

THINKING WITH ORIGEN TODAY: HERMENEUTICAL CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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1. Introduction: Origen, Contemporary Systematics, and Philosophical Theology

Re-thinking Origen serves as the final instalment of a distinctive theological project. It follows two previous issues of *Modern Theology*, *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* and *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, to complete the trilogy.¹ The unity of the trilogy lies in its intellectual affinity to the twentieth-century project of patristic *ressourcement* which involves thinking not only *about* the early Christian fathers but *with* them as luminous figures, as though our contemporaries, who promise to generate fresh directions in theological thinking in the present. The underlying conviction is that Patristics constitutes a crucial resource for rethinking the practice and direction of systematic and philosophical theology in its modern (and postmodern) condition. Patristics, in virtue of its historical distance, helps recalibrate our theological imagination by challenging us to encounter anew the foundational resources of Christianity (Bible, tradition, liturgy, ascetical practice), and by encouraging us to reconsider options fallen by the wayside or roads not taken *en route* to theology's present condition. This exercise in *ressourcement* gifts the disciplines of theology with new resources, as well as new modes of attention, both of which can help inform how theologians might live and perform the task of speaking well of God in the present.

Given the conceptual unity between *Re-thinking Origen* and the two previous instalments of the *Re-thinking* trilogy, I shall begin this introduction by sketching out how this present issue relates to the project of patristic *ressourcement* at the heart of this trilogy. The focus of the present collection of essays concerns the figure of Origen of Alexandria

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¹ *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* = Volume 18, Issue 4 (Oct 2002); *Re-thinking Dionysius of Areopagite* = Volume 24, Issue 4 (Oct 2008).

(ca.185-ca.254), the third-century Christian teacher, exegete, preacher, philosopher, speculative theologian, and ascetic. Despite being the most important thinker in the first three centuries of Christianity, he left a paradoxical legacy in Christian history. For not long after his death, and indeed, even amidst his own lifetime, Origen became the centre of theological controversies. His tainted reputation in subsequent Christian history is largely the result of the historical developments surrounding the “Origenist controversies” that culminated in the condemnation of “Origenist” teachings first at a regional synod in Alexandria (400) and subsequently by the Emperor Justinian in his condemnatory documents against “Origenism” (543) and in the 15 *anathemata* appended to the Second Council of Constantinople (553). It is therefore unsurprising that ever since Late Antiquity, Origen has received a mixed reception.

Nevertheless, there are clear signs that we are currently witnessing one of the most intense surges of interest in thinking *with* Origen. The task of rethinking Origen is especially at the forefront of the discipline of systematic and philosophical theology today. The most obvious place to note the Alexandrian’s presence in contemporary theological discourse is in the lively debates surrounding the merits and pitfalls of universalism, the doctrine that there will be a restoration (*apokatastasis*) of all things in the divine economy. The crux of the debate about universalism concerns how we reassess the place of Origen in the history of Christianity. Anyone familiar with recent scholarship will have noticed that divergent evaluations of universalism amongst major voices in the debate (Ilaria Ramelli and David Bentley Hart, on the one hand, and Michael McClymond, on the other) are closely bound up with divergent historiographical assessments of Origen’s importance in the development of Christian Theology.² Another noteworthy contemporary attempt to reconsider Origen in order to think *with* him constructively is John Behr’s recent work on theological prolegomena.³ Behr’s constructive account of the incarnation and Christology, the cornerstone of what he calls the prologue to theology, draws great inspiration from thinking with Origen: theology begins through the paschal mystery, in the light of which Jesus of Nazareth is no longer viewed through his physical properties but translated into a spiritual gospel, a proclamation of his true identity as the divine Logos. This constructive proposal was greatly shaped by Behr’s reinterpretation of Origen’s understanding of the Incarnation and protology-eschatology pairing in *On First Principles (de Principiis)*.⁴ A final instance of contemporary engagement is found in the first volume of Sarah Coakley’s systematic theology in which she draws on Origen’s *On Prayer (de oratione)* to recover a prayer-based model of the Trinity.⁵ She

² See Ramelli and McClymond’s exchange in *Theological Studies*, 76, no. 4 (December 2015). Ramelli’s historical reconstruction of universalism is Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena: 120* (Leiden : Brill, 2013); McClymond offers his own in Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil’s Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018). See also the recent discussion in David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

³ John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁴ See John Behr, trans., *Origen: On First Principles*, vol. 1, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Introduction, especially his rereading of Origen’s understanding of the Incarnation in de Princ. 2.6 (lxxvi-lxxvii), his McCabe-inspired interpretation (lxxvi-lxxx), and his apocalyptic reading of Origen (lxxx-lxxxviii), all of which features heavily in his monograph on the Gospel of John (compare Behr, *John the Theologian*, 19-26, 28-30).

