
Universalism In Origen's First Principles

by Jerry Walls

Origen (185-254) is probably the most celebrated advocate of the belief that all free creatures will finally be restored to God. Although the Church has traditionally rejected universalism as a heresy, there has been a resurgence of the doctrine in our day. Given the importance of Origen as a historical precedent for modern universalism,¹ his version of the doctrine deserves specific examination. The focus of this paper will be Origen's conception of universalism as he developed it in the *First Principles*.

I

Before we proceed, let us make some brief observations on historical background. Origen wrote *First Principles* during his time in Alexandria, where he served as head of the Catechetical School from 203 to 230. Alexandria was an important intellectual center, and boasted the best library in the world. As a resident of this city, Origen naturally encountered various competing philosophies and religions.

He familiarized himself with Greek thinking in order to meet his opponents on their own ground. In this vein, he attended the lectures of Ammonius Saccas, who was the teacher of Plotinus, the great neo-platonist philosopher.² The impact of Greek philosophy on his thinking can be discerned in Origen's writings. His heretical views are often traced, at least in part, to his desire to reconcile platonic and neo-platonic philosophy with Christianity.³ We must keep in mind that he lived prior to the period of the Ecumenical Councils, and did not have the benefit of their decisions to guide his thinking and writing.

In this later period, Origen's doctrine of universalism was officially

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condemned, along with his other aberrant views. However, the details of his condemnation have been a matter of much historical debate.

The issue is complicated by conflicting data, which I will not attempt to sort out since my purpose lies elsewhere. It is agreed that about 543 the emperor Justinian published a refutation of Origen including a list of anathemas. Moreover, the emperor directed Mennas, the patriarch of Constantinople, to convene a synod which also condemned Origen. The controversy centers on whether or not he was condemned a decade later at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553.

Much of the dispute involves a series of 15 anathemas, which were discovered by Peter Lambeck of Vienna in the 17th century. The heading of the anathemas assigns them to the Fifth Council, but the authenticity of the heading has been challenged.⁴ There is evidence which indicates that these 15 anathemas should be attributed to the synod conducted by Mennas in 543, although it is by no means conclusive.

Even if the 15 anathemas were not adopted by the Fifth Ecumenical Council, the fact remains that Origen was condemned by name as a heretic in the 11th Canon of that Council.⁵ But this has been accounted for by some as a later interpolation.

However, for now we must leave this matter to the historians, and move on.⁶

II

There is, of course, material dealing with universalism in other works of Origen besides the *First Principles*. However, there are at least three reasons why this book alone is sufficient for a valid study of his version of that doctrine.

First, although Origen wrote *First Principles* when he was only about 30 years old, there is no reason to believe that he modified his opinions in any significant way.⁷ So we are not dealing with views he later repudiated.

Second, his doctrine of universalism is organically related to his thinking as a whole. It cannot be isolated from other aspects of his theology. Since the *First Principles* is “the most complete and characteristic expression of Origen’s opinions”⁸ we can examine universalism there in its broader context.

Third, universal salvation is one of the “main themes” which “run

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throughout the whole of the work”.⁹ We do not have to rely on a few passing references to the doctrine in forming our interpretation.

There is also one noteworthy drawback however. The original Greek version of the book is almost completely lost. What we have is the Latin translation of Rufinus prepared about 150 years after Origen's original edition, and a few fragments of a translation by Jerome. The problem is that Rufinus took liberties in his translation, partly to smooth out Origen's heretical views. Therefore, we have to reckon with the fact that what we read is not always the thought of Origen.

Because of the general structure of the *First Principles*, Origen is often recognized as the first systematic theologian of the Christian church. But that should not be pressed too far, because the arrangement of the material is not always logical. Moreover, it is sadly deficient in whole areas, one of which is soteriology.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Origen should be commended for realizing that Christianity must be given a holistic interpretation in order to compete with other world views.¹¹

In the preface of his book, Origen begins by assuming the basic elements of the faith on the authority of the church. But given these definite limits, he sees room for speculation. In the four books which follow, he not infrequently admits the tentative nature of his theories.

