

Orthodoxy of Origen of Alexandria's Trinitarian Doctrine: Is his Theology Arian or Nicene?

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Abstract

Origen of Alexandria (184-254 CE) is one of the most influential theologians of early Church history. His Trinitarian theology is often designated as the originator of Arianism. In fact, Origen's orthodoxy is a much debated issue among ancient and modern scholars. Our essay aims to shed light to this debate through a comparison of Origen's Trinitarian views with the Nicene Creed and the doctrines of Arius.

Key Words: Origen, Trinitarian doctrine, Origenism, Arianism, the creed of Nicea.

Özet

İskenderiyeli Origen (184-254) erken kilise tarihinin en etkili teologlarından biridir. Ancak onun Teslis doktrini sıklıkla Aryüsçülük akımının kaynağı olmakla suçlanmıştır. Bu bağlamda Origen'in görüşlerinin ortodoksluğu antik çağda ve modern dönemde tartışma konusu olagelmıştır. Makalemizin amacı Origen'in görüşlerini İznik kredosu ve Aryüsçü doktrinler ile karşılaştırmak suretiyle söz konusu tartışmaya katkıda bulunmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Origen, Teslis doktrini, Origenizm, Aryüsçülük, İznik kredosu.

a. Origen's Theological Work

Origen of Alexandria (184-254) is one of the most influential and controversial figures of early Church history.¹ In fact, he is regarded by many as having

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¹ For Origen's life, works and theology you can consult the following: Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 3 *The Ante Nicene Literature after Irenaeus*, Notre Dame 1961, 37-101; Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*, Oxford and New York 2003, 135-144; Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen*, Oxford 1966, 66-111; W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church*, Minneapolis 1994, 85-94; J. Daniélou, *Origen* (trans. W. Mitchell), New York 1955; Hubertus A. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, transl. Siegfried S. Schatzmann, Peabody, Mass. 2007, 136-148; Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge 2006, 117-130; Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, New York 1992, 205-227; Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, London 1987, 131-148; Basil Studer, *Trinity and the Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church*, trans. Matthias Westerhoff, Collegeville, Minnesota 1993, 77-91; Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* London and New York 1998; P. Nautin, *Origène: Sa vie et son œuvre*, Paris 1981; H. Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall, Edinburgh 1989; C. Kannengiesser and W. L. Petersen (eds.), *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*, Notre Dame, Ind. 1988; Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church*, Atlanta 1983.

been the greatest figure in the Christian Church in the period between Paul and Augustine.² His admirer Eusebius of Caesarea devoted nearly the whole of the sixth chapter of his *Church History* to Origen, which is one of the most important sources for the latter's life and works.³ The first systematic theologian of Church history, Origen provided the first comprehensive exposition of the apostolic rule of faith on the bases of Platonic philosophy and allegorical exegesis of the scripture. He had an enormous impact on later Christian tradition through his allegorical interpretation and his speculative theology. However, his over-engagement with philosophy in the exposition of his theology provoked criticism and caused formidable ecclesiastical disputes, known as the "Origenist controversies," in the late fourth and the sixth centuries.⁴ Indeed, Origen has been criticized for letting philosophical concepts and problems dominate his theology.⁵

The major task of his life's work was to interpret the scriptures and explain the Christian faith for his generation in the Church. Both his biblical commentaries and dogmatic works were written to explain and defend the Christian faith against various Gnostic sects and pagan and Jewish critics of the Christian religion.⁶ His major theological work, *De principiis* [περὶ ἀρχῶν], is considered to be the first Christian system of theology and the first manual of Christian dogma.⁷ The treatise also constituted a major apologetic effort aimed at refuting the theologies of the Gnostics Marcion and Valentinus.⁸

² Frend, *The Early Church*, 85.

³ Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (transl. G.A. Williamson), New York 1989, 179-220.

⁴ For the Origenistic controversies see Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 433-445 and 613-627; Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church*, 147-148; E.A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate*, Princeton, N.J. 1992; Trigg, *Origen*, 62-66.

⁵ Quasten, *Patrology*, 42.

⁶ Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 135.

⁷ Quasten, *Patrology*, 57. Critical editions of *De Principiis*: P. Koetschau (ed.), *De principiis*, vol. 5 of *Origenes Werke*, GCS 22, Leipzig 1913; H. Görgemanns and H. Karpp (eds.), *Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, TzF 24, Darmstadt 1976; H. Crouzel and M. Simonetti (eds.), *Traité des principes*, 5 vols., SC 252, 253, 268, 269, 312, Paris 1978-1984; translations: F. Crombie, trans., "Origen De principiis," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF), Peabody, Mass. 1995, repr. of 1885 ed., 4:237-384; W.W. Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles: Being Koetschau's Text of the De principiis Translated into English, Together with an Introduction and Notes*, London 1936; repr., Gloucester, Mass. 1973. We will use the ANF translation throughout the essay.

⁸ Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 135. For Gnosticism of the second century see Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: the Nature and History of Gnosticism*, P.W. Coxon, K.H. Kuhn and R. Wilson (transls.), New York 1987, 308-326; Giovanni Filoramo, *Gnosticism Tarihi*, Selma Aygül Baş, Bilal Baş (transls.), İstanbul 2005; P. Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism*, New York 1980; H. A. Green, *The Economic and Social Origins of Gnosticism*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 77, Atlanta 1985; R.M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 2nd rev.ed., New York 1966; Şinasi Gündüz, *Sabitler-Son Gnostikler-İnanç Esasları ve İbadetleri*, İstanbul 1994, 109-149.