⁵ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “on the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ch.3.

argues that Origen taught an “incorporative” model of the Trinity, which preserves a forgotten pneumatological reading of Romans 8 on prayer, alongside the more well-known linear, “subordinationist” model often associated with the Alexandrian. A recovery of this framework promises to repair the broken connection between Trinitarian theology and prayer, as well as to help rediscover a nexus of associations not found in traditional Trinitarian theology “between the Spirit, prayer, loss of control, and the dangers of women’s attractiveness and sexual susceptibility.”⁶

These examples indicate not so much a single locus of postmodern concern that led to a recent upsurge of interest in Origen. In this regard, the state of scholarship that sparks the need of the present special issue differs from that which gave rise to *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* and *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, namely, a dominant strand of postmodern readings (Gregory and Trinitarianism in systematics, Denys and apophaticism in philosophical theology) had emerged that call for deeper readings and hermeneutical correctives. Rather, the state of Origen *ressourcement* today suggests a bewildering variety both at the level of constructive engagement (how to think with Origen) and interpretation (how to read Origen). In the face of this diversity, systematic and philosophical theologians today unfamiliar with the vast literature in the growing interdisciplinary field of Origen studies can easily lose their way. Moreover, as anyone who has worked on Origen will know, the task of thinking with his texts and staging a constructive conversation with them is no small challenge. It is easy to get lost in the labyrinth that is the never-ending movement in Origen’s exegetical thinking to conduct a theological symphony out of polyphonic voices from different parts of Scripture. In light of these challenges, there is a need for a collection of contemporary Origen scholarship that best aids the systematic and philosophical theologian to navigate the task of interpreting Origen’s corpus in order to think with him constructively. To meet this challenge, *Re-thinking Origen* brings together thirteen essays that address three perennial hermeneutical challenges every generation of readers needs to tackle anew.

2. Reading Origen Today: Three Hermeneutical Issues

How do we reread Origen in areas that have been read through a hermeneutic dominated by the concern to assess his doctrinal orthodoxy or heresy? Given Origen’s controversial place in the Christian tradition, the first challenge for the contemporary theologian is to decide what to make of Origen’s heretical teachings and their condemnation in key junctures of Christian history. In *Geist und Feuer*, Hans Urs von Balthasar explains his decision to regard Origen’s heretical materials as irrelevant for his attempt to retrieve his thought for the contemporary reader.⁷ This approach, no doubt fuelled by a certain panoramic narrative on the development of doctrine in Christian history, severely limits the reception of Origen by restricting his significance within an overly one-sided account of the development of Christian Orthodoxy wherein the Alexandrian was primarily interpreted through the lens of his (later) accusers from the fourth till the sixth century. This will not be the approach followed here. The question that animates

⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 128.

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen. Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, trans. Robert J. Daly (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 1-23. See also Jennifer Newsome Martin’s essay on Balthasar in this issue.

the first group of essays in this collection is: is it possible to bypass polemical readings in order to engage with controversial theological themes in Origen's thought anew? If so, what alternative interpretative strategies are promising for thinking with Origen in these areas?

The first four essays reconsider the sources of Origen's Trinitarian theology by probing beyond the standard narrative of associating Origen with either "subordination" or "anti-subordinationism." Together, these essays provide a hermeneutical framework for interpreting Origen's Trinitarian theology in its own right, free from the concern of his possible alignment or misalignment with later Nicene orthodoxy. The first theme that emerges is that the most significant theological source of Origen's Trinitarian thought, especially of what has been regarded as his subordinationist tendencies, is found in *Johannine* language itself. Pui Him Ip and Giovanni Hermanin de Reichenfeld together build a case for the *Johannine* provenance of Origen's Trinitarian thought. Both Ip and Hermanin de Reichenfeld take Origen's "subordinationist" language seriously. Both interpret this language as a sustained attempt to pattern the inner dynamics of Trinitarian life after the *Johannine* idiom. Whether this should be described as subordinationism remains an open issue, as will be evident from the fact that whereas Ip is inclined to steer away from this language, Hermanin de Reichenfeld is happy to retain it.

