhood and of their fallen nature, to emerge into the freedom of "the upwards call of God in Christ Jesus"? What is it that allows them to become truly the image of God, and stewards of a new creation? The answer to that question is not parenthetical but altogether basic to Irenaeus's vision of man.

It is too little noticed about Irenaeus's anthropology that, just because it takes its bearings from what happens with Jesus, it is profoundly pneumatological. The image of God is a bodily creature with a rational soul, to whom God gives time and space to think and move and grow. But more than that the image is the human creature in receipt of the Holy Spirit. "Where the Spirit of God is, there is a living

man." This is the meaning of deification: God becomes man that man might receive the Spirit, through whom we come alive, and "see and hear and speak." Our *ἀνοδος* or *ascensus* or promotion into God is precisely our investiture with the Spirit.¹⁸

In other words, the making of man is very much a two-handed affair. When the Word of God descends to take up his stance with the wounded, the sick, the dying and the dead, he does so in order to prevent their abortion by applying the medicine of the Spirit. The Spirit is what humans need to be human. So the Word, incarnate in a fallen world, "accustoms" the Spirit to dwell even with the likes of us. When therefore upon his homecoming to the Father he pours forth that same Spirit, he pours forth one who is ready and willing to liberate us, to free us from our corruption and death into eternal life. That freedom is just what the gnostic abortionists would defraud us of, however. By trying to split apart Jesus and the Word, they miss the whole point of his descending and ascending, and "set aside the Spirit altogether." That is, by dispensing with the human Jesus they conflate Christology and pneumatology, rendering the latter redundant. Theirs is a one-handed theology, built around a synthetic spirit-Christ; as such it is a poison that disagrees with our human constitution (*Against Heresies* 3.17).

With this background we ought really to go on to talk about ascending man as *ecclesial* man, strengthened "by joints and bands" that he might effectively receive the liberty of the Spirit, which he is otherwise not fit to bear. It is only in that way that we can continue to expound the concepts of growth and fruitfulness which are at the heart of Irenaeus's anthropological vision. For the movement of our ascent is a communal and a eucharistic one. We ascend by the Spirit to communion with the Son—who in the kingdom will be seen everywhere in his incarnate glory, "according as they who see him shall be worthy"—and with the Son to the Father, who in due course will bless his maturing family with the privileges of a freedom as yet unimaginable. By the same token we ought also to speak of the way in which ecclesial man is called, since he is not yet in glory, to take up the same generous stance as his crucified Lord, descending in loving solidarity with the world before ascending in the resurrection. But there is space only to make this one analytical remark: that the Irenaeian concept of man is dependent on a particular concept of God. Humanity is ecclesial in nature because God is trinitarian in nature.¹⁹

What have we found, then, in the Irenaeian doctrine of ascension in the flesh? That it looks optimistically for the salvation of the whole person and, philosophically speaking, represents the triumph of the

particular. That it is the enemy of all gnostic mythologizing, which by abstracting from the actual history of Jesus of Nazareth launches an attack on the integrity of the God-man, and so on man *qua* man and on God *qua* creator. That it has a pneumatological dimension, leading through (not beyond!) the triumph of the particular to an ontology that is communal and ecclesial, because trinitarian. Does all of this not suggest a most interesting exposition of 1 Timothy 3:16, that is, of το της ευσεβειας μυστηριον?

Origen: Ascension as "a movement of the mind"

Origen shared Irenaeus's antipathy to gnosticism, but breathed a different and drier air theologically. On the one hand, that northern bishop, though respectful enough of Plato for example, did not hesitate to make plain that the gnostic teachers were, at the end of the day, but plagiarizers of their more respectable philosophical forebears, who were themselves ignorant of the God revealed in Jesus Christ.²⁰ On the other hand, as J. W. Trigg (1983, 9) observes, "we have Origen, more than any other single person, to thank that Athens and Jerusalem belong equally to our philosophical heritage." He speaks of the conviction that Origen acquired through Ammonius Saccas "that Platonism was the best antidote to Gnosticism" (9). Harnack (1896, 2/332) suggests, in fact, that the more philosophically sophisticated Alexandrian freed Christian theology from its earlier polemical aim. But it would be more accurate to say that he brought it back into the service of theodicy. That is the context in which we need to explore his doctrine of the ascension.

