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The Characteristics of Greek Religion According to Origen's *Contra Celsum*

Aspasia Kaloudi

Historical framework

The rapid increase in the number of Christian communities and the influence which they were acquiring created stresses in the foundations of the Roman Empire, leading to the taking of direct measures against the disturbing phenomenon with persecutions and other extreme actions.¹ The future of Christianity was connected to that of the Roman Empire: its spreading was mainly limited to within the borders of the Roman state. The Christian religion was considered outlandish, regarded as the cause of the problems in traditional life; it also forced the prevalent beliefs to reconsider their fundamental ways of thinking.²

Roman society had been strongly influenced by Greek culture. At the time in question, the population's ways of thought and action were contributing factors to the fundamental principle of the official religion – worshipping the emperor. The citizens worshipped other deities as well. The devotion and the adoration of the emperor's person strengthened the hold of the regime.³

Particular interest was taken in religious syncretism.⁴ Frequent movements of the population provided an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and the dissemination of new religious and philosophical traditions. To choose a sacramental form of worship or some philosophical trend was considered reasonable and justified: there was a general turmoil in the Graeco-Roman world and people felt a religious insecurity.⁵ The inability to modify and affect the political and economic conditions, the desire for change and the search for well-being and safety urged people to try to find an answer through religion. That encouraged the emergence of new religious currents and cults within the ranks of the Roman army, as well as within Roman society in general. Such burgeoning cults were those of Isis, Mithras, Christianity, Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and others. As a result, cults and religious movements formed.⁶

In such an environment, the need and ability to defend the principles of Christianity emerged.⁷ The followers of the new religion were considered to be unintelligent, ruthless, unholy and incestuous cannibals. Their representatives were considered criminals, naïve and abject people. To confront their condemnation, Christians reacted with the composition of apologies, written down to be kept in the archives of the churches and at the same time to help in determining their Christian identity. Scholars, apologists, ex-

¹ Rhee 2005, 9–10; Stark 1996, 5–7; Hopkins 1998, 192–195; Novak 2008, 81.

² Kirtatas 2003, 68–69; Barnes 1968, 520–521.

³ Beard *et al.* 1998; Karavidopoulos 2000, 130; Anastasios 1982, 23–25.

⁴ Pachis 2003a, 327; Pachis 2003b, 97–125; Martin 1987, 10; Burkert, 1994; Karavidopoulos 2000, 130.

⁵ Brown 1989, 58–59; Karavidopoulos 2000, 130–131.

⁶ Martin 1987, 10–11; Pachis 2003a, 327–329; Tarn 1966, 355; Hadas 1959, 191; Karavidopoulos 2000, 25–28.

⁷ Fidas 1994, 132; Novak 2008, 150–152.

gentiles with a great philosophical education found in Christianity the true meaning of life.⁸ They argued and convinced with their knowledge, eloquence and zeal.⁹

Origen of Alexandria was one of the early theologians with a profound secular education.¹⁰ He was a man with a most powerful and systematic persona, and was to influence the church of the first centuries.¹¹ As a theologian and an interpreter he worked tirelessly, defending his religion in a scholarly way, a religion which was suffering from multiple schisms and sects.¹²

Origen was probably born in Alexandria around AD 185, as one of the sons of a large family. In a short time, he became known for his zeal for learning and for Christianity. He studied in the circles close to Clement of Alexandria, Pantaenus and Ammonius Saccas; he was entrusted with the direction of the Catechetical School, as the head of which he remained for twenty-eight years.¹³ Origen travelled to the most famous centres of the Roman world, teaching and writing. In AD 253/54, a few years after the persecution of Decius, exhausted from the tortures he had suffered, he died, leaving behind a great work, in size and in quality. Only a small part of his writings has survived.¹⁴

His work was exegetical, dogmatic and apologetic. With the recognition of the central role of the Bible in Christian faith and with the aid of a deep knowledge of the principles of Plato's philosophy, Origen formed his theology, connecting Greek philosophy with Christian tradition.¹⁵

Valuable testimony to this is the apologetic work of Origen, *Contra Celsum*. The treatise reveals the prevailing view among the intellectual pagans about Christianity. A philosopher named Celsus wrote a treatise titled *True Logos* in AD 178.¹⁶ It has survived only partially but came to us thanks to Origen.