Book one begins with a discussion of the persons of the Trinity. There follows a treatment of other basic doctrines such as the fall, the nature of rational beings, and the final consummation of the world. The second book deals with the beginning of the world, the incarnation, resurrection and divine punishment. Arguments which show that the God of the law is also the God of the gospel are given to refute dualism. Book three opens with a lengthy defense of free will. A discourse on the devil and other “opposing powers” appropriately follows. The book concludes with another discussion of creation and the end of the world. Repetition in the first three books is considerable. The last book has to do with theories of the inspiration and interpretation of Scripture. The well-known allegorical method of interpretation is expounded. The final section of *First Principles* is a summary of the key doctrines already discussed.

III

As noted above, Origen's concept of universalism cannot be grasped without engaging to some extent the complexity of his

thought as a whole. Universalism is the outcome of several motifs in his theology. I hope the following discussion will make that apparent.

Let us start by noting this dictum of Origen's:

For the end is always like the beginning: and therefore as there is one end to all things, so ought we to understand that there was one beginning; and as there is one end to many things, so there spring from one beginning many differences and varieties, which again . . . are recalled to one end, which is like unto the beginning.¹²

Here we have, in capsulated form, his doctrine of universalism. In a nutshell, the end is a return to the beginning.

Origen's beliefs about the beginning are obviously very important. At this crucial point his thinking betrays a dependence on neo-platonic philosophy.¹³ In a famous argument, he maintains that creation is eternal, and necessarily so.

As no one can be a father without having a son, nor a master without possessing a servant, so even God cannot be called omnipotent unless there exist those over whom He may exercise His power. . . But if there was never a time when He was not omnipotent, of necessity those things by which He receives that title must also exist; and He must always have had those over whom He exercised power, and which were governed by Him either as king or prince. . .¹⁴

If omnipotence entails creatures, then God has always had creatures or He has not always been omnipotent. But if He has not always been so, then He is not immutable, which is absurd.

Does this mean that this universe as we know it has always existed? No, for Origen did not believe that matter is co-eternal with God. Original creation for him consisted of a finite number of intellectual beings. "In that commencement, then, we are to suppose that God created so great a number of rational or intellectual creatures . . . as He foresaw would be sufficient. It is certain that He made them according to some definite number, predetermined by Himself."¹⁵ Moreover, each of these beings was created exactly alike. "For it is established by many declarations that all rational creatures are of

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one nature.”¹⁶ Had not all creatures been created equal, God would not be just.

In the beginning, then, creation was a perfect harmony of intellectual beings in union with God. Origen's conception of this can be better understood by looking at his description of the end (since “the end is always like the beginning”). He anticipates a final state of mystical union in which God will be one with His creatures. Origen finds this idea in two key passages of Scripture. The first is John 17:24 which reads: “Father, I will that where I am, these may also be with Me: and as Thou and I are one, they also may be one in Us.” The other key passage is I Corinthians 15:24-28, particularly verse 28 which looks to a time when God will be “all in all”.

When that state arrives, our likeness with God will advance “from being merely similar to become the same”.¹⁷ Furthermore, “it may be understood as a rational inference that where all are one, there will no longer be any diversity.”¹⁸ Those who have become “united to God shall have been made one spirit with Him.”¹⁹ It is apparent that the lines separating creature from Creator are not clearly drawn here, if at all. This final state is unity indeed.

Now having examined the beginning and the end, what is to be said of the middle? If the key word describing the beginning and end is unity, the key word describing the middle is diversity. The question is, how did this diversity come to be? There are two basic factors which explain the present diversity. The first is free will and the second is God's providence.

