THE SHAPING OF CHRISTIANITY

The History and Literature of Its Formative Centuries (100–800)

Gérard Vallée

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Heyday of Patristic Literature (Mainly 300–550)

When one skims over the entire Patristic Period for its most distinguished literary representatives, one finds that two authors emerge as unmistakable towers: Origen in the Greek East, Augustine in the Latin West. To study each in his respective context would already yield something essential of the magnificent literary production of the third through fifth centuries, the most prolific of the whole period. Yet in addition to those two towering scholars, the period also produced a remarkable number of imposing personalities. Some of them will be met here, their characters briefly outlined and some of their main works identified. Many of them have already appeared in a flash in the previous narrative. They are here presented in sequence to form, as in a gallery, a series of snapshots of companions-in-arms inviting the reader to get to know them better.

The following portraits are necessarily selective. Careers and works are sketched in such a way that comparison is made possible between various achievements and appreciation is elicited. A striking feature of recent scholarly research has been the rehabilitation of traditional villains (Gnostics, Arius, Origen, Evagrius, Nestorius, Pelagius, Theodoret of Cyrrhus) who, we now hear, were given short shrift by the orthodox party, and the critical depiction of long-held heroes and saints (Irenaeus, Eusebius, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, Jerome), often lionized by hagiographers and indeed receiving the lion's share in the standard treatments, which are mostly interested in the history of winners.

The Origenist controversy of the fourth through sixth centuries will receive special attention in this chapter because of the involvement of so many authors reviewed here and because of the recent reassessment of the part each played in the fateful debates.

General Remarks on the Literature

With the fourth century, Christian literature definitely emerged from its infancy. Henceforth patristic literature appears in a wide variety of genres. Even where, in these pages, all the genres found in individual writers are not mentioned, it will be assumed that most of them tried most literary styles.

The most frequently encountered genres can be reduced to the following. The apologetic literature of the second century made large use of biblical quotations and paraphrases. Thereafter biblical interpretation would be the most common activity of the fathers in the form of exposition, commentary, homily or sermon, or simply interpretation in the service of an argument. Then come the various tractates: apologetic, polemical, theological, or spiritual. Increasingly encountered from the third century on are letters, sometimes a considerable flow of correspondence. Biographies and "lives" multiply. Finally, we can read diverse collections of sayings, especially of famous monks, and of extracts from great commentators, especially *florilegia* or anthologies, and *catenae* or chains of citations that could be used as proof texts.

Much of the literature of the time has been lost, mostly due to the condemnation of authors whose works were then bound to be destroyed; in that case writings may have partially survived in somebody else's work in the form of quotations, or under a pseudonym. In fact, Christian literature of the period knew not only the phenomenon of pseudonymity or false indication of the name of the author, but also that of anonymity or absence of indication of the author, the whole rendering hazardous the task of placing those works in their historical and theological contexts.

The critical assessment of the material produced during that period has attracted the attention of an ever-growing number of scholars in the last two centuries. Authorship, redaction, edition, dating, manuscript tradition, translation are some of the questions to which scholars devote their efforts with a view to presenting the academic community with authentic and reliable texts. I cannot deal here with those highly interesting problems, for I intend only to point, for a first orientation, to the main works of a few writers who made a lasting contribution to Christian history.

When dealing with fourth-and fifth-century writers, the impression might arise that ethical concerns, virtuous life, and questions of justice occupied a back row, especially in the East, in favor of lofty disputes and

the subtle paradoxes of the triune God and of the God-Man—speculations that show how far theology had traveled since the gospels and Paul. Yet that impression has to be corrected by the consideration that most participants in those debates were bishops eager to discharge their pastoral duties, preaching regularly to simple people and enjoining all to progress in their religious and spiritual lives. John Chrysostom and Ambrose are among the most insistent on the duties of social and individual ethics. So the literature reviewed here includes that moral component and one should not forget the headway made by asceticism in those times. Still it is true that the bulk of the literature shows an unrepentant inclination to establish Christian faith at a high level of rational thinking.

There were powerful and influential women and mothers throughout the period, but clearly the Patristic Period was unashamedly patriarchal and has reached us through a patriarchal tradition. Some women were written about: martyrs, ascetics, empresses; very few took to writing. Society and history seem to have conspired to push women into invisibility. We slowly discover today that there were indeed Christian women, even women preachers and teachers, leaders, prophets, and ascetics, as early as there were men in the same functions. The history of the early Christian movement is too often written from the perspective of the victors (here men) and lets the vanquished (here women) sink into anonymity. The objective in these pages is not to lift the veil that renders Christian women of the past vastly invisible (recent works mentioned below attempt just that) but to preface the present section with the warning that our sources, and the traditional way of using them, are incontrovertibly limited, one-sided, and monophonic.

A last preliminary remark must be made. After the establishment of Christianity in the fourth century, the church soon acquired wealth, property, and treasures. Office-holding in the church then became attractive to those desiring to make such work a career. Thus it is not surprising that some officials were in it for riches, influence, and power. The literature produced thereafter reflected that situation; it is not uncommon to find biting critique of office-holders, even of colleagues, and of all those who forgot the guidelines of the gospels. It is also understandable that in circumstances perceived as decadent, elevated souls opted for ascetic life and the monastery.

Because of his influence, direct or indirect, on virtually all patristic writers to come, our survey must begin with Origen.

Origen (185–254) and His Legacy

On the basis of the Apologists' works addressed to pagans (Justin's and those of others), of polemical writings debating with Marcion and the Gnostics (especially those by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement), and of the first ventures into theological exposition (by Irenaeus, Tertullian), Origen emerged as a genius of a new kind. Active first in Alexandria, then in Caesarea (Palestine), he pioneered scholarly traditions that marked generations of theologians and gave its shape first to the intellectual landscape of the East, but also, through his legacy, to the West. His works, however, became posthumously a bone of contention and many of them were consequently lost, even most of his quite innocent *Hexapla,* a learned work of textual criticism presenting the text of the Old Testament in six columns for comparison—Hebrew, Greek transliteration of Hebrew, and four Greek versions.