At first, Celsus's treatise did not seem to have attracted the attention of either pagans or Christians. For many years, it went unnoticed. It came to notice only about seventy years after its completion, when Ambrose, a friend of Origen, observed that it remained marginalized.¹⁷ Ambrose encouraged his friend to answer to Celsus's falsehoods, but Origen believed that the best 'apology' was the right way of living: actions speaking louder than words. Finally in AD 248, he decided to write a refutation, though Celsus had already died, in order to satisfy his friend and to support all those who had been disturbed by the treatise.¹⁸ In those days, Christians were threatened again by renewed persecutions,¹⁹ and Origen was one of the few capable of defending the new religion.²⁰

The *True Logos* was drafted in order to express the dissatisfaction of Celsus with the emerging Christian culture, which was gaining ground throughout the Roman

⁸ Koukousas and Valais 2011, 111.

⁹ Tatakis 1989.

¹⁰ Beck 1992, 264.

¹¹ Anastasios 1982, 206.

¹² Arabatzis 2010, 175.

¹³ Trigg 1998, 9–10, 12.

¹⁴ Christou 2005, 805–883.

¹⁵ Despotis 2015, 10–11.

¹⁶ Arabatzis 2010, 179; Fidas 1994, 132.

¹⁷ Ulrich 2007, 116.

¹⁸ Christou 2005, 805–883; Papadopoulos 1982, 393–422.

¹⁹ Edwards 1993, 70–89.

²⁰ Trigg 1998, 53.

Empire.²¹ In introducing the discussion, Celsus outlined Christianity as an offshoot of Judaism, as a novel heresy with naive and uneducated followers.²² It might, though, bring about the total breaking up of the prospering empire. It was a propaganda effort against the lifestyle and the new morals that Christians professed, and it was also an attempt to defend the Roman emperor's policy in his provinces.²³

This treatise was the first systematic text directed against Christianity. Celsus had prepared the attack, after studying written Christian sources. Using excerpts from the Old and New Testaments, and from the Apocrypha, he displayed the corrupt doctrine of the Christians and urged the government to extirpate the new heresy.²⁴ Celsus altered biblical passages. His 'insights' also derived from the observation of the life of the Christians and from oral sources.²⁵

Celsus's position

In the beginning, Celsus presented the general characteristics of Greek religion. During the process, he pointed out a number of details as well about its theology, cosmology, soteriology and anthropology.

According to this philosophically trained man, Greek culture was characterized by light, in contrast to Christian culture, which was marked by darkness and secrecy.²⁶ Gentiles did not exercise their religion in secret and were not ashamed or afraid for their manners and customs. They did not hesitate to express and defend their religious beliefs proudly and bravely. They were law-abiding and offered the certainty and safety of a lawful and official way of living.²⁷ Answering the accusations of Celsus concerning a 'hidden dogma', Origen stated that this particular tactic of secrecy was applied in philosophical circles as well. Many wished to prevent their values being misrepresented and misunderstood by non-believers, and therefore abided by them, practicing in secret.²⁸ Others followed the Pythagorean example αὐτός ἐφα and were teaching openly.

According to Celsus whatever is somehow related to the past is best. Thus, in any comparison between an older philosophical way of thinking and Christianity, the first always triumphs. His personal feeling was that the latter lifestyle derives from the first, which is the source of the truth.²⁹ The Greek religion was not a 'disguised religion', like Christianity, but an intact, original and established one. He called his treatise *True Logos* because he asserts that if something claims to be true, it should be ancient, stable

²¹ *Cels.* 4.1.10–15.

²² *Cels.* 4.36.

²³ De Lange 1976, 64; Anastasios 1982, 110; Fidas 1994, 132.

²⁴ *Cels.* 2.1.65–70.

²⁵ Christou 2005, 118. Celsus's sources were the *Psalms* in the Old Testament, the *Gospels*, Paul's *Epistles* and the *Acts* in the New Testament.

²⁶ *Cels.* 1.3.5: [...] ὡς συνθήκας κρύβδην πρὸς ἀλλήλους ποιουμένων χριστιανῶν παρὰ τὰ νενομισμένα, ὅτι τῶν συνθηκῶν οἱ μὲν εἰσὶ φανεραί, ὅσαι κατὰ νόμους γίνονται, αἱ δὲ ἀφανεῖς, ὅσαι παρὰ τὰ νενομισμένα συντελοῦνται.

