

Origen: or, The Claims of Religious Intelligence

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[p.43]

Origen, from whom this Lecture takes its title, has several claims to veneration. He was one of the greatest teachers ever known in Christendom, an Abelard without his arrogance, a Newman who never misled his disciples. He was the founder of biblical science, and, though not absolutely the first great biblical commentator, he first developed the principles which exposition was to follow and applied the fashion of methodical explanation on the widest possible scale. He inaugurated the systematic treatment of theology, by writing a book which treated of God, the world, and religion in their several relations. He finally, and completely established the principle that Christianity is an intelligent religion, by bringing all the strength and vigour of Greek philosophical insight to bear on the elucidation of Hebrew religious intuition and Christian spiritual history. It may seem astonishing that he has never been canonised, for in addition to these supreme services to Christianity he lived a confessor and died, to all intents, a martyr. The omission, however, is itself a tribute to the fertility and originality of his genius; he received the posthumous honour of being made a heretic by Jerome and Justinian—men of large attainments but unamiable minds—because some of his speculations, suggested in all intellectual humility and with touching loyalty to the tradition of the Church, turned out on subsequent examination to be untenable. Origen is the greatest of that happily small company of saints who, having lived and died in grace, suffered sentence of expulsion from the Church on earth after they had already entered into the joy of their Lord.

In approaching Origen we pass from West to East, exchanging Rome and Sardinia for Alexandria and Palestine. His name Origenes, "child of Horus", echoes a decidedly Egyptian note. But the name is no more than an echo, for his family was Christian, his father bore the thoroughly Hellenic name Leonides, and his own second name, Adamantius, was Greek also. The names convey no indication of descent, but only of social convention. Origen's nomenclature, however, was extraordinarily appropriate, for Adamantius means "steely" and Horus was the ancient falcon-god identified both with

[p.44]

the Egyptian royal dynasty and with the sun. If ever a man proved himself as tough as steel, or soared above pedestrian labours in royal contemplation of the Sun of Righteousness, that man was Origen.

He was born at Alexandria in or about the year 186, and was a child of brilliant promise, forward in all his studies, with a precocious interest in the fundamental meaning of the Bible. His father Leonides made him learn a daily portion of Scripture by heart, presumably a psalm. The boy was profoundly interested, and kept asking to be told the inward interpretation of the words, behind the obvious and literal sense. Leonides told him not to bother himself with questions too deep for his years; but secretly he thanked God for the child's intelligent and devout mind, and used to stand and look at him as he lay asleep in bed, in an ecstasy of paternal pride. In 203, when Origen

was nearly seventeen, persecution broke out. The cause appears to have been the issue of an imperial edict forbidding Christians to proselytise. The edict had been preceded by a similar prohibition to the Jews, and may have had a merely local force, but hostility towards Christians certainly increased about that time in Syria and Africa. It bore heavily on the keen and active Christian community in Alexandria. Leonides was arrested. Origen burned to join his father as a martyr. His mother, thinking doubtless not only of herself but of Origen's six small brothers, begged him to be cautious. When her entreaties failed to turn him from his design, she took a stronger line and hid all his clothes, which effectively checked his design to rush out and give himself up to the police; but he wrote his father a letter; urging him strongly to bear faithful witness to Christ, and adding words which have deservedly been recorded: "Mind you do not change your purpose on account of us." In times like that, there are more important considerations even than the responsibilities of a family.

Fortified by the sincere encouragement of his raw, but far from childish progeny, Leonides suffered execution. The government confiscated all his property, but help was forthcoming from a wealthy benefactress, and Origen threw himself with such vigour into his studies that he was soon earning enough as a professional teacher to secure his own support. So quickly did he make a reputation both for educational ability and for Christian orthodoxy—for although he showed extreme tolerance to any honest intellectual effort he always refused to have personal dealings with heretics, except with the object of converting them from their errors—that a number of heathen approached him with a request for instruction. Alexandria had been the seat of a famous 'catechetical school', which was one reason why the persecution had fallen upon it. This school should be envisaged

[p.45]

rather as a school of thought than as a formal academy. It probably began in much the same way as the 'lecture-halls' of Christian Rome at the same period; Christians of note, with gifts of teaching and ability to attract a following, opened their doors to any who might care to attend. Such was the celebrated Clement of Alexandria, a highly educated convert from Athens, under whom Origen himself appears to have studied for a time before the persecution. The chief difference between the Roman and the Alexandrian schools seems to have lain in a closer association between Christian thought and ecclesiastical government in the eastern metropolis. Possibly the popes of Alexandria enjoyed a more sympathetic understanding of the minds of visiting professors, and so may have been better able to advise and control them; certainly they were not faced with the self-assertive ambitions which animated too many of the theological eagles that flocked to the Roman dovecot. In any case, it may be remembered that for centuries the Egyptian Church was the most highly centralised in Christendom. But Clement and the other teachers had with; drawn from Alexandria; so far the edict against making disciples had proved effective, and it fell to the youth of seventeen to assume the mantle of Christian philosophy which they had discarded.

Origen was immensely successful. Several of his pupils were themselves martyred, another, many years afterwards, became the bishop of Alexandria. He taught as much by his example as by his eloquence. He visited the confessors in prison, attended them to the scaffold, gave them their last kiss of peace. The mob tried to stone him. His lodgings were picketed with soldiers,

though whether to arrest him or to extend the protection of a government more lenient than the populace towards so distinguished a figure, is not clear. At any rate, he evaded his enemies by a constant change of dwelling and with the aid of the flock of disciples who attended his instructions. Before long, the bishop formally recognised him as the head of the catechetical school. That he escaped alive was, and remains, a matter for thanksgiving to divine providence.

After the persecution, this layman still in his 'teens continued to carry on the work of the school with undiminished fervour. The Bible, then as always, was the groundwork of his life and teaching. "Origen lived in the Bible", says Dr. Lietzmann in a glowing passage, "to an extent which perhaps no one else has rivalled, except Luther" (*The Founding of the Church Universal* p. 417). He even took the unusual step of learning some Hebrew from a Jewish tutor, in order to investigate personally the problems of the text of the Old Testament. But he was no less indefatigable in pursuit of secular learning. Porphyry, the Neoplatonist, who met him personally when Origen

[p.46]

was an old man, complained that Origen "was always consorting with Plato" and studying the books of later Greek philosophers; academic pagans considered that Christians who exercised the rights of rational thought were encroaching unfairly on the professional preserves of infidelity; and it is odd that from rather different angles a similar judgement has been passed both by the late Dr. Harnack and by Dr. Karl Barth. Origen himself claimed the widest liberty to drink at all the springs of Hellenic rationalism. He asks how he could deal with the religious difficulties of heretic and heathen enquirers if he did not make himself familiar with their literature; it was the course followed by Christian leaders at Alexandria both before and after himself.