The important parts that have been saved from his copious commentaries and homilies on most books of the Bible show the transition from typological interpretation as encountered in Paul, Justin, Irenaeus, and Origen himself ("typology" looks at the Old Testament writings for prophetic or symbolic anticipations of Christ and of the church) to the allegorical mode characteristic of Alexandria, eager to find, hidden deep under the literal narratives, spiritual meanings concerning the being of God, the cosmic constitution, and human existence. Contrary to Marcion, who globally rejected the Hebrew scriptures, and to some Gnostics who attributed them to unequal deities, Origen viewed them as entirely inspired by the one God, but thought they called for various levels of interpretation and understanding. The exegetical method he developed on the basis of this view was to leave its mark on all biblical studies since.

He also authored a powerful defense of Christianity, *Against Celsus,* written for a lettered public and propounding a form of Platonic Christianity that was the first real attempt to give a rational account of the foundations of faith. He saw in Greek philosophy and ethics providential instruments due to the action of the divine Logos and preparing the way for Christianity. Still more he thought that to become a Christian was to accede to true culture and true learning, or to true philosophy in the sense of a way of life. In *On First Principles,* of which we only have Greek fragments but a complete though tendentious translation by Rufinus, he crafted the first coherent system of speculative theology, containing ideas that were to become questionable in the light of later

doctrinal developments. He had a vision of a preexisting chain of rational beings or souls whose descent into bodily existence had been caused by their own free decision and the cooling off of their love, and whose ascent and return to God were carried out through successive existences, at the end of which there would be a final restoration of all spirits. Thus human spirits reintegrate the original unity after exhausting all experiences of history. These ideas were to appeal to such kindred minds as John Scotus, Hegel, and Schelling. Such a vision, expanded in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* into a graded theory of three sciences—moral instruction, knowledge of the world, contemplation of God—made Origen not only a pioneer in speculative theology but also into a master of the spiritual life conceived as a rising along the spiritual ladder through the stages of self-denial, virtuous life, and union with the Logos, and which found further elaboration in monastic milieux.

Origen's legacy came to fruition mainly among the Alexandrian and the Cappadocian fathers, making Christianity both acceptable and respectable in the eyes of the cultured people. But the first promoter of Origen's ideas was Eusebius of Caesarea (265–339), the father of church history. Eusebius inherited Origen's library in Caesarea, a collection of Jewish, pagan, and Christian literature assembled by Origen and his friends. He also inherited his scholarly approach and vision, according to which the best of Greek learning is confirmed and raised by Christian revelation. In Eusebius's hands, the Roman Empire itself receives a providential status. Thus in his apologetic treatises, *Preparation for the Gospel* and *Proof of the Gospel,* Eusebius, seemingly aiming to imitate Origen, tries to show that Christianity fulfilled pagan and Jewish aspirations. He does not always provide evidence that he really understood Origen's Logos-theology and his allegorical method, but he did succeed in popularizing some of Origen's themes, which made him suspect of the Arian virus anachronistically imputed to Origen. His *Ecclesiastical History* remains his most valuable contribution. In this work firsthand information is couched in the service of an overall thesis: Christianity, the zenith of all human history, has a divine origin and is guided by God's special Providence. The narrative, which Eusebius kept revising, is illustrated by substantial extracts from previous writers, precious documents otherwise unavailable.

Evidently Eusebius spanned a turning point in Christian history. He not only euphorically acclaimed Constantine's conversion and

reign, especially in his *Life of Constantine;* he also shone as the first theoretician of Byzantinism. After him most Eastern prelates, with the notable exception of John Chrysostom, agreed on the emperor's elevated status over all, including those very prelates themselves. With the "peace of the church," Christian literature entered a period of remarkable flowering, fed by the imperatives of rapid expansion and the increase of internal tensions and conflicts. Creeds, definitions, and regulations resulted from much-needed councils. Consequently, all literary genres and styles of current culture, and more, were put to use in the marching episodes of Christian conquest. Eusebius's verve witnesses to those gripping times.

Alexandrians

Athanasius (299–373) dominates fourth-century Christian history and thought, providing definitive contours to the Alexandrian brand of theology sometimes labeled "Christian Platonism." His was a turbulent career. Five times exiled during his forty-five years as bishop of Alexandria (from 328), he remained the intrepid defender of Nicaea against the Arians through the reigns of Arianizing emperors. His links with Origen, though real, were mainly mediated through Eusebius's apologetic work; he could not follow Origen's view of a "graduated Trinity" and fought the Arian subordinationism that looked for a footing in Origenism. His *Orations Against the Arians* emphasized that salvation, to be real, required the Logos to be truly God in order to cleanse us from the depth of sin. He developed his soteriological approach in *On the Incarnation,* where the much-debated statement was found: The Son became man, that we might become God. A defender of the monks' orthodoxy, who protected him during his third exile, he authored the influential *Life of Antony,* which, soon translated, spread the monastic ideal in East and West. In fact, at the time of his first exiles in Trier and Rome, Athanasius had forged solid links with Rome and the West. Finally, mention must be made of his *Festal Letters,* which, using the occasion of announcing the date of Easter, contained pastoral exhortations to the communities; one of those letters presents the definitive list of the New Testament books (canon), along with the Old Testament list.

The legend of a meek, compassionate, and upright Athanasius, champion of Nicaean orthodoxy and martyr for the sake of truth, has

been somewhat deflated by recent research. A less favorable portrait has emerged of a man inclined to intrigue and violence, who misunderstood the Antiochene concerns, willfully vilified Arius (who himself fares better in recent studies), and died a sign of contradiction after a mixed career. Nonetheless, the study of his writings restores the balance; the coherence and sincerity of his doctrine cannot be impugned. The uncompromising fighter became more flexible at the end of his life; and in the end, his positive impact on the shaping of orthodoxy in East and West can certainly not be lamented.

