

XVIII. Origen and Indian Thought

By Gopal Stavig, *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* 54 (March 2003), pp. 133-40

Origen (185-254) was the leader of the Christian school at Alexandria in Egypt and Caesarea in Palestine. He wrote the book *First Principles* (FP), in Alexandria, Egypt around the years 219-25 A.D. This text was the first attempt to develop a large scale comprehensive system of Christian doctrines, for the purpose of placing the religion on a rational foundation. Origen was a highly original and encyclopedic thinker, who taught many ideas that are compatible with the Vedantic philosophy.¹ They include:

1) The divinity of the soul: Origen discerned that the Trinitarian God, angels, and humans by virtue of the soul's dignity, are of a single substance. Each soul (including the human) as the inner self, was made in the image and likeness of God, which shares in the divine wisdom and sanctification. "Every existence which has a share in that eternal nature must itself also remain forever incorruptible and eternal" (FP IV, 4.9). God "made our intellectual nature immortal and akin to himself" (FP III, 1.13). The Son of God is an image of the invisible God, and we were created after the image of the Son, who is the indwelling Logos in the soul. Humans are created like an image carved or painted on a piece of wood or stone (FP I, 2.6). A human body cannot display the likeness of God since the physical body is corruptible, while God is incorporeal and incorruptible (FP III, 6.1). Immaterial and immortal souls were made in the image of God, but have not yet attained to His likeness (CC IV, 30). Since we were created in the image of God, it possible for us to realize our perfection, which is eventually achieved when the likeness to God is attained (FP III, 6.1).²

2) Universal salvation and liberation: All people will eventually reach a state of divine unity and perfection (FP I, 6.3). As a consequence of their sins, souls have fallen from a higher world and

have become humans. God "in providing for the salvation of his entire creation through the unspeakable plan of his word and wisdom" has ordered the creation for that purpose (FP II, 1.2). When the cosmos comes to an end, God will be 'all in all' in each person (FP III, 6.3). Sin resides in the human will and not in the deeper essential nature of the soul. "The Logos and the healing power within him are more powerful than any evils in the soul" (CC VIII, 72). "For God deals with souls not in view of the short time of our life here ... but in view of the everlasting and eternal age, exercising his providential care over all souls that are immortal ... the soul, which is immortal, is not shut out by the shortness of our present life from the divine healing and remedies" (FP III, 1.13). All souls will "become perfect 'spiritual men' and 'judge all things,' because their mind is illumined in all holiness through the word and wisdom of God" (FP I, 8.4). Some people "are not ready for instruction, their treatment and healing being undoubtedly reserved for a later time" (FP III, 1.12). God may not send an individual immediate help, if they are in danger of eventually reverting back to their old ways (FP III, 1.17). Through His gracious compassion God cures the soul, utilizing a wide variety of remedies which lead to salvation (FP II, 9.7). In time all wicked and demonic people will be purified and restored to communion with God and will partake of the sacred essence (FP I, 6.3; II, 10.8; III, 1.24).

3) Gradual salvation and liberation: When they die only a few saints and martyrs are ready for a continual direct vision of God. Most people require a period of purification before they can enter into the state of the highest blessedness. At death, they enter a lower heaven where they are instructed by divine beings (angels) into the nature of the soul and spirit, and the meaning of the religious scriptures. After attaining a certain level of development, the soul advances to the next stage, until it finally ascends to the kingdom of God (FP II, 11.7). In heaven there are varying degrees of participation in God, depending on the capacity, purity and subtleness of the mind (FP II, 10.2; IV, 4.9). A person may

understand a portion of the divine reality, but there will always be more to seek after (FP IV, 3.14). Eventually, the purified soul will unite with the Logos in a perfect and eternal union. The soul will be at rest in its knowledge and contemplation of God, Whom it will see and comprehend at every moment (FP II, 11.7; III, 6.3). Some souls must wait until the final universal consummation of the world, before they will attain to the highest beatitude.³