Now I want to say (*pace* John Hick) that Irenaeus himself had no theodicy to speak of, or rather none but the gospel itself, which sets the good news of the recapitulation of all things in Christ over against the evils of our world.²¹ The gnostics, for their part, had quite notoriously tried to deal with the problem of evil by sacrificing God the creator in favour of God the redeemer. What is more, their pessimism also led them to embrace a form of fatalism or determinism. This they carried to the extreme of dividing men and women into three types, the spiritual, the soulish, and the fleshly.²² Here there *was* no gospel; one's destiny was already settled according to one's type. Irenaeus rejected all of this emphatically. For him there were only two kinds of people, those who perversely and quite inexplicably persist in pushing away God's two hands, and those who do not.

Like Irenaeus, Origen also repudiated both the Marcionite and the determinist aspects of gnosticism. Unlike Irenaeus, however, he had learned from Clement a certain respect for the higher forms of

gnosticism represented by Basilides and Valentinus. From Clement and Ammonius he had also learned to embrace the methods and insights of Philo and of middle Platonism. Moreover, having taken more seriously than Platonism the problem of evil, he attempted to construct a theodicy of his own. This required some significant changes to the received tradition, as we shall see, and to the doctrine of the ascension not least.

De Principiis begins with its own account of the rule of faith. Its initial statements about God and Jesus are worth repeating in spite of one or two irregularities. "The kind of doctrines which are believed in plain terms through the apostolic teaching are the following," says Origen:

First, that God is one, who created and set in order all things, and who, when nothing existed, caused the universe to be. He is God from the first creation and foundation of the world, the God of all righteous men.... This just and good God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, himself gave the law, the prophets and the gospels, and he is the God both of the apostles and also of the Old and New Testaments.

Then again: Christ Jesus, he who came to earth, was begotten of the Father before every created thing.²³ And after he had ministered to the Father in the foundation of all things...in these last times he emptied himself and was made man, was made flesh, although he was God; and being made man, he still remained what he was, namely, God.... And this Jesus Christ was born and suffered in truth and not merely in appearance, and truly died our common death. Moreover he truly rose from the dead, and after the resurrection companied with his disciples and was then taken up into heaven.

Taking a page from the gnostics, however, he contends that to these plain doctrines those able to receive wisdom may add and expound certain "other doctrines" only hinted at by the apostles.²⁴ In fact, he goes on to develop a distinction between the gospel that is for the simple and the gospel that is for the wise. This, he maintains, is the same gospel in two forms: a temporal form, focusing on the *λογος ενσαρκος*; and an eternal form, leading upwards to the *λογος ασαρκος*. The distinction of gospel from gospel, and doctrine from doctrine, prepares us for the changes of which I have spoken.²⁵ We may examine those that are salient by touching quickly, in reverse order, on the subjects already raised in section one.

Origen's view of man does not begin with the history of Jesus but with a speculative history of the world, and it does not so much arrive at an ecclesial vision as presuppose one. For Origen the true church is

the sum total of all rational spirits, who existed originally in the undifferentiated bliss of a pure contemplation of God. Satiated with God, they gradually fell away as their ardour cooled. Human life as we know it comprises a certain spectrum, so to speak, of that eternal church in its fallen mode of existence, after many prior worlds through which it has arrived at its current state. In the Christian community people recognize this by striving through discipleship of the saviour to return to their heavenly origin.

This general framework elaborates the central claim of Origen's theodicy—that the inequalities and apparently unjust sufferings which characterize our present lives can be accounted for by appealing to sins freely committed in a previous aeon. The very fact that the world is the way it is, that we ourselves are the way we are—creatures of flesh and blood who by nature are subject to passions and to all sorts of misery—is the consequence of a freedom that has been abused. By turning away from our primordial unity with God we have brought on ourselves, each in an appropriate form and to an appropriate degree, the tragedy of temporal and material existence. It is into this situation that the gospel speaks, first in its temporal form and then in its eternal.²⁶

Having posited a whole progression of descending or deteriorating aeons as the best way to explain the problematic conditions of our own, Origen goes on to posit a similar progression of ascending or unifying aeons, in which (through God's eternal faithfulness) the damage of the fall will be undone and the original condition of the church restored. His too is an ascension anthropology, then, or rather an anthropology of descending and ascending through a long course of worlds. But what precisely is the footing for the movement from descent to ascent? That is where Jesus comes in. Origen's theodicy may be logically independent of the story of Jesus, but that story is nonetheless the hinge on which it turns. The upwards progress that is now open to rational creatures depends, he says, upon the redeeming work of the Logos, who acts through the free incarnation of a uniquely unfallen soul, the soul of Jesus. When Jesus' work is done—the teaching complete, the example laid down, every seducing and enslaving power subjugated by the cross—he returns triumphantly to heaven, having marked out a path for other souls to follow. From there he continues his instruction to worthy souls.