A more integral disciple of Origen is encountered in the person of Evagrius of Pontus (345–399), the famous ascetic and cultured man. A friend of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, well trained in Greek learning, he spent time among the "Origenists" in Palestine, where he was converted to the ascetic life, and arrived in the Egyptian desert in 382. There he became familiar with early monastic practices and applied his creative mind to the assiduous study of Origen. Over the years he was able to translate Origen's notion of three sciences (moral, philosophical, contemplative) into a complete system of spirituality that influenced all traditions of Christian spiritual itineraries. The system can be expressed in a ternary form (purgation, illumination, union) or in a binary one (*praktikè*/asceticism, *gnostikè*/mysticism), hence two of his major works, *Praktikos* and *Gnostikos*. In his speculative musings Evagrius decisively went beyond Origen's vision of the fall and return of the soul. He refused to image the incorporeal God, who can be talked about only in apophatic terms (eshewing precise description or definition). Describing the union with God in terms of absorption, he made contemplative prayer the goal of monastic life; yet he was able to use graphic language to depict the victory over demons leading to *apatheia,* that deep calm of the one in control of one's emotional life, and to *agape,* the loving state of the one who contemplates God. Asceticism thus leads to mysticism, both being dynamically integrated. In Evagrius monasticism had found its lasting language if not its definitive theology. Cassian and Rufinus made him known to the Latin West.

The condemnation of Origenism in 553 (see below) affected the writings of Evagrius; some of them were destroyed but many were preserved in translation (Syriac and Armenian) or survived under someone else's name. Hence many of his works are available today—among them, the above-mentioned ones plus the *Kephalaia gnostica,* pub-

lished in 1958 from a Syriac version—and uncover a rich side of the Alexandrian tradition. As early as around 400, Evagrius had been slandered by Theophilus of Alexandria, who started harassing Evagrius's disciples (especially the monks known as the Tall Brothers and their Nitrian colleagues) and fired up anti-Origenist passions. Evagrius's influence endured, though, and the recovery of his works vindicates the memory of a loyal and penetrating genius.

Cyril of Alexandria's (372/376–444) career and personality were and remain highly controversial. Was the "doctor of the Incarnation" a saint, a second Athanasius, a profound theologian? Or rather was he basically endowed with a vicious character, the unscrupulous nephew of the opportunist Theophilus, whom he succeeded in 412, out to secure by all means the place of Alexandria in the contest with Constantinople? There were indeed two extreme sides to his nature, which brought about contradictory assessments of his contribution.

On the one hand, he seemed to revel in rough confrontations—he was said to have worked at despoliating Jews and taking over their synagogue; to have had a hand in the killing of a woman-philosopher, Hypatia; to have fenced with the prefect and helped burn pagan temples. He illustrated and brought to new heights a negative aspect of the Alexandrian tradition: the fanatic intolerance and biting polemic deployed against pagans, Jews, and heretics alike. His bullying opposition to Nestorius from 429 on was particularly dripping with venom; his role at the council of Ephesus in 431 was shameful, managing to have the proceedings start before the arrival of the Antiochenes. But all the same, of his three letters challenging Nestorius, the third one ended up being included in the acts of the council of Ephesus and received canonical status at Chalcedon. In his attacks on Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, whom he suspected of having influenced Nestorius, he did not mind relying on truncated and hostile excerpts and using monophysite arguments to counter his "dyophysite" opponents. Only after the cease-fire of 433, in the Formula of Reunion mainly due to John of Antioch, did he tone down his bad manners and drop the twelve anathemata against Nestorius he had appended to his third letter and that were totally unacceptable to the Antiochenes.

On the other hand, his immense literary output shows clear signs of a resourceful and astute theologian. His anti-Arian treatises, anti-

Nestorian writings, and dialogues on the Trinity, on Christology, on worship in spirit and truth, all reveal a searching mind, clarifying and modifying the work of his predecessors (Athanasius, even Apollinarius), and reaching levels of understanding still inspiring today. He authored the first essays in biblical theology with his homilies and copious commentaries on the Old and New Testaments. In his exegesis, because of the ongoing controversy and under the influence of Jerome and of his uncle's anti-Origenism, he distanced himself from Origen, though holding to the view of two levels of meaning in close correspondence, as best illustrated in the parables. So the allegorical interpretation is used along with typological exegesis to vindicate christological claims. With Christ "recapitulating" Adam, the superiority of Christianity is manifested by a spiritual exegesis of the text and supported by the "patristic argument." Based on the authority of the earlier fathers, the argument aims to document the constant view of the tradition.

Cappadocians

The same reserve on allegory due to the same Origenist controversy is noticeable among the three extremely talented writers of Cappadocia (Asia Minor): Basil and the two Gregorys. Nonetheless, their debt to Origen is unmistakable, and they made great use of his exegetical work. Highly cultured people, children of rich Christian families and destined all three to be at some point influential bishops, they show in their own persons the interplay of classical culture, especially Platonism, and Christianity. They experienced the chill of Julian's prohibition against having Christians teach classical literature and pagan science. They came out of that interlude convinced that, far from belonging to paganism, classical culture is the true fruit of the Logos and hence the ideal vehicle of theology. Athens is indeed very close to Jerusalem. In exploiting that proximity the Cappadocians contributed a great deal to the creation of a Christian literature that went beyond the literary forms of earlier Christian writings; they were able to put the rhetorical tradition to use and began producing essays, poems, letters, orations, of a new vintage.