4) Resurrection of the spiritual body: Some people believe in the resurrection of the material body, because they desire to experience bodily pleasures and physical luxury in heaven (FP II, 11.2). It is the spiritual and not the material body that rises at death (FP II, 2.2). According to the apostle Paul "It is sown a natural body, it will rise again a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44; FP II, 10.1). "God refashions out of the earthly and natural body a spiritual body, which can dwell in the heavens" (FP II, 10.3). "This same body having cast off the weakness of its present existence, will be transformed into a thing of glory and made spiritual ... shall itself be purified and become a vessel of honour and a habitation of blessedness" (FP III, 6.6). The soul takes on different bodies in accordance with the world it resides in. A transformation will occur in the natural body, which will change it into an ethereal spiritual body with extreme fineness and purity, fit for the heavenly regions (FP III, 6.9; II, 2.2; CC VII, 32). Celestial ether and not the four material elements, is the substance of the spiritual body. A resurrected body has the same form as the earthly body, which represents the soul's individual and distinctive characteristics. Transformation of the body does not impair the self-identity of the individual. Even in the heavenly domain, spiritual bodies vary in their degrees of subtlety and purity. Eventually, "we are no longer flesh and bodies, and possibly not even souls, but mind . . . we shall see rational and spiritual beings 'face to face' " (FP II, 11.7). In heaven the ethereal body will eventually disappear, and only incorporeal pure intelligence will remain that is perceptible only to the mind (FP II, 11.7).⁴

5) God as Absolute: The Supreme Reality is unknowable to the human intellect given that He "transcends mind and being, and is simple and invisible and incorporeal" (CC VII, 38). "He is incomprehensible and immeasurable ... he is far and away better than our thoughts about him... our mind is of itself unable to behold God as he is" (FP I, 1.5-6). "None of the descriptions by words or expressions can show the attributes of God" (CC VI, 65). God is voiceless and cannot be heard. He is beyond being, knowledge and change. "God does not even participate in being. For He is participated in, rather than participates" (CC VI, 64). "Since He is the Father of truth, is more and greater than truth, and since He is the Father of wisdom is greater and more excellent than wisdom" (CJ II, 18). The Supreme Reality is one and a unity, being eternal, incorruptible and immutable both in act and thought. "God is simple and has no intermixture of any additional substance" (FP II, 8.2; I, 1.5-6). He is incorporeal without size, shape or color (FP I, 2.4). It is wrong to think that God "is circumscribed in bodily fashion and dwells in heaven" (OP XXIII, 1). If God dwelled only in a special place like heaven and had a body he would be divisible, corporeal and corruptible. God is omnipresent and is not confined to any special location (OP XXIII, 3).⁵

6) Personal God, Logos and the Divine Incarnation: The Logos is the only begotten Son of God, "the 'image of the invisible God' and the 'firstborn of all creation'" (FP II, 6.1). "He is an image of God's goodness, but not goodness itself" (FP I, 2.13). Eternal generation means that the Father is continually begetting the Son out of the divine substance, in an eternal process throughout all time. As a perfect image of the Father, the Son is Wisdom, Word, Truth and Life.⁶ The Logos is an intermediary between the Father Who is an absolute simplicity and unity, and the multiplicity of the creation. The Sons "birth from the Father is as it were an act of his will proceeding from the mind" (FP I, 2.6; IV, 4.1). As splendor radiates from the source of light, the Logos radiates eternally from the celestial realm (FP I, 2.4). He is 'second God' who is coeternal with,

but subordinate to the Father Who alone is Absolute. While the Father's power extends to all created things, the Son's pertains only to rational beings (FP I, 3.5). The Logos is "the very word of the Father, and the very wisdom of God, in which were created all things" (FP II, 6.2; I, 2.2). Divine power which is manifested in the creation is finite, for if it "were infinite of necessity it could not even understand itself, since the infinite is by its nature incomprehensible" (FP II, 9.1). God is omnipotent, yet He cannot perform an evil act or do anything that is contrary to reason, such as ceasing to be God (CC V, 23).

A divine incarnation is a God-man, who assumes both a body and a soul that are wholly subject to the Logos. The entire majesty of the Logos is not confined to a particular place and thus was not contained within the limits of the body of Jesus (FP IV, 4.2-4). Sufferings of the mind or body of Jesus were not experienced by the Logos (CC IV, 15). Christ is the tangible image of the invisible God. Through him all people can gain knowledge of the Father and creator of the universe (CC VII, 43). He established the Church on earth, which is a unique vehicle of God's grace. It is a spiritual institution through which a believer learns the truth about God and the standards of moral life, which make it possible to have a personal experience of the supersensuous realm. Members of the spiritual elite are the true clergy of the church. The invisible spiritual church is composed of the communion of the saints in heaven and on earth. Outside of the spiritual church there is no salvation.⁷

7) Divine helpers: There are souls "who have been brought down, even against their will, from those higher invisible conditions [realms] to these lower visible ones, in order to be of service to the whole world." Angels and great souls not only serve God in heaven, but may incarnate to fulfill a special divine function. God sends to this world, "ministers to work for the correction and salvation of those who had fallen" (FP III, 5.4). According to the Hebrew apocryphal writing *The Prayer of Joseph*, the Biblical Jacob was an angel of God and Abraham and Isaac were also preexistent beings

who incarnated in a human body for a spiritual purpose (CJ II, 25). John the Baptist was sent down from heaven by the Lord to the earth to fulfill a divine ministry. He was one of those rare souls who descend from a higher plane of existence, to the earth for the purpose of spiritually benefitting humanity. John the Baptist came to this world to baptize his followers, to prepare people for the coming of Jesus and to bear witness to the light (CJ II, 30). Paul the apostle took on human birth for the purpose of being a teacher and guide to fallen souls.⁸ FP, p. 239.