But he did more. He attended the lectures of Ammonius Saccas, who can thus claim as his pupils in philosophy the two outstanding Greek thinkers of the Christian era-Origen himself and, some years after him, Plotinus. To Ammonius, says Porphyry, Origen owed a great deal of his grasp of philosophy, but unlike Ammonius he chose the wrong path; instead of abjuring the illegal superstitions of the Gospel, as his tutor had done, he gave them fresh support by introducing Greek ideas into Christianity. So for a dozen years Origen laboured as a student, a teacher, and an ascetic. In course of time he established one of his own converts, the future bishop, who had studied with him under Ammonius, as assistant director of the school, which had outgrown the capacity of any single-handed master. Long before this he had been compelled to give up secular teaching altogether and confine his efforts to the catechetical school, taking this opportunity to purchase himself an annuity of sixpence a day by the sale of his whole library of ancient literature. This was less than the daily wage of an unskilled labourer, but it was ample for his own needs, for he lived with extreme simplicity, owning only one coat, walking barefoot, sleeping on the floor, drinking no wine, eating only what was necessary to support life, and after a long day's work sitting up half the night to study the Scriptures.

During this period Origen paid a short visit to Arabia at the request of the governor, and another to Rome. But about 215 he was forced by a fresh outbreak of hostility to make a longer absence, which he spent at Caesarea in Palestine, where the bishop received him with kindness and directed him to expound the Scriptures publicly in church. This was a great but not

unprecedented honour for a lay man. When his own bishop heard of it, however, he took offence and peremptorily summoned Origen back to Alexandria. The consequence of the recall was as fortunate as it was unforeseen. Origen met a wealthy patron named Ambrose, whom he converted from

[p.47]

heresy, probably Valentinianism, and by whom in turn he was induced to engage in a course of authorship which lasted for over thirty years, and resulted in a series of works incomparable in range and importance, and seldom rivalled in mere volume. This earlier and obscurer Ambrose, whose influence and generosity fairly deserve that the memory of his name should not be altogether absorbed by the more resplendent celebrity of his namesake of Milan, not only spurred on Origen to publication, but provided most amply for the necessary means, supplying him with seven shorthand writers, to work in relays, and an equivalent number of transcribers, not to mention specialists in penmanship. Seldom has the endowment of a scholar so well repaid the cost. Books began to pour out from the literary workshop so established, under the combined impulse of the author's prodigious activity and the patron's splendid munificence. Among them "First Principles", as Westcott remarked with justice, opened a new epoch in Christian speculation, and the early parts of the "Commentary on St. John" started a new era in Christian interpretation. Origen's fame and authority rose to an extraordinary pitch.

At the opening of the twentieth century the late Lord Salisbury, who as Prime Minister was responsible for advising the Crown on appointments to the English episcopate, took an unfavourable note of evils which had accrued to religion through the excessive divorce, then covering two generations, between influential leadership in the Church and responsible tenure of the bishop's office. A state of hopeless indiscipline had grown up, largely because so many of the bishops were incapacitated from leading and so many of the leaders had been excluded from being made bishops. Something of the same sort of difficulty would appear to have threatened at Alexandria in the third century. Origen, though still a layman, was effectively controlling the thought of near-eastern Christendom. The reason why he had never been ordained appears to be that in the immature enthusiasm of youth he had mutilated himself, an act which was taken in practice, as later canonically, to render him ineligible for the priesthood, and which he afterwards condemned with manifest feelings of self-reproach. Loyal and humble as he was, and fully as he had hitherto received the support and encouragement of his ecclesiastical superiors, he now found his bishop turning against him, not, we are expressly told, on doctrinal grounds (Jerome, *ep.* 33, but this may be no more than an inference from the general statements of Eusebius), but over questions of discipline.

Some time in or after 230 Origen was invited to undertake an important mission in Greece, and seized the opportunity to hand over the charge of the catechetical school to a successor. On his

[p.48]

way to Greece he visited once again his friends in Palestine, the bishops of Caesarea and Jerusalem. Those prelates, disregarding, for reasons to which no direct clue survives, alike the physical impediment and the canonical subjection which he owed to his own bishop, ordained

him to the priesthood. He proceeded on his journey, stopping for some considerable time at Athens, which was still a centre of intellectual activity, and again at Ephesus. Then the storm burst. His bishop had already, fifteen years before, exhibited jealousy of his Caesarean connection. The resentment which he now showed at the interference with his rights and the overruling of his judgement was so hot that an Egyptian synod was impelled to decree Origen's deposition from the priesthood. Condemned in Alexandria, from 232 he made his home at Caesarea, the unchallenged glory of the Palestinian firmament.

Here, with intervals of travel and of persecution, Origen pursued his habits of industry in lecturing, writing, and preaching, illuminating the Christian faith and rebutting heretical misunderstandings, for the remaining twenty-three years of his life. Ambrose and the book-producing organisation had accompanied him to Caesarea, and a share in the dedication of two works was bestowed on that loyal benefactor. Origen had already addressed to him a very beautiful little book on prayer and the Lord's prayer, when, some four or five years after the transfer of their operations to Palestine, persecution broke out and Ambrose was arrested. As he had once sent a letter to his father in similar circumstances, so now Origen addressed to his friend and patron an exhortation to martyrdom, dwelling on the blessedness of endurance, the comfort of the presence of unseen witnesses to the contest which he would be waging on behalf of Christianity, the spiritual benefits and satisfaction of the sacrifice he would be offering to God, the providential counsels thus fulfilled, and the power and fruit of a life laid down so gloriously. Ambrose was ultimately released; Origen, who seems to have been in Cappadocia during part of the persecution, was also spared; and the work went on unceasingly.

