

Appendix on Origen

Note: This appendix was part of a paper on “The Harmony Principle”, presented at a meeting “Samvad and Swaraj” at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, in April 2008, in memory of the late Indian philosophers Daya Krishna, and Ramu Gandhi. Due to reasons of space it could not be included in the final version of the paper. However, it is of independent interest, since it pertains to a fundamental issue about the transition from early Christianity to post-Nicene Christianity: viz. the change in Christian doctrine brought about by the shift from the earlier belief in quasi-cyclic time to the later belief in “linear time” in Christian theology.

Augustine’s criticism of Origen by misrepresentation, the suppression of Newton’s work, etc., are all discussed in detail in my book *The Eleven Pictures of Time*.

Appendix 1: Origen on cosmic recurrence and *karma-samskara*

This appendix gathers together quotations from the *De Principiis* of Origen to establish the point that (a) belief in quasi cyclic time and the related notion of *karma-samskara* (regarded as fundamental to Hinduism) was also a key aspect of early Christian doctrine, and (b) although these beliefs are seen as the basis of inequity in Hinduism, Origen used these beliefs as fundamental to his arguments in favour of justice and equity.

As a key Biblical scholar, and author of the *Hexapla* (six versions of the Bible put side by side for comparison), Origen naturally based his beliefs on the scriptures. (The current St James version of the Bible derives from the later-day *Vulgate* of Jerome, who based himself on Origen's notes, and initially praised him to the skies as “immortal genius”.)

It is well known that the Bible has not stayed constant: the earliest (Aramaic) versions of the Bible are to be found from India; these were so different from the currently accepted version that Bishop Menezes, of Goa, tricked the Syrian Christian Bishops at the infamous Synod of Diamper (Udayamperoor) in 1599 to burn most of the alternative versions as part of the “cleansing” process of the Inquisition. Specifically, present-day uniformity was enforced, and did not arise through debate. As the scientist Isaac Newton argued in his long-suppressed 7-volume church history, the very scriptures were modified to suit the theological opinion which suited the self-interest of the priest. The real dispute with Origen was over his advocacy of equity: if all people were equally saved, this was contrary to the priest's self-interest, for it eliminated the need for priests. (Hence the priests later cursed Origen, and the belief in quasi-cyclic time, and Augustine's theology, using apocalyptic time, was adopted by post-Nicene Christianity, and it is noticeable how that brought priests to centre stage.)

The quotations are from an easily accessible source: (New Advent Church Fathers, *De Principiis* (Origen) <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04122.htm>). Other sources can, of course, be used, but the numbering might be different. The first number here is the book (Book II), the second number is the chapter number, and the third the paragraph number.

Origen starts by defining the “world” to include everything

the world ... is composed not only of rational and diviner natures, and of a diversity of bodies, but of dumb animals, wild and tame beasts, of birds, and of all things which live in the waters; then, secondly, of places, i.e., of the heaven or heavens, and of the earth or water, as well as of the air, which is intermediate, and which they term aether [II.1.1]

Next he sets out to investigate whether the present world is unique

The next subject of inquiry is, whether there was any other world before the one which now exists; and if so, whether it was such as the present, or somewhat different, or inferior [II.3.1]

He explains that the world is called an "age" in the scriptures

But this world, which is itself called an age, is said to be the conclusion of many ages. [II.3.5]

He then claims that the scriptures speak of a series of ages.

Now that after this age, which is said to be formed for the consummation of other ages, there will be other ages again to follow, we have clearly learned from Paul himself, who says, "That in the ages to come..." [II.3.5.]

He regards this as proof that there is a sequence of worlds.

Origen now asks whether each world in this sequence of worlds is exactly like the preceding one, and rejects this possibility

And now I do not understand by what proofs they can maintain their position, who assert that worlds sometimes come into existence which are not dissimilar [i.e., are similar] to each other, but [are] in all respects equal. For if there is said to be a world similar in all respects (to the present), then it will come to pass that Adam and Eve will do the same things which they did before: there will be a second time the same deluge, and the same Moses will again lead a nation numbering nearly six hundred thousand out of Egypt; Judas will also a second time betray the Lord... [II.3.4]

He rejects this possibility on the grounds that it goes against the freedom of the will

and everything which has been done in this life will be said to be repeated,--a state of things which I think cannot be established by any reasoning, if souls are actuated by freedom of will, and maintain either their advance or retrogression according to the power of their will. [II.3.4]