Ip offers the first systematic treatment of Origen's Trinitarian theology of love that has hitherto received little attention. He argues that Origen's distinction between the Father as *he agapē* (1 John 4:8) and the Son as *he agapē ek tou theou* (1 John 4:7), and Origen's claim that the Father and the Son are one and the same *agapē*, are both derived from the language of 1 John. In particular, Origen's insistence on the Son's derivation from, and participation in, the Father is patterned on the Johannine understanding that sonship is the distinctive mode of divinity human beings assume in deification. As found in 1 John 4:7, all who become love become like God (cf. 1 John 4:8) and are *ek tou theou*, that is, they are becoming divine sons. Since deification involves the ongoing incorporation of humanity into the sonship of the only begotten Son of God, divine sonship must entail a sense of dependence and participation. In light of this, Ip urges a shift from speaking of Origen's "subordination" of the Son to speaking of his Johannine account of sonship, since Origen's Father-Son distinction has its origin in the Johannine emphasis of sonship as the "middle" that bridges divinity and humanity.

Hermanin de Reichenfeld turns instead to Origen's subordination of the Holy Spirit by arguing that it is thoroughly a Johannine motif. He argues that Johannine materials led Origen to distinguish between ontological subordinationism of *priority* (one that applies to intra-trinitarian relations) and ontological subordinationism of *superiority* (one that applies only to the God-world relation). Unlike Ip, Hermanin de Reichenfeld contends that Origen's understanding of the Holy Spirit's place in the Trinity is aptly described as ontological subordinationism of *double* priority because (1) the Holy Spirit possesses all divine attributes as fully and perfectly as the Father and the Son while (2) the Holy Spirit's possession of these attributes depends upon his participatory dependence on the Father which is mediated to him through the Son. Hermanin de Reichenfeld shows (persuasively in my view) that this position is patterned after the fourth Gospel and derives from a synthesis of John 1:1, 1:3, 4:24, 14:26, and 14:28. Origen's pneumatology thus neatly captures the Johannine sense of the Holy Spirit's

subordination in an intra-Trinitarian context without turning him into a mere creature in whom the full and perfect possession of divine attributes, unlike in the case of the Father and the Son, never obtains.

With the Biblical roots of his Trinitarian theology reinvigorated, this emphasis on the Johannine origin of Origen's Trinitarian thought must be situated within a second theme highlighted by Giulio Maspero and Rowan Williams: Origen's Trinitarian theology is patterned after his spiritual practices. According to Maspero, the practice of prayer led to the central intention underlying Origen's Trinitarian theology: his emphasis on distinguishing creation from the pure spiritual subsistence shared only by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is the deepening practice of prayer that led Origen to a resolutely anti-materialistic account of the divine Trinity. But the binary distinction between divine (purely spiritual) and created (material) raises a difficulty for defining intra-trinitarian distinctions because it leads to a linear model of the Trinity that implies gradations within the divine. Origen's solution is to complement the linear model with the triangular model, which places the Son and the Holy Spirit on equal footing since both are sent together by the Father in mission to the world. Drawing on the interplay between these two models, Maspero argues that Origen in no way proposes an unwarranted sense of "subordination." Rather, he concludes that Origen held the perfect co-equality of three persons with an incomplete "participatory" language to express the difference between the divine persons.

Rowan Williams' essay traces the source of various misreadings of Origen's Trinitarian thought in the fourth century. At a doctrinal level, Origen is concerned about accounts of the Logos that restrict the domain of his work and power or lead to divisibility of the divine life. Williams argues that later interpreters—critics and defenders alike—missed an underlying concern behind these doctrinal emphases. What Origen fears is the tearing apart of the act of exegesis from the logic of the created universe itself, i.e. Trinitarian theology. Divisibility of the divine life endangers the possibility of grounding the task of Scriptural exegesis as intrinsic to the restoration of the divine image in us upon the eternal return of the Logos in his contemplation of the Father. This, in turn, threatens Origen's understanding of the spiritual maturity of the exegete as a hermeneutical key for the right reading of Scripture, a vision that relies on the shape of divine activity and the shape of the activity of the exegete as inseparably linked. The seismic shifts in the fourth century, both in terms of how exegetical practice is embedded in the Christian life and the locus of spiritual authority in the church, made it increasingly difficult for later readers to discern the link in Origen between Trinitarian theology and his pedagogical vision of exegesis as spiritual exercise. Williams thus further evidences the point highlighted by Maspero, namely, that Origen's Trinitarian thought is embedded in the context of his spiritual practices.