8) Mysticism: "The highest good is to become as far as possible like God." At the beginning of the creation process the image of God is established, while the perfection of the likeness is received at the consummation of the world cycle (FP III, 6.1). "Contemplate that image of God that we can be transformed to his likeness.... by beholding the image of God, according to whose likeness he has been made by God, he will receive that form, which was given to him by nature, through the Word and his power."⁹ Experiencing the vision of the Lord, human nature becomes divine and the likeness of God is attained. Perfection is realized by uniting the soul with the Logos, which is accomplished by contemplating the supersensuous reality. The Logos is our teacher, lawgiver and model. Our spiritual goal is to experience an unbroken contemplation of the things of God; a union with the Logos acquired by partaking in the divine nature. By being united to God we gain a share in His divinity, and the soul discovers its true nature. Through the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit we can participate in the likeness of God, but the fullness of this realization is only attained after death. Unlearned people understand the humanity of the divine incarnation, but only the advanced contemplative comprehends his divinity.¹⁰ In the heavenly life of the future, religious scripture and ritual will be unnecessary. It is best to pray at least three times a day, in a place consecrated for that purpose. To pray properly we must live a moral life, forgive others and free ourselves from all disturbances of the

mind. During the act of prayer the soul turns away from the physical body and the world, and devotes itself to spiritual matters.¹¹

9) Pre-existence of the soul: Originally all souls were pure, serving the Lord and obeying His commandments. Gradually they began to sin, and their soul become heavy and weighted down. The greater the soul's iniquities, the farther it descended from a higher to a lower world. Through the misuse of their innate power of freewill, pre-existent souls turned from God. Depending on the extent of their accumulated sins, they became angels, humans and demons (FP I, 8.1; III, 6.4). "All rational creatures who are incorporeal and invisible, if they become negligent, gradually sink to a lower level and take to themselves bodies suitable to the regions into which they descend" (FP I, 4.1). "It was for those souls which on account of their excessive spiritual defects required these grosser and more solid bodies," that this world came into existence (FP III, 5.4). The descending process is reversible and eventually, the soul progresses through multiple bodies and lives, and is restored to the heavenly realm (FP I, 8.4). In the creation allegory discussed in the book of Genesis, all males are symbolized by Adam and all females by Eve. They originated in paradise as pure intelligences and then because of their sins descended to a lower world (CC IV, 40).¹²

10) The law of karma: God "has arranged the universe on the principle of a most impartial retribution, according as each one deserves for his merit . . . Herein is displayed in its completeness the principle of impartiality, when the inequality of circumstances preserves an equality of reward for merit. But the grounds of merit in each individual are known with truth and clearness only to God" (FP II, 9.8). "The position of every created being is the result of his own work and his own motives" (FP I, 5.3). God "dispenses all his gifts in proportion to the merits and progress of each recipient." Angels and demons have received their respective positions in accord with their prior good and bad conduct (FP I, 8.4). "Certain sins existed before the souls, and as a result of these sins each soul receives a recompense in proportion to its deserts." Behavior

performed in a prior life is the cause of the diversity and variety of circumstances that we find in this world. This explains why some babies are born blind and others with no defects whatsoever (FP I, 8.1-2; I, 6.3). " Concerning Esau and Jacob in the Bible, God loved Jacob more in the womb than his brother Esau, due to the merit he achieved in a previous life (FP II, 9.7). If it were not possible for an individual to fail, there would be no merit in conquering evil. We have a choice to utilize our freewill with strength in order to conquer and be blessed and holy, or to use it feebly and to succumb through negligence (FP III, 2.3; I, 5.5; II, 9.6).¹³

11) Eternity of the universe: God is always active and eternally creates the world from the necessity of His own nature (FP I, 4.3). "During the whole of God's existence His creatures have existed .. without a beginning" (FP I, 4.4). "All genera and species have forever existed" since "God did not begin to create after spending a period in idleness" (FP I, 4.5). If the creation of the world took place at a particular time, God's immutability would be contradicted. It is absurd to think that God did not possess something that was appropriate to His nature and later possessed it. If there was a time when the creation did not exist, God would not be almighty (FP I, 2.10; III, 5.3). The Lord has always created a world to manifest His power on. "What was God doing before the world began? For it is alike impious and absurd to say that God's nature is to be at ease ... to suppose that there was a time when goodness did not do good and omnipotence did not exercise its power" (FP III, 5.3).

