

Origen and the Doctrine of the Soul: Reincarnation and the Pre-Existence of Spirits in Early Christian Thought

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Abstract:

This article examines the concept of the displacement of the spirit, commonly referred to as reincarnation, within early Christian doctrine with a particular focus on the views of Origen, an influential early Christian theologian. Origen's unique interpretation of reincarnation and the pre-existence of souls represents a significant, though controversial, perspective within early Christian thought. This study delves into Origen's writings and contrasts his views with other early Christian perspectives, aiming to clarify the theological and philosophical underpinnings of his doctrine. The investigation is based on a comprehensive literature review of primary and secondary sources, and it employs historical-critical methods to analyze Origen's contributions to early Christian theology. Known in Christianity for his views on reincarnation and the displacement of the soul, one of the scholars who even developed his teaching was Origen (185-254 BC), who received the name "British slave" and became much more respected and famous among the clergy of the church.

Keywords: reincarnation, doctrine, Christianity, Bible, spirit, Origen, Early Christian Doctrine, Reincarnation, Pre-existence of Souls, Displacement of the Spirit, Theological Interpretation, Early Christianity, Christian Theology.

Introduction. Reincarnation, or the belief in the displacement of the spirit across multiple lifetimes, is a concept more commonly associated with Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. However, within the early Christian tradition, the idea also found a place, albeit a controversial one. One of the most notable proponents of a form of reincarnation in early Christian thought was Origen of Alexandria (c. 184-253 CE). Origen's theological framework, which included the pre-existence of souls and their transmigration, offered a distinctive interpretation that set him apart

from other early Christian theologians. This article aims to explore Origen's views on reincarnation, assess their reception among his contemporaries, and understand their implications for early Christian doctrine.

Saint Hieronymus Origen, who translated the Bible into Latin, was one of the major exponents of Christianity, as “one of the major bishops of the Church standing after the Apostles”. St. Gregory and Bishop Nissky, on the other hand, glorified Origen as “the Prince of Christian doctrine of the 3rd century”. So, what was the vision of a major scientist with such titles about reincarnation? Origen’s views on this are attributed to the Rev. William R., Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London. Inge’s famous work “Gifford Lectures” was cited. Origen advances a doctrine that seems to be a logical end to the belief that every Greek is alive forever, that is, his view that the soul exists even before the birth of the body. In his opinion, the soul is not material, for this reason the soul does not have both the beginning and the end of life. Origen's belief in this doctrine was so strict that he could not hide his hatred of the views of adherents of the orthodoxy about resurrection and resurrection after death. He says, “How can a dead body, whose parts are broken into thousands of bodies, be revived? After all, a person does not know who owns the particles(molecules)in his body. People cling to the saying “there is nothing impossible for God himself and in this way plunge into the swamp of nonsense”.

Literature Review The scholarly exploration of Origen's views on reincarnation and the pre-existence of souls has been extensive, reflecting both historical interest and theological controversy. Key sources include Origen’s primary texts such as “On First Principles” (De Principiis), where he expounds his theological system, and his “Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew”. Secondary sources include scholarly analyses like Henri Crouzel’s “Origen,” which offers an in-depth study of Origen’s theology, and the works of John Dillon and Karen Jo Torjesen, who provide contextual and philosophical insights into Origen's thoughts. Furthermore, Elizabeth A. Clark’s “The Origenist Controversy” sheds light on the broader reception and controversy surrounding Origen’s doctrines in early Christianity.

According to the “Catholic Encyclopedia”, Origen’s teaching closely matches the theory of reincarnation in the teachings of Platonists and Jewish mystics, as well as in the religious sources of Hinduism.

Historian-theologian Isaac de Bozobr, commenting on Origen's views, draws the following conclusion from him: “Obviously, Origen believed that the soul moves into several bodies, and his further fate will be according to the good or bad deeds of the soul.” This conclusion corresponds exactly to the explanation given to reincarnation in dictionaries.

Methods. This study employs a historical-critical methodology to investigate Origen’s writings and their theological implications. The approach involves a thorough examination of Origen’s primary texts, contextual analysis of his doctrines within early Christian thought, and a comparative analysis with other contemporary theological perspectives. The study also incorporates secondary scholarly sources to understand the broader historical and theological context and to provide a balanced interpretation of Origen’s views.

Discussion. Origen's doctrine of the pre-existence and transmigration of souls represents a fascinating intersection of Christian theology with Platonic philosophy. In “On First Principles,” Origen argues for the pre-existence of souls, suggesting that souls existed before their earthly lives and will continue to exist after death, potentially experiencing multiple lifetimes. This view was partly influenced by Platonic thought, which posits the immortality and transmigration of the soul. Origen’s interpretation of reincarnation, however, was not widely accepted in early Christianity and was later deemed heretical at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 CE. The opposition to Origen's views was rooted in concerns about their compatibility with orthodox Christian doctrines, such as

the resurrection of the body and the uniqueness of Christ's salvific act. Despite the controversies, Origen's theological contributions offer a profound insight into early Christian attempts to grapple with complex metaphysical questions.

Origen himself did not hesitate about this: "Some spirits are prone to evil, settle on a human corpse, and then, having lived out the deadline, move to an animal corpse, eventually falling to the level of vegetation. He then goes back along the path he has come and finally reaches the Kingdom Of Heaven".