²⁷ *Cels.* 1.1.2–10.

²⁸ The typical example was the mystic ceremonies of the famous Eleusinian mysteries, where the chance to participate was granted only to the initiated, who agreed to keep secret all the events that took place in the process.

²⁹ *Cels.* 1.14.25–30.

and unaltered.³⁰ Thus, it was not possible for this ‘new word’, as professed by Christian thinkers, to be the true one, simply because it was attempting to overturn the ‘old word’. Celsus refers to Plato,³¹ as he believed that Plato did not express new ideas, but supported ancient dogma.³² Celsus defended Judaism over Christianity.³³ Knowing that Christianity appeared later in history than Judaism, Celsus assumed that the former was a heresy originating from the latter.

When comparing something ancient with a novelty, wisdom was to be attributed to the first. Since Greek religion was chronologically older, it was ‘natural’ to presume it to be authentic and dependable. To make the same case for Christianity was something that Celsus deemed impossible. For a start, the emerging Christian faith had its vulnerabilities as it was relatively new: therefore, it could not contain the truth.

Philosophers are the possessors of wisdom and correct thinking. The values of Greek culture were sophisticated, and the virtues played a very central part in it all. The traditional religious systems and the philosophical schools in the Roman Empire harboured no barbaric, foreign, uneducated or uncultivated features. If the barbarians were to create new dogmatic principles, they would undoubtedly prove themselves to be transient, since their creators would fail to be able to prove them. Dogmatic truth can be established only by the means of philosophy.³⁴ According to Celsus, the barbarians lacked the essential beliefs in their faiths. Though he acknowledged their ability to come up with a new faith, he yet claimed that they were unable to provide a logical proof for the justification of their faith, as they did not have the means of real reasoning.

The superiority of Celsus’s religion lay in the rational thought of its followers. The philosophical mind seeks explanations for everything. They thus consider themselves different from the ‘naïve’ Christians who lack rational reasoning in their expression of faith. Celsus searched for logical elements in religion.³⁵ Reasonable, understandable arguments and clear evidence were its criteria. Its supporters were wise and cultured; they did not follow the allegorical method of interpretation, but only the logical and the literal ones.³⁶ The gods in philosophy were not objects constructed with fallible human hands.³⁷ This was the reason why they were not ephemeral: Greek religion is the only logical one. Such wisdom and logic demonstrated the good faith.³⁸ In order to embrace a religious

³⁰ *Cels.* 1.40. 25–32.

³¹ *Cels.* 1.14. According to Plato, the more someone goes back in time, the wiser the men he can meet and the closer to the divine one gets. In Plato’s way of thinking, immortality was the main characteristic of god. The perfection in a deity was considered to consist in its degree of separation from the other beings. Demons and demigods inhabiting the lower spheres of this world had an unclear idea of their celestial origin. The mortal creatures, if they are humans, try to gain a share in immortality with the creative arts (philosophy). All the others try to overcome mortality by trying to leave descendants (Pl. *Symp.* 202e).

³² *Cels.* 6. 2.10. Affected as he was by Plato’s ideas, the Christian values seemed fictitious to Celsus.

³³ *Cels.* 1.25.10–15.

³⁴ *Cels.* 1.2–7.

³⁵ Dodds 1965, 187. What made a great impression on the gentile observers of the Christian faith was the Christians’ absolute belief in something that lacks proof and their obsession to die for it.

³⁶ Only those who can philosophize can reach an approximate knowledge of the divine and the demonic (*Cels.* 4. 65.10–25).

³⁷ *Cels.* 1.4.1–5.

³⁸ *Cels.* 1.8.10–15. According to Celsus, “[...] within each person there is a soul, which is superior to the flesh and is relative to the divine. The soulful people, wherever they are, crave this relative relationship, bringing it constantly to their mind. They always desire to learn about it. If they are going to embrace new doctrine, they have to be guided by the logical way of thinking.”

creed, people should be guided by rational thinking, not by blind faith as in the Christian religion. Advocates of the slogan 'believe and do not inquire' were uncultivated; in their naïve attempt not to seek logic in religious matters, they may be misled and deceived, relying only on their barren faith.³⁹ The process of acquiring proof for everything, and the effort to explain everything logically, were of extreme importance for Celsus.