He, however, accepts the possibility of a sequence of worlds where things either progress or regress

So therefore it seems to me impossible for a world to be restored for the second time, with the same order and with the same amount of births, and deaths, and actions; but that a diversity of worlds may exist with changes of no unimportant kind, so that the state of

another world may be for some unmistakeable reasons better (than this), and for others worse, and for others again intermediate. But what may be the number or measure of this [i.e., how many worlds there are altogether, or how long this sequence of world goes on] I confess myself ignorant, although, if any one can tell it, I would gladly learn. [II.3.4]

This belief in a sequence of worlds is not incidental, but is closely connected with Origen's theological understanding of God which may be expressed succinctly as follows. (Equity) God created all people equal. (Justice) However, in succeeding worlds he rewards and punishes them in accordance with their merit or demerit. (Punishment for education) God punishes souls only because there is the prospect of improvement in the next life.

Origen lists the objections raised by the (pagan) philosophers of his Alexandrian school: inequity is irrational and an argument against creation:

briefly, if the Creator God wants neither the will to undertake nor the power to complete a good and perfect work, what reason can there be that, in the creation of rational natures, i.e., of beings of whose existence He Himself is the cause, He should make some of higher rank, and others of second, or third, or of many lower and inferior degrees? [II.9.5]

The other objection is that if the inequity of circumstances by birth is an accident (since it cannot be attributed to free will), then there is no reason to believe in God.

In the next place, they object to us...that a happier lot by birth is the case with some rather than with others;...Their argument accordingly is this: If there be this great diversity of circumstances, and this diverse and varying condition by birth, in which the faculty of free-will has no scope (for no one chooses for himself either where, or with whom, or in what condition he is born); if, then, this is not caused by the difference in the nature of souls, i.e., that a soul of an evil nature is destined for a wicked nation, and a good soul for a righteous nation, what other conclusion remains than that these things must be supposed to be regulated by accident and chance? And if that be admitted, then it will be no longer believed that the world was made by God [II.9.5]

Origen answers these objections by stating that all people were created equal.

When He in the beginning created those beings...He created all whom He made equal and alike, because there was in Himself no reason for producing variety and diversity. [II.9.6]

However, on account of their own free-will they did good and bad things, and were then reborn accordingly: that is good and bad *samskara* is a direct consequence of good or bad *karma*.

First, Origen supports this by an appeal to the scriptures.

the apostle says,... "If a man purge himself, he will be a vessel unto honour..." undoubtedly point[ing] out this, that he who shall purge himself when he is in this life, will be prepared for every good work in that which is to come [II.9.8]

Then Origen explains how this demonstrates that God is both equitable and just.

consequently every vessel, according to the measure of its purity or impurity, received a place, or region, or condition by birth, or an office to discharge, in this world...according to a most impartial retribution.... In which certainly every principle of equity is shown, while the inequality of circumstances preserves the justice of a retribution according to merit.

[II.9.8]

This is closely connected to Origen's understanding of the problem of evil and understanding of justice:

they think that no benefit is conferred on him who is visited with any suffering or calamity. Justice, on the other hand, they view as that quality which rewards every one according to his deserts....they think that it is just to send evils upon the wicked and benefits upon the good; i.e., so that, according to their view, the just God does not appear to wish well to the bad, but to be animated by a kind of hatred against them. And they gather together instances of this [II.5.1]

He is quite explicit that punishment is conferred by God only because of the prospect of improvement in future worlds, because God hates evil, and not those who perpetrate it.

God who rewards every one according to his merits, does, through hatred of evil, recompense the wicked with evil, and not because those who have sinned need to be treated with severer remedies, ...[but] because He applies to them those measures which, with the prospect of improvement, seem nevertheless, for the present, to produce a feeling of pain. [II.5.3]

Finally, a point of historical interest. Origen specifically addresses the criticism that in such a series of world orders, Christ would be repeatedly crucified, so that his suffering and crucifixion would serve no purpose.

Now the holy apostle teaches that in that age which preceded this, Christ did not suffer, nor even in the age which preceded that again; and I know not that I am able to enumerate the number of anterior ages in which He did not suffer. I will show, however, from what statements of Paul I have arrived at this understanding.[II.3.5]

It seems clear from Augustine's criticism of Origen that Augustine had noted the two points (about free will and Christ's suffering) mentioned by Origen himself, and also noted how they could be cynically used to up the emotional stakes and thereby counter Origen through misrepresentation.