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The Case of the Platonism of Origen of Alexandria in Early Modern Dutch-Arminian Theology.¹

Andrea Bianchi

After Walther Glawe's *Die Hellenisierung des Christentums* (1912),² only relatively little research has been carried out on the topic of the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian thought. In parallel, this last century has witnessed a revival of research on patristic thought. This paper is an attempt to recover and deepen elements of Glawe's research and to contribute to the ongoing exploration of early Christianity and its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, with a specific focus on the reception of patristic thought in early modern reformed thought, and in particular in Jean Le Clerc (1657-1736). Le Clerc was a highly controversial figure in his time. Part of the Arminian church, he united technical philological works with other ones tailored to a wider audience, the *Bibliothèques*. Through their vast circulation in Europe, Le Clerc became highly influential in the shaping of the early modern European mind, although research on him has been scarce so far.³ Among early Church writers (if not among the Church Fathers),⁴ I will focus on Origen of Alexandria (c.184-c.253) who, even though his thought has been condemned by the Church in multiple occasions, has been often considered a primary figure within the debate of the Hellenization of Christianity.

My goal in this paper is to better place the Platonism of Origen as in Le Clerc. After a first overview on related early modern debates, I will focus on Le Clerc and provide a recollection of what he considered

¹ This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 676258.

² Glawe (1912).

³ For an introduction to Le Clerc's biography as well as his thought see the still invaluable: Barnes (1938).

⁴ In this article, I will often discuss Origen's thought within the wider Patristic context. Even though his status as a Church Father is disputed, at least Le Clerc and many other writers of his time referred to Origen as one of the Fathers.

Origen's "Platonisms". I will also highlight what role the Arminian considered for the Platonism of Origen in the Hellenization of Christianity. As a final step, I will review further elements related to Origen's Platonism. I will claim that Origen's Platonism was surely considered negatively as a source of errors and "doctrinal pollution" by Le Clerc, but also that both there was a positive side to Platonism and, more importantly, that in Origen's case a de-Platonized Origen could still serve well the Christian cause. This insight will contribute to current research on the use of the early church in early modern and modern theological philosophical debates and thus further explore argumentative practices of the last centuries.

Debates on early Christian Platonism

Early modern reflections on the influence of Platonic philosophy on the self-understanding of Christianity came from a variety of voices. Before we analyze Le Clerc's thought, it seems crucial to offer a few insights on the wider context with which he had been in contact. Emblematic for the time was, for instance, a treaty by Jacques Souverain (164.?-1699?), *Le platonisme dévoilé*, published in 1700 with the help of Le Clerc.⁵ In this work, Souverain contended with particular force the anti-Trinitarian thesis that the doctrine of Trinity originated from Platonism and was ultimately the result of a speculative process by the Church Fathers, something that could be seen at work also in the Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614-1687) and in the Cartesian Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715).⁶ Part of this Platonic heritage was, according to him, also the notion of the pre-existence of the soul that Church Fathers had used to explain the resurrection.⁷

Pointing to an old understanding of Platonism (already present in some of the Fathers, like Clement and Eusebius),⁸ Souverain had also clearly distinguished between two forms of Platonism: a more "popular" Platonism (*grossier*) and a more "subtle" (*delié*) one, stating that only the former was responsible for the detrimental effects of

⁵ Souverain (1700).

⁶ Ibid. 75.

⁷ Ibid. 2-24; Schmidt-Biggemann (2001) 297, 300.

⁸ Le Boulluec points out that the early modern understanding of Platonism was also already based on a construction, a "doxography" made by the Early Church, which had done so with an apologetic goal: Le Boulluec (1993) 417.

paganism onto Christianity. Whereas a more subtle Platonism considered the three Platonic principles (or three virtues of God, goodness, wisdom, and power, in this case) only allegorically as three gods, popular Platonism had made these into hypostases and thus personified them.⁹ These references were clearly made with a Socinian spirit within the context of the heated debate on the solidity of the doctrine of Trinity that we will briefly review below and that I will describe in more detail in the next section. What is sure is that these thoughts have had a wide resonance within the history of the debate on the connection between Platonism and the Trinitarian doctrine.¹⁰ Although Souverain was not the first to discuss the topic of the Hellenization of Christianity in his time, as, surprisingly, some scholars have claimed,¹¹ his contribution to the debate has surely been of primary importance. His work was critically used by Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693-1755)¹² and later (1782) translated into German by Josias Friedrich Christian Löffler (1752-1816), who helped spread Souverain's ideas in Germany.¹³

The debate on the Hellenization of Christianity, as we said, did not start with Souverain, or Le Clerc. Such a discussion was present already in the 16th century with Erasmus, whom Le Clerc admired and whose work he had edited between 1703-1706, as a parallel debate on the essence of Christianity, although the scope of Erasmus' critique was fairly limited in nature.¹⁴ Fausto Sozzini (1539-1604) had interpreted the prologue of the Gospel of John in an anti-Platonic and anti-Trinitarian key. John's intention, according to Sozzini, but this was also later in Le Clerc,¹⁵ had been to carefully choose words so as to avoid any support to a form of Platonic Trinity. The Evangelist had wanted to clarify that "the Word", the *logos*, could not be considered

⁹ Souverain (1700) 60-67, 119; Le Boulluec (1993) 427.

