

Mark Julian EDWARDS, *Origen Against Plato*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002 [October], 180 p. - ISBN 075460828X.

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Professor Mark J. Edwards is a total communicator. His last book on *Origen against Plato* is a marvel in the proper sense, given the scarcity of occasions which prove the competence of Patristic scholars both in philological exactness and theological orthodoxy. No vital issue related to Origen and his modern reception seems to have escaped Edwards' vigilance. All the contemporary platitudes of handbooks concerning Origen's theology are given here a caustic treatment. The reader is easily fascinated by the vast labyrinth of references which display considerable learning and, not less importantly, a refreshing wit. *Origen against Plato* is a masterpiece in theological hermeneutics, discussing topics of urgent interest for all the students of early Christianity.

Chapter one (11-46) addresses the historical context, from which Origen emerges as a biblical scholar with a decisive apostolic stature, who is committed to carry out the intellectual battle of the early Christian writers against Gnostics. Chapter 2 ('The God of Origen and the Gods of Plato', 47-86) outlines the main differences not just between Origen and Plato, but also between the Christian gospel and the philosophical mythology of classical Greece. An important heading refers to 'The Trinity, *ousia* and *hypostasis*', and demonstrates, *pace* Dillon, the incongruence between the Triad styled by the later Platonists and the Christian interpretation of Trinity. The third chapter ('The Doctrine of the Soul in Origen', 87-122) will probably meet some resistance from scholars, but it has the great merit of showing how far Origen is from the accusations brought by modern theologians from both East and West (especially the allegations about Origen's theory on the 'consubstantiality' between God and the human mind). There is no transmigration or reincarnation in Origen's theology, despite what some of his declared adversaries had to say over the centuries. In fact, there is little conceptual consistency in thinking the separation between body and soul in terms of a *post mortem* life, and not also *ante mortem*. With respect to the immortality of the soul, it would have been interesting to compare Origen with the later representatives of Catholic Orthodoxy, in particular with Athanasius, who was a staunch defender of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Athanasius went so far that, in *De incarnatione* (iv, 26), he holds the following: 'by nature, man is mortal, because he is made out of nothingness.' Consequently, immortality is a gained attribute (for both body and soul) only by participation, without being something intrinsic to the human soul. Mark Edwards seems also to dislike the conceptual distinction between the Asiatic school of theology (represented by Irenaeus or Methodius of Olympe) and the Alexandrian one, first established by Manlio Simonetti (*Crisi ariana*, 1975, *ad finem*), and reappraised by E. Prinzivalli in her important volume: *Magister Ecclesiae – Il dibattito su Origene fra III e IV secolo* (Rome: Augustinianum, 2002). An interesting discussion could have emerged along this line of thought, especially with reference to the 'antropomorphite' controversy ignited around the year 399 in the Egyptian desert. Moreover, as to the question of *apokatastasis*, a reference to G. Bunge's article from 1997¹, would have been even more illuminating.

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The book ends with a short chapter on 'The Interpretation of Scripture' (123-158), which includes a sophisticated discussion of allegory (which could be read in dialogue with Illaria Ramelli's outstanding research on the same topic²). Given the indubitable richness of allegorical readings, the modern readers have learned so far solely the poor lesson of 'demythologisation'.³ However, for Origen allegory was part of a spiritual dynamic, which

¹ Gabriel BUNGE, "« Crée pour être ». A propos d'une citation scripturaire inaperçue dans le *Peri Archon* d'Origen (III, 6, 5)", *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclesiastique* (Toulouse) 97 (1997), p. 21-29.

² Anneo Cornuto, *Compendio di teologia greca*, Italian translation, introductory study and postface by Ilaria RAMELLI (Milan: Bompiani, 2003).

³ It is surprising to see that these two very different techniques of reading are paralleled by a great Patristic scholar such as Jean DANIELÉLOU, "Die Entmythologisierung in der alexandrinischen Schule", *Theologische Forschung* 30 (1963), p. 38-42.

did not dissociate faith from history, but was ready to frame them within an eschatological setting wherein the human being was assisted and inspired by the Spirit. As Louth has aptly argued⁴, allegory could hardly be termed as ‘method’, in the modern sense of the word. In the Christian context at least, it is an art coterminous to prayer, being linked with the discernment of the depths of Word’s incarnation in the nearly sacramental body of the Scriptures. Precisely this represents the most uncontroversial side of Origen’s teaching, which has been quickly adopted by the Cappadocians (St Gregory of Nyssa, in particular) and the representatives of the monastic tradition (the apex of the Byzantine era being, of course, St Maximus Confessor). While taking refuge in the allegorical interpretation, Origen became the greatest defender of the universality of Scriptures against the attack of the relativists. Perhaps he can be read more sympathetically and with greater comfort also by those readers who are disturbed by the modern challenges of biology and cosmology. However, as a good hermeneutist, Mark Edwards gives them a warning: ‘we should speak not so much of an allegorical meaning in the scriptures, as of an allegorical process of ascent’ (*op. cit.*, 142).

Despite its brevity, *Origen against Plato* surpasses even the most vibrant defence of the great Alexandrian author, done during the last decades by the great Jesuit academic Henri Crouzel. There is not a single page in Edwards’ thoroughly engaging book from which serious students in Classics, Patristics, systematic theology or history of religion will not feel the need to take extensive notes. Therefore, I recommend the urgent reading of this tome, written by a true knower of Late Antiquity.

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⁴ A. LOUTH, *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), ch. five.