In the preface to his *De principiis*, Origen explains that his intention is to lay out a systematic presentation of the fundamental principles of the apostolic rule of faith, much as the title "*On first principles*" indicates. He begins by declaring the rule of faith to be the criterion for all theology. However, whatever is left partly defined or undefined in the rule, according to Origen, is open to interpretation and free inquiry by qualified theologians:

Now it ought to be known that the holy apostles, in preaching the faith of Christ, delivered themselves with the utmost clearness on certain points which they believed to be necessary to every one, even to those who seemed somewhat dull in the investigation of divine knowledge; leaving, however, the grounds of their statements to be examined into by those who should deserve the excellent gifts of the Spirit, and who, especially by means of the Holy Spirit Himself, should obtain the gift of language, of wisdom, and of knowledge...⁹

The task of theology is to explain the truths of the apostolic rule of faith as well as to explicate various unanswered questions regarding the origin of the human soul, of the angels, of Satan, etc.¹⁰ Origen thus paves the way for speculative theology; and for this reason might well be considered as the founder of systematic and speculative theology.

Origen's mind seems to have been shaped by philosophical problems and concepts; his system incorporates large elements of Platonic philosophy and this made him one of the most controversial theologians of early Church history both during and after his lifetime. Origen had his critics and admirers whose views clashed in the Origenist controversies.¹¹ Nevertheless, his thought was so complicated that both groups' readings of his works could be accused of misunderstanding and misrepresenting his theology. Even during his life the theologian suffered from misapprehension from both his admirers and opponents.¹² When his major theological work *De principiis* was appealed to in justification of speculative theology, the more conservative theologians reacted against Origen's views; in fact, in the late fourth century Jerome and Epiphanius, and in the sixth the emperor Justinian I, criticized and condemned his views.¹³

Origen's Trinitarian theology, as constructed in *De principiis*, was a major attempt to overcome the different understandings among Christians of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the three personae of the Trinity.¹⁴ In articulating the relations among the Father, the Son, and the

⁹ *De principiis*, Pref., 3.

¹⁰ Quasten, *Patrology*, 59.

¹¹ See footnote 4.

¹² Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 143.

¹³ Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church*, 147-148.

¹⁴ Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 143.

Holy Spirit, nevertheless, Origen opposed the monarchian interpretation, which stressed the unity of the Godhead and explained the three personae as different aspects of the same divinity. He argued that the true monotheistic conception should recognize the distinctive realities among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Origen's Trinitarian theology, in stressing these realities, used the language of derivation for the Son, and implied rather explicitly an ontological subordination among the three. Therefore, Origen, through his attempt to craft a systematic exposition of the Trinitarian theology, paved the way for future debate on the Trinitarian theology in the next century: to a large extent, the Arian dispute is the direct result of his speculative theology.¹⁵

Origen also uses some expressions that clearly imply the Son's full divinity. His Trinitarian theology thus seems rather divided and overly complicated. Whether his Trinitarian theology is orthodox by the measure of Nicea is a much disputed problem among ancient and modern scholars of Christian dogma, due to his inconsistent language. Some scholars think that Origen's theology is subordinationist and as such is the originator of Arianism. Others, however, claim that such an interpretation is a misreading of Origen's theology and that he might be considered an orthodox.¹⁶ The object of our essay is to discuss this question through a comparison between the Trinitarian theology of the Nicene Creed and Origen's Trinitarian views. Since the Nicene Creed is largely worded to ward off Arian doctrines, Origen's Trinitarian theology will also be evaluated in comparison with Arianism.

¹⁵ Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 143; Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 216. For Arianism see Bilal Baş, "Monoteist Bir Hıristiyanlık Yorumu: Aryüşçülük Mezhebi," *Diwan*, 9 (2000/2) p. 167-200; R. C. Gregg (ed.), *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments*, Cambridge, Mass. 1985; J. T. Lienhard, "The 'Arian' Controversy: Some Categories Reconsidered," *Texts and Studies* 48 (1987): 415-37; C. Kannengiesser, "Alexander and Arius of Alexandria: The Last Ante-Nicene Theologians," *Compostellanum* 35 (1990): 93-105; L.W. Barnard, "What Was Arius' Philosophy?" *Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (1972): 110-117; R. D. Williams, "The Logic of Arianism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1983): 56-81; Michel R. Barnes and Daniel H. Williams (eds.), *Arianism After Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts*, Edinburgh 1993; E. Boularand, *L'Hérésie d'Arius et la "foi" de Nicée*, 2 vols., Paris 1972; A. Martin, "Le fil D'Arius: 325-335," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 84 (1989): 297-333; R. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, London 1987; Mehmet Aydın, *Hıristiyan Genel Konsilleri ve II. Vatikan Konsili*, Konya 1991, 13-14; Francis Dvornik, *Konsiller Tarihi İznik'ten 2. Vatikan'a*, trans. Mehmet Aydın, Ankara 1990, 5-11; H. M. Gwatkin, *The Arian Controversy*, New York 1979; Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea*, trans. Conn O'Donovan, London 1976; Mehmet Bayraktar, *Bir Hıristiyan Dogması: Teslis*, Ankara 2007, 124-127. For a comprehensive review of the modern scholarship of Arianism see Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 1-25 and G.C. Stead, "Arius in Modern Research," *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994): 24-36.