The ascension of Jesus can hardly be ascension in the flesh, however; that would be a contradiction in terms. Given his prior commitments, Origen is bound to interpret it much more narrowly than

Irenaeus as a movement of the mind. In his influential work *On Prayer* he offers the following guidance:

And let us seek to understand in a mystical sense the words at the end of the Gospel according to John, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father," thinking of the ascension of the Son to the Father in a manner more befitting his divinity, with sanctified perspicuity, as an ascension of the mind rather than of the body.²⁷

In other words, the apostolic tradition is set aside through an appeal to spiritual exegesis. His "sanctified perspicuity" does not see in the ascension the receiving up of the whole human Jesus into the bosom of the Father. It sees instead the detachment of his rational soul from this grosser realm, its liberation from a world far removed from its proper abode.

Like the gnostics, then, if more gently, Origen drives a wedge between Jesus of Nazareth and the heavenly Christ with his doctrine of the ascension. For Irenaeus, as for Paul, the exalted one is still God's incarnate wisdom, intrinsically related to the world of man. But for Origen he becomes (in a notable emendation of Colossians 1:15) the *invisible* image of the invisible God, in whom we are to imagine nothing corporeal in the ordinary sense of the word.²⁸ If we ourselves hope to regain the heavenly realms and our lost enjoyment of God, we must look past the λογος ενσαρκος to the λογος ασαρκος; we must penetrate through and beyond the Jesus of history to the cosmic Christ, in whom the fullness of the divine mystery is revealed. The humanity of Christ, as Augustine would later put it, is necessary only for our weakness.²⁹ The doctrine of the ascension invites us to transcend that weakness. It points us towards things that cannot be grasped κατά σαρκα.

This brings us back around (completing the loosely chiasmic structure of our comparison) to the question about the goodness of creation, and to Origen's understanding of the relation between creation and redemption. The Alexandrian theologian did not adopt the view either of Irenaeus or of the gnostics, but took a middle course. Plainly he was prepared to concede to the latter a connection between evil and the material world. Indeed he opposed gnosticism with a gnostic device, for in his own theodicy he too relocated the fall, which he alleged to have preceded the present creation. Our world was admittedly not the world of God's original design, nor would it have come into existence at all but for sin. However—and here was no small disagreement—the sin in question did not consist in its faulty generation. Origen wanted no truck with that impiety, which conveniently

shifts attention from our own failings to those of the gods. Rather he upheld belief in the world as the benign handiwork of "the just and good God" by pointing to its tutorial value: the material creation is a school for souls, belonging to a process of cosmic reform. It has purgatorial purposes. Though not exactly good in and of itself, it is at least good for us.

Now in its utilitarianism this *via media* obviously falls well short of a biblical endorsement of creation, just as Origen's reform school imagery, if we may call it that, lacks the richness and warmth of the adoption imagery of Irenaeus. For Bible and bishop creation *is* good in itself, the incarnation is not temporary but permanent, and humans learn with Christ how to *be* human. Through the gift of the Spirit they themselves become the first vintage of the new creation. But according to Origen the wine of Christ "takes one out of the human" (Crouzel 1989, 129). How could it be otherwise where the whole sphere of human existence is regarded as the consequence of sin, where the process and pluriformity of the material world already signal to us our defection from God? Redemption as the Alexandrian describes it may not be the reversal of creation as such, but it is still the reversal of *this* creation. When it has worked its remedial purpose the world of man will have disappeared. For the end will be like the beginning, once every spirit has returned safely to the realm of pure rational being from its temporal sojourn.³⁰