Faithful defenders of Nicaea, they helped its triumph under Theodosius I (378–395), above all at the council of Constantinople. In the process they opened up the untapped resources of religious language and imagery in order to bring remarkable elaborations to trini-

tarian theology (especially Basil) and to Christology (especially Gregory of Nazianzus). Here lies their lasting achievement, which they buttressed with the help of an Alexandrian emphasis: Christ's incarnation, still more than his death-resurrection, constitutes the decisive act of salvation. But they did more: They proposed a Christian way of life that remained ideal for its balance, midway between abdication to the world and total renunciation. This they achieved through their efforts at Christianizing philosophy and culture.

Basil of Caesarea (330–379) and his friend Gregory of Nazianzus both studied the classics and Platonism in Athens, among other places, before returning to Cappadocia and entering ecclesiastical careers. Familiar with the monastic establishments of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, and eventually made a bishop, Basil organized charity and founded brotherhoods not in the desert but "within reach of suffering humanity."[1] He advocated the simple life lived close to the world. The "liturgy of St. Basil" that he developed is still in use today. He shone as a great exegete in his numerous commentaries and homilies and was a powerful theologian as demonstrated in his anti-Arian work *On the Holy Spirit*. The *Rules* that go under his name *(Ascetica)* consist mainly of ascetic works and letters, collected in the sixth century, summarizing his ascetical ideal for use by monks; though not cast in the mold of later codes of monastic life, they did influence the latter. Basil was well aware of the excesses of Syrian monks and opted for Pachomius's ideas of communality and social responsibility, the whole being cast in a Stoic and Platonic framework. His correspondence, which survives in over 300 letters, reflects this spiritual equilibrium.

Made bishop of Constantinople for a short while only, at the time of the second general council (381), Gregory of Nazianzus (330–390) had a declared preference for less stormy surroundings. He was able, nevertheless, to prevail over the Arians of the capital, especially through his five well-known theological *Orations* (there were some forty-five of them in all) in which he reveals himself as a brilliant exponent of trinitarian orthodoxy and of the divinity of the Spirit. His language remains close to the biblical model with the added flavor of mystical and devo-

1. F. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Development*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, p. 108.

tional scent. The compositions of Gregory "the Theologian," as he is known in the East, are worthy of the greatest classical models. He left numerous poetical works and some 250 letters. Together with his friend Basil, he compiled the *Philocalia,* a collection of extracts from Origen, an "Origen reader" of unique value to students of the great master. We owe to Gregory also an autobiography in verse.

The most prolific of the Cappadocians was doubtless Gregory of Nyssa (331–393), brother of Basil and of the ascetic Macrina the Younger. In spite of having received merely informal training, he greatly influenced the council of Constantinople (381) and must be counted among "the greatest philosophical minds of the early church."[2] In his dogmatic and exegetical writings, the doctrine of the Trinity received its final shape and he purged Christology of the last glimmer of docetism still lingering in Alexandria. *Catechetical Oration, That There Are Not Three Gods,* writings against the extreme Arian Eunomius, homilies, commentaries, letters (some thirty survived), all document the ability of this powerful thinker. The *Life of Moses,* on the ascent of the soul to God, and the *Life of Macrina,* on the ideal virtuous life, the truly "philosophical life," show him equally at ease describing mystical experience and propounding a model of ascetic life. In him Christian Platonism—more precisely, Middle and Neoplatonism—found its finest spokesman.

Antiochene-Syrians

Two authors writing in Syriac left their mark on the fourth century and beyond: Aphrahat and above all Ephrem (306–373). The latter lived as a deacon in Nisibis, then in Edessa when Nisibis was ceded to the Persians in 363; he is remembered as hymnist and exegete. Didactic poetry and biblical commentaries in the typological vein embody a vision of the world as a sea of symbols; access to it is given by the incarnate Son, himself "the Lord of the symbols" and the key opening the gate to the true understanding of Bible, nature, and history. Ephrem is credited with the introduction into orthodox Christianity of the early Syriac, non-Greek tradition in close but polemical relation to both

2. Ibid., p. 105.

Gnosticism and Jewish-Christianity. His hymns became known, in translation, to all branches of Christianity and he is celebrated as one of the most important poets of the period.

First a student of the philosopher Libanius and baptized at the age of eighteen, John Chrysostom (345–407) then tried the life of a renouncer. Having damaged his health in the process, he came back to Antioch where he worked as deacon, then priest, preaching to wide audiences regularly and with increasing self-assurance. One day he was "kidnapped" to become the bishop of Constantinople (from 397). He was a formidable preacher (*Chrysostom* means "golden mouth"), the greatest of the Christian rhetors, capable of abusing his under-Christianized audience as well as his adversaries. His style and character combined to antagonize almost everybody, including the clergy, who found him severe, irascible, cruel, and imperious. His downfall was the consequence—he died in exile, the victim of his own doing and of the wicked tricks orchestrated by Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria. Because he gave hospitality to the Tall Brothers and their fifty companions, members of Evagrius's community, who were harassed by Theophilus wherever they tried to flee, John was unjustly accused, among other invented "crimes," of Origenism. His writings are characterized by the single-minded concern to uplift the moral level of all, believers, monks, and bishops. He knew of no double standard but thought that the ascetic life could be lived within the daily conditions of the world. However harsh in his criticism, he could also demonstrate compassion. This complex personality appealed to many, which accounts for his works having been carefully transmitted and being still widely read in Greek-speaking churches. His "liturgy" is, along with Basil's, the main source of eucharistic service still used today in the Orthodox church. Commentaries (e.g., on St. John), tractates (on priesthood, on virginity), sermons (e.g., the eight sermons against the Judaizing Christians, not preached against the Jews but addressed to Christians too much inclined to participate in Jewish festivals and attend the synagogue—though they were later used to foster hostility and hatred toward the Jews), baptismal instructions, letters (some 240 have survived): All illustrate the Antiochene approach and style of interpretation, explaining lines and words, and offering a christological reading of the Old Testament.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428) had been, like John Chrysostom, a pupil of Libanius and like him first chose the ascetic life before becoming a bishop. His commentaries, doctrinal works *(On Incarnation),* and catechetical homilies, when not entirely lost, are mainly preserved in Syriac. They typify a historical exegesis close to that of Paul, insisting on the newness of the gospel and keeping away from both the Platonic flight from this world and the Alexandrian allegorism. In spite of his having been disparaged by opponents and posthumously condemned in 553 along with Origen, both victims of Byzantine politics and, in the case of Theodore, of the Alexandrian obsession with the Syrian precursors of Nestorius, his writings remained very influential. Like Origen rehabilitated by recent research and finds, he is honored in the East as "the Interpreter," the best representative of the Antiochene type of interpretation.