¹⁶ For an overview of the different currents of the debate see Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 131-148.

b. The Problem of the Trinity

The earliest Christians held a monotheist concept of God as eternal and as the creator of the universe, a concept taken from the Jewish tradition.¹⁷ As a principle, this one God was essential for Christians in their battle against formidable opponents, such as paganism, Gnostic emanationism, and Marcionite dualism. The Christian God was the same God that had sent the law and the prophets, the inspirer of both the Old and the New Testaments. This was essential.¹⁸

Christians also asserted that they experienced this supreme deity in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as separate entities in the Godhead. Expressions of this experience in the New Testament were the starting point of the doctrine of the Trinity. Christians came to claim that they believed in one God in three separate and different entities. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were separate Gods and yet they were one deity.¹⁹

The Trinitarian theology thus assumed the duty of explaining this apparent dichotomy between the unity and the separate identities of the Trinity. The difficulty of the task lay in maintaining the unity of the Trinity, and, at the same time, in taking care not to annul their separate identities. In simple terms, the main problem of the Trinitarian theology is to give a reasonable explanation for the two apparently contradictory principles of the Christian faith: on the one hand, God is absolutely one; on the other, this unity expresses itself in three different personalities, whose distinct, separate, and equal natures are to be confessed. That is to say, Christianity insists on defining itself as a monotheist faith; hence, charges of ditheism or tritheism must be refuted. Yet, the principle of monotheism should not annul the separate identities of the three persons of the Godhead, i.e., the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.²⁰

The theologians who emphasized the unity of the Godhead were charged with subordinationism and denying absolute equality among the three. On the other hand, the theologians who underlined their separate natures were charged with tritheism as to endanger the principle of the unity in the Trinity. Orthodox doctrine thus tries to find a middle way between subordinationism and tritheism in explaining the fundamental principles of the unity of God and the separate and distinctive natures of the Trinity.

¹⁷ For the earliest Christian monotheism see Bayrakdar, *Teslis*, 17-34; M. Atâ'u'r-Rahim and Ahmed Thomson, *Bir İslam Peygamberi Hz. İsa* (trans. Gülsüm Mehdiyev), İstanbul 2009, 109-149.

¹⁸ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 85-87.

¹⁹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 88-95.

²⁰ For the early doctrine of the Trinity see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 85-136 and 255-279; Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 172-225; Bayrakdar, *Teslis*, 35-94.

The first two ecumenical councils in Church history, Nicea (325)²¹ and Constantinople (381)²² both resulted from the Trinitarian disputes of the fourth century. As mentioned above, to a large extent, Origen's speculations on Trinitarian theology set the terms of the debates between the Arian and the orthodox parties on this subject. To many ancient and modern scholars, Origen's Trinitarian theology was in fact responsible for the rise of Arianism. On the other hand, for an alternative group of ancient and modern scholars, Origen's theology is closer to orthodoxy and charges of Arianism laid against Origen's Trinitarian views originate from a misreading of his exposition.²³

Origen lived and explained the Trinitarian formula long before the outbreak of the Arian disputes, and therefore the application of Nicene orthodoxy or Arian views to his Trinitarian speculations might be called anachronistic.²⁴ Nevertheless, his writings constituted the major reference for the entire range of Trinitarian disputes by both parties during the Arian controversy and the Origenist disputes of the late fourth and sixth centuries. This being the case, it becomes legitimate and meaningful to ask whether his Trinitarian theology is orthodox according to a Nicene measure.

c. Arian Doctrines and the Creed of Nicea

Arianism was a Trinitarian debate, since the main problem was the nature of the Son and his relation to the Father, i.e., whether he was as equally divine as

²¹ For the council of Nicea (325) consult the following: B. Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology*, trans. C. O'Donovan, London 1982; T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, Edinburgh 1988; G. C. Stead, "Eusebius and the Council of Nicea," *Journal of Theological Studies* 24 (1973): 85-100; D. L. Holland, "The Creeds of Nicea and Constantinople Reexamined," *Church History* 38 (1969): 248-61; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed., London 1972, 205-62; A. de Halleux, "La réception du symbole œcuménique, de Nicée à Chalcédonie," *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 61 (1985): 1-47; Aydın, *Hristiyan Genel Konsilleri*, 13-14; Dvornik, *Konsiller Tarihi*, 5-11.

²² For the council of Constantinople (381) consult the following: T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, Edinburgh 1988; D. L. Holland, "The Creeds of Nicea and Constantinople Reexamined," *Church History* 38 (1969): 248-61; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 296-367; R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy*, 318-381, Edinburgh 1989, 791-823; I. Ortiz de Urbina, *Nicée et Constantinople, Histoire des conciles œcuméniques* 1, Paris 1963, 137-242; Thomas Torrance, *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*, A.D. 381, Edinburgh 1981; A. de Halleux, "La profession de l'Esprit-Saint dans le symbole de Constantinople," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 10 (1979): 5-39; Aydın, *Hristiyan Genel Konsilleri*, 14-15.

²³ For a thorough exposition of Origen's doctrine and the issues of ancient and modern disputes on Origen see Williams, *Arius*, 131-157; Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, 95-103.