The scheme to which Origen has pegged his theodicy is thus both more and less optimistic than that of the Christian tradition generally: more, because faith in God's infinite patience, and in the ultimate unity and stability of rational being, points him in the direction of a universal ἀποκαταστασις; less, because this ἀποκαταστασις negates all but the spiritual aspect of the universe. Which is to say, Origen subverts both the continuity and the discontinuity crucial to the older construct. By giving a sub-lapsarian account of our world he conflates creation with redemption. On the one hand, this blunts the sharp discontinuity between the old creation and the new. The impact of the cross, and something of its offence, is absorbed by that vast loop of descending and ascending aeons. On the other hand, the real proximity and profound continuity between old and new that is implied by bodily resurrection is also lost to incrementalism. Ascension, as a soteriological movement, really means the slow stripping away of creaturely forms and occupations. The eucharistic tension which controls the eschatology of Irenaeus therefore gives way in Origen to a familiar circle, by which is traced, on a cosmological scale, the descent and ascent of the soul.³¹

From the outset of *De Principiis* it is clear that nothing is to interrupt this introspective exercise! How else shall we explain the astonishing fact that in his account of the rule of faith Origen quietly elides the parousia, and after mentioning the ascension turns directly to the third article?³² This is the place to notice that Origen is the real source of the notion of the general ascent of man, which was later taken up by Lessing, Kant, Hegel, Strauss, Darwin, and a goodly host of adventurous modern theologians. Few among the latter, however, appear to have thought very hard about where this adventure leads, with the honourable exception of Teilhard de Chardin perhaps.³³ More disconcerting, from my point of view, is that most appear quite comfortable with the condition on which it depends, namely, the decapitation of Jesus-history. But then that decapitation, which is already decreed by the shift from a doctrine of ascension in the flesh to a doctrine of ascension of the mind, is the only sure way to free theology from its "polemical" aim. And with that polemical remark I must bring my paper to its own rather abrupt end.

Conclusion

Whatever else one might wish to say about these two men and their treatment of the ascension, certain things seem clear enough. First, that the doctrine in question helps to form the substructure of their respective theologies. Second, that their doctrines of the ascension are radically different and, at some levels, incompatible. Third, that these differences reflect a difference in world view and hence in theological method. Fourth, that it is necessary, then, either to choose between them or to generate another alternative altogether, if that indeed is possible.

What is finally at stake in the choice, should we be forced to make it? Irenaeus and Origen were right to place the doctrine of the ascension close to the heart of the Christian mystery. That there are many vital matters of faith which cannot be settled without settling the issue between them—ascension in the flesh or ascension of the mind—demonstrates that. We have touched only on a few of these, but the most crucial is surely what Kierkegaard, Barth and Bonhoeffer have identified as the "Who?" question. Who is the risen and ascended Lord? To this question is attached a question about the kind of liberty which the saviour comes to bring—is it a freedom *from* the human or *for* the human?—which obviously has deep implications for spirituality and for Christian ethics.

Had Irenaeus lived to read Origen, I suspect he would have confronted him, humbly and respectfully, with the same option he laid

before the gnostics: Follow "this same Jesus" into new life, or follow your λογος ασαρκος into the void; for you cannot follow both at once. Is that not what the church was saying to the followers of Origen, albeit in somewhat sharper tones, when the fifth council condemned his teachings with the fifteen anathemas?³⁴ Yet many of its leading scholars have to this day retained a preference for the Alexandrian's approach. It seems to me that the contemporary church may need in its own way to reconsider the matter, and make its decision equally plain.

Endnotes

1. See Farrow 1995, and especially *Ascension and ecclesia* (T&T Clark/ Eerdmans, forthcoming), from which much of the present material is adapted.
2. και την ενσαρκον εις τους ουρανους αναληψιν του ηγαπημενου χριστου Ιησου του κυριου ημων και την εκ των ουρανων εν τη δοξη του Πατρος παρουσιαν αυτου επι το ανακεφαλαιωσασθαι τα παντα / *et in carne in caelos ascensionem dilecti Iesu Christi Domini nostri et de caelis in gloria Patris aduentum eius ad recapitulanda universa*. Translations, with occasional minor alterations, are from Roberts 1987.
3. A cryptic remark of the Venerable Bede (*Hom.* 2.9; cf. Davies 1958, 158–59) points to the ascension as the ground of all present liturgical acts, by comparing the sacraments left to the church by Christ to the mantle left to Elisha by Elijah. That is a valid move, I think, so long as we keep in view the gift of the Spirit as that which the mantle/sacraments represent and invoke; see 2 Kings 2:9ff.
4. Thus already Marcion. We need not be afraid to use the anachronistic term "gnosticism" in order to indicate the main tendencies of a broad and disparate movement, the history of which remains a subject for debate (see, for example, Logan 1996).
5. This is ironic in view of the fact that the gnostic denial of the goodness of creation was meant to preserve the unity of God, an aim in which they failed miserably, as Irenaeus delighted to point out. For his part he moved a long way towards a trinitarian conception of unity in thinking together his doctrines of God and of creation.
6. In the words of one of the bishop's favourite passages, "for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Cor. 8:6, NIV).