As noted above, free will is an important element of Origen's system. Along with rationality, it is essential in all beings. Moral qualities, on the other hand, are accidental in creatures. Whereas God is good in His essential nature, we are good or evil contingent upon our choices. “And since all are possessed of free will, and may of their own accord admit either of good or evil . . . angels may become men or demons, and again from the latter they may rise to be men or angels.”²⁰

Because rational beings chose to do evil, this world with all its diversity was brought into existence. Angels, demons and men have been given their present status according to the deserts of their former choices. This physical world was created for those who fell so far as to require bodily existence.²¹ It was preceded by other worlds, and will likewise be followed by other worlds. Origen expresses his view of the fall in the form of a question.

. . . what other cause, as we have already said are we to imagine for so great a diversity in the world, save the diversity and variety in the movements and declensions of those who fell from that primeval unity and harmony in which they were at first created by God. . . ?²²

The justice of God is at stake here for Origen. Unless our lot in this life is a consequence of guilt acquired prior to birth, God is not a just governor.²³

So the diversity of this world cannot be fully explained without reference to divine providence. “For God must be believed to do and order all things and at all times according to His judgment.”²⁴ Only He is truly able to recognize the merits of each individual’s choices. Thus, free will plus divine providence accounts for diversity and eliminates any basis for charging God with injustice.

And these are the causes, in my opinion, why that world presents the aspect of diversity, while Divine Providence continues to regulate each individual according to the variety of his movements or of his feelings and purpose. On which account the creator will neither appear to be unjust in distributing . . . to everyone according to his merits; nor will the happiness or unhappiness of each one’s birth, or whatever be the condition that falls to his lot, be deemed accidental; nor will different creators, or souls of different natures, be believed to exist.²⁵

Divine punishment must be understood in terms of providence. As such, it is not eternal separation *from* God; rather, it is a means of restoration *to* Him. Origen’s concern is to find a way to understand God’s anger which is worthy of Him.²⁶ But sin is not taken lightly. Some creatures will have to undergo severe punishment and discipline before they can be restored. God is depicted as a physician employing penal measures in order to “remove the defects of our souls, which they had contracted from their different sins and crimes. . . . By which certainly it is understood that the fury of God’s vengeance is profitable for the purgation of souls.”²⁷

The cure may take time, but since we are rational creatures and God is wise in His application of the remedy, it will eventually come according to His plan. “For He made the thinking principle immortal

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in its nature, and kindred to Himself; and the rational soul is not, as in this life, excluded from cure."²⁸ "For nothing is impossible to the Omnipotent, nor is anything incapable of restoration to its Creator: for He made all things that they might exist, and those things which were made for existence cannot cease to be."²⁹ Thus Origen can offer this hopeful account of how God will bring to pass the final restoration of all creatures:

And this result must be understood as being brought about, not suddenly, but slowly and gradually, seeing that the process of amendment and correction will take place imperceptibly in the individual instances during the lapse of countless and unmeasured ages, some outstripping others, and tending by a swifter course towards perfection, while others again follow close at hand, and some again a long way behind; and thus through the numerous and uncounted orders of progressive beings who are being reconciled to God from a state of enmity, the last enemy is finally reached, who is called death, so that he also may be destroyed, and no longer be an enemy.³⁰

IV

As observed above, Origen freely admitted the speculative quality of some of his judgments. At the beginning of his discussion of "The End or Consummation" in Book I, he remarked: "These subjects indeed, are treated by us with great solicitude and caution, in the manner rather of an investigation and discussion, than in that of fixed and certain decision."³¹ In appreciation of this unusual modesty in a theologian, the following criticisms are offered.

First, I would dispute from the outset Origen's opinion that universal salvation is a matter for speculation. In his preface, he distinguished those matters in Scripture which are clearly given from those which are open for discussion. Obviously Origen did not think that universalism is clearly ruled out by Scripture. Here the question involves the reformation issue of the external clarity of Scripture.³² If we have a clear word from God that some will be eternally lost, the case is closed. I would concur with the vast consensus of tradition that we have such a word.

