For a century and a half at least, it has generally been assumed, by its defenders and by its detractors alike, that ecclesiastical thought in the age that separates Paul from Constantine was not a mere blossoming of the primitive gospel but a kind of oleaster, the result of a studious grafting of mundane philosophies on to the biblical stem. There are those who maintain that it had to be so, that God could not have spoken to every people through the words of Christ had he not prepared them already by communicating truth to them in their own idiom; others protest that Paul denounces the wisdom of this work, that Christ was avowedly the bearer of a new commandment, that his advent was anticipated only in the preaching of the Hebrew prophets, and even they were misunderstood by those who had only nature’s ears to hear them. On either view, philosophy is an importation into Christian teaching, and, because it is widely held that the philosopher in the Roman world was not a man who thought for himself but the mouthpiece of a dead master, it has been natural to assume that the Christian too would not devise his own philosophy, but would attach himself to the creed already promulgated by an established school. Thus an author will be classified as a Platonist or a Stoic if he airs a doctrine that reminds the modern critic of those sects, and all the more so if his own citations lead us to his source. The author adduced most frequently, and with the least reproach, in Christian texts is Plato; Platonism, therefore, is supposed to have been the dominant philosophy of the church fathers, and the reason for this is commonly said to be not so much that they chose to make it so as that its influence in the world from which they received their education was irresistible. The adoption of philosophy, then, is presented at best as a wise passivity to circumstance, which cajoled the intelligence and dispelled the enmity of pagans, while enabling the Christian neophyte to eke out the teachings of the infant church with answers to questions that the apostles and Jesus never thought to ask.

Yet if accommodation had been the aim of the first apologists, they ought to have done anything sooner than take up philosophy. The philosopher was one who abstained from sacrifice, who baited the pride of tyrants, who denied himself the ties of matrimony and procreation, and who taught the young to disobey their parents (Plato, *Meno* 91c–92c). In return the world mocked his isolation, his moroseness, his
ostentatious ineptitude in worldly matters: even if he were not cruising the air in a basket or hurling himself into a volcano, we have it on Plato's authority that a philosopher is a hermit abroad, who knows the heavens better than his own street. The philosopher, then as now, was a marginal figure, and for this reason alone, we could never speak of Platonism, or any of its rivals, as a dominant philosophy, as we might speak of the dominance of Islam or Marxism in a modern culture. Christian apologetic, which is polemical or hortatory more often than it is defensive, was designed not so much to illustrate the conformity of the church to the world as to justify its defiance; the virtue of the philosophers, in Christian eyes, was that at their best they had set an example of overt defiance which was tolerated not so much despite, but because of, its intractability. The nonconformity of the philosopher, like that of the Jew, was acceptable to the government because it was not a solvent to the conformity of others; if Christianity too could take its place among the philosophies (as Judaism had already done), it would be possible for the believer to proclaim his faith without dilution and without dying for it. To accredit this claim, the Christian had not only to don a cloak and differ conspicuously from the ambient population; he had also to show that his creed possessed its own axioms, which differed from those of any other school, and that these axioms, together with a cogent system of glosses and deductions, had passed down from one generation of authorized teachers to another. The same principle which led pagans of this epoch to set up half-fictitious dynasties for the transmission of ideas led Jews to manufacture equally fictitious chains of rabbinic tradition and churchmen to construct invidious pedigrees for heretics; but it made it equally necessary for churchmen to advertise their own genealogies, to be able to say “I had it from a presbyter, who had it from an apostle, who was with Christ.” Against the cults of the ancient world, but in common with the philosophical schools, both Jew and Christian held religious tenets that determined all belief and conduct, proving themselves philosophers by the singleness of aim in life and fortitude in death; but Christians also urged, in contrast to both, that their immutable doctrines were founded upon the teachings of a single man, who was literally infallible because he was identical with the word of God himself, and that this word in turn was identical with the written text or group of texts that the church had adopted as its norm of faith.