A classical villain, the deposed bishop of Constantinople Nestorius (380–451) was born in Syria and educated and ordained in Antioch. He has been considerably vindicated by the recent discovery of his *Book of Heraclides,* which shows him as a quite worthy theologian of the Antiochene style. But devoid of political sense and overzealous in his censoring of heretics and women, he made too many powerful enemies. He had the misfortune of clashing with Empress Pulcheria and above all with Cyril of Alexandria (as John Chrysostom had with Cyril's uncle Theophilus). Even his bad character was no match for Cyril's temper. His account of Christ's unity at the level of the *prosopon* (subject) was certainly consistent though not strict enough for most colleagues. Refused a hearing at Ephesus in 431, he was deposed and exiled to Egypt, ready to live in oblivion provided God was not dishonored. He seems then to have been willing to call Mary the *theotokos* but astutely warned against making the virgin a goddess. He found a more sympathetic hearing at Chalcedon in 451, where Pope Leo's *Tomus* was seen by many to side with him. But, it is said, he did not wish to tarnish truth with his hated name and stayed away from further contest. His followers did not imitate him in that; they, not Nestorius, were the real Nestorians.

Another victim of Cyril was Theodoret of Cyrrhus (399–466), later hailed as the greatest of the Antiochene scholars and the best presenter of the christological disputes. Renowned as historian and hagiographer *(Church History, History of the Monks of Syria),* he also

authored apologetic and exegetical works of high quality, as well as over 200 letters. Reluctant to condemn Nestorius, whom he considered misrepresented by Cyril's caricature, and maligned for his lack of ardor, he was first vindicated at Chalcedon. But in 553 his anti-Cyrillic writings were condemned in the hostile excerpts known as the *Three Chapters* (including passages from Theodore of Mopsuestia and Ibas of Edessa). In his dogmatic essays *On Trinity* and *On Incarnation,* he marks his difference from the Alexandrians, interpreting salvation as union with God by participation, not as divinization. Modern research emphasizes his originality, his many-sided talent, and his clear prose; but it considers his historical work most valuable, based as it is on a mass of original documents.

Latins

The literary activity of Tertullian and Cyprian, who stood out in the third century among the first Latin writers, has already been mentioned. In the fourth and fifth centuries, four characters were to eclipse all others. They were active not only in various corners of the Latin West; two of them—Rufinus and Jerome—worked also in the East. All but Augustine were conversant with the work of Origen, if not with Greek Christian thought altogether.

Ambrose of Milan (337–397) is even credited with having mediated the Greek tradition to the West (especially Origen, Athanasius, and Basil), adding to it a further Neoplatonic color. A man of action, the bishop of Milan held his own against the emperor and in the process might have become a bit intolerant; at any rate he determined the future course of church-state coexistence in the West. He gave lasting shape to Western liturgy thanks to his innovations in Milan and his composition of hymns. His sermons, with their nonliteral interpretation of the Old Testament, had great impact, not least on the young Augustine. Among his writings should be mentioned his *Hexaëmeron,* an allegorical treatment of the six days of creation, the *Holy Spirit,* the *Mysteries,* the *Sacraments,* the *Duties of Ministers,* and some ninety letters.

Born in Aquileia and initially a friend of Jerome, Rufinus (345–410) embarked on a course of literary studies that took him to Rome, where, while developing precious contacts with the nobility, he

joined an ascetic group that had Jerome as a member. Disenchanted with life among Roman high society, he opted for the ascetic life. This took him to Egypt, where he encountered the living thought of Origen embodied in Evagrius and Didymus the Blind. He then went to Jerusalem, where he founded, with Melania the Elder, a double monastery of men and women ascetics. Soon he fell out with Jerome, who had become a competitor in recruiting noble ascetics (Paula, Marcella) and above all had abruptly joined the anti-Origenist camp with Epiphanius against John of Jerusalem and Rufinus himself. A bitter relationship developed that ended only at the death of Rufinus, who had returned to Italy in 397. Besides scholarly works of his own, Rufinus is mainly remembered for his gigantic work as a translator. We owe him, among other works, a complete though toned-down version of Origen's *On First Principles,* which fed the Origenist controversy; of Eusebius's *History of the Church,* which he updated; of Basil's *Ascetica;* of Evagrius's *Sentences*. Because Rufinus had his coterie of supporters in Jerusalem and in Rome at odds with Jerome's coterie of female friends in Bethlehem and Rome, there resulted colorful intrigues as well as important developments in the ascetic tradition, both offering glimpses into vivid aspects of Christian life.

Similarly, Jerome (347–420) left Dalmatia as a young man for Rome, where he made contact with the imperial house. Having finally chosen the ascetic life, he joined the Syrian monks near Antioch, soon to discover that he was not cut out for the excesses of those extremists. Back in Rome, he became spiritual advisor to noble Roman women and made preparations for establishing houses for ascetic women. He left for Jerusalem in 384 and, with Paula, opened a double monastery in Bethlehem, where he also pursued his scholarly career. A difficult character, grumpy and acidic, after an Origenist period he turned (probably intimidated by Epiphanius) against Origen, as he did against Pelagius; denounced John of Jerusalem for his Origenist leanings; and countered Rufinus's translation of *On First Principles* with his own literal translation, now lost. He demonstrated a remarkable activity in the many letters (about 150 are extant) he wrote, many of them polemical. He was made and remained famous for his translation of the Bible (called the *Vulgate*), which, with its translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew text, superseded all existing versions and nourished Western Christian thought until today. He also wrote numerous commentaries

on biblical books and what could be called the first "patrology," his *Famous Men*. He was an extremely talented writer, yet he delighted in abusive language and often used his intelligence to crush his opponents. It has been said that he basically was a satirist who took his own satires seriously, thus attracting countless enemies. It can be added that to know him well is to know his entire period because he was found everywhere, involved as soon as the possibility of a debate was offered.