Alongside Trinitarian theology, a second area in which readers of Origen must navigate complex hermeneutical challenges is his theory of asceticism (for want of a better term). As mentioned before, Origen's reputation was damaged during the fourth to sixth century due to the various controversies surrounding precisely his theological understanding of the ascetical life. The following three essays together redress the significance of Origen's theory of asceticism in Christian history on its own merits. What emerges from these essays is a framework by which to interpret the Origenian theory of asceticism that circumnavigates the binary contrast between simple Scriptural piety and philosophical sophistication. Such a binary is not sustainable in the light of how Origen's own vision of asceticism was received by Late

Antique Christian ascetics and monks. The essays by Rubenson, Stang, and Ramelli powerfully underlie the potential of Origen and Origenian asceticism as a rich resource for rethinking the link between philosophy and *askēsis*.⁸

Samuel Rubenson's programmatic essay offers a hermeneutical key to understand Origen afresh as a spiritual teacher and ascetic by demonstrating that the contrast between the philosophical *paideia* of Origen and the simple asceticism of the monk is untenable. Indeed, it is precisely Origen's identity as a teacher who transforms classical *paideia* into a vision of spiritual progress that explains why he became such a prominent figure for later monasticism. Origen's importance for the monks is better understood in the light of his identity as a biblical exegete and teacher who advances a program of education intended to aid Christians to read the Scriptures for making sense of and giving direction to their lives. This pedagogical dimension of Origen as an essential feature of both his person and of his writings, Rubenson argues, clarifies why the Alexandrian master was important in monastic circles—communities that are profoundly educational in character and served as centres of instruction.⁹ Origen became important in the monastic environment because he models how one can live an ascetical life through engaging with Scripture. The monks share with Origen an understanding of how Scriptural exegesis is bound up with progress towards spiritual perfection in the ascetical life. This profound affinity explains why Origen was deeply appreciated and appropriated by the monks. The increasingly controversial status of this model of educational and ascetical modes of life, encapsulated so well by Origen, may well be the deeper issue that leads to the late fourth-century controversy about Origen and his theology. Rubenson's essay thus provides a new theoretical framework to reinterpret Origen's importance for the monks and for shaping the interplay between philosophy, exegesis, and practice in Christian asceticism.

Following Rubenson's lead, Charles Stang explores one important example of how Origenian philosophical theology became embedded within ascetical practice and ideas in early Egyptian monasticism. He traces how the theme of fire, which has a long philosophical history since Heraclitus, was transmitted through Origen to the context of early Egyptian monasticism. Stang argues that fire offers a promising theme to discern Origenian thinking in later monastic sources, while attending to discrepancies between Origen's theology and the (perhaps more sanitized) use of fire language in these sources. What emerges from this study is that Origen's understanding of judgment and purification in terms of fire is less apparent in later monastic sources. But monks in the *Apophthegmata partum* literally burst into flame, a hint that monastic ideals of holiness and perfection were deeply shaped by Origen's (Stoic-inspired?) philosophical understanding of divinisation as a process of cooled-down souls once again growing fiery.

Illaria Ramelli provides further insight into how philosophical reflections and ascetical ideals go hand in hand by exploring the legacy of Origen's metaphysics of freedom in Gregory of Nyssa's well known anti-slavery stance. Remarkable in the context of Late Antiquity and contrary to the attitudes of many Christian

⁸ This theme has received attention recently from philosophical theologians. See the important discussion by Simone Kotva, *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

⁹ On this point, see Samuel Rubenson, "Early Monasticism and the Concept of a 'School,'" in *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, edited by Lillian I. Larsen and Samuel Rubenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 13–32.

contemporaries, Gregory advanced arguments against slavery and social inequality. Ramelli argues that Origen's theology of freedom, which has its philosophical origin in imperial Stoicism (and perhaps connected to Bardaisan of Edessa) and finds a parallel in Plotinus, is the chief inspiration of Gregory's anti-slavery arguments. The absolute value and dignity of a human person associated with the *imago dei*, a central premise in Gregory's arguments, emerges as a theme inspired by the Origenian metaphysics of freedom. A human person can only be subordinated to God his creator since if even God grants each person freedom to determine one's own choices, then no creatures could pretend to have the power to determine another person's status. While this line of thought tragically did not acquire canonical status in Christian history, by tracing this important thread of ideas Ramelli establishes Gregory's concern for social justice as one of the most important legacies inspired by Origen's philosophical asceticism, one that can still be reclaimed today.