Celsus' theory about the divine is based on Plato's, who talked about purity and godliness. God is the supreme good (ἀγαθόν). He is the archetype of justice, nature and order.⁴⁰ He is in a state of perfection and excellence. The ἐπουράνιον could neither be described, nor praised as it deserved: no poet can manage to do that. A place without colours and shapes was impossible to describe. It was the place of divine dwelling, as well as a place for those who from the knowledge possessed could provide their souls with rest. Everything derives from god. However, he does not express an interest in anything that is prone to decay, as such things are contrary to his nature.⁴¹

Some philosophically trained and cultivated people who take care of their spiritual health might be able to express their opinion about the godhead.⁴² In the personal relationship between mankind and the divine, a certain elitism can be observed.⁴³ Celsus stated that knowledge of god leads humans to study the words of the great thinkers of the past. Those who have no philosophical education are considered ignorant and inferior people. The divine being neither interferes with them, nor gives them any possibility of salvation. Even if it did, these people would be unable to take advantage of it because of their ignorance.⁴⁴ Prudence and wisdom are the main conditions elevating a person to the truth.⁴⁵

Being omniscient, the divine being does not feel the need to know anyone or anything. It does not, therefore, socialize with mankind.⁴⁶ Every change or movement would inevitably imply a change away from the established good to evil. God is presented by Celsus as part of the harmony and equanimity in the cosmos. If god interfered with mankind, he would thereby unsettle the balance and inevitably unleash evil.

God remains a motionless spirit, and contains everything (a Stoic idea).⁴⁷ The divine does not share any features with mankind, thus it could not have created men to its image. It is colourless, shapeless and immaterial. One could say that god is not a part of matter, but on the contrary, matter could be a part of god. As god is passionless, humans cannot understand him.⁴⁸ He cannot have a son. Even if he had, this son should have to be a strong one, worthy of his divine origin. A weak son of god, prosecuted, arrested, crucified and fearing death,⁴⁹ has no place in a mighty religion, such as the Greek one.⁵⁰

³⁹ *Cels.* 1.9.1–4.

⁴⁰ *Cels.* 5.14.

⁴¹ *Cels.* 5.14.

⁴² *Cels.* 6.3.5.

⁴³ *Cels.* 6.8.5, 6.15.5–10.

⁴⁴ *Cels.* 6.14.5–15.

⁴⁵ *Cels.* 1.57.1–5.

⁴⁶ *Cels.* 6.3.5.

⁴⁷ *Cels.* 6.64, 4.5.3–5, 6.71.5.

⁴⁸ *Cels.* 6.64.

⁴⁹ A reference to the flight of Jesus in order to avoid the slaughter of the toddlers by Herod (*Cels.* 2.24.3–6).

⁵⁰ According to Celsus, the Christian God is a weak god. As a Father, he is not capable of saving his Son and as a Son, he did not manage to rescue himself from death (*Cels.* 2.68.2–5, 2.77.2–5).

God, as 'the great Lord' dominates the whole earth, his divinity makes everything proper and pleasant. It is impossible for a god to beg and mourn. Generally, any anthropomorphic features assigned to god are used by Celsus to express what god is not. He is not envious and he is not mortal.

Celsus tackles the Christian doctrine about the incarnation of Jesus.⁵¹ The philosopher underlined the difference between the Christian and the Greek cultures. Being omnipotent, god had no need to incarnate, to distribute his blessings, or descend to the world of humans. God is strong and complete, he is capable of manipulating human nature as he wishes.⁵² There was no need for god to get involved with the process of becoming human himself, affected by the wrong doings of the perishable world. God must stay fixed in his place. If he does not maintain his stable position, he would put his divine substance at risk.⁵³

According to Plato, human souls follow the paths of the planets.⁵⁴ The soul is immortal. There is a true heaven and a true light that the human soul is not strong enough to bear. The soul was located on earth in order to be purified through designated circles of fate. The soul could be happy only if it was associated with god. The human soul is eager to meet the divine that is the source of all good things. Being superior to the human body, the soul dwells in the vicinity of the divine. Benevolent people tend to seek out divinity, which is all they are concerned to think and learn about.⁵⁵