It is unique in the history of the Patristic Period, and even of the West altogether, for one single author to have been involved in four major and decisive disputes in the course of which his positive contribution eventually became the lasting position of the church, and to have authored three works that became classics of Western literature. This was the achievement of Augustine (354–430), who did for the West what Origen did for the East: set the tone for all future theological reflection. But he seems to have been, among Westerners, the least aware of the Origenist explorations.

In the course of the four main controversies of his career (see chapter 5), Augustine initiated positions that all future theologians were bound to take into account. Against the Manichees he defended the place and significance of the Old Testament, and discussed the problems of free will, evil, and God. Against the Donatists he developed the doctrine of the church and sacraments. Against the Pelagians he introduced the doctrine of original sin, along with further elucidations of grace and free will. Against the pagans, who occupied his mind from the time of his conversion, he proposed the doctrine of the "two cities," clarified the relationship between faith and reason, and sketched a comprehensive philosophy or theology of history.

Besides his three classic works, the *Confessions, On the Trinity,* and *The City of God,* Augustine wrote a multitude of works that illustrate the greatness of his mind and his command of rhetoric: tractates on specific questions, biblical commentaries, sermons, well over 200 letters, two dozen of which have recently been discovered and published.

Compared with Origen, Augustine exhibits a less optimistic cast of mind and he got grumpier with age. Nevertheless, the traditional saying can be altered and bent to state that the history of Christian theology is a footnote commentary to both Augustine and Origen.

The Origenist Controversy

The presentation of this momentous though fateful controversy had to be delayed until this point, for the main participants it mobilized had first to be introduced. Moreover, the controversy itself was not ended before 553. In it trinitarian and christological debates as well as cosmological and anthropological speculations were dramatically orchestrated, and several of the authors mentioned so far had some involvement. This is to say that an entire epoch finds its reflection in those discussions as in a mirror.

"Origenism" is the name given to a certain theological system attributed to but drifting away from Origen, in doctrinal conflicts of the fourth through sixth centuries. Condemned by various synods and by Emperor Justinian, it contained ideas such as the preexistence of souls, which, because of a pre-cosmic fault, were forcibly united to bodies; the spherical shape of resurrected bodies; the universal salvation of all rational beings; and a tendency to view the Son as not quite equal to the Father. Origen's thought could not, obviously, be reduced to those isolated statements and oversimplifications, the work of certain disciples and above all of bitter foes.

How did the controversy develop? Perhaps we can identify four stages. The first stage coincides with the publication of *On First Principles* and its immediate aftermath. In that work Origen intended to address a Christian audience interested in philosophical questions at a time (219–225) when no "connected body of doctrine"[3] existed and when very few dogmatic agreements had been reached by the church. Using the distinction between *dogmatikos,* what is plainly clear and affirmed as doctrine in the "rule of faith," and *gymnastikos,* what can be said tentatively by mode of research and hypothesis, Origen felt confident that he could safely speculate in the second sense by means of the allegorical approach, and that he could legitimately make forays into unexplored territory. This he did, speculating on the preexistence of the soul, the accidental union of souls with bodies *(ensomatosis),* the imaging of God, the status of the Son, the Trinity, the resurrection of the body, and the restoration of all things—including the final salvation of all rational beings and embracing even the devil. Given his initial distinction, not all of Origen's statements had the same claim to certainty;

3. De princ., Pref. 10.

critical discernment in reading his writings and some sense of his historical situation were called for, qualities often lacking at the time of the controversy.

From the fourth century on, lively and, to some, scandalous discussions broke out among the followers of Origen, the "Origenists," marking the second stage of the controversy. Not all had the good sense of Evagrius in the use of the allegorical method and in discerning what in Origen was an assertion or thesis and what a searching question or hypothesis. Some, it seems (the Syrian monk Stephen, perhaps the Tall Brothers of Nitria and their companions, some Palestinian monks), not only tended in their Origenist fervor to apply a spiritualizing approach to all biblical "anthropomorphisms" and "material" references, including even such things as the sacraments, but they even claimed that the allegorical interpretation was the only valid one, thus rejecting all imaging or representation of God. Even expressions such as God's love, God's act, Father and Son, had to be interpreted spiritually. Many thought that this tendency was endangering the humanity of God in his incarnation. Furthermore, an unbridled inclination to mystical speculation appeared that threatened to dissolve the historical character of Christian revelation, claiming a direct union with God that did not have to be mediated by historical events and persons. This was more than Origen would have conceded or than Evagrius's piety had claimed.

In the meantime, the third stage of the dispute had set in, at the time the Arian party had piqued powerful opponents among the orthodox. Epiphanius of Salamis (310/320–403) had seen as a young man how much Egypt was torn apart on the subject of Origen's legacy. Soon he came to see Origen and his christological views (anachronologically and not very consistently)[4] as the source of Arianism, and in his *Panarion,* written 374–377, charged Origen with heresy. But it is in 393 that the controversy really flared up when the same Epiphanius dared to broadcast the charge in a sermon in Jerusalem, that is, outside his own jurisdiction. He then repeated and amplified it in a letter to John of Jerusalem. Epiphanius also wrote to John Chrysostom prior to 400 urging him to abstain from studying Origen's writings and to convene a synod to condemn him. John Chrysostom dragged his feet in

4. See E. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 104.

that matter and did not see fit to move against Origenism. When begged by the cynical and opportunistic Theophilus of Alexandria, early in 403, to defend the orthodoxy threatened by John Chrysostom's supposed alliance with the Origenists, the old Epiphanius had by then developed the notion that he was the providential "hammer of Origenism";[5] he leaped into action, sailed to Constantinople, made a fool of himself, failed to have Origen's writings condemned by the bishops he could assemble, realized that perhaps he had been enrolled by Theophilus for his own purposes of dethroning and degrading John Chrysostom, and died on the high seas on his way back home.