²⁴ Origen died in 254, Arius first made his views public in 317 while the Nicene Creed was promulgated in 325.

the Father. Adolph V. Harnack states the central question of the debate as follows: "Is the divine who appeared on the earth and had made its presence felt, identical with the supreme Divine that rules heaven and earth?"²⁵ Since it was worded to refute Arian claims for the subordination of the Son to the Father, the Nicene Creed's main interest was the question of whether the Son is as divine as the Father.²⁶

The wording of the creed was designed to emphasize the divinity and eternity of the Son as being equal to that of the Father. The Nicene Creed was so emphatic on this matter that out of the 26 lines of the original text only 3 are related to the Father and one to the Holy Spirit, while the remaining 22 lines are reserved for the Son.²⁷ As these figures reveal, the Nicene Creed is a sophisticated refutation of Arian doctrine. Now, since Nicene orthodoxy and Arianism are interconnected, the question of the orthodoxy of Origen's Trinitarian theology according to Nicene criteria should also take the Arian doctrines into consideration. In other words, the question of the orthodoxy of Origen's Trinitarian theology involves the question of its Arianism; therefore the relation between Origen's Trinitarian theology and Arian doctrine should be evaluated.

Arius's Trinitarian theology solved the tension between the unity and the trinity by emphasizing the unity of the Father; thereby subordinating the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father. The starting point of Arius's theology is the transcendent Father who is the absolute monad and only eternal deity. He is the only unbegotten (*ἀγέννητος*) God. Arius assumes a total separation between God and all other beings. He is a simple, spiritual being whose substance cannot be divided or diffused. As the cause of all other beings, he created the Son from nothing. He is thus not eternally Father; this attribute applies to Him only since creating the Son. Similarly, there existed a monad eternally, but dyad came into being with the generation of his Son, and a triad with the production of the Spirit or Wisdom.²⁸

Since the transcendent God cannot have any direct relations with matter, he has begotten his Son/Word as a means of creation before all ages. The Son then was created by the will of God as a free creature, though not out of God's substance. He is designated as the "Word" or the "Wisdom" in the Scriptures. He has a beginning like every other creature. In other words, there was a time when the Son was not. The Son, moreover, in accordance with the purpose of his

²⁵ Adolph V. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, New York 1961, IV/1.

²⁶ For the creed of Nicea see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 215-6.

²⁷ For the Greek text see Karl Joseph V. Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils*, Edinburgh 1883-96, I/4; Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church*, 292-294.

²⁸ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 194; Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church*, 236; Williams, *Arius*, 95-116.

creation, created the universe. As for the Holy Spirit, Arius states that he is a spiritual being who is ontologically inferior to the Son and superior to all other beings.²⁹

Arius therefore emphasized the following points in his Trinitarian theology: a) the Father and the Son are ontologically different beings—the Father being the absolute, transcendent, and eternal God, with the Son belonging to the created; b) Arius assumes an absolute ontological subordination between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; c) the Son is not eternal, but his existence has a beginning.

The Trinitarian theology of the Nicene Creed is worded with the specific task of refuting these Arian doctrines. First of all, the creed underlines the ontological equality and sameness of the Son with the Father as well as the Son's divinity.³⁰ Phrases such as "from the substance of the Father" (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς), "God from God" (θεὸν ἐκ θεοῦ), "light from light" (φῶς ἐκ φωτός), "true God from true God" (θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ), were carefully drafted to refute the Arian claim of ontological separation between the Father and the Son by declaring the divinity of the Son as being equal to that of the Father. More importantly, the creed secures the divinity of the Son by stating that He is "consubstantial with the Father" (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ). The creed also anathematizes those who claim "that he [Son] is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion." Secondly, the creed also refutes the ontological subordination of the Son to the Father, stating that He is just as divine as the Father. Finally, the creed emphasizes that the Son is as eternal as the Father. According to the creed, the Son cannot have a beginning in time. Therefore, whoever says "that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not" will be anathematized.

In short, the Trinitarian theology of the Nicene Creed emphasizes that the Son is equal to the Father in terms of divinity, and that as such there can be neither an ontological separation nor any kind of subordination between the Father and the Son. Moreover, the Son is as divine as the Father and is not created; therefore, he is as eternal as the Father.

Origen's Trinitarian Theology: Arian or Nicene?

The question of the orthodoxy of Origen's Trinitarian theology by the measure of the Nicene Creed then becomes one of situating it among the Trinitarian doctrines of Arius and that of the Nicene Creed. In light of these alternative

²⁹ Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 276.

³⁰ For the Greek text and translation see Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils*, I/4-5.

Trinitarian theologies; we will evaluate whether his views are closer to the Arian or the Nicene position.