The second group of essays addresses another important hermeneutical challenge facing interpreters of Origen today: what kind of task is Origen pursuing in his writings? How can we understand the complex relation between what we view as separate disciplines of theology, philosophy, and exegesis? This question has a long history in Origen studies, tracing its origin all the way back to the modern debates about whether Origen is best characterised as a Hellenised (Platonist) philosopher, a spiritual master, or a Christian exegete.¹⁰ In order to discern the nature of Origen's undertaking, the contemporary reader cannot presuppose commensurability between ancient and modern (and postmodern) forms of philosophy and theology. To tackle this issue, what is required is a comprehensive reassessment of Origen's work vis-à-vis the modern disciplines of philosophy and systematics respectively: where are the points of intersection in terms of ideas and method, and where are key points of divergence and incommensurability? Where do our disciplinary boundaries facilitate or hinder the possibility of thinking *with* Origen in our time?

Mark Edwards sketches a panoramic overview of the relationship between Origen and modern philosophy. Traversing through the vast landscape of modern philosophy, in both its "analytic" and "continental" guise, he argues that the place where fruitful conversation and shared assumptions between Origen and modern philosophy can be found is not amongst "conservative" or "Orthodox" Christian thinkers but amongst those who stand outside, or on the edges of, the Christian faith. On the one hand, given Origen's exegetical style of doing philosophy, there is little overlap with the philosophy practised today by philosophers of religion trained in the analytic school. On the other hand, Origen shares more promising overlaps with postmodern philosophy (e.g. Barthes and Derrida) since his exegetical philosophy concurs with the assumption of several key figures that it is through the written that we encounter the real. As Edwards shows, Derrida's ideas on the autonomy of writing and its implication on the liberty of interpretation for readers offer an important constellation of themes for staging a fruitful conversation (via Plato) with the philosophical assumptions embedded within Origenian exegesis. Edwards' survey is by no means a final word on this vast topic, but it sets the foundation for situating Origen's work vis-à-vis modern philosophy.

¹⁰ For a brief history of these debates, see Herbert Musurillo, "The Recent Revival of Origen Studies," *Theological Studies* 24, no. 2 (May 1963): 250–63, (252–54) and Joseph Trigg, "A Decade of Origen Studies," *Religious Studies Review* 7, no. 1 (January 1981): 21–27.

Samuel Fernández reconsiders the relationship between Origen and systematic theology by addressing the age-old question: was Origen's *On First Principles* (*De Principiis*) a systematic theology? He answers that Origen's project in this work seeks to address exegetical problems through a coherent interconnected doctrinal body that covers all parts of the Christian faith. This is the primary purpose of systematisation in Origen's work. If systematicity entails coherence and comprehensiveness, then Origen indeed offers a systematic theology, given how central both are in *De Principiis*. To illustrate this point, Fernández sketches the contours of Origen's theological system, offering one of the most comprehensive treatments of the structure, scope, and theological method of *De Principiis* in the English language. While recent scholars of early Christianity have rightly stressed the character of early Christian theologies as primarily exegetical, as Fernández illustrates, in Origen we find the emergence of a system of Christian doctrine founded upon the practice of exegesis itself. Origen's systematic theology is thus one in which neither systematics nor exegesis has priority over each other—insofar as both are concerned with one and the same Logos. Systematics and exegesis are therefore held together in a single theological enterprise. Fernández's essay provides a reference point for new engagement with Origen's *De Principiis* as a source for rethinking the scope and method of contemporary systematics.

The third hermeneutical challenge concerns Origen's reception. What are the most significant moments in the recent history of reception that will likely exert influence on the interpretation of Origen today? The final group of four essays examines the two most well-established examples of Origen Renaissance in modernity: Cambridge Origenism in the seventeenth century and Catholic *ressourcement* in the twentieth century. The seminal importance of these two moments are well recognised today and they will likely continue to shape the hermeneutical concerns of the contemporary theologian turning to the texts of Origen.

The ideas of divine goodness, human freedom, and *apokatastasis* form a constellation of themes that sum up the interests and concerns of seventeenth-century Cambridge Origenists (chiefly in Ralph Cudworth, Henry More, and Anne Conway) in their attempts to respond to deterministic currents emerging in early modern Europe (e.g. Spinoza). Christian Hengstermann's genealogical essay attempts to break new ground by tracing how this nexus, characteristic of the Alexandrian master's thought, thoroughly shaped enlightenment rationalism not only in England but also in Germany. While recent scholarship has established the importance of Origen in Cambridge, Hengstermann's thesis is that this in turn was passed onto seminal figures of the German enlightenment, most notably Leibniz through his engagement with the works of the Cambridge Origenists and Origen himself (although like his English counterparts mainly restricted to select key texts such as *Contra Celsum* and *de Principiis*). Narrating the intricate interconnection between Cambridge Origenism and two German rationalists—Leibniz and Lessing—Hengstermann offers an ambitious attempt to insert Origen as a key figure into the intellectual history of the Age of Enlightenment. Giving the significance of Leibniz and Lessing for subsequent German thought, Hengstermann's essay makes it possible to view Origen's influence in later German philosophy, a project that could revolutionise our appreciation of the Alexandrian's legacy in modernity.