Second, Origen does not give sufficient place to the work of Christ for our salvation. In his Christology, Jesus' soul was one of the souls

originally created by God. It did not fall with the others, and was therefore chosen to be united to the divine Logos, like white-hot iron is united with fire.³³ Jesus serves as our example, and by imitating Him, we too may “be made partakers of the divine nature”.³⁴ We obtain salvation only by obedience and His death teaches us obedience to the Father.³⁵ This hardly does justice to the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace.

Third, Origen’s Christology suggests an inconsistency with his universalism. That soul which became united with Christ is said to have attained immutability. By firmness of purpose and an indistinguishable warmth of love it “destroyed all susceptibility for alteration and change; and that which formerly depended upon the will was changed by the power of long custom into nature.”³⁶ This seems to raise the possibility of irreversible evil. If it is possible to become immutably joined to God by the “power of long custom” why is it not possible to become irreparably separated from Him by the same means?

Fourth, a consistent conception of free will poses difficulties, and Origen appears to be aware of this. He concedes that there are those “whose conversion is in a certain degree demanded and extorted.”³⁷ Is this not tantamount to admitting that some will never willingly submit to God? Furthermore, Origen allows for the possibility of falling away from God again, after having been restored.³⁸ This opens the door to a perpetual cycle of falling away and restoration. In this precarious state of affairs, God may never achieve His final purpose. This is also inconsistent with his Christological theory in which a soul may become irreversibly united with God.

Fifth, I do not think Origen has adequately reckoned with the irrational nature of evil. It is emphasized throughout the *First Principles* that we are rational creatures, although fallen. Since we are akin to God, we should eventually see the wisdom of obeying Him. But as T.F. Torrance has pointed out, “sin is illogical, and by its very factual existence cannot be rationalised without being rationalised away”.³⁹ Origen’s confidence in the rationality of fallen creatures vitiates the force of sin.

Finally, the doctrine of necessary creation contains a serious error. If God creates out of necessity, it is a small step to say that He also saves His fallen creatures out of necessity. If He is almighty because He created the world, it seems reasonable to say He is good because He saves the world. If God’s nature is in some sense bound up with

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His creatures, then His fate is not independent of theirs.

Origen's mistake, as Florovsky points out, is a failure to make a distinction between the will of God and the essence of God. "The idea of the world has its basis *not in the essence but in the will of God.*"⁴⁰ God was free to create or not to create without any alteration of His nature. To argue otherwise "leads to raising the world, at least the 'intelligible world' to an improper height".⁴¹

There is a connection between universalism and the tendency to overestimate the world's importance for God. Peter Geach counters this tendency:

We cannot think properly about Hell if we do not start from a right view about God. God has no need of us as we need Him; no need of us, or of our love. . . . For God a billion rational creatures are as dust in the balance; if a billion perish, God suffers no loss, Who can create what He wills with no effort or cost by merely thinking of it.⁴²

Since God does not need us, He is under no compulsion to save us. If we are lost, He is not the loser.

Barth rejected *necessary* universalism for a similar reason, according to Joseph Bettis.

For the universalist, since God is love, all men must finally be saved. But Barth rejects the common premise that God's love is defined in terms of what it does for men. . . . This is to say that God's essence is not self defined, but is defined in relation to men. . . . The problem is not that universalism ties God to all men but that it ties God to men at all.⁴³

In connection with the above, God is not good because He saves men any more than He is almighty because He created the world. Rather, He is both good and almighty in His essential Being. He suffers no diminution if His creatures perish.

