Critical Notice:
Patristic Philosophy: A Critical Study


I should first acknowledge that I read two chapters of this book for suggestions prior to publication (see thanks on p. ix). The main value of this interesting work lies in the claim that at least some ancient Christian thinkers qualify as philosophers (although there would be many more patristic philosophers than those discussed here). Karamanolis [K.] maintains, with reason, that ancient Christianity cannot a priori be described as a religion that, as such, is incompatible with philosophy (17 and passim). I have often expressed a similar view.1 K. rightly notes that already in antiquity people like Galen, Lucian, and Celsus tried this move in order to attack Christianity—however, they could do so before Origen, but not later.2 I also entirely agree with K. that in antiquity philosophy and theology were not separated (17, 240) as they are in a post-Kantian perspective, that it is not the case that Christian thinkers practiced theology, but not philosophy (240), and that Origen wrote his Περὶ ἀρχῶν like other Platonists and not like other Christians: I have actually demonstrated precisely this with an extensive analysis in “Origen, Patristic Philosophy.”

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K. observes, with good reason, that Christian philosophers did not merely appropriate Platonism or Stoicism (or, one may add, Aristotelian elements or even Skeptic arguments), but did so with a view to creating something new: the Christian doctrine (26). K.’s position is that the philosophy of early Christianity is part of ancient philosophy as a distinct school of thought, in addition to the Platonic school, the Stoic school, etc. (ix, 24, 240, and passim)—even though there are momentous philosophical divergences within patristic philosophy, for instance between Origen and Tertullian (provided that the label of patristic philosopher is granted to Tertullian). One might see uniformity, not so much within the Christian philosophical doctrine, whatever it may be, as within Christian Platonism. As I have also suggested, Origen, for example, aimed at creating an “orthodox” Christian Platonism, against “heresies” such as Marcionism and “Gnosticism,” as well as against competing philosophical systems such as Epicureanism, Stoicism, or Aristotelianism, and against “pagan” versions of Platonism. A systematic study of Origen as a philosopher is in the works.

A specific chronological range was chosen for this book: second to fourth century CE, to the exclusion of earlier thinkers such as Paul—whose commitment to philosophical ideas, especially Stoic ones, is debated—or later thinkers such as Ps. Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, or Eriugena. I missed especially Dionysius and Eriugena as prominent Christian Neoplatonists, although I realize that choices had to be made. The book is thematically structured, with Chapter 1 devoted to philosophical methodology, Chapter 2 to physics, metaphysics, and cosmogony, Chapter 3 to logic and epistemology, Chapter 4 to freewill and providence, Chapter 5 to psychology and the soul-body relation, and Chapter 6 to ethics and politics.

The title of Celsus’ Ἀληθὴς λόγος is translated “True Account,” which is in fact the most widespread translation and is certainly one possibility. In addition, I suggest that Celsus chose a title that could resonate polemically with the main epinoia of Christ: Logos. On this hypothesis, Celsus was establishing and supporting “the true Logos” against the false Logos that is Christ. Indeed, he was arguing that the philosophical (Platonist) Logos was incompatible with Christ-Logos and the logos of Christianity, whereas Origen argued that the philosophical Logos was in fact Christ-Logos. Like Porphyry later, and apparently like those who continue to deny the very existence of a patristic philosophy, Celsus thought that philosophy was incompatible with Christianity. This is why Porphyry famously denounced the intellectual figure of Origen, the Christian

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