

Unit 2C: TRADITION

52: Fathers and Teachers of the Church in the Late 2nd and 3rd Centuries (and a few notable heretics!)

Clement of Alexandria (150-215)

Gnosticism, derived from the Greek word for knowledge (gnosis), was used “to describe a broad trend of late Hellenistic religiosity that embraces a large variety of movements and different sects.”¹ The Gnostics supposed that the material world was evil; and, if they claimed to be Christian, described salvation as a progress through ascending levels of esoteric knowledge until the soul was liberated from the bondage of physicality and united with God. Plainly this belief system was thoroughly heretical and incompatible with the Christian doctrines of Creation and Incarnation. However, in the great city of Alexandria, in antiquity second only to Rome and a great intellectual and philosophical hub of the Empire, Christianity had to be lived out in the context of competing philosophies, some of them Gnostic in the esoteric sense rightly criticised by St Irenaeus, but others espousing a Hellenistic scheme of gnosis relatively free of the baggage of antipathy to the material world. It is not surprising therefore that this great city should attract such great Christian philosophers as Clement of Alexandria who attempted to combine revelation with an Orthodox Christian gnosis.

Clement was only partially successful; and in later times his place in the calendars of the Church was challenged by his unwillingness to ascribe pleasure and pain to Christ, who was ambiguously described by Clement in his teaching as possibly neither fully divine nor fully human. Clement’s thought displays the Alexandrian tendency to rank the Son and Spirit below the Father as well as a spiritualising approach at once both intellectually and ethically demanding. For Clement, Christ is the Logos who is the Father’s means of dispelling ignorance and imparting virtue through the incorporation of baptism and the sustenance of the Eucharist. He was

¹ Father John Anthony McGuckin, “Gnosticism,” *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p, 147.

once thought to be the head of the Church's catechetical school in Alexandria and to have taught Origen, but this is considered less likely now. His value in Tradition is that he represents an urbane and intellectually credible articulation of Christianity to an educated class. However, his inability to take the Incarnation with sufficient seriousness renders him an unreliable guide notwithstanding his many profound insights. Intriguingly, Clement was "the last great Christian theologian to exist in an environment uncontrolled by episcopal oversight."²

For Clement, "the Christian life begins with faith, which is seen as the basis and origin of all knowledge . . . [in the context of] 'the conviction of things not seen' of Hebrews 11:1."³ God is "our educator" who accepts us as we are and brings us freedom.⁴ However, "Clement seems to dispense with the need for both vocal and religious prayer 'for God continually hears all the inward converse' . . . Above all there is an absence of any invitation to petitionary prayer or to the sacraments."⁵ Unfortunately, Clement's "rarefied conception of prayer has little obvious similarity with the New Testament . . . [but is highly similar to] the private intellectual contemplation outlined by Plato in the *Republic* and Aristotle in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*."⁶

Monarchianism and Subordinationism

Without doubt the centre of theological controversy in the third century was at Rome; and the issue was the status of the Son in relation to the Father. Some strands of Logos Christology, stretching back to Justin Martyr, had asserted that Christ was in some sense a second 'god' ... to use the terminology of the influential Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria. Clearly this proposal caused problems for

² MuGuckin, "Clement of Alexandria," p. 68.

³ Anthony Meredith, "Clement of Alexandria," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, in *The Study of Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1986), p. 113.

⁴ *The Tutor*, III. 11.59, in Eberhard Arnold, *The Early Christians in Their Own Words* (Robertsbridge, E. Sussex, 1997), p. 107.

⁵ Meredith, p. 115.

⁶ Meredith, p. 115.

a monotheistic faith, so without either as yet really addressing the issue of the divinity of the Spirit, the question arose as to how the Father could be God and the Son also God at the same time. The challenge was how “to reconcile a profound sense of biblical monotheism with the [C]hurch’s developed instinct in the divinity of Jesus.”⁷ It was Tertullian who coined the term Monarchianism for those who contended that one could only speak of the Godhead of the Father. Some Monarchians (Sabellius, Pope Callistus, Praxeas and Noetus) supposed that this Godhead manifested itself in successively different modes, hence modalism or Sabellianism. So God was Father for a time, then Son, then Holy Spirit. Others (Theodotus the Cobbler, Theodotus the Banker and Artemon) preferred to see the divinity of Christ in terms of the presence of God the Father within Him; and some of this group, notably Paul of Samosata expressed this in a frankly adoptionist Christology. Underpinning both these strands was the reluctance or the inability to see Jesus as God from all eternity. The Logos theologians (Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen of Alexandria) mocked the first sort for Patripassianism (God the Father suffered and died on the cross) whilst attacking the second for the inadequacy of seeing Christ acquiring divinity as an indwelling entity *from* or indeed *of* the Father.