In his *De principiis*, Origen gives a systematic exposition of his Trinitarian theology. As a thorough Platonist, his main polemical target seems to be the materialism of Stoic metaphysics.³¹ He begins his exposition of the doctrine of God by refuting those who argue that "...even according to the declarations of our own Scriptures, God is a body."³² These commentators, argues the theologian, interpret biblical passages such as "God is a consuming fire,"³³ and "God is a spirit"³⁴ anthropomorphically so as to imply that God is a body. Against such views, the basic principle of Origen's doctrine of God is His absolute transcendence and incorporeality. He refers to many Johannine passages such as "God is light (φῶς) and in Him there is no darkness (σκοτία) at all"³⁵ and "God is a spirit (πνεῦμα), and they who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth (ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ)"³⁶ to support his claim that the Scripture calls God "spirit" in order to distinguish Him from bodies; and also calls Him truth to distinguish God from a shadow or image.³⁷

Origen interprets the Johannine identification of God with "truth" within the paradigm of Platonic metaphysics. His intention seems to be that of erecting a firm barrier between the transcendent God belonging to the realm of ideas and a more worldly God of the realm of images or shadows. God cannot be a shadow or image, for this is a property of the material world. In short, designation of God as the "spirit" and "truth" in the scripture, argues Origen, reinforces his claim that He is an incorporeal, spiritual, and transcendent being. He contends that biblical references that might imply God's corporeality such as "God is a consuming fire"³⁸ must be interpreted allegorically.³⁹

The Nicene Creed does not say much about God the Father except the following: "We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of all things both seen and unseen."⁴⁰ However, the creed, in using the word "Father" (πατέρα), implies that the Godhead existed eternally as Trinity. Origen, on the other hand, begins his Trinitarian theology with God whom he never designates as "the

³¹ Chadwick, *Early Christian Tradition*, 106.

³² *De principiis*, I, 1.

³³ Deut. 4:24.

³⁴ John, 4:24.

³⁵ 1 John, 1:5.

³⁶ John 4:23-24.

³⁷ *De principiis*, I, 4.

³⁸ Deut. 4:24.

³⁹ *De principiis*, I, 2.

⁴⁰ "Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ὁρατῶν τε ἀοράτων ποιητήν."

Father." Origen thus implies that only one God, a "monad," existed eternally:

God, therefore, is not to be thought of as being either a body or as existing in a body, but as an uncompounded intellectual nature, admitting within Himself no addition of any kind; so that He cannot be believed to have within him a greater and a less, but is such that he is in all parts *Μονάς*, and, so to speak, *Ἐνάς*, and is the mind and source from which all intellectual nature or mind takes its beginning.⁴¹

Origen's God is thus an uncompounded intellectual nature, the *Μονάς* or *Ἐνάς*, Who does not admit in Himself any addition. He is the mind out of which all intellectual beings came to exist. This intellectual, spiritual monad is the most fundamental first principle of Origen's Trinitarian theology. Therefore, God, the first person of the Trinity, is noticeably distinguished from the Son and the Holy Spirit. As such, Origen's Trinitarian theology seems to underline the unity of the Godhead over against the Trinity. This preference, one might say, paves the way for subordination among the Trinity. We may contend that such emphasis on the unity of the monad and its ensuing subordination constitutes a stark contrast to the Trinitarianism of the Nicene Creed, which is very careful to underline the equal divinity of the Son and the Father.⁴² On the other hand, we might argue that Arius's doctrine of God follows that of Origen in many ways. Arius's radical subordinationism, in fact, derives from his understanding of God as an absolute transcendent Father, who is the absolute monad, and the only eternal deity, a concept that can easily be traced back to Origen.⁴³

Origen argues that the incorporeal spiritual God is also incomprehensible by human reason, for the limited cognitive capacities of humans cannot measure, in any way, the unlimited; yet Origen acknowledges a certain comprehension of God's magnitude through his works in creation.⁴⁴ He denies every possibility of communication between this incorporeal nature and corporeal existence, for any relation of the perfect absolute being with the non-perfect material world would entail a certain limitation and a consequent defect on the part of God. In short, according to Origen, there is a necessary detachment or separation between the incorporeal one and the corporeal many.

John in his Gospel, when asserting that "no one has seen God at any time"⁴⁵ manifestly declares to all who are capable of understanding, that there is no nature to which God is visible: not as if He were a being who was visible by nature, and

⁴¹ *De principiis*, I, 6.

⁴² "...that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father..."

⁴³ *De principiis*, I, 1.

⁴⁴ *De principiis*, I, 5-6.

⁴⁵ John, 1:18.

merely escaped or baffled the view of a frailer creature, but because by the nature of his being it is impossible for Him to be seen.⁴⁶

The only possible relation of human beings with the incorporeal God is through their incorporeal part, i.e. the mind or the soul, or the heart; for the incorporeal cannot have any relation with the corporeal. In fact, in interpreting the verse of Matthew, "blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,"⁴⁷ Origen asserts that God can be seen not with the eyes but with the heart, which is the mind of those who are worthy.⁴⁸

In articulating his doctrine of the Son, the second element of the Trinity, Origen interprets the verse that speaks of the Son as, "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature."⁴⁹ He first ascribes the attribute of invisibility to the image as well; as such the Son becomes "the invisible image of the invisible God."⁵⁰ According to Origen, invisibility involves the transcendence and incorporeality of the divine. In this context, Origen underlines the true divinity and incorporeality of the Son as the Father. He defines the Father and the Son as transcendent, incorporeal, and spiritual realities, who are both detached from all creatures:

Whatever, therefore, is a property of bodies, cannot be predicated either of the Father or of the Son; but what belongs to the nature of deity is common to the Father and the Son.⁵¹ Now this image [the Son] contains the unity of nature and substance belonging to Father and Son.⁵²

Origen thus emphasizes the unity of substance between the Father and the Son, underlining the true divinity of the latter. From the point of view of Nicene orthodoxy, his position would perfectly agree with the principle of consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, and his view thus fits into orthodoxy. The continuation of the last passage, however, hints at an unwillingness to refer the divine attributes and power to both the Father and the Son equally; rather, it considers the source and real owner of these qualities to be the Father, Who, out of His will, gives them to the Son. In other words, the unity of will and action between the two is referred to the Father, who alone has the power and the will. The Son, accordingly, receives them from the Father:

⁴⁶ *De principiis*, I, 8.