In his version of cosmogony, Celsus presented god as one who saw that matter was in disorder. He united it and endowed it with symmetries, disposing of other deities that were associated with it.⁵⁶ The universe had no inception, nor corruptibility, but everything on earth was subject to changes. It underwent natural events and disasters (floods and fires). Celsus, like the Stoics, supported the idea that the world had a divine origin, consequently all parts of it were divine, even 'wordless' animals.⁵⁷

The world was not created for the sake of humankind. Lightning and thunder are not the results of divine acts.⁵⁸ God did not bring nature into existence as a result of a divine Providence, because nature includes cruelty.⁵⁹ Celsus regarded mankind as a part of nature and not something special. He puts humanity on the same level with the other creatures of the creation. The world was made in such a way that all parts could contribute to its perfection and completion. Everything was made to serve the 'whole' and not the 'one', and to seek the specific place it deserved.

From the aforementioned principles, the philosopher's anthropology emerges. God, according to the philosophical theory, did not participate in the daily lives of people, on the contrary, he seems to be totally alienated from humankind.⁶⁰ The acts of god have nothing to do with any product of materiality, which would at once make them perishable,

⁵¹ *Cels.* 6.34.5–25. Celsus ironically undermines the fact of incarnation.

⁵² *Cels.* 4.3.4–6, 3.15–19.

⁵³ *Cels.* 4.14.1–13.

⁵⁴ *Cels.* 6.21.5.

⁵⁵ *Cels.* 1.8.10–15.

⁵⁶ *Cels.* 6.43.50–55.

⁵⁷ *Cels.* 5.7.

⁵⁸ God created only the immortal features. The mortals are 'another's' work, and certainly have nothing to do with God. Nothing perishable was ever the result of God's action (*Cels.* 4.52.6–15).

⁵⁹ *Cels.* 4.75.14–17. "In nature, trees coexisted with plants full of prickles and wild animals."

⁶⁰ *Cels.* 4.52.6–10.

but are to be characterized as eternal and immortal. Mankind can have confidence in god because he is the stronger than all. He does not deal with matter,⁶¹ and of course does not die, nor does he need to return to the world,⁶² unlike the Christian god, who suffered, feeling pain and being eventually crucified. Transition to the earth and an abandonment of his heavenly place is absolutely unthinkable. The intellectual culture by Greek doctrine was not anthropocentric; it did not see humans as the centre of the universe. Everything was to be viewed through the prism of a cosmic harmony. Mankind was not the only interesting aspect of creation. The above-mentioned features lead Celsus to prove the non-superiority of man in relation to other creatures of creation. Bees and ants also have organized societies and live in collective structures without disturbing the overall harmony.⁶³ The nature of man is corruptible, mortal; it is made from the same common material as all beings (bats and frogs).⁶⁴ The nature of all passes away and returns through various ways, to return to the same situation. The mortal life is part a loop, a cycle. When the cycle is complete, things restart. In that way, the image of perpetual change is presented, but it does not affect god, but only humans.

In the soteriology of Celsus, the human body was seen as a burden,⁶⁵ which man tries to find a relief from.⁶⁶ God did not create mankind, as he could not put a soul in something as unholy as the human body.⁶⁷ The excessive affection shown by humans to the human body can only distract human beings from searching for the divine. In contrast, spiritual cultivation gives people the ability to socialize with god's divinity. Continuous interaction of this latter sort can lead to salvation. This could indeed take place with the aid of philosophy. Humankind in its effort to reach the godhead had to transcend the mind, ignore the flesh and activate the spiritual sight. There was a conflict between the soul and the body: the first did not want to share with the latter, which was prone to decay. Celsus, in his effort to mock the resurrection of Christ, wondered how a rotting body, full of worms, could be restored to its previous condition.⁶⁸

Through contemplating certain antitheses (such as intelligible-visible, true-delusion, science-personal vision), the path forward emerged. God always takes care of people; he does not show his interest only once,⁶⁹ and not merely for a specific group of followers, such as the Christians, but eternally for everyone.

Celsus's philosophical and theological model is characterized by the morals of global serenity. In his approach, morals played the leading part in practically achieving its application. They comprised the social balance. Thus, Celsus made an effort to illustrate the consequences of his philosophical theories accomplished by the means of strict philosophical thought. The privilege of salvation is granted to those who would cultivate their mind by the constant acquisition of knowledge. Demons/lesser deities

⁶¹ Celsus noticed that everything bad was related to materiality. God was not the creator of evil, that is why he stayed away from such (*Cels.* 4.52).