In the following discussion, we must remember that this subordination of every human word to the word of God was a notorious trait of Christian thought, and one that pagan philosophers adduced as a proof that Christians were not of their fraternity. We must remember again that the purpose of representing Christianity as a philosophy was partly to justify martyrdom and partly to forestall it, so that pagan controversialists seemed all the more culpable in Christian eyes when instead of applauding the martyrs they colluded with their murderers and supinely conformed to religious practices which they openly derided in books and lectures. Finally we must remember that, both in commending the philosophers and in denouncing them, a Christian was apt to assume that every sect was answerable only to its founder, and hence to ascribe a changeless uniformity to its teachings. The failure of the apologists to notice the philosophers of their own time is partly a symptom of that antiquarianism which is characteristic of all Greek writing of the Roman era; at the same time, it indicates that
the marriage of the gospel to philosophy was palatable only when the pagan school had come to be perceived as a kind of church.

The majority of those who knew what an ancient philosopher said will not have read him, in the Roman world or in ours. The aims of the present study require us to ascertain not what any distinguished thinker of antiquity may have said, but what his name represented to cultivated minds in (what we now call) the second century. Such knowledge will have been derived in the first place from compendia – like those ascribed to Aetius, Galen, and Plutarch – which proceeded topic by topic, briefly adumbrating the doctrines of the principal schools in series under each head, or from a biographical digest such as the Lives of the Philosophers by Diogenes Laertius, in which lesser names are appended in temporal sequence to that of the real or putative founder of the school, and the account of the latter includes a systematic inventory of his leading doctrines. As in our time, such manuals governed the common understanding of a thinker even in readers who had made their own perusal of his writings. It has been maintained that the frequency with which the same quotations recur in Christian authors betokens the use of a different resource, a florilegium of pagan testimonies to the gospel.² No such collection is known, however, and a survey of modern books on ancient philosophy will show that an informal florilegium tends to evolve within the scholarly tradition, merely because the repeated canvassing of the same difficulties sends one commentator after another to the same small quorum of texts. In addition to the handbook and the conjectural florilegium, we may be sure of another influence which would modify even an independent reading of the authorities – the consensus of a dead philosopher’s latter-day interpreters, which we know only from desultory citations, though in the intellectual atmosphere of those times it was the oxygen of all study and debate.

**Platonism**

The majority of Plato’s works are too playful or gladiatorial in form, too abrupt or tentative in their results, to be kneaded without duress into a coherent system. Nevertheless, the conventions of doxography, or history of opinions, in antiquity, demanded that every philosopher should build with purpose upon a few fixed principles, and, since the Timaeus was much the most celebrated of his dialogues, his system was conceived as a cosmology whose principles were God, the ideas, and matter. The term “God” denotes the Demiurge, or father and maker of all, whose superabounding goodness prompted him to frame the earth and the spheres that circle it in imperishable harmony, to entrust the orchestration of these motions to a benevolent soul, and to delegate the creation of sentient beings to lesser deities. The ideas, which in the Timaeus are said to constitute the paradigm of which the material world is an image, appear in other dialogues as the immutable and universal archetypes of virtues, qualities, natural kinds, and mathematical properties, which transcend the flux and change of the sensible world but are predicated of objects in this world which participate in them; it is the presence of these archetypes, when correctly apprehended, that imparts validity to our judgments of rectitude, beauty, equality,
and the like. “Matter” is not a term employed by Plato, but was used after Aristotle to denote the space or receptacle whose disorderly motions the demiurge subjects to form, but with incomplete success, so that the universe which this substrate upholds is not only distinct from the paradigm but prone to ills, vicissitudes, and frailties that are unknown in the higher realm.