7. To disagree about the cause of the dissolution of creation is to disagree also about the nature of its unity; so with respect to both God *and* the world Irenaeus had some rethinking to do vis-à-vis the basic tenets of Hellenism (cf. *Against Heresies* 2.14.4).

8. Which is to say, he could not be known at all except insofar as he was known in and as oneself, precisely through dying to one's creaturely particularity. The redeemer was a myth and the myth a redeemer that enabled one to make one's own ascent to God.

9. "Learn, then, ye foolish men, that Jesus who suffered for us, and who dwelt among us, is himself the Word of God," protests Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.9.3).

10. That is, that it has its roots, as they suggested, in a degeneration of the divine Pleroma. Note well that in gnosticism to dispense with bodily ascent is all of a piece with rejecting bodily descent—namely, the cross—and these do in fact belong together. There is no gracious word in the crucifixion if it is not accompanied by that of the resurrection and ascension of "this same Jesus." Likewise there is no gracious word of welcome in Jesus' ascension without the cross as its prologue.

11. In some circles it may be necessary to point out that the term "man," as used by the fathers, is not a sexist term but an inclusive one. I retain it for three reasons: first, because I do not think it right to alter texts; second, out of respect for the demands of rhetoric; third, because there is no term in English other than "man" or "woman" which at the same time provides both a collective and an individual meaning—an indispensable versatility—and of these two only the former is widely regarded as being inclusive.

12. "Well may their Mother bewail them," says Irenaeus (3.25.6), "as capable of conceiving and inventing such things; for they have worthily uttered this falsehood against themselves, that their Mother is beyond the Pleroma, that is, beyond the knowledge of God; and that their entire multitude became a shapeless and crude abortion: for it apprehends nothing of the truth; it falls into void and darkness.... We do not misrepresent these points, but they do themselves confirm, they do themselves teach, they do glory in them; they imagine a lofty thing about their Mother, whom they represent as having been begotten without a father, that is, without God, a female from a female, that is, corruption from error!"

13. *Against Heresies* 2.28.1. In the same spirit, "loving them better than they seem to love themselves," Irenaeus prays that his opponents may "relinquish the shadow" in which they have wrapped themselves, letting Christ enlighten them and "be formed in them"; that they may be joined to the church and "cease from blaspheming their creator, who is both God alone, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (3.25.7). Yet this is a choice which they must make, for (as we will see) he does not share their rigid predestinarianism.

14. Cf. *Against Heresies* 2.25.3, 4.38–39.

15. *Against Heresies* 4.21.3. His descending and ascending “established fallen man,” rendering him “receptive of the perfect Father” (2.20.3). “For never at any time did Adam escape the hands of God, to whom the Father speaking, said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ And for this reason in the last times...his hands formed a living man, in order that Adam might be created after the image and likeness of God” (5.1.3). In Christ, then, we are those “whose creation is still being carried out” (4.39.2).

16. To be more precise, “the Logos of God became man so that you might learn from a man how a man may become God” (*Prot.* 1.84).

17. Cf. *Against Heresies* 5.9–10, 4.18.

18. See 5.6ff. Athanasius, Maximus, and other influential theologians make the same point, but none do so with the same thoroughness or conviction.

19. Cf. *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 5ff., 99–100.

20. That included “Pythagorus, and Plato, and Aristotle, and the rest,” whose images, he noted, those who “style themselves Gnostics” sometimes honoured (together with images of Jesus, etc.) in the manner of the Gentiles; see *Against Heresies* 1.25.6, 2.14.

21. See Hick 1985, 201ff.; cf. Surin 1986, 15ff.

22. There could be no salvation for people in the last of these categories, since the saviour did not descend and ascend in the flesh. In other words, the gnostic gospel was not, like that of Irenaeus, a eucharistic one. It was not about a *conversio* of the whole person or about a *communio* with the saints, but about “the return of like to like,” which meant the ascent of the spiritual and the descent (destruction) of the fleshly, with the soulish entering into a kind of limbo.

23. Probably modified by Rufinus in an orthodox direction; see the note at 1.preface.4 in G. Butterworth’s translation of *On First Principles* (Origen 1973), from which quotations will be taken.

