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Arthur O. Roberts

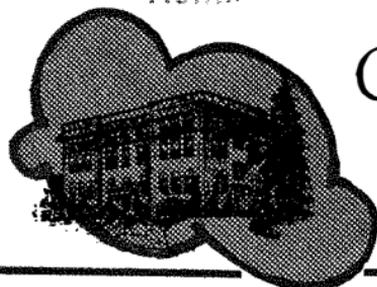
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"And so be faithful every one to God . . . that ye may answer God's love and mercy to you, as obedient children of the Most High . . . that God may be glorified in you, and you kept faithful witnesses for him and valiant for the Truth on earth."

George Fox, Journal, 1656

Origen: Early Christian Scholar

BY ARTHUR O. ROBERTS, PH. D.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

The Christian scholar faces a problem concerning the relationship between Christian devotion and scholarly devotion. How shall the questing mind and the receiving spirit find mutual strength? The very term implies a conviction that there is no conflict at the highest level; consequently he is not satisfied with the three possible alternatives: disdain for the adjective, "Christian", disdain for the noun, "scholar," and acceptance of a double standard for truth. The Christian scholar recognizes that pride in human achievement leads to moral and, eventually, to intellectual relativism. But if pride in intellectual achievement is odious, so is pride in ignorance. Today, after a period of the separation of faith and reason (and, often, the divorce), men are again seeking to ascertain the relevance of Christianity to truth and reason.

The ablest scholar in the early Christian era to face this issue was Origen. Prior to the fourth century, when Constan-

tine the Great embraced Christianity and made it the religion of the Empire, the Christian community sought to demonstrate its faith and to declare its truths to the pagan world. In the first task the blood of the martyrs was spilled; in the second, the words of the Apologists were spelled out. Origen belongs to both groups, but especially to the latter, for he sought to lift Christianity to the searching light of philosophy and there to vindicate its integrity.

Origen was born in Alexandria, 185 A.D., to a Greek father, Leonides, and a Jewish mother, in whose marriage Greek culture and Hebrew piety met and were fused by the Christian faith. Leonides drilled his son daily in the Scriptures, finding him "eager and diligent," and he saw too, that the boy learned his mathematics, grammar and rhetoric. The young lad harassed his father with much inquiry into the subtle meanings of Scripture, to the extent that he was rebuked and told not to "search beyond his age." But inwardly Leonides thanked God to be worthy of such a son.

So encouraged, Origen leaped ahead in spiritual insight and in intellectual acumen. He attended Clement's catechetical school in Alexandria, second largest city of the Empire. The lighthouse which guarded the eastern point of Pharos island not only beckoned the ships which plied their commerce between Europe and Arabia, but it also symbolized the culture which flourished on the site of Alexander's naval base. It was here that Judaism had met Hellenism, that the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures) had been produced, that Philo had attempted to harmonize the Old Testament with the best in Plato through the elaborate use of the allegorical method. In this wide crossroads of the Greco-Roman world—a city of some 300,000 free citizens, plus innumerable slaves—great political, religious, and philosophical ideas flourished. Here Cleopatra had flirted with Julius Caesar and had gained the power which the Ptolemies had once possessed. Here, too, she mingled love and politics with Antony; and, failing to win successor Octavian, had committed suicide.

be hateful. In patience he wore out his opposers and left a heritage of love and diligence to his admiring students. Purity of life and devotion to study mark him as a real Christian teacher.

His educational method was to study the potentialities of his students and to guide them accordingly. He taught them that language is designed not to furnish material for display but to express truth accurately, and that logic is not a tool for securing a plausible success but for testing beliefs rigorously. To his students he recommended the writings of all philosophers and poets, except those of the atheists (to deny God appeared tantamount to denying reason and truth). The Incarnation of God in Christ was for him the key to knowledge. "I wish to ask you," he wrote to his pupil, Gregory (Thaumaturgus), "to extract from the philosophy of the Greeks what may serve as a . . . preparation for Christianity . . ." With Origen, as with Augustine, and many contemporary thinkers, philosophy and theology are essentially one. To think truly about life as a whole is to think God's ways, illuminated by Christ, the Word of God.

The beloved teacher was caught by the Decian persecution, in 249 A.D. At Tyre he was tortured; and in 254 A.D., health broken, he died, away from the great cities of his labours, but not away from the love of those whom he had taught. He had run his course in life, not in death, as noble an "athlete for God" as any in the early church. No greater tribute can be paid him than that given by his pupil, Gregory, in whom Origen had incited a love for the Holy Word:

This love induced me to give up country and friends, the aims which I had proposed to myself, the study of law of which I was proud. I had one passion, philosophy, and the godlike man who directed me in pursuit of it.