Christian authors espoused the most literal reading of the *Timaeus*, according to which the paradigm is eternal, whereas the sensible world has an origin in time. This tenet they could cite in corroboration of the opening chapter of Genesis, where God is said to create the heaven and earth a mere five days before the creation of the first man, and thus deflect the ridicule of those philosophers who maintained that the world was eternal, or that world follows world in perpetual succession. On the other hand, the similarity enabled them to subordinate Plato to Moses, as it could not be denied that the Hebrew philosopher antedated the Greek by a thousand years. As to the ideas, no Christian could endorse the view (which the dialogue seemed to inculcate when literally construed) that these inhabited a plane independent of, and indeed superior to, that which the demiurge occupied; if these archetypes could be said to exist eternally, it could only have been as prescient thoughts in the mind of a God who knew what he intended to create. The postulation of matter as the raw stuff of creation seemed warranted by the statement in Genesis 1:2 that the earth remained “without form and void” until the spirit moved upon its waters. No Christian, on the other hand, could allow that this primordial turbulence was uncreated, or that the evils of the world proceeded from its invincible enmity to the will of the Creator.

Both in what they affirmed and in what they denied, the Christian readers of the *Timaeus* were anticipated, and in some respects guided, by the Jewish apologist and exegete Philo of Alexandria. While he is often ranked with the middle Platonists – a purely taxonomic label embracing all writers between 350 BCE and CE 250 who read Plato’s works with sympathy and attention – his platonism is circumscribed by his loyalty to the Torah as the infallible and sufficient word of God. It is God’s injunction “let there be light” at Genesis 1:3, together with variants and glosses on this verse in the later Israelite tradition, that accounts for his use of Logos as an appellative for the intermediate deity, or divine power, through which God creates the world without any sacrifice of his own transcendence or simplicity. But, whereas in the Mosaic text and its echo at John 1:1 this term denotes the creative act of speech, Philo takes it also to signify “reason” (as it often does in Greek), so that his Logos is at once the dynamic and almost personal author of a temporal creation and an eternal archetype in the mind of God. In short, this Logos is at once the paradigm of Plato and his Demiurge; whether Philo held that he makes use of a material substrate in this latter capacity seems not to have been securely ascertained. The belief in Jewish circles that the cosmos was formed from “things that are not” is attested in 2 Maccabees 7:28 and endorsed in Hebrews 11:2; Christians, to whom both texts were authoritative, had still to decide whether “out of nothing” meant from an absolute void, from the indeterminate possibilities which lay before the creator at the outset, or from an inchoate materiality which God himself produced as the foundation of all that he purposed to bring into being.
Coincidences between Christian and Philonic exegesis are common enough to suggest that his work was widely known in the church at first or at second hand, though Clement of Alexandria is unusual in citing him by name. To Clement he is not a Christian but a Pythagorean, that is a member of the sect which professed to cherish and interpret the cryptic teachings of Pythagoras of Samos. Born perhaps a century before Plato, Pythagoras is supposed to have discovered the mathematical proportions which defined both the notes of the octave and the intervals between the orbits of the celestial spheres. He was thought to have anticipated one of the most arcane of Plato’s doctrines by making the monad and the dyad (reified forms of the numbers 1 and 2) the progenitors of all things, both in the intellectual and in the sensible cosmos. The Pythagorean tradition surpasses Plato in its ascription of mystical properties to numbers and in its testimonies to the inscrutability of the first principle, which it characterizes only by the negation of every predicate, including the most dignified of those that we apply to objects in the present world. The practical counsels handed down in the name of Pythagoras, outwardly trifling or superstitious, were understood in the Roman age as esoteric precepts for the discipline of the soul. Philo could pass for a Pythagorean because he celebrated the properties of the number seven, held that God could be spoken of only in privative terms, and urged that the ordinances of the Mosaic law were designed to be applied literally to the flesh and symbolically to the outward man.

Roman Pythagoreanism and Roman Platonism coalesce in modern scholarship; what early Christians knew of either we can hardly say. We do not know if they were conscious of the tendency, represented in the Handbook of Alcinous, to treat the ideas as thoughts in the mind of God. We do not know when they first learned of a shift from the naïve interpretation of the Timaeus to a more artificial reading, first attested by the grammarian Calvenus Taurus, who argues that the sensible world, like the paradigm, is eternal, and that the former is generated in the sense that it depends upon the latter for its existence, not in the sense of having an origin in time. The one middle Platonist cited in Christian texts of the first three centuries, Numenius of Apamea, could also be called a late Pythagorean. As a Platonist he conflated the Timaeus with the Republic, in which the highest principle is the Good – that is, the unsurpassed measure of value and the terminus of all rational endeavour. Numenius arrives at a theory of two gods, the first corresponding to the Good, the second to the Demiurge, while the paradigm takes shape in the second through its contemplation of the first. Some early Christian writers found the relation between these two gods analogous to that between the Father and the Son. But the parallel is not exact, and the most anomalous teaching of Numenius – that this world results from the schism which the second god incurred when a lapse of concentration embroiled it in matter – could not have been entertained by any Christian whom we should now think orthodox.
Philosophies of the Roman world