That stage of the controversy had a second plot. Up to the mid–390s Jerome had been an Origenist of a sort. Doubtless impressed by Epiphanius's denunciations, he suddenly changed sides, making first a half-hearted volte-face and putting out a "lukewarm" attack on Origen.[6] In that he was imitating Theophilus of Alexandria, who had similarly changed his stance and begun persecuting Origenist monks in Egypt. At one point Theophilus himself enlisted Jerome's literary support against Origenist errors. It is at that juncture that the Tall Brothers and some fifty companions, accused of Origenism, had to flee to Palestine and then to Constantinople, where they were given hospitality by John Chrysostom who, in this indirect way, became unwillingly entangled in the controversy. As for Jerome, he shouted his dissociation from Origenism in one breath: "I am no Marcionite, Manichee or Encratite."[7] To a large extent his turnabout served to rescue his own reputation and in the end his ferocious attack on Origen became a means of vilifying his present-day enemies, above all Rufinus, the Origen scholar.

The theological controversy had by then become a political strife and involved the resentment of Alexandria toward the capital Constantinople. Intrigues by Theophilus (anticipating those of his nephew Cyril against Nestorius), gradually losing interest in Origenism and bent on weakening the church of the capital recently (381) given primacy of honor, centered on the person of the bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, himself not very popular because of his rigorous standards and acerbic criticism of clergy and court. The outcome was

5. J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*. London: Duckworth, 1995, p. 205.

6. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy,* p. 150.

7. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.3, NPNF, 2nd ser., vol. 6.

the deposition of John, secured in 403 at the synod of the Oak (the young Cyril was there with Theophilus) and enforced in 404 by Emperor Arcadius, who exiled him. His successor, Theodosius II, however, considered John a martyr and had his relics brought back to the capital in a fitting display of honor.

The fourth stage of the controversy lingered for the next century, reaching its high point at the second council of Constantinople, in 553. Ten years earlier, writing to Menas, patriarch of Constantinople, Emperor Justinian had given a list of objectionable statements, questionably attributed to Origen (we now know that they were mainly from Evagrius). Those fragments and anathemas were made public at a synod in Constantinople and confirmed at the general council of 553. Origen's works were proscribed and most of them, probably five-sixths of the whole, were lost; Evagrius's speculative treatises (not his ascetic works) left the Greek stage but were preserved in Palestine and Syria, to be partially recovered through recent finds.

This intricate story contained a warning that shrewd analysts were to hearken to. A condemnation had been pronounced with total disregard for the changes that had accrued to the historical situation and to the puzzling variety of charges successively laid at the door of Origen. Origen had written his works at a time prior to conciliar definitions, prior to the formulation of trinitarian and christological dogmas, a time when theological vocabulary was quite imprecise. Three centuries later that situation had significantly changed, but the change was not taken into account in condemning Origen. The distinction between Origen and the Origenists collapsed. Origen's own intentions were neglected and the opponents' interests were allowed to prevail. Justified as the condemnation of Origenist extravagancies was because of intervening doctrinal developments, the condemnation of Origen himself was a total anachronism in addition to being marred by a kind of error on the person. History took care of the due rectification. The East kept revering Origen as its most important theologian while the West, especially since Erasmus in the sixteenth century, has rehabilitated him completely.

The Last Fathers

Before turning to some of the "last" representatives of the Patristic Period, we have to mention the literary activity of various groups at

the fringes of, or outside, the empire. They show that Eastern and Oriental patristic literature went on well beyond our period. The works produced are often important in themselves; however, their translations are especially precious for the knowledge they afford of mostly Greek works whose originals are lost but, thanks to the labor of these groups, were translated into their respective languages. Thus we have works in Coptic of the fourth to seventh centuries; in Armenian from the fourth/fifth to fourteenth centuries; in Georgian from the seventh to fourteenth centuries; in Arabic (based on Greek and Syriac works) from the eighth to fourteenth centuries; and in Ethiopic (based on Greek, Syriac, and Latin works) from the seventh to fourteenth centuries. All those works are presently being edited and made available.

Among the last fathers and already mentioned because of his influence at the time of Chalcedon 451, we encounter Pope Leo I (or Leo the Great, 400–461), who wrote many sermons (some forty-six are extant), over 100 letters, and several tractates. But he is best remembered for his *Tomus* (Tome), which, sent to Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, signaled his most important intervention in problems of dogma and politics. In it, using some Eastern sources, he propounded the christological doctrine of "two natures in the one person" of the incarnate Christ, which was received as the orthodox position at the council of Chalcedon, though challenged by important "Oriental" groups for centuries to come. He championed the claim to primacy of the bishop of Rome within the church, seen as the vicar and heir of Peter.

Sometimes called the "founder of the medieval papacy," Pope Gregory I (or Gregory the Great, 540–604) authored the famous *Moral Discourses on Job,* a series of instructions on moral and ascetical questions in the form of a commentary on the book of Job, which is, in fact, a commentary on the entire scripture. In that work he puts to use the best of the exegetical tradition formalized in the three levels of interpretation: literal, allegorical or spiritual, and moral. More than 800 of his letters have survived. His *Dialogues* recount the marvelous lives of holy men and women in Italy. His theological views were generally close to Augustine's. His name has traditionally been connected with the reform of the liturgical practice of the church and the fresh impulse given to sacred music. In 596 he sent forty monks headed by one Augustine to evangelize the Anglo-Saxons of Britain. The first pope to call himself

"servant of the servants of God," he was also clear about his own dignity not only as Peter's vicar, but even as "Christ's representative."