⁶² Unlike New Testament incarnation theology.

⁶³ *Cels.* 4.82–83.

⁶⁴ *Cels.* 4.23.

⁶⁵ For Celsus, the human body was mortal, the soul was not. The human body belongs in the same category of flesh as frogs and bats (*Cels.* 4.30.45–50, 52.13–15).

⁶⁶ The nature of the human body is perishable. Gold and silver are more durable than humans.

⁶⁷ *Cels.* 6.72.5.

⁶⁸ *Cels.* 5.14; Demoura 1989, 385–392.

⁶⁹ At the precise moment of God's son's descent to the Earth.

must be honoured also. Originating as they do from god, they have his judgment as their guidance. They are to be ranked according to the task which they are assigned to perform. Celsus supported the idea that the inferior deities have to be worshipped also as divine creations.⁷⁰ Sacrifices must be performed to honour them so as to earn the favour of the highest god. Each deity is in charge of a specific task that includes all elements, such as air and water.⁷¹ Deities comprised a part of the harmonious whole, and ignoring them would cause disarray. There are deities who protect each part of the body. Their cult should not exceed the cult of the highest Godhead, the Good, though. Evil is a necessity, it is the price one has to pay for experiencing the Good.

Origen's perspective

Origen responded to the philosophical and theological questions of Celsus, dismantling them one by one.⁷² His theological answers were determined by the philosophical questions he was being asked.⁷³

The arguments he used derived from the Bible and from history. The historical revelation of the Logos comprised Origen's main theological proof. The language he used was that of Greek philosophy.

Basically, he had to prove Christ's divinity through the Old Testament prophecies, the miracles, actions and revelations of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ His main goal was to make it clear that Christianity was the one and only true religion.⁷⁵ His weapons were his excellent knowledge of the Old and New Testament,⁷⁶ in contrast to Celsus who did not seem to be as strong in this matter, the principles of Greek philosophy,⁷⁷ and the allegorical method of interpretation.⁷⁸ Having acquired a deep insight into the ancient religions and customs of other civilizations, Origen became a forerunner of comparative religion.

In the preamble, he had made it clear that everything that would follow was based on an absolute loyalty to God. Faith, according to Christian interpretation, did not require the absence of logical argumentation.⁷⁹ Origen did not promote passive faith, but urged for a dialectical faith, based on evidence. Origen set about reconstructing rather than refuting what Celsus claimed.⁸⁰ He made clear the Christian point of view and went further in clarifying the inner meaning of his faith.

⁷⁰ *Cels.* 4.65.

⁷¹ *Cels.* 5.7.20. In Greek thought, rivers and seas were called 'demons'.

⁷² He reverses the very reasoning of Celsus concerning antiquity as the main criteria of truth (*Cels.* 4.28.25).

⁷³ Piliouris 2008, 49.

⁷⁴ *Cels.* 1.50.5–10.

⁷⁵ Christou 2005, 119.

⁷⁶ Origen's sources were the *Psalms* from the Old Testament and the four *Gospels*, Paul's *Epistles* and the *Acts* from the New Testament.

⁷⁷ Beatrice 1992, 351–367. Porphyry acknowledged the Greek education of Origen. The only negative aspect of Origen was his commitment to Christianity.

⁷⁸ Christou 2005, 120; *Cels.* 6.6.

⁷⁹ Harnack 1931, 658.

⁸⁰ Origen's attitude towards the Greek basic theory concerning 'epouranion' did not reject it, but comprised something that Paul himself embraced (*Cels.* 6.19.25–35).

Celsus's philosophical and theological worldview displays a moral quietism in all respects. In all such views, morality resulted from the practical application of theory. This constituted the framework that defined the balance within society.⁸¹

Origen's view of morality was totally different.⁸² Such morality as Celsus' does not save mankind.⁸³ Morality in Christian faith is not bounded by any philosophy or society, any curbing of human free will.