Commentaries and occasional treatises flowed from the workshop. Yet at the age of sixty Origen was persuaded that its output was still insufficient. Hitherto he had refused to allow his public sermons to be taken down by the stenographers; he confined them to the discourses which he had regularly prepared with publication in view. But time was growing short, and his long years of study had brought him immense facility of thought as of expression. So the self-imposed ban was removed, and still more homilies appeared on still more books of the Bible from the dictation of this wonderful old man, who corre-

[p.49]

sponded with the Emperor Philip and the Roman Pope and a host of other people of importance, yet found his greatest happiness in teaching young men the love of God and the enthusiasm of Christianity. At last the fire of martyrdom, to which the fire in his own breast had always drawn him, came near enough to scorch at least the skirts of his mortal tabernacle. In the persecution of Decius Origen was singled out for special attack. He was flung into prison, chained and tortured, threatened with the stake and strained upon the rack; everything possible was done to prolong his torments while preserving his life to undergo them. Decius died after a short reign, which was a reign of terror to the Church, in 251. Origen was released. But we can imagine something of the effects of imperial concentration-camps on white-haired professors. He died about four years later, at the age of sixty-nine, at Tyre, where his tomb was still shown with reverence behind the high altar at the end of the thirteenth century, in the church which also contained the remains of the Emperor Barbarossa. It appears that Origen was popularly reckoned the greater hero of the two.

His power as a teacher can fortunately be measured by the account which is recorded of it by a grateful pupil. His school at Caesarea exercised a magnetic attraction not only over the neighbouring country but on hearers from abroad, who came to hearken to his wisdom from all parts, as the Queen of Sheba came to Solomon. Among the earliest of them was a young law student from Pontus, by name Gregory, afterwards surnamed the Wonder-worker owing to the apostolic signs and wonders which he wrought in his singularly successful labours as a missionary among his own people. Gregory was intending to travel to Beirut in Syria, in order to pursue his studies in jurisprudence, and was apparently still a heathen, when a series of providential circumstances brought him to Palestinian Caesarea, just after Origen had settled there. His sister was married to an official of the governor of Caesarea, and he was charged to escort her to join her husband. Passing by Beirut on his journey, he arrived at Caesarea, only to fall under Origen's spell and find himself the captive, not of Roman law, but of the Christian Gospel. He stayed for five years under the tuition of the master, at the end of which, on the eve of returning home and receiving the bishopric, he delivered his panegyric on Origen.

The object which Origen had set before him from the first was the attainment of the good life, the life in accordance with reason, the genuine philosophy which brings to its devotees rewards far greater than any conferred by wealth or by success in other professions, such as the army or the law. He was affectionate and, says Gregory,

[p.50]

bewitching. He kindled in the hearts of his pupils a burning love, "directed at once towards the divine Word, the most lovable object of all, who attracts all irresistibly to Himself by His unutterable beauty, and also towards himself, the friend and advocate" of Christ. Gregory's soul was knit to that of Origen as Jonathan's was to David, while the teacher went to work convincing the pupil that Christ is indeed A and O, the first Word in cosmic science and the last Word in rational personality. Origen set about him, he relates, like a husbandman labouring on an unwrought and neglected field. He surveyed, he delved, he uprooted. He cleared the ground with Socratic enquiries, breaking down preconceptions, until by a process of "persuasion and constraint" he had brought his disciples into a state of intellectual passivity. His penetrating criticism made them revise all their previous convictions and accept a fresh estimate of all their unconscious conventions. Then he talked about the magnitude and wonder and system of the natural world, and the laws by which God orders and controls its working, till with the aid of geometry and astronomy he led them to contemplate the most sublime mysteries of the created universe, in due relation both to God who made it and to man who studies it, "so that our minds", says Gregory, "were filled with rational instead of irrational admiration at the divine ordering of the world."

The next stage was moral philosophy, which was treated not only as an abstract science but as a means of forming character. Origen talked to them wisely, encouragingly, convincingly. But the most convincing features of his teaching were the example that he set them, "stimulating us by the acts which he performed more than by the theories which he taught", and the way in which he caused them to inspect the springs of their own conduct; to observe the impulses and affections by the development of which their minds might be brought out of confusion and discord into a

condition of sound judgement and moral order; to guard against the first beginnings of evil and to cultivate the growth of goodness and—what to Origen was the same thing under a different name—of reason. He taught them prudence, temperance, righteousness, and courage, the four Platonic cardinal virtues, with all the insight of a practical psychologist, and quite astonished them with his demonstration that these are qualities not only to discuss and analyse but to use and practise. No other philosopher whom they had known had ever done that for them, and Gregory maintains quite simply that the reason for Origen's success was his pupils' realisation that he himself supplied the pattern of the noble life of a truly wise man. All this time the basis of instruction was Greek philosophy: they had not reached so far as Christian

[p.51]

theology. The Churchman was stealing all Plato's and Aristotle's honey. He made them love the virtue of which their other teachers only talked, until they came to see that the whole object of pursuing virtue is to draw nigh to God by making oneself like Him, and so to rest in Him.

There were no restrictions on their reading, except that they were told not to waste their time on authors who denied the existence of any God or any providence. Apart from such barren toilers, they had to study all the poets and moralists on whom they could lay hands, both Greek and foreign, not with the object of exercising their own undeveloped power of criticism, but simply in order to examine what the recognised authorities all had to say. What Origen had in mind, we are informed, was to guard against the danger of premature conclusions. The ordinary philosophers attached themselves to particular schools of thought, and once they had established their private intellectual loyalties they could never be induced to pay any attention to the guidance of any rival school. Origen wanted the minds of his pupils to retain a due measure of fluidity and independence—a very important point in the education of young clergymen or of prospective members of any other profession, so long as the process leads in the end to acquiring powers of judgement and decision. And this he took good care to secure, by expert personal criticism of the books which he made his pupils read. He taught them to study all the secular masters but to swear by none; and so he brought them to God and the prophets, to whom at length he permitted them to form an attachment. Here, in the Scriptures, they sometimes found things dark and enigmatical. But Origen explained and illumined all their problems, "as being himself a skilful and most discerning hearer of God"; he was, remarks Gregory, of all the contemporaries whom he had met or of whom he ever heard, the only man who had so profoundly studied the luminous oracles of God as to be able both to absorb their meaning into his own mind and to convey it to others. He was a true exponent, for the Holy Spirit, the Guide of mankind, who had originally inspired the prophets, honoured him as He would a friend and gave him the power to interpret them.