I think it is clear that one's conception of God's relation to the world will shape the rest of his theology. Indeed, "the problematic of creation . . . is the central problem of Christian philosophy — the problem of the coexistence and coagency of the infinite and the finite, the necessary and the contingent, the eternal and temporal, the absolute and the relative".⁴⁴ Origen went astray at this most crucial

point. This suggests that the most serious objection to his doctrine of universalism is that it begins with a deficient view of God. ■

Footnotes

¹eg. William Barclay, who describes himself as a “convinced universalist” suggests a version of the doctrine which is consciously similar to that of Origen. See *William Barclay: A Spiritual Autobiography*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 65-8.

²Frederick Crombie, “Introductory Note to the Works of Origen” in Vol. IV of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), Reprint of the Edinburgh Edition, p. 226. Page numbers cited in Origen will be for this edition.

³Frederick Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Part 1, (New York: Image Books, c. 1950), pp. 41-2. cf. also Hugh T. Kerr, *The First Systematic Theologian: Origen of Alexandria*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 10-15; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 101.

⁴See *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. XIV of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 316. See also pp. 318-20 for the text of these Anathemas, as well as those of Justinian.

⁵*The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, p. 314.

⁶The whole issue is succinctly dealt with in an article entitled “Origenistic Controversies” in the *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, Vol. IV, ed. Smith and Wace, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1887), 142-156. It is noteworthy that Chadwick flatly states that the Council did condemn Origen: *The Early Church*, p. 210.

⁷B.F. Westcott, “Origenes” in the *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, Vol. IV, p. 119.

⁸Westcott, p. 119.

⁹Kerr, p. 34-5.

¹⁰Kerr, p. 41. He believes the *First Principles* must be judged a failure as a systematic theology, p. 39.

¹¹cf. Chadwick, p. 104; and Kerr, pp. 3-4.

¹²*First Principles*, I. 6. 2., p. 260. cf. Nygren’s characterization of Plotinus: “For Plotinus, therefore, the whole world-process is summed up in the double conception of the out-going of all things from the One, the Divine, and the return of all things to the One.” *Agape and Eros*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, c. 1953), p. 189.

¹³cf. Copleston, pp. 41-2.

¹⁴I. 2. 10, pp. 249-50.

¹⁵II. 9. 1, p. 289.

¹⁶III. 5. 4, p. 342.

¹⁷III. 6. 1, p. 345.

¹⁸III. 6. 4, p. 346.

¹⁹III. 6. 6, p. 347.

²⁰Fragment from Jerome, p. 267.

²¹III. 5. 4, p. 342.

²²II. 1. 1, p. 268.

²³III. 3. 5, p. 337.

²⁴I. 10. 8, p. 293.

²⁵II. 10. 6, p. 292.

²⁶II. 4. 4, p. 278.

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²⁷II. 10. 6, pp. 295-296.

²⁸III. 1. 13, p. 314.

²⁹III. 6. 5, p. 346.

³⁰III. 6. 6, p. 347. "Death" in this passage is the devil, whose destruction refers not to non-existence, but to being made no longer an enemy.

³¹I. 6. 1, p. 260.

³²The reformers strongly rejected allegorical interpretations of Scripture. As Kerr notes, "The Reformation was notably cool to Origen" (p. 5).

³³II. 6. 3-6, pp. 282-283. cf. Chadwick, p. 105.

³⁴IV. 1. 33, p. 378.

³⁵III. 5. 6, p. 343.

³⁶II. 6. 5, p. 283.

³⁷III. 5. 8, p. 344.

³⁸II. 3. 3, p. 272. cf. Chadwick, p. 107.

³⁹"Universalism or Election" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 311.

⁴⁰Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption* (Massachusetts: Nordland Publishing Co., 1976), p. 56. God's creative freedom is discussed on pp. 56-62.

⁴¹Florovsky, p. 59.

⁴²*Providence and Evil*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 124; 128.

⁴³"Is Karl Barth a Universalist?" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 20, pp. 428-429. Barth allowed for the possibility of universal salvation, but refused to make it a necessary doctrine. See p. 427.

⁴⁴John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 92.