⁴⁷ Mat., 5:8.

⁴⁸ *De principiis*, I, 9.

⁴⁹ Col., 1:15. "ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως."

⁵⁰ *De principiis*, II, 5-6.

⁵¹ *De principiis*, I, 8.

⁵² *De principiis*, II, 6.

For if the Son do, in like manner, all those things which the Father doth, then, in virtue of the Son doing all things like the Father, is the image of the Father formed in the Son, who is born of Him, like an act of His will proceeding from the mind. And I am therefore of opinion that the will of the Father ought alone to be sufficient for the existence of which He wishes to exist. For in the exercise of His will He employs no other way then that which is made known by the counsel of His will. And thus also the existence of the Son is generated by Him.⁵³

The existence of the Son and the will that he exercises in concord with His Father's belongs in fact to the Father. The Son therefore derives his existence and will from the Father. Hence Origen uses the language of derivation for the Son, a concept that implies His subordination to the Father. Similarly, the existence of the Son is generated by the Father. Origen does not, like Arius, openly separate the substance and nature of the Son from the Father; nevertheless, his doctrine of the Son does make the latter almost a secondary deity who derives His existence from the Father. In this regard, it is difficult to say that Origen's position is orthodox according to the creed of Nicea, for, against such a subordinationist understanding, the creed insists that the Son is God to an equal degree as the Father by means of the phrase "true God from true God." It is difficult to maintain that Origen's Trinitarian theology agrees with such a complete equality between the Father and the Son.

The Son is commissioned by the Father as the mediator who reveals the Father to humans. The Johannine verse, "He who has seen me has seen the Father also,"⁵⁴ is interpreted by the theologian as subordinating the Son to the Father epistemologically: the Son is the image who reveals the Father to us. The implication is that the mediator through whom humans can understand the Father represents a lower level of knowledge and perception than whose knowledge he mediates; He therefore is subordinated to the Father. As a Platonist, Origen assumes that the Father is incomprehensible except through a mediator. The Nicene Creed also considers the Logos as the facet of God, which deals with the cosmos and humanity: he is the one who realized the creation, and the salvation. He also will judge the living and the dead at the end of the world:

...through whom all things came to be, both those in heaven and those in earth; for us humans and for our salvation he came down and became incarnate, became human, suffered and rose up on the third day, went up into heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead.⁵⁵

However, contrary to Origen, who assumes a natural subordination of the

⁵³ *De principiis*, II, 6.

⁵⁴ John, 14:9.

⁵⁵ Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils*, I/5.

Logos, the mediator to the Father, the Nicene Creed considers the Father and the Son to be complete equals. According to the creed, the Son's being the agent of creation of cosmos and salvation and judgment of humanity in no way implies that He is a secondary God.

Origen similarly uses the language of mediatorship in the interpretation of certain other verses such as the Pauline designation of Christ as "the brightness of the glory of God, and express figure of His person":⁵⁶

For agreeably to what we have already explained as to the manner in which He is the Way, and conducts to the Father; and in which He is the Word, interpreting the secrets of Wisdom...and is also the Truth, and the Life, and the Resurrection, in the same way ought we to understand also the meaning of His being the brightness: for it is by its splendour that we understand and feel what the light is. And His splendour, presenting itself gently and softly to the frail and weak eyes of the mortals, and gradually training, as it were, and accustoming them to bear the brightness of the life renders them capable of enduring the splendour of that light, being made in this respect also a sort of mediator between men and the light.⁵⁷

Origen uses these verses that define the Son as the reflection, image, or light of the Glory as to imply the Son's ontological subordination, for the figure or the image is naturally lesser than the one whom he figures or images. As a matter of fact, Origen's doctrine of the Son makes a distinction between His position as the only-begotten Son of God and His disposition as the incarnate Son:

In the first place, we must note that the nature of that deity which is in Christ in respect of His being the only-begotten Son of God is one thing, and that human nature which He assumed in these last times for the dispensation (of grace) is another.⁵⁸

This matter relates more to the question of Christology, and Origen seems to have played an important role in terms of setting the questions of Christological debate. Nevertheless, these remarks have also important implications for Trinitarian theology. We have mentioned that Origen's doctrine of the eternally begotten Son of God implies ontological and epistemological subordination. In relation to the incarnation, however, Origen maintains that, during the incarnation, the Son had to divest himself of his divine attributes, and that such divesting was necessary so that human perception can receive the knowledge of the divine. Yet if the Son is "the image of the invisible Father,"⁵⁹ as the eternally begotten Son of God, He becomes doubly subordinated to the incorporeal Father

⁵⁶ Heb., 1:3.

⁵⁷ *De principiis*, II, 7.

⁵⁸ *De principiis*, II, 1.