Aristotle's lectures to his students were assembled as a corpus by Andronicus of Rhodes, about thirty years before the start of the Christian era. Two centuries were to elapse before detailed commentaries on these esoteric works were undertaken by Alexander of Aphrodisias, and in the meantime they are not so widely cited as the "exoteric" treatises which Aristotle himself prepared for general circulation. In the latter, the existence of a benevolent creator was deduced from the pulchritude and harmony of the visible cosmos, and a fifth element, or quintessence, was added to earth, air, fire, and water, though authorities are divided as to whether this was conceived as the stuff of God, the soul, or the circumambient ether. It is in his esoteric disputations that Aristotle asserts, against his erstwhile tutor Plato, that the world has no beginning in time, that essences and ideas do not exist except insofar as they are instantiated in matter, that God is the final cause or end of all but not the efficient cause of anything, and that the soul (or at least the irrational soul in contrast to the intellect) is as mortal as the body that it informs. It did not occur to Christians in the age before Constantine that this last tenet could be turned into a proof of the resurrection, or that a man who gives the name God to the highest principle might be a more durable ally than one who set the Good above the Demiurge; it is possible, indeed, that it was only from Platonic controversialists that most Christians learned anything of Aristotle's defection from his master. Some profess an acquaintance with his logic, though most often to deride and misrepresent it. Clement of Alexandria owes to Aristotle the title, but not the tenor, of his Exhortation to the Greeks (Protrepticus), or summons to conversion, while Alexander of Aphrodisias may have furnished a model for commentary to those who required any other model than Philo. For the most part, it cannot be said that Christian knowledge of Aristotle's teachings was profound.

Whereas Aristotle taught that the soul cannot flourish without some measure of good repute and material comfort, Plato equated happiness with the uncomposed pleasure of contemplation. The most rigorous of all sects in their moral teaching were the Stoics, whose three authorities – the caustic Zeno, the pious Cleanthes, and the subtle Chrysippus – wrote successively in the fourth century BCE. They urged that the end of human life is to live with the frugality and integrity that nature prescribes; the good they located not so much in the achievement of this end as in the virtuous pursuit of it, and the unbending zeal which many of the followers displayed in the teeth of mockery and oppression could not fail to impress the first Christians. On the other hand, their doctrine that all existence is corporeal, which entailed the identification of God himself with a tenuous fire that pervades the universe, could not be endorsed by anyone who wished to uphold the liberty and omnipotence of God. The Stoic god does not create, but comes into being as the logos or informing principle of each new world, surviving only until that world is swallowed up in its appointed ekpyrosis or combustion to be succeeded by another in which the same cycle of events will be reproduced to the last particular. Still more repugnant to Christian faith was the cold theology of Epicurus, a contemporary of the earliest Stoics, who taught that the world and its gods arise from the chance collision and confluence of atoms. The
end of life, according to this philosopher, is simply to be free from pain; the gods are the lofty exemplars of this imperturbability, and for that reason exercise no providential government below. The Stoics rejoined that a natural affinity between the human intellect and the divine guarantees that the world is ordered for our sake and that the future can be revealed by divination. It followed that what is ordained cannot be evaded, a corollary that to other schools (though not to the Stoics themselves) appeared to rob humanity of that moral freedom which permits the allocation of praise and blame.