The heavenly religious scriptures are also eternal. "In heaven will truly exist what is called the 'eternal gospel' " which is the eternal law. "Moses handed down through the 'shadow' of the law. . . that which is a copy and shadow of heavenly things" (FP III, 6.8). The saints live by the law of the 'eternal gospel.' It exists in heaven and is far superior to the temporal earthly gospel that will eventually pass away (FP IV, 3.13).

See Pralaya-

12) Eternal cosmic cycles (yugas): There is an innumerable succession of worlds, where one age (aeon) follows the next in an eternal sequence. Since there have been innumerable ages in the past and in the future, the present age is only a single day in the life of the cosmos (FP II, 3.1). "God did not begin to work for the first time when he made this visible world, but that just as after the dissolution of this world there will be another one, so also we believe that there were others before this one existed" (FP III, 5.3). "This world, however, which is itself called an 'age,' is said to be the end of many ages" (FP II, 3.5). This does not mean that each world-period is identical in all respects with the previous one, as the Stoic philosophers mistakenly thought (CC V, 23; FP II, 3.4). Because human freedom allows for a wide variety of events to occur, the world-periods are diverse and not exact replicas of each other.¹⁴

13) Universal restoration (apocatastasis) of the world: At the end of the world cycle, all things shall be restored back to their original state of perfection and the entire creation will be subject to God (FP I, 6.2; II, 3.5; III, 5.7; III, 6.3). A complete restoration of the entire world will occur, not "by use of force, but by word, by reason, by teaching, by the extortion to better things, by the best methods of education" (FP III, 5.8). "From one beginning arise many differences and varieties, which in their turn are restored, through God's goodness . . . to one end, which is like the beginning" (FP I, 6.2). "When 'God shall be in all,' they also, since they are part of all, may have God even in themselves, as he is in all things" (FP I, 7.5). All people will be free from vices, and "the mind will no longer be conscious of anything besides or other than God, but will think God, and see God and hold God" (FP III, 6.3). Universal restoration will occur "gradually and by degrees, during the lapse of infinite and immeasurable ages" manifesting at a different rate in each individual.

It will happen at the end of terrestrial time, after a long succession of worlds or aeons in which evil will be gradually purged away. Some people will progress quickly, others at a moderate pace, and others will lag considerably (FP III, 6.6).

Historical Factors

Around the year 180 Pantaenus (c. d. 202) became the first leader of the Christian catechetical school at Alexandria. Jerome (c. 343-420) wrote that Pantaenus was sent to India at the request of the Indian Christians, in order to aid them in their debates with the Brahmins. Eusebius (c. 263-340) the Christian historian, wrote that in India Pantaenus discovered a copy of the Gospel of Matthew written in Hebrew, which had been left there by Christ's apostle Bartholomew. Pantaenus was succeeded by his pupil Clement of Alexandria (c. 150/160-213/220), who was head of the Christian school from about 190 to 203.¹⁵ Clement was the first Christian to mention the name of Buddha and that he received divine honor. He also stated that the Greek philosophers like Pythagoras were influenced by the Brahmins of India. He discussed Alexander the Great's conversation with ten Indian philosophers and wrote that there are two main Indian sects, the Sarmanaes (Sramana=Buddhist) and the Brahmins (Hindus). In Alexandria he conversed with a wise man from India.¹⁶

Origen was born in Alexandria, Egypt probably of Greek parents. His father was martyred as a Christian in 201/02. Being Clement most brilliant pupil, at the young age of eighteen he became the head of the catechetical school in Alexandria from 203 to 232. Due to his heterodox ideas Origen was excommunicated from the Alexandrian Church in 232 and forced to migrate to Caesarea in Palestine. After being the victim of persecution within the church, Origen learned his lesson and after the year 232 he made a serious attempt to avoid writing controversial material. Due to the persecutions of Christians by the Roman emperor Decius

(201-51), Origen was imprisoned and tortured and as a consequence, he courageously died after his release from jail. As a forerunner to the organized monastic movement, he had a spotless character and lived an extremely ascetic life of poverty and celibacy.¹⁷