(Bibliographical note: Eusebuus, **Church History** is the source for the life of Origen. Murray's **Dictionary of Christian Biography** is helpful in narrating and evaluating the events of his life. His writings may be found in the **Ante-Nicene Fathers**; selections also being included in the **Library of Christian Classics, Vol. II.**)

to be the truth, agreeably to His own declaration, "I am the truth," derive the knowledge which incites men to a good and happy life from no other source than from the very words and teachings of Christ.

As his fame increased he served as a consultant on doctrinal matters, visiting the "ancient church" at Rome, churches in Arabia, Palestine, Phoenicia, Achaia, and Macedonia. Persecution plagued his steps but somehow never took him. Serving efficiently as a sort of ancient day "apostle to the sceptics" (like C. S. Lewis, in the twentieth century) he was yet criticized severely from within. That he was a eunuch was one cause for distrust; in addition, some of his teachings were suspected as heresy. His thinking had led him to speculate concerning the possible redemption of the inhabitants of the stars (shades of science-fiction!) and the final restoration of all men and of the fallen angels. Some of these things were musings which enemies enlarged beyond their worth. On the doctrine of the divinity of Christ and the inspiration of the Scriptures Origen stood with the most orthodox.

Spending many years in Palestine, he wrote prodigiously (the number of his works is variously estimated at between two to six thousand). Many sermons were dictated, and at times he used seven amanuenses, who worked in shifts, along with copyists and girls "skilled in elegant writing." One of his early works was the *Hexapla*, a parallel Old Testament which had a column for the Hebrew, one for a Greek transliteration and the remaining four for various versions. Other works include *De Principiis*, which shows a blend of historical and allegorical interpretation; *Against Celsus*, a masterpiece of Christian apology; and numerous doctrinal treatises, homilies, and admonitions, such as the *Stromata*, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, and *On Prayer*.

Although his speculations brought him eventually under ecclesiastical condemnation, his insights are valued by orthodox and herodox alike. But as he himself admits in his work against Celsus, the Christian life is the best witness against an accusing paganism. He might be wrong; he would never

During the years of Origen's childhood the Christians lived in comparative peace. But Septimius Severus became alienated and announced an edict against Jew and Christian in the early years of the third century. A number of Alexandrian Christians had to prove their prowess as "athletes of God." Among these was Leonides. When the sixteen year old son saw his own father led away to death, he, too, wanted to thus honor Christ. Failing to dissuade him, his mother at last hid all his clothes and compelled him to remain home until the wave of fury had subsided. Tradition declares that the boy did succeed in writing a little note to his father: "Take heed not to change your mind on our account."

In the year which followed, Origen studied more Greek literature and assumed the burden of support for his mother and six younger brothers, aided in his own study by a benefactor who gave him "grant-in-aid." At eighteen he assumed leadership of the catechetical school. During this period he determined to *live* the sacrifice to Christ: to avoid comfort and ostentation seemed to him the least he could do to match the sacrifice of his father and his friends. He sold valuable ancient books to meet his meager expenses. Rigidly ascetic, he fasted frequently, slept on a mat on the ground, walked barefoot and had but one coat to wear. In order to have more time to study Scripture, he curtailed his sleep to the bare subsistence level. In a final act of mis-placed zeal, rationalized in terms of loyalty to Matthew 19:12, he emasculated himself. This deed did not meet with general Christian approval, nor, later, of his own, but it demonstrates the awful force of his earnest desire to serve God with abandon.

While teaching, he also studied Greek philosophy under Ammonius Saccas, "father of Neo-Platonism", and teacher of Plotinus. Origen wished to understand this high religio-philosophical system, the non-redemptive mysticism of which hindered (and still does) students in their understanding of the Christian faith. He feared no system of thought for he believed that all truth came through Christ and that it could stand the tests of logic. These words preface his *De Principiis*:

All who believe and are assured that grace and truth were obtained through Jesus Christ, and who know Christ

CALENDAR

- December 23—4:00 p. m., Christmas Vacation Begins.
January 3—8:00 a. m., Classes Resume.
13—Faculty Seminar.
21—End of First Semester.
24—8:00 a. m., Registration for Second Semester.
25—8:00 a. m., Classes for Second Semester Convene.
28—Formal All-School Party.
31—Senior Comprehensive Examinations Begin.
February 4—End of Senior Comprehensive Examinations.
10-11—Major Dramatic Production.
11—Quarterly Meeting of George Fox College Board of Trustees.
13—3:00 p. m., Sixth Annual Gospel Quartet Festival.
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