The odium which the world had hitherto reserved for the Epicureans fell upon the Christians who proclaimed that the gods of myth and the civic cults were helpless idols. They were also assimilated to the Cynics, who on the plea that whatever is merely customary is unnatural, made a duty of denouncing common goals and flouting public norms of conduct. The likeness was not even superficial for the Cynics lived under no law, impugned their founder Diogenes as freely as they upbraided one another, and preached autonomy rather than the service of any superhuman power as the goal of life. It was alleged that certain Christians had imposed on the mob by a showy imitation of Cynic fortitude; intellectual churchmen were more likely to seek their allies among the skeptics who, while entertaining no creed of their own, set out to explode whatever was taught in other schools as more than a probable approximation to truth. Christians could deploy the skeptic's arsenal against the shams of magic and astrology; at the same time, they could urge, against the skeptic and the dogmatist alike, that the authority of the Bible is established by the uniqueness of its own claim to authority, now that reason itself has demonstrated the vanity of the philosopher's promise to build on reason alone.

First steps

It is hard to say when Christian thought began to sport the colors of philosophy. The first chapter of John's Gospel represents Christ as the embodiment of the Word, or creative utterance, that was "with God in the beginning"; the epistle ascribed to Barnabas gives a figurative turn to the superannuated rites and ordinances of the Mosaic covenant, sometimes applying them to the inner man, sometimes construing them as mystical adumbrations of the gospel. The first apologist, Aristeides of Athens, apes the doxographers by dividing peoples rather than men according to their first principles; rather than canvass the fashionable question, whether philosophy was invented by the Greeks or by the barbarians, he asks which race has held the worthiest notions of the divine and awards the palm to those who are not Chaldaeans, Greeks or Egyptians, neither polytheists nor Jews. The First Apology of Justin Martyr, who wore his philosopher's cloak with ostentation until his death in CE 165, informs the Greeks that the best of their philosophers merely eavesdropped on the truth that had been vouchsafed to the barbarians. In his Dialogue with Trypho he relates that, having spurned three other teachers as soon as he met them, he became an ardent Platonist, until he was robbed of his faith in the capacities of the soul by an encounter with an old man. The latter waylaid him with arguments derived from Aristotle, but his
medicine for perplexity was submission to the words of a single book, to which the classics of the pagan world were children both in age and in profundity. Justin has been credited with the view that what Israel received through oral prophecy was imparted by inspiration to a handful of philosophers; what he says, however, is only that the philosophers excelled in logos, not that they were acquainted with that Logos whom Justin celebrates as the architect of the heavens, the author and subject of all true Scriptures, and in latter days the embodied Son of God. Independent knowledge of him was granted to the Sibyl and Hystaspes, but the philosophers trained their wits on a revelation gleaned by stealth from the Greek translation of the Torah. Platonists partook of this Logos fully enough to recognize him in Hermes, the ambassador of Zeus, and Plato himself had even framed the soul in the image of the cross in his *Timaeus*; the Stoic belief that the Logos is born and extinguished with the universe is a specimen of the errors that result from a false presumption of affinity between the soul and God. Popular lampoons on the founders of all schools are revived in a coarse *Oration to the Greeks* by Justin’s pupil Tatian, whose image of the Logos leaping forth from the Father after a stage of latency is too violent for the Platonists, too fissiparous for the Stoics. For Christian apologists of the second century, reason and speech are two successive determinations of the Logos, and not merely contiguous senses of the same term as in Philo. Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, writing about 170, borrows Stoic terms to discriminate the *logos endiathetos*, or immanent word, from the *logos prophorikos*, or word enunciated; Stoics, however, used these terms to contrast articulate thought with the din of brutes, not to delineate two stages in human utterance. Theophilus may also be the first to say expressly that the world was made from nothing, taking matter to be the void and formless earth of Genesis 1:2 and hence the first product of God’s will.