By the time Monarchianism had become a spent force at Rome, the proponents of a Logos Christology prevailed to the point that it became necessary to think of one power of deity being manifested in three distinct hypostases—that is, in Greek literally ‘that which stands underneath something,’ equivalent in Latin to *subsistentia* which means subsistence or individual entity; however, the Latin word *subsistentia* could also be translated with *substantia* as meaning substance, which led to much theological confusion in later dialogues between the Greek and Latin churches.⁸ Moreover, the unresolved issue of the relative status of the Logos to the Father, notably in Alexandria with its tendency in some early approaches to

⁷ McGuckin, “Monarchianism,” p. 226.

⁸ For further discussion, see McGuckin, “Hypostasis,” pp. 173-175.

rank the Persons of the Trinity ontologically rather than in a personal and relational sense, sowed the seeds of the Arian controversy which was later to define the Nicene period. Arius himself was influenced by the adoptionism and subordinationism of Paul of Samosata and Lucian of Antioch. The philosophical underpinning of these heresies can be traced back through some of the Apologists to Philo of Alexandria and Neo-Platonism more generally. Only in the 4th century were these issues really grappled with in a manner that did justice to revelation and Christian Trinitarian experience.

Hippolytus (170-236)

Hippolytus was active at Rome as a presbyter and renowned theologian and teacher. Some Eastern sources refer to him as Bishop of Rome and this probably refers to his combative rebuttal of the teaching of the Popes Zephyrinus (198-217), Callistus (217-222) and Pontianus (230-235) during which period he probably replaced Callistus amongst his own followers as anti-Pope. These men he regarded as theologically suspect in the Monarchian disputes and/or morally lax in the teaching of Rome concerning repentance and reconciliation against which Tertullian had also complained. However, after dying a martyr's death in exile with Pontianus during the great persecution in 235, both men were reconciled at this time, Pope Fabian (236-250) brought their bodies back to Rome as venerable martyrs.

Largely forgotten subsequently in the West as a result of his schismatic activities and for having written in Greek (common at that time but not later) Hippolytus has come into his own in the modern era not so much as a theologian but as a liturgist. From his surviving works we gain unparalleled insight into the liturgical practices of the Church at Rome concerning the catechumenate, baptism, the Eucharist and ordination. For example, it is from Hippolytus that the prayer comes down to us which overseers (that is, chief priests/presiding bishops) offered at ordinations in local communities:

Pour forth now that power which comes from Thee, the spirit of leadership!
Thou gavest it to Thy holy apostles through Thy beloved servant Jesus Christ.
They established the church in every place that became thy sanctuary that
Thy name be praised and thanked unceasingly!⁹

This perspective is very much in keeping with the gifts set out in 1 Corinthians 12:28 in which “spiritual leaders were first apostles; second, prophets, and third teachers.”¹⁰

The deep underlying faith in Christ and in the Holy Spirit is evident in Hippolytus’ understanding of the Eucharist:

We ask thee to send Thy Holy Spirit as a gift to Thy holy church. Make us one through this! Grant to all who partake in Thy holy things that they may be filled with the Holy Spirit so that their faith may be strengthened in the truth and we may praise and glorify Thee through Thy servant Jesus Christ through whom be glory and power to Thee with the Holy Spirit in the holy church both now and throughout the ages for ever and ever.¹¹

His determination to protect the sanctity of baptism is demonstrated by a long list of those whose occupations or behaviour excludes them from membership in the Church, to which he adds: “Should we have missed anything here, practical life will teach you, for we all have the Spirit of God.”¹²

His theology though also deserves to be better known, not least because the great Origen himself came to Rome from Alexandria to hear him lecture. Hippolytus stood in the great tradition of Logos theologians; and as we have seen, this helped him to expose the inadequacy of the Monarchian response to the issue of Christ's divinity in a monotheist faith. He developed Justin Martyr’s thought concerning the Logos by declaring the Word to be immanent with the Father from eternity but manifest

⁹ *The Apostolic Tradition*, chapters 2, 4. quoted in Arnold, p. 250. For a complete free online translation of the 43 chapters of *The Apostolic Tradition* see www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html.