According to Origen, proper morality springs from faith.⁸⁴ It is not the privilege of a restricted elite group, which having assumed the mantle of knowledge was perceived as the source of constant philosophizing.⁸⁵

In his writings, Origen managed to rescue man's transition to divine nature, to maintain the certainty of God's unchangeable nature, and simultaneously defend the actual descent of God into the material world. Godhead was made incarnate to enable a meeting with mankind. Origen noted that knowledge of the Father was made possible through his image, the Son.⁸⁶ The Holy Spirit is the one who sanctifies man and allows him to accept God. Man is not capable of managing anything on his own. The Scriptures derive from the Holy Spirit. Therefore humankind must get to the very essence of the message that the Scriptures convey and not read them too literally. The biblical theologian saw salvation through a Trinitarian perspective.

The main characteristic in Origen's theology was the emphasis on asceticism and martyrdom.⁸⁷ People will not know God with the mind, as philosophers claim, but with the heart.⁸⁸ Origen himself lived his life as a prophet. With his ascetic way of living, he lived as he preached. Purity and devotion to God are achieved through spiritual struggle and abstinence from the world.⁸⁹ Origen was a part of the church tradition and was thus convinced that Celsus was the one who lived in ignorance.⁹⁰ In the philosopher's thinking, it was impossible for the Divine to descend to the earth and speak to humans. Christians argued that they were the ones who had the privilege and the honour to meet and know God, incarnated in flesh and bone. Origen, combining theory with practice (which was not the case with Celsus) made God approachable rather than inaccessible.⁹¹ All the same, Origen and Celsus shared the same starting point, that of the inexpressible God.

⁸¹ A decent person, one who protected the laws of the state, was regarded a philosophically trained person.

⁸² *Cels.* 5.24.5. Origen's attitude towards God is well known, both affirmative and apophatic. God is not the main leader of a stray cosmic disorder, but the main leader of justice and benevolence.

⁸³ *Cels.* 4.65.1–15.

⁸⁴ Origen reveals here Celsus' method of interpretation. Celsus was subjective and did not treat Christian and pagan intellectual texts in the same way. He ridiculed, abhorred and emphasized the ambiguity and the lack of logical arguments in Christian texts (*Cels.* 1.13).

⁸⁵ *Cels.* 1.18.10–11; 21.1–5.

⁸⁶ *Cels.* 5.24.25. The main source of everything, according to Origen and the Christians, was always God.

⁸⁷ Martens 2003, 1115–1121.

⁸⁸ Philosophy alone cannot save mankind (*Cels.* 4.65.10–25).

⁸⁹ af Hällström 1985, 10–12.

⁹⁰ Origen believed that he was the one who represented the truth present in the church.

⁹¹ Cook 2004, 124–125.

Conclusion

Origen lived during a complex epoch that was the turning point of Roman history, between the second and the third centuries AD. He accepted the challenge of expressing the Christian values in philosophical terms. His works reflect an effort to define Christian morals and values within a philosophical approach to human life. Celsus in his work, *The True Word*, defended the religion and tradition of his ancestors. He expressed his conservative devotion to theology, as well as his opposition to the innovation displayed in Christianity.

Celsus's traditional view is partially visible in the works of Origen. It highlighted the moral codes in Greek religion, disseminated in all regions of the Empire, and how it complied with the imperial laws and orders. Its followers legally, openly and proudly performed all their religious duties. The ancient origin of Greek religion by itself justifies its truthfulness and status. Due to its ancient origin, much earlier than that of the Christian faith, the role of Greek religion was very significant. Philosophy as well as the actual thirst for investigation and the discovery of the true meaning of existence comprised ways of expression in Greek religion. The human mind managed to produce a logical explanation for religious beliefs and to approach the divine with the help of the philosophy, using the ancient 'true word' and present-day reflection. The divinity was unchanging in its wholeness, far removed from humanity, far from any attempt at definition. Only through comparison and antitheses was it possible to attribute characteristics to the divine, attributes that derived from the recognition of human inferiority. The superiority of the divine over humanity lies in its infinite power, without passion or decay. The immortality of the soul was a strict entitlement of the elite class of the sages, enabled by their capacity to achieve purification.

Every change that could threaten global stability was considered evil by Celsus. In all the excerpts quoted by Origen in his work *Contra Celsum*, one can observe an obsession on Celsus' part to support stability and the existing order of things, the *status quo*. Celsus thereby reveals his clear fear of the oncoming great change, which the spreading of the Christian religion could bring about.

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