**Disenchantment**

Secular philosophies are epitomized in the manner of the handbooks, but with sustained and polemical rancor, by Hippolytus, a disaffected prelate of the Roman church at the end of the second century. Conscious no doubt, that *hairesis*, or “choice,” was the technical term for a philosophical sect, he undertakes to prove, in his *Refutation of all Heresies*, that every “choice” which deviates from the teaching of the church is underwritten by some stealthy appropriation of pagan thought. The libel is eclectic if not erudite: Pythagoras inspired the numerology of the gnosticizing heretic Valentinus; his disciple Empedocles bequeathed to Marcion a false dichotomy between the just creator and the benevolent redeemer, while an older sage, Heraclitus, was the true father of that protean speculation which the first heretic, Simon Magus, published as his own discovery, in the hope of being taken for a God. Basilides, a pioneer of apophatic or negative theology, is said to have found his “non-existent deity” in Aristotle, whose *Categories* are paraphrased with the shrewd burlesque that characterizes adversarial writings by the Platonists of this era. Much of this is fallacious and defamatory, but not all, for we possess two Gnostic tractates of the third century, the *Allogenes* and the *Zostrianus*, in which motifs from Plato were handled deftly enough to vex his pagan followers into composing long replies.
Equally contumelious, though far more energetic in style, is a Latin contemporary of Hippolytus, Tertullian of Carthage, who, in his philippic against the use of philosophy by heretics, produced the famous epigram, “What is Athens to Jerusalem, the academy to the church?” Nevertheless, Tertullian is perhaps the earliest Christian to have mastered not only the tenets but the controversial arts of the pagan schools. Knowing that he cannot produce a decisive text from the Scriptures to support his view that the soul is a kind of body, he threatens his adversaries with paradox. Why should we deny corporeality to a being simply because it lacks the traits of other bodies? How can the soul be innocent of corporeal affections when the body itself would not feel these affections but for the presence of a soul? Can it be said to inhabit any place after death, can it even be said to quit its carnal tenement, unless is possesses some shape and dimension? No Christian hitherto had fenced so nimbly with the weapons of the Stoic, and yet Tertullian is no Stoic but a biblical Christian, urging strenuously that God and the human soul are not of a piece. It is not clear that the Stoics could differentiate corporeality from materiality, but in Tertullian’s day, a Latin speaker could assert that God is a corpus and mean only to credit him with discrete existence, without subjecting him to the frailty and impermanence of matter. It is spirit, not matter, that constitutes the substance of Tertullian’s God, who is not the immanent logos of creation, but has projected his eternal thought as the sempiternal Logos to bring creation out of nothing. Stoics may be the janitors of truth, but not its guardians: the locution dixit Seneca saepe noster should not be rendered “as our Seneca often says” (as though Tertullian and the Stoic teacher were of the same school) but rather “as Seneca says, who is often on our side.”

New approaches

The libraries of Alexandria bred a scholasticism in philosophy that resembled Christian handling of the Scriptures. The author whom we call Clement of Alexandria received a pagan education in Athens before he took up residence in the Egyptian capital. Pantaenus, his instructor in Christianity, is frequently alleged to have been a Stoic, though we do not learn this from Clement. Both were later said to have presided over the Catechetical School in Alexandria, but in Clement’s first surviving work, the Exhortation to the Greeks (Protrepticus), the philosopher is more in evidence than the theologian. The text derives its name from a famous work by Aristotle, and its denunciation of pagan cults as marts of imposture and lechery finds an echo in harangues against the populace by Platonists, Cynics, Stoics, and Epicureans. Yet Clement leaves these forebears behind him in his denunciation of idolatry, his allusions to the fall, his refusal to palliate myth by allegory, and his castigation of philosophers who scoff at the cults but are afraid to shun them. That Christians and philosophers can be intellectual allies he sets out to prove in his Miscellanies (Stromateis), where philosophers are said to have arrived at correct opinions on many topics, the Logos is discovered to be the seat of the Platonic ideas, and the principles of Pythagorean symbology are adopted not only to dissipate obscurities in the Scriptures but to buttress the claim that deeper truths are hidden even in the more lucid passages.
Clement shows off his proficiency in logic; in the first, he commends the acquisition of an “eclectic” wisdom, which is common to all philosophies, as a means to the perfection of Christian faith. It is the knowing or gnostic Christian who obeys the commandments truly, discerning (for example) that the “noetic” sense of Christ’s injunction to give away one’s riches can be applied to the inner man without any outward loss to the wealthy benefactors of the church. Unsympathetic commentators surmise that Clement’s true philosophy is his “eclecticism,” from which he makes a procrustean bed for the gospel, lopping away the unpalatable elements which had made the world afraid of Christ and formidable to his saints.