⁵⁹ Col., 1:15.

when divesting Himself of His divine attributes during the incarnation:

...the Son of God, who was in the form of God, divesting Himself (of His glory), makes it His object, by this very divesting of Himself, to demonstrate to us the fullness of His deity. For instance, suppose that there were a statue of so enormous a size as to fill the whole world, and which on that account could be seen by no one; and that another statue were formed altogether resembling it in the shape of the limbs, and in the features of the countenance, and in form and material, but without the same immensity of size, so that those who were unable to behold the one of enormous proportions, should, on seeing the latter, acknowledge that they had seen the former, because it preserved all the features of its limbs and countenance, and even the very form and material, so closely, as to be altogether undistinguishable from it; by some such similitude, the Son of God, divesting Himself of His equality with the Father, and showing to us the way to the knowledge of Him, is made the express image of His person...⁶⁰

Therefore, that the Son is “express figure of His person” is interpreted in such a way as to explain that, in order to reveal God’s knowledge, the Son divested Himself of His equal divinity. In other words, before the incarnation, the Son, in Origen’s words, was the “invisible image of the invisible Father” and when he became incarnate He divested himself from this invisibility, which implies His transcendence and incorporeality, and became a visible image of the invisible Father. The incarnation, then, implies a double subordination for the Son.

Nicene orthodoxy, on the other hand, maintains that the eternal Son of God, who is of the same substance with the Father, is the agent of creation, salvation, and the last judgment. Origen’s double subordination is therefore not acceptable according to the principles of the creed. As a matter of fact, in his well-known *De incarnatione*, Athanasius, the foremost champion of Nicene orthodoxy, makes a cogent argument that creation of the world and the incarnation in the person of Jesus for the salvation of humanity had to have been accomplished by the same agent, the Logos of God.⁶¹

In short, Origen’s doctrine of the Son is orthodox according to the Nicene measure insofar as he acknowledges the eternity and equality of the Son to the Father. The Son shares all the attributes that the Father possesses. He even states that the Son is absolutely incorporeal, like the Father, and that He is of the same transcendent nature as the Father.⁶² In this regard, the Nicene concept of consubstantiality is perfectly acknowledged by Origen. We may contend

⁶⁰ *De principiis*, II, 8.

⁶¹ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 203. For Athanasius’s doctrine of salvation see Bilal Baş, “Creation and the Incarnation in Athanasius’s Doctrine of Salvation,” *Kutatgubilig*, 16 (2009): 277-299.

⁶² *De principiis*, II, 9-10.

therefore that it is incorrect to declare Origen's doctrine as unorthodox on the basis of the actual wording of the Nicene Creed, since he would have concurred with every single phrase used to designate the Son's relationship with the Father. Yet Origen's doctrine of the Son also has important features that attribute subordination to the Son. In explaining the unity of all attributes shared between the Father and the Son, he ascribes the source of these attributes to the Father: the Father is thus designated as the real owner of the attributes who, out of His will, gives them to His Son. Origen also assumes that the divinity and existence of the Son originally belong to the Father, who, again out of His will, bestows them on His Son. The Son's existence and divinity therefore are derived from the Father. Origen uses the concept of generation for the Son, according to which the Father generates His Son eternally.⁶³ Since He is generated, the Son has a beginning, but not in time.

In conclusion, Origen's Trinitarian theology presupposes an ontological subordination of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father. As a thorough Platonist, it was difficult for Origen to consider the Trinity as the principle of existence. He rather assumes the Monad/God as the principle of existence, from which the Son and the Holy Spirit are given their existences through eternal generation and eternal procession, respectively. The Monad is a transcendent, incorporeal principle whose nature prevents Him from communicating with the universe directly; therefore, God has to utilize the Son as a mediator for creation, salvation, revelation, and judgment. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is His agent for sanctification.⁶⁴ Such are the main principles of Origen's Trinitarian theology.

In philosophical terms, this same theology depends on the principle of ontological subordination from the incorporeal, intellectual Monad—the Father—to corporeal cosmos and humanity. The One, as the most perfect existence, cannot communicate with the corporeal without losing His perfection or limiting some of His attributes; hence, He needs an agent, a mediator for every kind of relation with the cosmos. The second and third persons of Origen's Trinity are thus given their existence for that specific reason: the Father exercises His power on the cosmos through the Son in matters of providence, salvation, revelation and judgment. Similarly, the Father employs the Holy Spirit for matters of sanctification. The Father, nevertheless, fully shares His attributes with the Son and the Holy Spirit; they are both as powerful as the Father; they have the same will as the Father. As long as they share the same attributes, Origen's Trinitarian theology acknowledges their equality and as such conforms to the Nicene Trinitarian theology. However, the real origin and source of divine attributes is the Father, Who eternally generated the Son and produced the Holy Spirit. The

⁶³ *De principiis*, I, 2.

⁶⁴ *De principiis*, III, 1-3.