¹⁰ Arnold, p. 24; note 60.

¹¹ *The Apostolic Tradition*, chapters 2, 4. quoted in Arnold, p. 256.

¹² *The Apostolic Tradition*, 16; quoted in Arnold, p. 114.

in an exterior manner in the Creation, the theophanies and the Incarnation. This was too much for Pope Callistus, however, who accused him of ditheism; not notably tritheism, for Hippolytus was either uninterested or dismissive of the divinity of the Spirit. That aside, his doctrine, although primitive and undeveloped, is not heterodox. Concerning salvation, he followed the teaching of St Irenaeus on recapitulation whereby Christ undid the fall of Adam and restored immortality to the human race. On a personal level he was perhaps an awkward character on account of his unbending conservatism and unrelenting hostility towards the local Roman hierarchy which gave him a certain not unmerited reputation. The fact that his legacy endures to this day, however, is its own testimonial.

Origen (c. 185 - c. 254)

History has not dealt kindly with Origen. During his lifetime the Alexandrian teacher was almost universally received amongst the fathers, martyrs and saints of the Church, inside and outside Alexandria, as a brilliant and faithful exegete of the Holy Scriptures. A man of remarkable piety and learning, he was sought after across the whole Christian world. Only his own Bishop, Demetrius, perhaps jealous of his fame, stripped him of his priesthood for having been ordained outside his own diocese. However, there was not the slightest hint that he was culpable of any heresy at this time although he had his detractors, few in number, not influential and in the main reacting against his Alexandrian tendency toward allegorical and symbolical meanings in sacred texts. The depth and complexity of Origen's intellect is evident in Father McGuckin's assessment of his life work:

Origen's guiding star in his intellectual life was the belief that the highest goals of philosophy were reconcilable with the mysterious plan of the divine wisdom (the Logos) and that in the sacred Scriptures, the gift of revelation and the human quest for enlightenment would meet, a symbolic

rapprochement that was mystically witnessed in the incarnation of the Logos within history.¹³

Origen is recognised as “the father of Christian exegesis;” and he brought his library with him from Alexandria to Caesarea in Palestine to become “the core of the world’s first Christian university.”¹⁴

If we list those fathers who admired him and those who were profoundly influenced by his theology the commendation is impressive—in the East: St. Firmilian, St Alexander of Jerusalem, Theoctistus of Caesarea, St. Anatolus of Laodicea, Julius Africanus, St. Hippolytus, St Dionysius of Alexandria, St Gregory the Wonderworker; (and after his death:), St Pamphilus, Eusebius of Caesarea, Didymus the Blind, St. Athanasius, St Gregory the Theologian, St. Basil the Great, St Gregory of Nyssa, who called him the Prince of Christian learning in the third century; and in the west: St. Eusebius of Vercel, St Hilary of Poitiers and St Ambrose of Milan. “The most influential of all Greek theologians, . . . his influence was as great as that of Augustine in the West.”¹⁵ In much of his preaching and teaching Origen reached out pastorally to communicate Christ to his people, for example in his treatise *On Prayer* when he insisted that in the face of temptations “when we have accomplished all we can by our ourselves, God will fulfil what is lacking because of human weakness.”¹⁶

Nonetheless, certain Origenist teachings were condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553, over 300 years after his death. Problems arose when Origen tried to fuse Alexandrian theology with Greek philosophy. He taught the pre-existence of souls, their transmigration at death and the freedom of action that would necessarily suppose the restoration of all things, universal salvation, at the end. However, Origen recognised incompatibilities within his speculative teachings; and,

¹³ McGuckin, “Origen of Alexandria,” p. 244.

¹⁴ McGuckin, “Origen of Alexandria,” pp. 244-245.

¹⁵ McGuckin, “Origen of Alexandria,” p. 243.

¹⁶ *On Prayer*, XXVIII, 19, For the full text of *On Prayer*, see <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/origen/prayer.html> .

for example, he fiercely denied that he believed Satan capable of redemption. He never dogmatised these matters; and they can hardly be thought to imperil the rest of his work. Sadly, this prolific author suffered the loss of most of his treatises, sermons, letters and commentaries posthumously but what remains, aside from these speculations is unimpeachable, provided that is one can tolerate his, at times, excessive Alexandrian allegorisation.