So their education was completed. No enquiry was closed to them, no knowledge was withheld from them. They had the chance to study every branch of learning, Greek or foreign, spiritual or socio logical, human or divine: "We were permitted with entire freedom to compass the whole round of knowledge and investigate it, to satisfy ourselves with every variety of teaching and to enjoy the sweets of intellect." To be under the intellectual charge of Origen, says Gregory, was like living in a garden where the fruits of the mind sprang

[p.52]

up without toil to be enjoyed with gladness by the happy occupants; "he truly was a paradise to us, after the likeness of the paradise of God"; to leave him was to re-enact the experience of Adam after the Fall. Few teachers have ever won so remarkable a testimonial from their pupils.

Didymus the Blind, whom Athanasius placed at the head of the catechetical school of Alexandria in the latter half of the fourth century, described Origen as the greatest teacher in the Church after the apostles; and Jerome, before orthodox tremors for his own reputation closed the avenues of his judgement, quoted the description with approval. Wherein, then, did the unique greatness of his achievements consist? In the first place, in the range and importance of his work on the Bible. He made invaluable pioneer investigations of its text. He published commentaries or homilies on nearly the whole of the two Testaments, covering considerable parts of their contents with more than one series of expositions. And he laid down explicit principles of interpretation which, though capable of serious abuse and requiring large supplementation, provided a working solution of the overwhelming problem of apparent contradictions, obscurities, and even immoralities in the Bible, and so opened the Scriptures to rational understanding; indeed, the interpretative methods which he applied to the Bible continued to fructify, and sometimes to obstruct, the thought of Western Christendom for a thousand years.

So far as concerns the text and contents of the Bible, Origen's work was only rudimentary according to any modern standard, and such actual conclusions as he propounded were frequently wrong. Yet that limitation was of little consequence to himself, for he constantly gave alternative explanations of the text, based on the varying readings which he found in his different manuscripts. His importance for biblical criticism lies in the fact that he was aware of the existence of this class of problem, and recorded so many instances of textual variation. The preliminary work which he accomplished, or to the need of which he called attention, formed an invaluable foundation for the more or less critical editions which were to follow a century later. But he was no thorough-going critic himself. He used every scrap of material that would serve his turn to illustrate or reinforce his argument, quoting not only from the present canon of Scripture but from books, such as the "Shepherd" of Hermas, which were finally excluded from it. In the last resort, as will be seen in connection with his principles of interpretation, his authority was not the written text, in spite of all the emphasis that he laid on it, but the living word of God which it embodied. He was fully conscious that the authenticity of certain books was disputed. He knew that Hebrews,

[p.53]

James, Jude, and second Peter were not received by everybody. But he includes them all among the spiritual trumpets which will overthrow the walls of Jericho. Had he been primarily interested in critical problems, he could not have shown such inconsistency in his attitude towards, them. In reality, he was determined to devote himself to the elucidation of the divine message contained in Scripture, and, confident that the message existed and that he could uncover it, was quite content to leave to others the task, which seems at first sight so essential a preliminary, of settling definitely what the authors of Scripture had actually said.

In one field, however, he produced a really epoch-making piece of research. Stimulated, perhaps, by appreciation of the problems which induced Marcion and others to reject the whole of the Old Testament outright, as well as by knowledge of the notorious divergences between the Septuagint version—the text then in regular use—and the Hebrew original, he prepared a truly colossal edition of the Old Testament. It was begun in his early days at Alexandria, before he started to publish treatises and commentaries, and it was continued with gradual elaboration over a quarter of a century, both at Alexandria and at Caesarea, until it came to fill no fewer than fifty volumes. It was arranged in six columns, whence it derived its title of "Hexapla": the first contained the unvocalised Hebrew, the second a vocalised transliteration in Greek characters, the remainder presented four Greek versions which were in circulation: Aquila's, which was extremely literal; Symmachus's, which was more idiomatic; the Septuagint; and Theodotion's, which was a revision of the Septuagint. For some parts of the Old Testament Origen even added to these translations further versions, of unspecified authority, which he had himself discovered; thus in the Psalms there were nine concurrent columns.

So vast and complex a work as this could not readily be copied except in the form of sectional extracts. The original manuscript was handled by Jerome in the library at Caesarea towards the end of the fourth century, but it is not surprising that its contents failed to survive, save for fragmentary quotations. Some further details of its method have been preserved. The several texts were divided up into clauses, arranged so as to indicate with the utmost possible facility how each different version rendered the same Hebrew phrase; and the text of the Septuagint was marked with obeli and asterisks, calling attention to insertions which did not appear in the Hebrew or to omissions for which the Septuagint translators failed to account. Origen may not have possessed a very profound sense of the relative value of his different textual authorities; indeed the purpose of the

[p.54]

Hexapla itself was comparative rather than strictly critical; his objective seems to have been a reliable interpretation of the meaning of the Septuagint, not a critical recension reproducing what the Hebrew authors had originally written. But the work was an object-lesson not only of portentous industry but of essentially sound method; and it was a wholly new venture. Nothing like it had ever been attempted on the Bible before, and no subsequent study of the text could fail to profit alike by its example and by its actual performance.

Although Origen's earliest commentary, on St. John's Gospel, is partly concerned to criticise the previous work on the same subject written by the Valentinian leader Heracleon, the earliest known author of a scriptural commentary, Origen's labours as expositor did not begin until after his visit to Rome. It has been conjectured that Ambrose was his companion on this tour, and that the impulse which induced his "task-master", as Origen calls Ambrose, to set him on to composing commentaries arose from their joint observation of the expository ardour of Hippolytus. Hippolytus was rather an industrious than an inspired author. He wrote a number of short books on parts of the Bible, and a few more extended commentaries; his method of interpretation was sufficiently like that adopted by Origen to make it probable that his work supplied the pattern which Origen determined to follow. But Origen far surpassed him both in the brilliance and fertility of his execution and in the range of his efforts. Hardly a book of the Bible,

except the Apocrypha, failed to be covered in the course of his expositions, either in the simpler form of sermons or in the profounder treatment of a commentary, or in both. The impression that his powers of interpretation made on his contemporary Gregory has already been quoted. To that testimony may be added the verdict of a great modern critic on his handling of the Fourth Gospel. In spite of great faults, diffusiveness, repetition, disproportion, obscurity, and complete deficiency in historical insight, says Westcott, "it abounds in noble thoughts and subtle criticisms, it grapples with great difficulties, it unfolds great ideas"; above all, in spite of the fantastic speculations in which it sometimes indulges, "it retains a firm hold on the human life of the Lord". It was due to Origen, more than to any other single master, that one of the most extensive branches of Christian literature, that of biblical interpretation, and one of the principal divisions of Christian thought, that of biblical theology, were established for all time in the centre of the activity of the Church.