This judgment is unlikely to survive a thorough reading of Clement’s works. The knowledge that he inculcates entails the recognition of humility as a virtue, though the philosophers had no word for it; admonishing the rich that they are debtors in spirit to those who receive their alms, it requires a woman to dress without ornament and a man to dispense with footwear. So much a philosopher might also do, but if he is guided in this by a true apprehension of God, he derived this (Clement argues) from the Hebrew prophets, not from any deposit of common truth. It is in their theology that philosophers differ, and it is not they but the Sibyl and Hystaspes (as in Justin) who have imbibed their knowledge of God by inspiration.

Clement’s inventory of pagan thefts from Scripture takes up half of the fifth book in the Miscellanies, and he has twice as many citations from St. Paul as from the more voluminous Plato. Pythagorean maxims are adopted to forestall the literal exposition of passages that we too would consider metaphorical; and while the Logos seems to represent a diffuse and universal teaching at some points in the Miscellanies, we must not forget that this is only one of his works, designed not so much to propagate a systematic theology as to reconcile the gospel with those elements in philosophy which admitted of harmonization. We cannot tell what we have lost in Clement’s Outlines (Hypotyposes), where he proceeds by exegesis of the New Testament; we can observe, however, that in his Christ the Educator, or Schoolmaster, the Logos is incarnate and attired in a crown of thorns.

Origën is reputed to have been a pupil of Clement and the next leader of the Catechetical School. Disappointed in his early hope of martyrdom, he became a noted expositor of the Scriptures, and in his celebrated treatise On First Principles he endeavors to build a system from this source alone, dispelling superficial contradiction and absurdities, vindicating the harmony of the two testaments and laying down canons for profitable reading. Yet he also alludes to his schooling with an unnamed master, whose name is agreed in ancient sources to have been Ammonius. This man or a namesake also taught Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, and the epithet “Platonist” sticks like a burr to Origën in modern criticism, though he cannot have read Plotinus, expressly repudiates the theory of ideas, and differs from every known representative of Platonism in using “God” as the proper, rather than merely honorific, name of the highest principle. His equation of God with mind and his adoption of the terms monad and henad to illustrate God’s simplicity are authorized by the practice of Philo and previous Christian writers; they are also exemplifications of that process which, in a letter to a disciple, he called “spoiling the Egyptians” – that is, enriching
the church from the treasuries of the nations who oppress her, or, in plainer terms, availing oneself of all that Greek philosophy and philology can contribute to the elucidation of Scriptures (Philokalia 13, citing Exodus 3:22). Philosophy may suggest, but Scripture judges: thus at On Prayer 27, Origen has to explain the otherwise unattested compound epiousios in the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:3), which he takes to mean supersubstantial. In imitation of Plato’s Sophist, he notes that the Greeks are divided into two parties, one contending that whatever truly is must be immune to change, and therefore incorporeal, while the other asseverates that nothing exists unless that is not apprehensible to the senses. The first are of course the Platonists and the others the Stoics, but in siding with the former Origen argues not from his schooling or the consensus of divines in Alexandria, and not even from those premises which were endorsed by all philosophers, but solely from other passages in Scriptures. If a Platonist is one who rests his beliefs on the authority of Plato, Origen does not qualify for the designation.