E.S. Kempson examines Anne Conway's engagement with Origenist ideas with a view to resource the contemporary theologian with an exemplary approach to thinking with someone "on the edge of Christian orthodoxy" such as Origen. There is an increased appreciation of Lady Anne Conway as a thinker who drank deeply at the well of Origen. Whilst Conway's dependence on Origen in her philosophy has received a significant amount of attention recently, she remains underappreciated as a heterodox and speculative theologian. Kempson's essay fills this lacuna as she considers the theological dimensions of Conway's metaphysical system—its Christological character, its theodicy, its defence of theism. In Kempson's treatment, Conway emerges as a fresh and creative thinker whose fruitful engagement with Origenist ideas led to a theological system that better confronts the question of ethics and salvation in the midst of her personal search for an adequate framework to the problem of evil and suffering. Constructively, this essay helpfully sets out six different ways to engage with Origen today before finally recommending Conway's own method: to be sympathetic yet critical, meaning neither to condemn Origen to heretical irrelevance nor to elevate him as a theological authority. Kempson thus proposes Conway as a promising model for theologians today interested in thinking with Origen but unsure as to how to deal with the heretical aspects of his thinking.

Turning to the twentieth century, the explosion of Roman Catholic interest in Origen revolves around the relation between tradition and creativity. Is the turn to tradition in the past stifling for a theological creativity that seeks to meet the existential and epistemological demands of our experience in the world? Or does the turn to tradition breathe new life into the sacred texts and theological visions that sustain Christian living in the world? These questions form the background of twentieth-century Catholic *ressourcement* figures' interest in recovering Origen for the church. As Joseph O'Leary highlights in his survey, Origen's legacy for Catholic theology is more multi-faceted than the image of a stagnant church drinking from the ancient well of spiritual vitality. Refusing to romanticise *ressourcement*, O'Leary argues that this project led to both mental enlargement and closure. On the one hand, in the hands of Jesuits such as Henri de Lubac and Henri Crouzel, Origen was used to establish a new identity for Catholic theology and ecclesiology that was overly curbed by anxiety about orthodoxy and the repudiation of what was viewed as an arid, inaccessible neo-scholasticism. This (except in Jean Daniélou) resulted in a reception that did not care much about the problems within Origen's thought (e.g. allegorical exegesis) and his daring suggestions (e.g. Trinitarian subordinationism) were often muted. On the other hand, Origen *ressourcement* enlarged Catholic theological mentality through interreligious dialogue inspired by the Alexandrian's *oeuvre*. Drawing from de Lubac's lesser-known comparative works on Buddhism, O'Leary shows that Origen facilitated a deeper appreciation of other religions by providing both an important theoretical basis (the doctrine of *logos spermatikos* which grounds an openness to other religions) and special ideas (glorified body of the *Logos* as analogous to the Buddhist doctrine of the "bliss body", Sambhogakaya). This Origenian legacy in French Jesuit interest in comparative theology persisted beyond the Second Vatican Council, as evident in subsequent works by writers such as Michel Fédou. The upshot of O'Leary's survey is clear: Origen *ressourcement* is not a one-sided affair, though it certainly stimulated fresh directions in Catholic theology.

Jennifer Newsome Martin turns to one of the most expansive engagements with Origen in the twentieth century found in Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar's engagement, Martin contends, is a mimetic and performative endeavour to think with Origen. Balthasar imitates the Alexandrian master's emphasis on attending to multiple layers of meaning contained within the theological tradition passed down to, and inherited by, those in the present. This is evident from Balthasar's rethinking of Origen which, as Martin details, imitates the Alexandrian's tripartite scheme of Scriptural exegesis. In Balthasar, there are three levels of Origen: letter, soul, and spirit. It is particularly the spirit of Origen, understood as a distinctive theological style or voice, that Balthasar wishes to recover. Martin argues that it is by re-performing Origen that Balthasar, in his own hermeneutic of Scripture, produces a non-identical repetition of the Alexandrian's spirit. What underlies this Balthasarian engagement with Origen is the conviction that theology is a new encounter with the Logos made present by a polyphonic symphony composed of the voices of human witnesses. The aim of engaging Origen is to discern the fire—the Logos—that radiates from the Alexandrian's thought. Martin recommends to contemporary theologians the Balthasarian-Origenian mode of engagement with the Christian tradition, arguing that the emphasis on the spirit and voice—an aesthetic (in Balthasarian terms) dimension which is "intangible, indeterminate, and non-measurable"—is better aligned with the reality of Christian practice and forms of life.