24. *Princ.* 1.preface.3. Some of these appear already to have found their way into his version of the *regula fidei*, which continues with comments on the Spirit, on the “rational soul” and its free will, on other spiritual entities or powers, on the beginning and end of the world, on the twofold sense of scripture, and on corporeal and incorporeal bodies.

25. Cf. *Princ.* 3.6.8, 4.3.13 (and the editorial notes), and Jerome, *Ep. ad Avitum* 12.

26. It is not really my purpose to debate the success or failure of Origen’s theodicy, theodicy being an enterprise of which I am in general deeply suspicious. But obviously whatever success there is comes at a heavy price: not only is the material creation downgraded, but the disadvantaged must be viewed as the *deserving* disadvantaged, disadvantaged for their own good. The implications for social ethics and pastoral care are not encouraging.

27. *ἡγτινα αναβασιν νοὺς μαλλον αναβαινει σωματος* (*Euche* 23.2). Both Clement and Origen adopted the current Platonist understanding of ascent as a process of purification, illumination, and vision (i.e., *γνωσις*).

28. Cf. *Princ.* 1.2, 2.6. We are no longer to think of Jesus “as being confined within those narrow limits in which he once lived for our sakes.” Rather he “is everywhere and runs throughout all things” (2.11.6). Origen likes to refer to him as the Angel of Great Counsel; see Trigg (1991).

29. *Sermo* 264. “What the Gnostics merely represented as a more or less valuable appearance—namely, the historical work of Christ—was to Origen no appearance but truth. But he did not view it as *the* truth, and in this he agrees with the Gnostics, but as *a* truth, beyond which lies a higher” (Harnack 1896, 2/368–69). In other words, in his *human* nature our Teacher is incidental in the way Socrates and Plato insist that a teacher must be, though the case is otherwise where his divinity is concerned.

30. “The weakness of Origen’s system, considered as a whole, lies in its assumption that the entire cosmic process is a mistake, due to the misuse of freewill” (Butterworth, lviii, in Origen 1973). And *pace* M. Edwards (1995) this assumption dictates that ascension means precisely a stripping away of bodily existence (cf. *Cels.* 2.62, *Princ.* 1.6, 2.3, 3.6, etc.).

31. Cf. *Timaeus* 41–42. Origen is portrayed as having the more open and progressive world view by those who stress Irenaeus’s primitive, restorationist side. But who really is the mere restorationist? Is it not Origen? Irenaeus’s doctrine of recapitulation is ultimately forward-looking; it is Origen who looks backwards with his doctrine of an *ἀποκαταστασις*, who indeed seeks a state “to which nothing new can ever be added” (3.6.9). As for his laudable defence of free will, arguably it comes apart at the seams under the conflicting pressures of Pelagianism and universalism.

32. See 1.pref.4ff. Origen does refer to the parousia in 4.3.13, but only in connection with a distinction between the temporal and eternal gospels. Harnack (1896, 2/369 n.1) rightly suggests that an “aversion to the early Christian eschatology” was native to his whole outlook.

33. “As the years go by, Lord, I come to see more and more clearly, in myself and in those around me, that the great secret preoccupation of modern man is much less to battle for possession of the world than to find a means of escaping from it. The anguish of feeling that one is not merely spatially but ontologically imprisoned in the cosmic bubble; the anxious search for an issue to, or more exactly a focal point for, the evolutionary process; these are the price we must pay for the growth of planetary consciousness; these are the dimly-recognized burdens which weigh down the souls of christian and gentile alike in the world of today” (Teilhard de Chardin 1965, 138–39; cf. Lyons 1982).

34. “If anyone shall say that it was not the divine Logos made man...[who] descended into hell and ascended into heaven, but shall pretend that it is the *Νοὺς* which has done this, that *Νοὺς* of which they say (in an impious fash-

ion) that he is Christ properly so-called, and that he is become so by the knowledge of the Monad: let him be anathema.

"If anyone shall say that after the resurrection the body of the Lord was ethereal, taking the form of a sphere, and that such shall be the bodies of all after the resurrection; and that after the Lord himself shall have rejected his true body and after the others who rise shall have rejected theirs, the nature of their bodies shall be annihilated: let him be anathema.

"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 *νοῦς*, let him be anathema" (Anathemas 9–11, Schaff and Wace 1900, 14/316ff).

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