Plato is the Greek most often praised in the one surviving work that Origen dedicated to philosophy. The eight books of his apology Against Celsus were written towards the end of his life to rebut an attack on the Christians which had been current for seventy years. Its author is characterized in modern scholarship as a rhetorician with Platonic sympathies, though Origen repeatedly taunts him as an Epicurean. This imputation allows him to draw promiscuously on all the schools opposed to Epicurus in his vindication of providence and the immateriality of God. He calls on the Stoics to expose the faults of his interlocutor’s logic, and to corroborate his Christian belief that the world is governed in the interests of humanity. On the other hand, the Symposium of Plato affords a parallel to the superficial obscenities of the Old Testament, an echo of Numenius is detectable when Christ is acclaimed as a second god, and a shopworn passage from the Timaeus illustrates the difficulty of obtaining or publishing knowledge of the Father. But none of this makes Origen a Platonist, and his defense of all three positions is designed not so much to reconcile the philosophers as to reprove them. He will not allow that the vices of any Greek text can be wholly purged by allegory, and his own assiduity in this practice struck the Platonists as an innovation, reminiscent of the Stoics. His second God is subordinated to God the Father only on biblical grounds, and enters the human realm by condescension, not by an inadvertent shift of vision. As for the impediments to our knowledge of God, they are barely observed by Plato, who pronounces difficult that which Christians know to be impossible without special revelation. Origen holds that Christians have a duty to answer the cavils of philosophers in language that will command their esteem, but at the same time he admonishes the Greeks that it is not the sublimation of the intellect, but the voluntary abasement of the Word, that spans the gulf between the infinite God and the objects of his love.

Aftermath

Origen’s pupil and panegyrist Gregory Thaumaturgus records that he devised his own conspectus of the chief schools as an introduction to theological studies. His writing
marks a caesura in relations between the church and the Greeks, not only because so little Christian literature on any topic survives from the next half century, but because, when the apologists once again took up the case against the pagans, it was no longer possible for them simply to spurn the philosophers even when they pretended to knowledge of God without revelation. Eusebius, though he endorses and embellishes the charge of plagiarism, blames the philosophers primarily for their failure to perceive that the works of their greatest predecessors anticipated or confirmed the Christian preaching of three hypostases and one God. Arnobius and Lactantius, taking the common Roman view that the test of philosophy is conduct, holds up Christ as the exemplar of those virtues which have been eclipsed in Rome by love of conquest or collusion with the vices of the conquered. For Arnobius the enemy is religion, while for Lactantius it is rhetoric; philosophy, as the latter intimates, can lead the Christian not only away from error but home to truth.49

Further reading

C. N. Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture, Oxford: Clarendon, 1940.

Notes

11 Justin, First Apology 44.
12 Justin, First Apology 59.
13 Justin, First Apology 21.
14 Justin, First Apology 60.
15 Theophilus, To Autolycus 2.10.
17 Hippolytus, Refutation of all Heresies 6.17–18.
18 Hippolytus, Refutation of all Heresies 6.17.
19 Hippolytus, Refutation of all Heresies 6.4; 12.
20 Hippolytus, Refutation of all Heresies 6.4–6.
22 Tertullian, Prescription against Heretics 7.9. In contrast to Hippolytus he labels Valentinus a Platonist and Marcion a Stoic – proof enough that he himself was no Stoic, and no historian.
23 Tertullian, On the Soul 8.3–5.
24 Tertullian, On the Soul 17.
26 Tertullian, On the Soul 5.3.
27 Tertullian, On the Soul 11.3.
28 Tertullian, Against Praxeas 7.8; cf. Augustine, Letter 166, and Tertullian, Against Hermogenes, on the creation of matter by God.
30 Tertullian, On the Soul 20.1.
31 Clement of Alexandria, Exhortation to the Greeks 6.
32 Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies 5.5.
33 Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies 1.7. In chapters 4 and 5 he follows Philo in interpreting Hagar and Sarah as representatives of secular and divine wisdom.
35 See Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 3.6–7, as well as Salvation of the Rich.
36 Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 2.8–12.
37 Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies 6.5.42.
38 Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies 5.14.
39 Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 2.8.
41 Plato, Sophist 245e–246e.
42 Origen, Against Celsus 4.39.
43 Origen, Against Celsus 5.39.
44 Origen, Against Celsus 7.42, citing Plato, Timaeus 28c.
45 Origen, Against Celsus 4.38.
46 Porphyry, in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6.19.
47 Origen, Against Celsus 4.15.
48 Origen, Against Celsus 7.42.

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