TWO KINDS OF LOGOS

Origen against Celsus*

The middle of the second century A.D. sees the start of a process which was to prove of enormous significance to our Western world: the encounter between what for brevity's sake I will call 'the Greek world' and Christianity. The present paper will focus on this encounter, and in particular on the literature which reflects this encounter.

The literary sources provide us with most of our information about this event. I just mentioned the encounter between 'the Greek world' and Christianity. But the first term needs to be formulated more precisely: the Greek world is the mental world of the Greeks, Greek thinking, Greek philosophy as it had developed since the sixth century B.C. and had culminated in the figures of Plato and Aristotle, while the Hellenistic era also saw the rise of the Stoa—often called 'the philosophy of Hellenism'. This means that philosophical literature is the primary source for this encounter.

Christianity not only sets itself against this philosophy, it presents itself as a philosophy, or rather as the philosophy par excellence, as the one true philosophy. This may seem strange to us, people of the twentieth century. But we should consider that philosophy in those days was literally philosophia, love of wisdom. Philosophy claimed to show man the way to eudaimonia, well-being in the fullest sense. It was to teach him virtue, so that he could achieve this well-being. As Armstrong puts it in his introduction to the most extensive and thorough handbook that has been written about this period in Western thought, there was in those days a close relationship between philosophy and religion.1 And Daniélou, one of the most authoritative scholars in the field of early Christian thought, says in his work on Origen that (Middle) Platonism, the great philosophical movement of the time we are talking about, was 'une philosophie religieuse'.2 If this is taken into

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2 J. Daniélou, Origène, Paris 1948, p. 98.
account, it is much easier to understand how Christianity could enter the flow of philosophical thinking in this period.

This entrance made a major impact, as is evidenced in various works of early Christian literature. I shall choose one in which it is possibly most discernible, because it not only voices the view of the Christian party but also that of Greek philosophy. It is Origen's work Against Celsus.

I start by introducing the dramatis personae. The author is Origen, the first great systematic thinker in Christianity. He was born circa 185, in Egypt, perhaps in Alexandria, one of the great cultural centres of the Hellenistic world, the city in which less than two centuries before—in Jesus' time—the Jewish thinker Philo had been active. Philo was a philosopher who had tried to connect his Jewish faith with Greek philosophical thinking. He had in particular attempted to explain the holy books, and above all the first book, the book of creation (Genesis), with the help of Greek philosophy. Origen's aim was similar. He wanted to explain his faith, i.e. the Christian faith, with the help offered by the instruments of Greek philosophy.

Origen was a Christian by birth. At a young age (about 18) he became the head of a catechetical school, which proves that his special gifts received early recognition. Later he founded a different kind of school, a sort of philosophical college. If we interpret the sources rightly, his philosophical schooling took place at the hands of someone greatly renowned in those days. Ammonius Saccas was a man who, like Socrates, wrote nothing himself. But it is apparent that he possessed great powers of stimulation, for he also taught Plotinus, who, after much searching and disappointment, eventually found what he wanted in Ammonius. Thus Ammonius was the teacher of the two great geniuses of the third century, as Plotinus and Origen may rightly be called.

The place occupied by Origen in the Greek Christian world can be compared with that of Augustine in the Latin Christian world. Like his predecessor Philo, Origen took up the task of expounding scripture, which he did in the form of sermons, commentaries, and notes on certain passages. Naturally he studied both the Old and the New Testament. He moreover wrote a systematic work, which he gave the typically philosophical title Ἡ περὶ ἀρχῶν. In this work he undertook to describe the 'principles' of Christianity by showing the lines along which Christian thinking proceeds.