So, what went wrong? Sometimes the reputation of men can be spoilt by the excesses of overzealous disciples who take their master's thought well beyond the limits of Orthodox Catholic truth. This seems to have happened with Origen. In the second half of the fourth century a division arose between the monks of Nitria who exaggerated his teaching and those of Scetis who exhibited an extreme reaction against his spiritualising tendency by anthropomorphising Biblical references to God in their literal sense. It was the Origenist zealots, however, who posed the most significant threat to the faith of the Church, at first and mainly in monastic circles in Palestine and Egypt.

The first Origenist crisis was ended by the judgement of St John Chrysostom at the close of the fourth century. No formal action was taken against Origen in respect of his own teaching at this stage. The second Origenist crisis erupted at the beginning of the sixth century in and around Jerusalem, but it was Emperor Justinian who promoted a policy of censure leading to the condemnation of Origen at the Fifth Council. Thereafter Origenism became synonymous with the teaching of the pre-existence and transmigration of souls, an exaggerated Alexandrian Monarchianism within the Trinity (we can see echoes of this in the later teaching of Arius) and a sharply defined distinction between the physical and spiritual realms. Whether the whole weight of this should be borne by Origen is quite another matter.

Origen's legacy lived on in later times, albeit significantly modified in the Church's ascetical theology (cf. Evagrius) and in the teaching of the Cappadocian fathers, all

of whom admired him and were influenced by him. Origen's "great impact upon the early development of the monastic movement" was due in part to his "view of theological wisdom as fundamentally an ascetic ascent to communion with God."¹⁷

The Church in Alexandria was preoccupied in the third century with its mystical theology, trying to steer it away from the dualisms of Hellenistic philosophy whilst at the same time engaging with the same. Meanwhile, in Rome attention shifted again to the discipline of the Church, an issue which had in earlier periods proved problematic for St. Hippolytus and Tertullian.

Novatianism and St. Cyprian of Carthage (200-258)

Novatianism was a rigourist movement in the Church at Rome led by Novatian, a Roman presbyter who after the Decian persecution (249-250) strongly resisted the new Pope Cornelius' provision of a penitential return for those who had lapsed. He was consecrated bishop, the first known anti-pope, and attempted to set up a rival hierarchy, but his movement only survived as a small sect into the fifth century. Novatian was not a heretic, but rather a schismatic in that he separated from the Church on an issue of discipline. However, insofar as he supported an idea of the church as an exclusive body of the pure and the faithful his sectarian rigourism did not endure in the Church.

In North Africa much the same issues were being faced by St Cyprian of Carthage in the same period of persecution. Cyprian took a similar line to that of Novatian and hotly debated with Pope Stephen the status of sacraments administered by schismatic clergy arguing that they were not valid. In 257 Emperor Valerian renewed the Decian demand that Christians should sacrifice to idols. St Cyprian

¹⁷ McGuckin, "Origen of Alexandria," p. 243.

was exiled only to be quickly brought back to Carthage where he continued to confess his faith and was beheaded as a martyr under proconsul Galerius Maximus.¹⁸

At the beginning of the fourth century the issue of rehabilitation and re-baptism re-emerged with greater force and consequence in the Donatist Schism. It was St Augustine who at this time successfully argued for a more pastoral approach to the return of the lapsed and the recognition of the validity of the sacraments amongst those whose clergy had shrunk from martyrdom in times of persecution. In Augustine's view, "the Church Christ wished to institute . . . was more of a general hospital than a sanitised isolation ward."¹⁹ In line with his stricter approach in these matters, St Cyprian's ecclesiology tended towards exclusivism. He denied that there was any possibility of salvation outside the canonical boundaries of the Church. The more nuanced and accommodating position of the Church of Rome, following St Augustine, contrasted the stricter and more demanding standards of the Christian East and North Africa. In many ways that spectrum and polarity of ecclesiology and pastoral practice still endures between Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

The irony today perhaps is that Orthodoxy has arguably developed more pastoral flexibility than Rome, and this includes a softening of St Cyprian's teaching that there is no salvation to be found outside the Orthodox Catholic Church. Even so, there are still many Orthodox who maintain St Cyprian's ecclesiology - at least far as saying that there is no ecclesial reality beyond the canonical boundaries of the Orthodox Church, only heterodoxy. These shifts in approach between east and west have notably become evident in the contemporary development of ecumenism and in the response to artificial contraception, divorce and remarriage and other aspects of moral theology. These will be treated in more depth in Year 3.

¹⁸ For further information, see McGuckin, "Cyprian of Carthage," pp. 92-93.

¹⁹ McGuckin, "Donatism," p.108.