In coming to the consideration of Origen's methods of interpretation, certain preliminary assumptions that he made, have to be borne

[p.55]

in mind. The Scriptures, he believed, are the depository of a divine revelation; they must therefore be taken as a whole. If they seem at first sight to be contradictory in their statements, some solution of the apparent contradiction must exist; the only problem for the Christian reader is to discover where it lies. Another consequence follows. They contain not merely a revelation, but a revelation made by God. If, therefore, their obvious and apparent sense provokes a conflict with the clear determinations of reason or with the necessary convictions of morality, the fact can only be an indication that their superficial sense is not the sense that matters; for God is rational and God is righteous. There must be some deeper lesson underneath the surface, which is the lesson that they are really meant to teach. So one passage must be compared with another passage, and the whole must be criticised in accordance with the general substance of the Gospel which the entire Scriptures exist in order to illuminate.

Here Origen scores a great advantage over the heretics whose interpretations he condemns. The regular tendency of a schismatical or heretical temper in all ages, ancient as well as modern, is to fasten on a few impressive texts, from which a rigid interpretation is deduced, and to the scheme and frame of which all other indications are constrained to conform. Origen, on the contrary, was insistent on adopting a sounder method. He would not allow his outlook to be narrowed; he required that it should rather be extended. Naturally, his application of these principles will not satisfy a twentieth-century critic. He had no idea of the almost apocalyptic mental clarification which proceeds from recognition of historical procedure, from realising that the Bible records both mundane facts and spiritual truths from the limited and shifting standpoint of a series of observers, whose statements were in part conditioned by their outward circumstances no less than by their own variable capacities of insight. He did no more than dally with the fringes of the great and enlightening conception of progressive revelation. But his application of his principles is comparatively unimportant. The vital contribution which he made to the science of biblical interpretation was that he saw so clearly both the real problems and the right principles for their solution. The whole Bible must be allowed to speak for itself, whatever a single text may seem to

say; and it must be permitted to speak not merely in its own behalf, but in the name of the God who inspires it.

‘That is why he troubles himself so little about mere problems of the text. If God is truly speaking through the Scriptures, He can make His meaning plain just as easily through the Septuagint, or through any given reading in the Septuagint, as He can through the primitively authentic utterance of the untranslated and uncontamin-

[p.56]

ated Hebrew prophecy. Origen’s position, in fact, is rather like that of any simple Victorian at his family prayers, who firmly believed in the divine inspiration of the Authorised Version, though for a different reason. The devout British paterfamilias knew only that the Bible came to him with living force in an English text; he was untroubled by any consciousness of original authorities. Origen, on the other hand, was fully conversant with the existence of archetypal authorities and with the changes and chances of transmission. But still he did not vastly care, for if God had inspired the original He was quite capable of inspiring an accredited translation, with all its variations; and if in the form which it had come to assume the text presented any additional difficulties, Origen was perfectly ready to deal with them as he would deal with the pre-existing stock. He was not afraid of difficulties. A few more or less made little odds. He read the Bible in order to hear God’s living voice. Every word of the Bible means something, or else it would never have been written. The only real question to answer is what each word does actually mean. Precluded by the date of his birth from drawing on the minted wealth of a fully developed Higher Criticism, Origen had recourse to the promissory notes of allegory, which constituted the higher critical method of his own time. He found it practised by St. Paul; and quotes the apostle as his justification. But he found it also a regularly accepted practice in all Hellenistic philosophy from the first Stoics onward; “it is applied to Homer, to the religious traditions, to the ancient rituals, to the whole world” (Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, ch. iv). Prophets and priests of paganism had wrapped up the meaning of their message in allegorical forms. When their successors came to consider the appalling contrast between the world as their idealisms pictured it, a system of utter blessedness and ordered perfection, and the actual experience of the world recorded in literature or endured in their contemporary circumstances, they were driven to allegory “almost of necessity.” The facts could not be accepted as they stood. They had to be explained as meaning something fundamentally different. Origen, with his serene conviction of God and his invincible faith in the eternal verities of which the best things in this world were only copies and shadows, found not the slightest difficulty in applying the current allegorical method to the outward forms of the scriptural revelation. The Bible, he was assured, could only have one meaning, and that was whatsoever God in His mysterious providence intended it to mean.

Porphyry saw quite plainly that Origen had derived the method from Stoic teachers (ap. Eus. *h.e.* 6.19.8). He attacks the whole procedure, with bitterness, as arbitrary and unhistorical. What he

[p.57]

does not seem to realise is that Origen was working not only from a thoroughly consistent standpoint, but also in accordance with principles clearly conceived and rationally circumscribed.

Origen explains his system of interpretation and the reasons for it in the fourth book of "First Principles". The historical revelation of Jesus Christ, he argues, not only displays the stamp of self-evidencing authority, confirmed by the conviction which it has carried with converts of many different races; but by its fulfilment of the general sense of Hebrew prophecy it also authenticates the Old Testament. Yet the Scriptures contain much that is obscure. The Jews reject the argument from prophecy because Christ did not fulfil strictly and literally every expectation attached to the Messiah. The heretics disown the Old Testament because they find in it evidence which, taken literally again, detracts from the moral perfection of God. And simple-minded Christians, through the same habit of literality, are induced to attribute to the true God such characteristics as they would not credit of the most savage and unrighteous of mortal men. Again, that the Bible contains a certain amount of figurative writing is generally acknowledged, and it is not difficult to distinguish passages which, if they mean anything at all, can only be interpreted as setting forth some type or figure. By what principle are such figures to be made to yield their mystery? They contain types of what truths are these the counterpart?

The solution is reached through recognising that Holy Scripture is endowed with three distinct voices, the literal, the moral, and the spiritual. The first of these is capable of being heard by any sincere believer, simple though he may be. The second is beyond the unaided powers of the simple; to comprehend it implies some faculty of understanding deeper than that required for comprehending a plain statement of fact. From the example which Origen gives—St. Paul's assertion that the law about not muzzling oxen as they thresh the corn applies equally to the right of Christian ministers to receive support from those to whom they preach—it would appear that the "moral" interpretation means the extraction from some particular instance of a general moral principle. The simple are quite capable of understanding such meanings when they have them pointed out. Accordingly, "most of the interpretations in circulation, which are adapted to the multitude and edify those who cannot understand the higher meanings, possess something of this character". In practice little is heard of this "moral" sense of Scripture in Origen's works, not only for the obvious reason that he is usually engaged in the attempt to lead his hearers into deeper levels of thought, but because in fact any attempt to give a straightforward explanation of the literal

[p.58]

narrative, of however simple a character, was reckoned by him without any further classification as belonging to this category.