Eusebius who greatly admired Origen, said that Porphyry (c. 233-304) the leading Neoplatonic disciple of Plotinus, met Origen when he was a young man. Porphyry said that Origen attended the lectures of Ammonius Saccas (c. 175-243) who was also the teacher of Plotinus (c. 205-70), the founder of the Neoplatonic philosophy. Origen also read the writings of Plato, and the leading Middle Platonist, Neo-Pythagorean, Stoic and Aristotelian philosophers, which formed the bases of his Vedantic perspective.¹⁸

After Origen's death his greatest supporter was the saintly Evagrius Ponticus (345-99), an Egyptian desert Father who was the first Christian monastic to write on mystical contemplation. Evagrius' mystical contemplative and ascetic teachings had a major influence on the monastic mysticism of the Eastern Christian Church. He probably influenced the Persian Christians who migrated to India after the rise of Islam, since his manual of spiritual teachings was the chief book of instructions in ninety Persian monasteries. One of Evagrius pupils, the monastic bishop Palladius of Helenopolis (c. 363/64-431), wrote a manuscript on the Indian gymnosophists and Brahmins. Another supporter of Origen's doctrines was the nun Melania the Elder (c. 342-409), who was one of the founders of the convent system, establishing a convent in Jerusalem around 378.¹⁹

There was a long period of condemnation and persecution of the monastic who supported Origen's convictions. At the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 fifteen anathemas were directed by the Emperor Justinian against Origen and his Origenist's supporters, given that their ideas were in opposition to some church dogmas. It is significant that the anathema's, did not reject the doctrine of reincarnation as some people think, but opposed Origen's specific doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul as falling from a heavenly

realm. In addition, the Church Council did not anathematize Origen's theories concerning: the eternity of the world and religious scriptures, cosmic world cycles, the law of karma, God as Absolute, or gradual salvation.²⁰

References

¹ The main sources used in this article are: Origen, *On First Principles* (hereafter FP), tr. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1973), pp. XXIV, XXVIII-XXXI; Origen, *Contra Celsum* (hereafter CC), tr. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: The University Press, 1965); Origen, "Commentary on John" (hereafter CJ) in Allan Menzies, tr., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971-86); Origen, "On Prayer" (hereafter OP) in John Oulton and Henry Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954).

² For Origen the divinity of humanity is centered in Saguna not Nirguna Brahman, possibly corresponding to the anandamaya kosha-karana sharira.

³ William Fairweather, *Origen and Greek Patristic Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), pp. 203-04; Antonia Tripolitis, *The Doctrine of the Soul in the Thought of Plotinus and Origen* (Roslyn Heights, NY: Libra Publishers, 1978), p. 130.

⁴ Tripolitis (1978), pp. 100-106-07, 146.

⁵ Following Origen's conception, there are some resemblances between God the Father and Nirguna Brahman, and between the Logos and Saguna Brahman.

⁶ Fairweather (1901), pp. 151-55.

⁷ Joseph Trigg, *Origen* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), pp. 141, 144, 199.

⁸ FP, p. 239.

⁹ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, tr. Ronald Heine (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981), p. 66.

¹⁰ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 68-73.

¹¹ Trigg (1983), pp. 158-59, 190.

¹² Origen's conception of the pre-existence and the descent of the soul, are to some extent based on Plato's *Phaedrus* 245-49. When Origen wrote *First Principles*, it is not clear whether he believed in reincarnation or not; i.e., that a

person lives successive lives on earth. His theory of the pre-existence of the soul followed by multiple lives, certainly implies the process of reincarnation.

¹³ Origen interpreted the Law of Retribution from a theological standpoint, as being administrated by divine providence, and not as a scientific impersonal law of nature.

¹⁴ Trigg (1983), p. 110.

¹⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* (2 vols; Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1965), I, pp. 302-05, II, p. 15.

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¹⁶ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), sections 1:15; 3:7; 6:4; J. Kennedy, "The Gospels of the Infancy, the Lalita Vistara, and the *Vishnu Purana*," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain* (1917), pp. 482-84; Walter Schmitthenner, "Rome and India," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979), p. 97.

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¹⁷ FP, pp. XXIII-XXVIII; Eusebius (1965), II, pp. 3-11.

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¹⁸ Eusebius (1965), II, pp. 33-35. It is evident that Ammonius Saccas' two pupils, Origen and Plotinus shared many common beliefs. See G. Stavig, "Plotinus and Indian Philosophy," *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* 53 (Aug.-Sept., 2002), pp. 313-18, 360-64.

¹⁹ William McDonald, ed., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (18 vols.; New York: McGraw Hill, 1967), V, pp. 644-45; IX, pp. 624-25; X, pp. 927-28.

²⁰ Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston, *Reincarnation* (New York: Julian Press, 1961), pp. 324-25, 39-42 lists the nine anathemas against Origen.