3. *Thinking with Origen Today: Future Directions*

I shall conclude by highlighting some emerging themes from this special issue that offer promising future directions for staging constructive conversation with Origen and his corpus in systematic and philosophical theology today. In particular, I wish to draw attention to one theological question, one historical-genealogical question, and one substantial methodological issue that invite the contemporary reader to think further with Origen.

First, does a vision of the Trinity emerging out of a mature spiritual life necessarily rule out a linear, hierarchical model of the Trinity? Sarah Coakley has recently drawn from Origen to argue that a prayer-based approach to the Trinity will lead one (with Origen) toward an incorporative Spirit-led vision of the Trinity reserved for the more mature.¹¹ But as we have seen, the linear scheme is central to Origen's Trinitarian theology precisely because it provides an eternal basis in reality that mirrors the dynamics of how human life is incorporated into the life of the divine. As I have highlighted in my essay, Origen envisages the summation of the spiritual life in terms of becoming love, that is (in the terms of 1 John) becoming sons (*ek tou theou*). But becoming sons involves precisely a participation in the double erotic movement of the only-begotten Son's eternal contemplation of the Father which supposes a sense of dependence that brings us back to the "linear" model of the Trinity. Is a linear vision of the Trinity incompatible with a deepening practice of prayer and a mature spiritual life, or should it be regarded as an important theological foundation for a vision of deification, understood as incorporation into the Triune fellowship of love? Further exploration on this question will likely involve reassessing the interplay between

¹¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 131.

Pauline (emphasised by Coakley) and Johannine (stressed by Pui Him Ip and Giovanni Hermanin de Reichenfeld) exegetical themes in Origen's Trinitarian thought.

Second, does Origen's so-called metaphysics of freedom prefigure (and perhaps serve as an important genealogical origin of) the cardinal emphases of individual freedom and human equality in the modern West? There has been a surge of interest recently in the claim that Origen, in placing a metaphysics of freedom at the heart of his thought, was one of the Late Antique predecessors of the Western tradition of human freedom.¹² Origen is seen as laying down the theological foundation for freedom of the human person integral for affirming the radical equality among human persons. Moreover, as we have seen from the essay by Christian Hengstermann, Origen was invoked specifically in early modern debates on the idea of individual freedom. However, in a recent article Matthijs den Dulk has offered evidence that disrupts the aforementioned narrative. According to den Dulk, Origen displays ways of thinking that bear substantial resemblance to later racial-deterministic thinking, a commonplace in the ancient world.¹³ The question of Origen's relation to the discourse of enlightenment modernity requires urgent attention: should Origen be assigned a key place in our genealogical understanding of modernity's notion of freedom and human equality?

Finally, one issue emerging from this collection of essays touches on the very nature of theology itself. There is a consensus amongst several contributors that Origen's exegetical theology is an "embedded" exercise (to use Rowan Williams' phrase). All of Origen's work makes sense only when seen as embedded within his vision of the spiritual life. In this vision, exegesis is a spiritual exercise to facilitate the exegete's progress towards final restoration.¹⁴ The task of exegesis is thus firmly embedded within the ascetical life of the exegete located between the Fall and *apokatastasis*—the narrational arc of the drama of salvation for a human person. Scripture exegesis serves as the gymnasium in which one learns not only how to read oneself but how to progress toward that union with God and deification that defines one's final destiny.

There is thus a distinctive role the spiritual life plays in Origen's theological enterprise as the unifying context of all theological activities. As Jennifer Newsome Martin suggests in her essay, the value of disciplinary boundaries recedes in the face of the unity found in the spiritual life. Moreover, the spiritual life, in which all theological tasks gain their coherence, is itself bound up with the coherence of systematic theology. Samuel Fernández's essay makes it clear that it is the coherence of Origen's

¹² See for instance the work accomplished by "The History of Human Freedom and Dignity in Western Civilization" project led by Anders-Jacob Jacobsen at Aarhus University. The project sought to trace the development of the notion of freedom in Western societies through a study of the history of reception of Origen. See <https://itn-humanfreedom.eu/> (accessed 21 February 2022). The theoretical foundation of this genealogical approach is based on the works of the so-called Münster school. See the discussion in Alfons Fürst, ed., "Perspectives on Origen in the History of His Reception," in *Perspectives on Origen in the History of His Reception*, vol. 21, Adamantiana (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2021), 24–25.