The spiritual or allegorical sense touches profounder depths. Because the Holy Spirit designed to bury in the words of the Scriptures rich truths of value to the souls that need enlightenment, this sense is to be extracted, not arbitrarily, but by reference to the vital doctrines of God and His only-begotten Son, of the Incarnation and the dispensation of grace, of man and the rest of the spiritual creation, and of the Fall and evil in general. In other words, Origen is simply saying in a manner at once more technical and more profound, what an older generation of Christian thinkers had invariably maintained, that the only key to unlock the Scriptures and to liberate their true meaning was the tradition—that body of central Christian truth which is more or less completely crystallised out in the creeds and in those ancillary doctrines which the creeds assume or imply. This principle applies to the prophets, to the Law, and to the Gospels and apostolic writings of

the New Testament also. Throughout the Bible, says Origen, priceless truths are hidden, the value of which can never be exhausted by the most diligent research. The deeper the study given to it, the greater will be the riches brought to light. And to serve as indications to the existence of this buried treasure, difficulties and impossibilities are sometimes deliberately inserted in the Scriptures, from which no literal sense whatever can be extracted, in order that the more enlightened reader may devote himself to the task of exploration and so may find "a meaning worthy of God". Accordingly, since the Saviour bade us "search the Scriptures", we must carefully investigate how far the literal meaning of a passage is true or possible, and use every effort, by comparison with relevant passages elsewhere throughout the entire Bible, to discover the real sense of what is in the literal sense impossible; so we shall arrive at a true understanding of the whole of revelation, by making a synthesis between the genuine history and the spiritual fruits of allegory.

Do not be misled into depreciation of Origen by the perversity of his supposition that God wilfully hid His revelation under a field of literalistic ant-hills, in order that mankind might discover the secret treasure by the process of falling over the obstacles. It was fantastic indeed. But the obstacles were real, and people were really falling over them. We in the twentieth century do no credit to ourselves if we despise the third century for not possessing those tools by the aid of which in our own lifetime we have only just succeeded in levelling the ground. What Origen achieved was of enormous importance. He made it possible for intelligent Christians to believe the Bible, and so for intelligent people to remain Christians. What would have hap-

[p.59]

pened to Christianity without a rationally interpreted Bible to feed its mind and to control the development of its thought, can only be imagined by referring to the disordered intellectual caprices of the crazier Gnostics, or to the more gross of the superstitions indulged by baptised paganism in mediaeval Italy or Reformation Scotland. The allegorical method "saved the Scriptures for the Church" (Tollinton, *Selections from the Commentaries and Homilies of Origen* p. xxxiv). It enabled the Old Testament to be claimed as Christian literature as against Jewish controversialists, and both Testaments to be defended against the destructive criticism of educated Hellenists. And by saving the Bible, it gave security to the historical foundation of the Christian faith and permanence to the evangelical standard of Christian values.

All-important as Origen's work was in connexion with the Bible, it represents only one side of his achievement. He is also the father; of systematic theology. Most of the output of previous theological writers had been either occasional in character or, when designed on a more extended scale, had consisted of elaborate refutations of the errors of Gnostic speculation. It was mainly either apologetic in character, seeking to remove the misconceptions of the ruling classes about the true nature and objects of Christianity, and so to establish a claim for security and toleration; or else controversial, defending Christianity against the criticisms of Jews and pagans and the perverse obsessions of heretics, and carrying the war into the enemy's country in an effort to demonstrate the moral and spiritual superiority of the Gospel. Otherwise Christian literature had produced little more than a series of tracts and pamphlets about current problems; apart from certain works about to be mentioned, a few collections of memoirs, since lost, practically complete the list.

To this general review two exceptions must be added. Some attempt had been made to draw up positive explanations of Christian teaching, but these were few in number and slight in substance; their scope and treatment did not extend far beyond an elaborated version of the elementary truths of the creed. Their object was practical, and they were liable to speedy supersession. Thus the deeply interesting little work of Irenaeus, "The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching", seems scarcely to have been noticed after the fourth century and has only been preserved in an Armenian translation. The second exception is that Clement, Origen's predecessor in the catechetical school of Alexandria, did indeed attempt the composition of a connected group of treatises on the Christian religion, the plan of which was deliberately imitated by his successor in a work which has failed to survive. But Clement dealt with practical religion, touching only

[p.60]

incidentally on questions of doctrine. Moreover, he was an extraordinarily diffuse writer, who had no gift for orderly presentation or clear theoretical statement. Origen was the first theologian to put out a full and methodical exposition of the whole intellectual framework of the Christian faith.

This was the task accomplished in his "First Principles", a monument of Christian speculation based on loyal acceptance of apostolic teaching and the evidence of Scripture. It was written during the earlier period of his literary activity at Alexandria, while he was still a layman, and before he had attained the age of much more than thirty years. The extraordinary maturity of his thought is shown by the fact that he never had occasion to modify in any great degree the views to which his early training and his own reflection had then already led him. He wrote for educated readers, in the language and within the realm of ideas with which his educated contemporaries were familiar, not because he felt any contempt for the simple faith of peasants and artisans, but because he realised that, if Christianity were to succeed in conquering the world and moulding its civilisation, it must justify itself to the intellect as well as to the heart of mankind. Moreover religion so thoroughly absorbed the exercise of every faculty of his own being, that the mere effort to understand was transformed from an act of speculative detachment into an energy of spiritual passion that united the thinker with the object of his thought. There is no reason to suppose that Origen was a mystic in the strict sense; but he sought to penetrate the mysteries of the God whom he worshipped by exercising all those higher powers of the mind, the possession of which bestows on human nature its only valid claim to be made in the image of God; and he both believed and experienced that in doing so he was being drawn into ever closer contact with the divine being to whom he owed reason, redemption, and advancement in the spiritual life.