Son's generation and the Holy Spirit's procession are both eternal and continuous processes, through which they both derive their existences from the Father.⁶⁵

As far as Origen acknowledges that all divine nature and attributes are equally shared by the trinity, his Trinitarian theology cannot be anathematized on the basis of the literal meaning of the Nicene Creed. In fact, it accords with every single phrase of the latter text. Even the controversial *homoousius* would be approved by Origen, for he believes that as far as the Son shares the nature and attributes of the Father, this phrase would perfectly express their relation. Origen claims that the Son is begotten by the Father but not in time; thus, he would never say "there was a time when he was not." Nor would he say "before he was begotten he was not." Yet if it were not for the time categories, Origen would agree with the anathematized statements that the Son derived His existence from the Father but not in time and that He is eternally generated by the Father:

Wherefore we have always held that God is the Father of His only-begotten Son, who was born indeed of Him, and derives from Him what He is, but without any beginning, not only such as may be measured by any divisions of time, but even that which the mind alone can contemplate within itself, or behold, so to speak, with the naked powers of the understanding. And therefore we must believe that Wisdom was generated before any beginning that can be either comprehended or expressed.⁶⁶

This language of generation and derivation for the second and third elements of the Trinity comes from Origen's belief that absolute existence belongs only to God the Father, for there is no other absolute existence, power, or will except for the Father's. Origen's Trinitarian theology would thus agree with many Arian notions that imply derivation, generation, and beginning for the Son with the only difference being time categories. Since the main principle of their respective Trinitarian theologies was the Platonic notion of the absolute monad, the incorporeal and transcendent God, Origen and Arius both assumed subordination among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As for our main question regarding Origen's Trinitarian theology, we can conclude that, according to the literal wording of the Nicene Creed, it might well be considered orthodox. However, his Trinitarian theology is conceptually unorthodox due to notions of subordination among the members of the Trinity, the language of derivation, and generation for the Son and the Holy Spirit. Origen's Trinitarian theology then is orthodox and unorthodox at the same time by the standard of Nicea.

⁶⁵ *De principiis*, II, 2 and III, 3-5.

⁶⁶ *De principiis*, II, 2.

Conclusion

The Nicene Creed claimed that the Son belongs to the sphere of the divinity, in contradistinction to the Arian doctrine, which situates Him among the created. Origen, as far as he acknowledges the true divinity of the Son, would agree with the Nicene Creed on this specific issue. In fact, he acknowledges that the Son of God is of the same incorporeal nature as the Father:

If, then, it is once rightly understood that the only-begotten Son of God is His wisdom hypostatically existing, I know not whether our curiosity ought to advance beyond this, or entertain any suspicion that *ὑπόστασις* or *substantia* contains anything of a bodily nature, since everything that is corporeal is distinguished either by form, or colour, or magnitude.⁶⁷

From the perspective of subordinationism, however, Origen's theology is similar to Arianism with the important difference that while the former situates the Son within the sphere of the divine, the latter considers Him among the created. We believe that, in the final analysis, Origen's Trinitarian views are closer to that of Arianism than to the position of the Nicene Creed because of Origen's dominant notion of the absolute monad as the principle of existence and the ensuing subordination of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father.

As for the main problem of Trinitarian theology—the tension between the unity and trinity of the Godhead—Origen definitely favored unity over trinity. He thus subordinated the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father and in this manner paved the way for Arianism. The fifteenth century philosopher and theologian George Scholarius remarks about Origen that “he splendidly defended Christianity, wonderfully expounded Scripture, and wrote a noble exhortation to martyrdom. But he was also the father of Arianism, and worst of all, said that hellfire would not last forever.”⁶⁸ As a matter of fact, Origen shared with Arius the same subordinationist Trinitarian theology with the only difference that the former placed the Son and the Holy Spirit in the sphere of divinity while the latter made them among the created.

What Origen achieved in his *De principiis* was, in fact, a profound synthesis between Christianity and Platonism.⁶⁹ The essential reason of the problem of Origen's orthodoxy seems to be this synthesis between Greek philosophy and Christianity: it is a matter of the level of his engagement with philosophical problems and concepts in his exposition of the rule of faith that caused suspicions about his orthodoxy. Origen's excessive engagement with Platonism caused him to transfer its problems and concepts into his Trinitarian theology. In

⁶⁷ *De principiis*, II, 2.

⁶⁸ Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, 95.

⁶⁹ Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, 102.

fact, towards the ends of the fourth century, Epiphanius remarked that Origen was “blinded with Greek culture.”⁷⁰ Origen’s entire Trinitarian viewpoint seems to be constructed so as to solve an essential problem of Platonic philosophy: the relation between the transcendent, intellectual, and incorporeal monad and corporeal plurality, the cosmos. Accordingly, Origen seems to read Platonic problems into the biblical doctrine of God in articulating his Trinitarian theology. For example, his doctrine of God as the incorporeal, transcendent monad who, by His nature, cannot directly communicate with corporeal reality, is a philosophical concept that cannot be referred to the Bible. Similarly, resolving the problem of this incorporeal monad *vis à vis* corporeal reality by means of a necessary mediator is really the province of Platonic metaphysics and as such cannot be derived from biblical doctrine. Nevertheless, these and several other philosophical assumptions constitute the dominating paradigm of Origen’s Trinitarian theology. In other words, Origen not only utilizes philosophical concepts in the articulation of his Trinitarian theology, but he also reconstructs it within the paradigm of Platonic metaphysics.

We thus conclude that the real problem of this debate is more about the position of philosophy in the explanation of biblical doctrine rather than the orthodoxy of Origen’s views. Therefore, the challenge of Origen’s Trinitarian theology seems to have been more subtle than the challenge of Arianism, involving as it did the question of to what extent philosophical conceptions can be used in explaining biblical doctrine. In this regard, Origen stands closer to Arius who also reconstructed his Trinitarian theology within a philosophical paradigm whose dominant concern was to solve certain cardinal problems of Platonic philosophy rather than to articulate a biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

⁷⁰ Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, 100.