The enigmatic figure of the Syrian *(Pseudo-)* Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 500) had a lasting impact on medieval Western theology with his mystical and spiritual works blending Neoplatonism (especially Proclus), Origen, and the Eastern tradition into a powerful doctrine. Written in Greek, his *Celestial Hierarchy, Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, On the Divine Names,* and *Mystical Theology* significantly nourished medieval theology and mysticism, after being wholeheartedly received by the Monophysites and Severus of Antioch. The best of Dionysius, but also of Origen, Evagrius, and the Cappadocians, was recaptured by one of the most powerful thinkers of the East, Maximus Confessor (580–662), in a synthesis that counts as the great achievement of Byzantine theology.

John of Damascus (675–749), the great opponent of the iconoclast party, well trained in Greek and Arabic culture, closes these centuries of literary production. His *Orthodox Faith* became the standard doctrinal textbook of Eastern Christianity; it intentionally avoids making original statements, extolling the tradition of the Greek fathers, especially Gregory of Nazianzus, to which he adds Leo the Great. His influence was also noticeable in the West from the twelfth century on.

A final writer ought to be mentioned: the learned Photius (820–897), twice patriarch of Constantinople. Although he falls beyond the limits of this survey, he had the good fortune of seeing and reading numerous works of previous centuries now lost to us, and the good instinct of reporting on them and quoting from them in his *Bibliotheca* (Library) or *Description and List of the Volumes Read by Us*, available today in eight volumes. These short notices are full of precious information on works that would otherwise be forgotten, and on the contents of the archives of the see of Constantinople.

Church Mothers

In his history of the desert fathers, referring to the heroic women ascetics who peopled the fringes of the Egyptian desert, Palladius depicted their significant impact by calling them "manly women" and

"female fathers."[8] The expression not only baffles our scruples concerning gender propriety; it also uncovers the silent presence of "desert mothers" and "wandering virgins" that traditional treatments of the Patristic Period are quick to forget. The present survey of patristic history and literature is itself extremely male in content. What exactly, then, can be said about the "mothers of the church"? Do excuses based on the paucity of the female record constitute a valid alibi for the thin treatment accorded women in the period under study?

Again, the "Patristic" age was one of unabashed patriarchal dominion, capable of the paradoxical tour de force of combining misogynism with the praise of virginity. All the same, some of the great leaders and writers among the fathers had women associates or confidantes. True, very few women themselves produced writings, but a fair number of them—virgins, widows, mothers, and empresses—were written about.

Much of the literature about women concerns first of all Mary, the mother of Jesus, whose virginity was rhapsodized about, particularly in times when theoretical treatises on virginity abounded. Also quite early, heroines and martyrs found praise and veneration for their faith, but also for their leadership and the challenge they meant to the authorities; such were Blandina and Perpetua, martyred in 177 and 203, respectively. Women ascetics received the widest treatment, mostly because of their association with eminent male leaders. Here mention must be made of the Cappadocian Macrina; of the two Melanias associated with Rufinus; of Jerome's co-workers Marcella, the two Paulas, Eustochium, Poimenia; of John Chrysostom's friend and confidante Olympias. Many of these achieved by their public activity a remarkable emancipation from societal norms.

There were also active prophetesses and women leaders among Montanists and Gnostics, although female roles among the Gnostics should not be idealized—Gnostics often extolled radical forms of antifeminity. Some noble women, aristocrats, even empresses were addressees of spiritual letters and exercised some ruling function. The empowerment of women was not totally lacking in this period, but it was the case of a tiny flock.

As to Christian literature written by women, a few instances are

8. Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 41.1. Translated R. T. Meyer. ACW, vol. 34, 1964.

recorded, without really justifying the talk of a lost tradition. The first in date is the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* mainly lifted from Perpetua's diary of 203/204, with editorial additions long attributed to Tertullian. In the mid-fourth century a certain Proba authored a *Cento,* a narrative of sacred history in artificial Vergilian verses to be used as a school text. In 1884 there was found an account of travel to the Holy Land *(Itinerarium)* by the Spaniard Egeria (or Etheria), which contains much information on the liturgical and religious life in Jerusalem around 385. In fact, pilgrimage to the Holy Land had been undertaken by noble women, from Constantine's mother, Helena, early in the fourth century to empress Eudocia, who traveled to Palestine in 438/439 and died there in 460. She herself wrote poetry and even doctrinal works, such as *The Martyrdom of St. Cyprian* (an Antiochene Cyprian), a work made up of Homeric stitchings written in laborious hexameters by a learned and pious person. Although they only occasionally took to writing, the Theodosian empresses were known for their imperiousness, best illustrated by Pulcheria, who personally influenced the proceedings of the council of Ephesus in 431 and exercised organizing and directing functions at Chalcedon in 451, to the point that it was said that she personally triumphed over Nestorius and Eutyches.

On the whole, therefore, though a few women were influential personalities in their times, women in general followed only too well the injunctions laid down by New Testament authors like Paul recommending submission and invisibility. Real empowerment of women can find only fleeting precedents in those centuries and must be wrought on other grounds. However, a globally negative judgment on this topic would be wrong.

> Christianity did...have the effect of bringing women into the public sphere. They could travel to the Holy Land, found monasteries, learn Hebrew, choose not to marry or to become celibate, dedicate themselves to the religious life and form friendships with men outside their own family circle, all things which would scarcely have been possible before. In contrast, we might remember, nearly all Christian slaves and *coloni* remain among the great mass of unknown ancient people, whom nobody wrote about.[9]

9. A. Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 148.

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