Despite the high appreciation of Origen and his teaching (including his views on reincarnation) by the founders of the church, the Roman Catholic Church dramatically changed its attitude towards Origen after his death. It should be noted that such an attitude did not arise as a result of Origen's views on the soul. The reason is something else. Origen is self-effacing as a young adult, with the aim of maintaining moral purity and purity as passions grow stronger. In the opinion of church priests, however, a person who injures his own body can never be elevated to the rank of Saint.

Origen's youthful curiosity causes him severe trauma. The church refused to place his views among the Saints, affirming his views as church law and declaring himself Holy on behalf of the church, not because of the reason for his views on reincarnation, but because of his deed cited above. The church's attitude did not stop there. Since Origen was not officially declared a saint, his views were also accepted by choice, only those aspects that served the interests of the church. As a result, his views on posthumous rebirth were not accepted even by those faithful to the Christian faith.

By the 6th century, his views had come under heavy criticism. It was during this period that Origen's teaching was formally persecuted by the church. Emperor Justinian (R.C.A. 527-565.) from their own interests, began to push citizens to convert to Christianity, the most common religion in the Empire at the time. But at the same time, there were several other sects among Christians, such as the origenists and Gnostics, who adopted reincarnation. The far-sighted emperor tried to take the measure by correctly calculating the doctrine that one life alone would not be enough for individuals to attain their spiritual maturity, risking their neglect of religious orders and prohibitions in Christianity. It was only natural for many to postpone the fulfillment of their religious duties if they believed that there was an opportunity to atone for the sins committed by men, that is, that there were still a few lives ahead. This was halal to Justinian using the Christian faith as a political weapon. Therefore, he came to the conclusion that if people are instilled in the mind only one life in their account, and after its end, they are instilled in the creed that they will go either to heaven or to hell, they will take their religious duties seriously. In this case, one can also use strong sense in people for political purposes. In addition, Justinian also used religious views and beliefs as tricks on his way to his goal. It was very convenient for him to "send" people either to heaven or to hell after they had lived one life. Influenced by such strict measures, Justinian was convinced that men would become "virtuous Christians" and loyal and obedient subjects to his emperor. As a result of Justinian's efforts, the ban on the study of Origen's teachings officially came into force in accordance with the Pope's decision: "if anyone believes that the soul exists even before birth and that there is a rebirth after death, he, obviously, becomes obsessed with anaphema (cursing)."

Writer and historian Joe Fisher, on the basis of the above facts, makes the following logical conclusion: "in 553 AD., after Emperor Justinian categorically rejected the "absurd" view of rebirth, Christians began to lay reincarnation and believe in the doctrine of eternal life. Christians are taught that eternity begins at birth. However, eternity has neither a beginning nor an end."

According to historical records, the second Constantinople Cathedral took place on May 5, 553. The Cathedral was presided over by the patriarch of Constantinople. In addition, representatives of the church governments in western and Eastern Christendom were gathered in the Cathedral. The agenda was to decide by voice whether origenism (as the doctrine of reincarnation had been called)

was acceptable to Christians. But Emperor Justinian kept the voting process under his control. Historical documents testify that a language was attached to reduce the amount of representatives of the Western Church who supported Origen's views. Of the 165 bishops who signed the anti-origenism resolution, it is not clear that only 6 are representatives of the Western Church. Pope Vigilius, realizing that there is no true "play" in the cathedral, refuses to make the most recent judgment.

Theologians and historians of the Christian church state the results of the Constantinople Cathedral as follows: "The enemies of origenism persuaded Emperor Justinian to write a letter to the patriarch of Constantinople accusing Origen of shakiness. In 543, by Justinian's decree, a church assembly was convened in Constantinople to discuss the "errors" that Origen had allowed. This decree, which should end the disagreements between the West and the East, on the contrary, only aggravated the disagreement between them. Pope Vigilius refused the emperor's decree and went so far as to quarrel with the patriarch of Constantinople, who supported him. But, after a certain period of time the pope had confirmed an official document that the emperor would not interfere in theological matters, he changed his mind and made the decision to give the Forbidden doctrine to anathema in accordance with the imperial decree. This decision caused a mood of discontent among bishops in Gaul, North Africa, and several other provinces, and Vigilius reversed his decision in 550, meaning that the event was only 3 years before the last, decisive blow to the Origen doctrine by the ecclesiastical court."

Conclusion. Origen's exploration of reincarnation and the pre-existence of souls highlights a rich and complex chapter in early Christian theology. His integration of Platonic ideas into Christian doctrine, while ultimately controversial, underscores the diversity of thought in early Christianity. Understanding Origen's views provides a deeper appreciation for the theological debates that shaped early Christian doctrine and reflects the dynamic interplay between Christian and Hellenistic philosophies. Further research could explore the long-term impacts of Origen's thought on Christian mysticism and later theological developments.

Given that the anathema placed on Origen was exactly overruled by the pope himself, many Christian historians and theologians have argued that for centuries the true Christian Origen doctrine should not be rejected. Despite the official ban, many of the intellectual Christians agreed with Origen's views on reincarnation both before and after the Constantinople Cathedral. Many books were written about Justinian's deeds. In conclusion, it can be said that the second Constantinople Cathedral eliminated the Origen doctrine, as a result of which the Aristotelian tradition came to the fore in the western part of the Christian world. This in turn stimulated the development of materialistic doctrine in the world. In the end, science pushed religion to the second level.

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