¹³ Matthijs den Dulk, "Origen of Alexandria and the History of Racism as a Theological Problem," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (April 2020): 164–95, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flaa025>.

¹⁴ For further details, see Rowan D. Williams, "Origen: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy," in *Origeniana septima: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Wolfgang Bienert and Uwe Kühneweg, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum theologicarum Lovaniensium* 137 (Leuven: Leuven University Press: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1999), 3–14 and more recently, Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

system as a whole that undergirds the intelligibility of any single doctrinal idea built from exegesis. Exegesis must therefore be embedded within the spiritual life, but the spiritual life in turn is made intelligible only in the light of a coherent and panoramic drama of the divine economy, i.e. systematic theology, in which one can find one's place between the beginning and the end. There is thus a reciprocity between the coherence of the spiritual life and the coherence of the divine economy made available by systematic theology. Hence Williams' thesis: Origen's whole theological vision lies in the presupposed coincidence between the shape of divine activity in the whole cosmos (= the divine economy) and the shape of the life and work of the spiritual exegete.

Now here is a first problem with this vision: might we make sense of Origen or think with Origen, if our practice today no longer shares the same embeddedness with his exegetical philosophy and theology, i.e. if we no longer make sense of ourselves and our theological activities within the same drama of divine economy? The answer suggested by several essays in this collection seems to be no. As Williams suggests, Origen's work makes little sense to any readers when read outside of this embedded context. For this reason, fourth-century readers misread Origen because his theology could no longer make sense for later readers who no longer share the Alexandrian's understanding of the exegetical task. Conversely, as Samuel Rubenson makes clear, what makes Origen intelligible to the monks is precisely the assumption they share with him about the embeddedness of Scriptural engagement within the ascetical life. To what extent, then, does the practice of theology today condemn us to a radical incommensurability between Origen and ourselves (as Mark Edwards asks in his article)? Or does the Origenian vision of the theological task continue to be a viable, live option (as Martin suggests via von Balthasar) and if so, where is theology after Origen to be located today?

A second problem with conceiving theological coherence as embedded in the inner coherence of the spiritual life is that this can be used as an excuse to perpetually suspend judgment on the system in question. For the elevation of personal authority of the exegete to become the criterion and ground for theological coherence could quickly descend into the abuse of such authority for promoting ideology and oppressive practices. Moreover, it is difficult to know how the theology of an authoritative exegete such as Origen can be properly subjected to open criticism and debate, when by design such a system can readily dismiss critics as missing the point. This is not to say that an Origenian vision of theology has no place for objective criteria and analysis. But the question precisely is to what extent does an appeal to the charismatic authority and example of the exegete invariably supersede an appeal to such tools and sciences that underscore objective criteria and critical analysis?

What is at stake in Origen's work concerns precisely the possibility and desirability of pursuing the task of theology today as embedded within a framework wherein the coherence and unity of the enterprise is located in spiritual maturity and holiness, and not necessarily derivative from theology's status as *Wissenschaft*.¹⁵ Such a vision will

¹⁵ I am not thereby suggesting simplistically that the Origenian vision is mutually incompatible with the involvement of any scientific notions of the theological task. Origen certainly draws extensively from ancient philology, grammar, logic, and so on. But the point remains that Origen does indeed raise a serious question about whether the unity of theology can ever be grounded on the basis of its scientific character. The search for the unity of theological tasks (exegesis, philosophy, historical studies, and so on) might well be as elusive as the search for the unity of science itself in the nineteenth century. See Stephen Gaukroger, *Civilization and the Culture of Science: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1795-1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

always be theologically contentious, perhaps not unfittingly so given the disputed nature of Origen as a thinker and his afterlife in Christian history.

4. Coda

No one familiar with the work of Sarah Coakley could fail to notice the consonance between the themes and emphases in the set of essays in this special themed issue and her own work. This is no coincidence, as the original stimulus for *Re-thinking Origen* (including the essays by Maspero, O'Leary, Rubenson, and Williams) was the day conference marking Coakley's retirement from her service as the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge (25 April 2018). And early conversations with Coakley herself on Origen and his *Nachleben* were instrumental in terms of setting the scope of this project. Though this special issue is not intended as a festschrift, I think it is fitting to offer *Re-thinking Origen* in honour of Sarah Coakley's enduring contribution to the task of Patristic *ressourcement*, demonstrating in her work an inspiring model of how to think *with* early Christian voices as interlocutors for the task of systematic and philosophical theology today.