Accordingly he embarked on a systematic exposition of religious truth, so far as he was able to comprehend that truth, employing the evidence of Scripture and the powers of human reasoning as instruments in an attempt to present Christianity methodically as the key to all human knowledge and experience. Whatever elements of original speculation he introduced, daring at times in substance as they were invariably modest and tentative in manner, his starting-point was the simple faith of the creed, and his groundwork was authoritative revelation. His philosophy was therefore never abstract. He was always speaking of facts and persons which to him, as to

any wholehearted Christian, were intensely vital and objective. In the first section of his work he discusses the nature of God, as declared in

[p.61]

the general principles of a theistic philosophy and as revealed historically in the Christian religion; and the last end of created man, which is, through the ceaseless work of grace, renewed at every stage in his spiritual struggle and progress, to attain hereafter to the vision of "the holy and blessed life". But the opportunity of progress involves also the possibility of falling away. The present condition of all rational creatures, whether human or unembodied, is dependent on the degree to which they have either freely co-operated with the opportunities and graces afforded them, or have been guilty of wilful negligence and rebellion. "It lies with us and with our own actions whether we are to be blessed and holy." In the end will come the judgement and the consummation, at which Origen hopes to see established a final, harmonious unity between God and a creation fully redeemed and restored.

In the second section he enlarges on the nature of the universe and its relation to man. The world provides the setting for the moral pilgrimage of mankind, and is the scene of a genuine historical continuity, of which the Old Testament is as much the witness as the New, since both alike, when rightly understood, depict the justice and goodness of God. On this historical scene God's only-begotten Son entered with a visible body and a human and rational soul. Origen's firm grasp of facts is illustrated by his strong insistence both on the deity of Christ and on the full integrity of His human nature. The Incarnation was a divine act performed on the field of objective history. In the same manner the Holy Spirit bestowed positive and definite illumination on the prophets and has, since Christ's ascension, conveyed to innumerable multitudes of believers a solid revelation of truth; they cannot all render a clear and logical explanation of their intuitions, but they have a firm understanding of the real meaning of such things as Church membership, worship, redemption and the moral law, and their apprehension of these and other truths is to be attributed to the historical working of the Holy Spirit. Origen then proceeds to develop particular features of his general argument, bearing on the moral foundation of the universe and the spiritual progress of rational creatures here and hereafter. In the third section he discusses at length the character and limitations of human free will, the solemn implications of moral responsibility, and the hope of its issue in an eternal and universal restoration. The fourth and last section of this comprehensive review of the universe, conceived as a rational and religious whole, justifies his method and argument by an explanation, of which some account has already been given, of the right principles on which the difficulties of biblical interpretation are to be overcome and the true meaning of the Scriptures unveiled.

[p.62]

This great work, presenting a Christian view of the world to the minds of his educated contemporaries, places Origen firmly in the centre of the long process by which the ancient Church came to express its beliefs in a philosophical theology. So far as that process was consciously undertaken, it may properly be said to have originated in the New Testament, with St. Paul and St. John. But little was done to develop the tendencies which they indicated until Valentine, the Gnostic, addressed himself to the task on lines which were immediately recognised

by sober followers of the Gospel as impracticable. It has been strongly argued by Dr. Burkitt that the system of Valentine was intended as a deliberate Christian philosophy. The emphasis which he laid on its Christian character is only convincing so far as it recognises that a Christian element was certainly included; it is difficult to believe that Valentine had an exclusively or even preponderantly Christian motive. His work certainly gives rise to the opinion that he was more interested in the problem of creation than in the gospel of salvation, and his depiction of the universal scheme is expressed in terms of myth rather than of history. Its effect alike on the calm and practical intellect of Irenaeus and on the brilliant controversial mind of Tertullian was one of horror and revulsion. Tertullian roundly rejected metaphysics as a denial of Christianity "unhappy Aristotle, who invented dialectics for these men to use", an art evasive, destructive and contentious, which denied everything and really settled nothing (*de praescr.* 7).

The Church was saved from abjuring rationalism by Clement of Alexandria, who pointed out that Greek thought could not properly be condemned on hearsay, that even a refutation must be rationally expressed, and that a convincing explanation of essential truth was calculated to lead an intelligent inquirer towards belief. Philosophy, he said, was "the clear image of truth, a gift of God to the Greeks" (*strom.* 1. 2, 20. 1); so far from drawing people from the faith by the magic of delusive art, it afforded an exercise by which the faith was demonstrated. Again, he claimed, philosophy was to the Greek mind what the Law was to the Hebrew, a schoolmaster leading to Christ. It was the handmaid of theology, as Hagar the Egyptian was of Sarah, the mother of the child of promise. Christ Himself said, "I am the truth". Human philosophy, which was concerned with the investigation of truth and of the nature of the universe, prepared and trained the mind for its subsequent anchorage in the Gospel; it stimulated the intelligence, and encouraged an attentive pursuit of the true philosophy revealed in Christianity (*ib.* 1. 5, 28. 3; 32. 1-4).

That Origen agreed with these conclusions of Clement is exhibited in every line that he wrote. He accepted Hellenic rationalism as a

[p.63]

valid instrument of enquiry. He thoroughly believed that the rational powers implanted in man by the divine Mind possess as their object a genuine apprehension of truth. But it is not a fair criticism to allege that he ignored the simple Gospel in favour of recondite enquiries and advanced intellectual gymnastics. While his mind was most active his heart remained simple; the vital evangelical realities are presupposed in the dizzy flight of his speculative imagination; nor could he have cared so deeply about the devil's prospects of salvation had not salvation seemed to him the most important thing in the life of any rational creature. He loved truth with all his soul, not because it satisfied a merely intellectual curiosity, but because its grasp conveyed the infinitely deeper and more mystical satisfaction proper to the apprehension of the supreme Reality, personal, historical, creative, and redemptive.

Salvation itself could not be thoroughly appreciated until it had as far as possible been understood. It was a duty owed to the Redeemer that His assistance should be sought to comprehend the richness of His own grace; to walk in communion with God must mean to advance both in keenness of perception and in clearness of understanding. Experience of redemption filled Origen with the desire to enter into the fullness of converse with his Redeemer,

and to enjoy the riches of his spiritual inheritance in a mutual fellowship with Him who when on earth had called His disciples His friends. The frontier was not closed against the traffic of his soul between particular religious events and general spiritual principles; his mind ranged freely from the God revealed in specific acts of providence, judgement, and restoration to the God who bears witness to Himself in the vast sweep of creative life and infinite wisdom, in sustaining cosmic order and in inspiring rational contemplation. The Hebrews recognised God by the evidences of His purpose, love and power; the Greeks sought Him as the infinite-ground of all thought and being; Origen considered it no wrong, but rather an imperative duty, to contemplate Him in both aspects at once. So he claimed, with unswerving insight, that the theistic rationalisations of the best Greek thinkers were fundamentally at one with the theistic intuitions of Moses and the prophets. Even heresy, by which Origen meant an aberration from the standards of the great masters, whether in philosophy or in theology, could be regarded in one aspect with a certain tenderness; though it was a distortion, it was a distortion of the truth (*c. Cels.* 3. 12).

Origen was the very last of mortals to imagine for one moment that he was himself infallible. His great dogmatic construction is fertile with imagination, but in several respects it failed to commend itself to the considered judgement of later theology—and that, not only in

[p.64]

minor details, but in some matters of the deepest moment. None the less, in him philosophical theology reached a definite watershed. For the first time a thinker of the front rank had not only conceived and taught the Christian religion from the viewpoint of a single, consistent scheme, but had also formulated his system of thought and put it into a book of manageable compass. However much that particular system might need to be modified and readjusted, theology had found a fixed channel down which for the future its upper waters were destined to flow to irrigate the minds of later generations. The thought of Alexandria, which dominated most of the East, was based on Origen for centuries. The great Athanasius, who saved Christianity from being paganised in the fourth century, was indirectly Origen's disciple. The Cappadocian Fathers, who under the influence of his tuition worked out the implications of the doctrine by which Athanasius had saved religion, venerated Origen with an enthusiastic devotion. They were alive to his faults, and discarded his errors; but the main foundations of his structure stood firm on the original lines. It is true that later Origenists were so called rather from their perverse following of his peculiarities than from a just appreciation of his greatness. Nor was he the father only of orthodoxy. Arius, whose Titanic heresy, earthbound as it was, shook both Church and Empire to their roots, constructed the framework of his own system with derelict timbers that he borrowed from Origen's woodyard, and twisted in the taking. No one who came after Origen could remain uninfluenced by him. But it is no less true that, in spite of every hostile criticism, the theology of the great doctrinal definitions, which has determined the essential faith of Christendom, grew up out of the vast and systematic discipline which Origen imposed.

The Church owes it to Origen, first and foremost, that, whenever Christianity is true to itself, it is a rational faith. The whole educated world is in his debt for the preservation of the old Hellenic intellectual culture, which he transformed by his genius into the beginnings of a philosophy perennis for Christendom. If there had been no Origen, it may be seriously doubted whether the rising forces of obscurantism might not have blocked the entrance of Christianity against the

genius of Augustine; and in that case the occasion might never have arisen for an Anselm or a Thomas Aquinas. A degenerate Christianity might well have found its leadership committed exclusively to illiberal imitators of Jerome and illiterate echoes of Bernard.¹ By the third century the old philosophy had exhausted its material, and was degenerating into platitude and superstition. Origen seized on it as

[p.65]

God's supreme instrument for the rational exposition of all truth. He captured it for Christianity, not as a commerce-raider sinks at sight both hull and cargo of a foreign seafarer, on the pretext that its victim is engaged in carrying contraband—though that is how Tertullian regarded speculation—but as a salvage-master brings home to port an ownerless and abandoned vessel and transfers the argosy with its rich freight to those who have the power of using it. The world continued to possess the faculty of philosophic thought largely because Origen naturalised, the processes and fruits of philosophic method in the enduring context of Christianity. The futility of Julian's effort in the fourth century to revive the intellectual life of paganism proves that, but for Christian salvage, all the freedom of its speculative range, and all the enlargement of the human spirit which it had once secured, would have been jettisoned.

In the third century two men, working in independence and on different lines, succeeded in conserving for humanity the benefits of Hellenism. The one was Origen, who, by supplying new and vital material for the exercise of human reasoning, gave permanent stability to Hellenic rationalism; Origen, and not the third-rate professors of a dying sophistry and nerveless superstition, stood in the true succession from Plato and Aristotle in the history of pure thought. The other was Plotinus, who formulated, and by formulating saved, the classical inheritance of Hellenic mysticism. He too drew his inspiration from Plato, supplemented in some measure by Plato's own disciples and the Stoics. By developing the strain of mysticism which was exhibited in Plato, and at which Hellenistic developments and oriental influence had prepared the pagan world to catch, he formed a theocentric system of religious discipline which fused the surviving schools of paganism together, and for a time provided a rival religion to Christianity. But two limitations have to be set on the relative importance of what Plotinus achieved. The first is that a strongly mystical influence had already been infused into the stream of Christian thought before Plotinus gave any expression to his own convictions; the second is that the ideas of Plotinus himself were only ensured a permanent survival when pseudo-Dionysius, a mystical Monophysite who flourished at the end of the fifth century and had absorbed the whole apparatus of Neoplatonism, canonised Plotinus by translating him into the sphere of Christian practice and expounding him in a Christian version. Thus even on the side of mysticism classical antiquity could only find a permanent home in human thought by yielding toll of all that was best and truest in its possession to the conquering faith of Jesus Christ.

Of the two contributions, rational and mystical, the former was

[p.66]

¹ According to St. Bernard, "to learn in order to know is scandalous curiosity—*turpis curiositas*" —Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, p. 64.

G.L. Prestige, "Lecture 3: Origen: or, The Claims of Religious Intelligence," *Fathers and Heretics*. Bampton Lectures 1940. London: SPCK, 1940. Pbk. pp.43-66.

incomparably the more indispensable. Mysticism, in the strict sense in which the term is applied to Plotinus or to pseudo-Dionysius, is capable of great extravagance. It is a specialised form of spiritual discipline applicable only to a minority of people and manifesting characteristic features of a fairly constant type, under whatever form of religious creed it happens to take shelter. Mysticism unsupported by revelation is like the Indian rope-trick; it evolves from the inner self-consciousness and nobody can tell precisely where, if anywhere, it leads. It certainly can claim no private monopoly in personal religion. Whatever its merits for the select souls who find in it their own particular vocation, there is no real trace of it in the Bible, and the loss of it would have caused no irremediable injury to the Christian experience which its inclusion enriched. But Christianity can never afford to be deprived of rational thought. The flight from reason marks the first stage in the surrender of religion to intellectual nihilism and vulgar superstition, from which dark prisons of the mind may that true Light deliver mankind, through whom to God the Father with the holy Spirit of Truth be all honour, worship and adoration, now and for evermore.

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