¹⁰ Gerlitz's introduction to the history of the development of the Christian dogma of the Trinity starts with Michel Servet (1511-1553) and Souverain before engaging Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Gerlitz (1963) 3.

¹¹ Rohls (1997) 127.

¹² Meijering (1975) 367-83.

¹³ Rohls (1997) 214. See also Glawe (1912) 115-32, 150-76.

¹⁴ Betz (1990) 263; Glawe (1912) 16-20.

¹⁵ Le Clerc (1695).

"God". In this way, John intended to clear the way to any possible misunderstanding by anyone with a Platonic outlook.¹⁶

The work of Jean Daillé (1594–1670), *De Usu Patrum*, had been published in French in 1632¹⁷ and reworked and translated into Latin in 1656¹⁸ (this latter version was the one who became the most known). This book, which Le Clerc mentioned in multiple occasions, criticized the Fathers for their having mixed (Platonic) philosophy and theology, for their lack of doctrinal unity and for having proposed unacceptable doctrines. Daillé's conclusion was that the Fathers' authority had to be fully reconsidered and that their arguments could not be used in confessional debates.¹⁹ It was, however, Denis Pétau (1583-1652) in his *De theologicis dogmatibus* who first clearly showed that the ante-Nicaean Church could be interpreted as essentially heterodox on the Trinity because of its Platonism. Pétau found in Platonism and later in ante-Nicaean Fathers (and he included Origen among them) an early form of the Christian Trinity. The subordinationist character (God the Son was a "lesser God" compared to the Father) of the pre-Nicaean Trinity had led, according to him, to later Arianism and had, therefore, to be rejected.²⁰ Still, he believed in the historical development of revelation, so that such an analysis of the early Church did not compromise for him (a Catholic) the significance of tradition.²¹ This was not so for the Protestant Le Clerc, who made use of Pétau's historical analysis as support for his own arguments.

Many other learned scholars entered the debate on the Platonism of the Fathers but the discussion was also mostly centered on the Trinitarian debate. Still, one last indication should be made of the contribution of Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688). Le Clerc had written and made active use of Cudworth's notion of the Platonic Trinity.²² Cudworth had contended that the Platonic and the orthodox Christian conception of the Trinity in his time *were* mainly in accord with each

¹⁶ Le Boulluec (1993) 415.

¹⁷ Daillé (1632).

¹⁸ Daillé (1656).

¹⁹ Daillé (1656) "Totius operis synopsis" [1-4]; Schmidt-Biggemann (2001) 278; Le Boulluec (1993) 423.

²⁰ Pétau (1644) bk.1 10-23.

²¹ Pétau (1644) praefatio [29-31].

²² Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol.3 89-106.

other.²³ For him, the concept of the Trinitarian "consubstantiality" employed by the Fathers that was later set by Nicaea referred to a unity of species, not of substance, of three distinct hypostases.²⁴ This implied that the three persons of the Trinity were divine and united in one God, like the branches, the stem, and the roots form a single plant.²⁵ Differentiated only internally, externally the Trinity appeared as one.

This short exposition of some of the trends within the debate on the Hellenization of Christianity highlighted different perspectives and problems that played an important role in Le Clerc's thought. We will now focus specifically on Le Clerc and his own version of the "Platonisms" of the early Church and of Origen more in particular. We will find again some of the topics sketched in this last section but also progressively discover a peculiar side of Le Clerc.

A disciple of Plato

The presence of references to Origen within Le Clerc's works is relatively significant and attests of a good knowledge by Le Clerc of some of Origen's most important works as well as scholarship on him.²⁶ His reception of Origen was diversified,²⁷ but it is beyond doubt that Le Clerc saw Origen as (heavily) influenced by Platonism. In the preface of his first published work, *Liberii de sancto amore Epistolæ theologicæ* (1679), he vehemently attacked ancient Christian authors for having distorted the original meaning of the Gospel. He brought forth Origen as a bad role model in this, as one who had corrupted the genuine message of Christ with Platonic ideas: "*Exemplo sit ORIGENES qui, quamvis Hebraicè sciret, Platonis sui dogmatibus ita Religionem Christianam inquinavit, ut vix ullum ejus*

²³ Cudworth (1678) 620-21.

²⁴ Cudworth (1678) 608.

²⁵ Cudworth (1678) 619.

²⁶ He had read and quoted extensively Origen's *Philocalia* and *Contra Celsum* from Spencer's edition (1658), was aware of Montfaucon's edition (1713) of the fragments of the *Hexapla*, and had reviewed the 1686 Oxford edition of the *De Oratione* in Le Clerc (1686-1693) vol.1 303-09. Le Clerc quoted often Huet's *Origeniana* and was knowledgeable, at least nominally, of the most important scholarship on Origen.

²⁷ A good introductory article on this point is Sina (1996).

caput reliquerit, quod inde petitis allegoriis non obscuraverit".²⁸ Years later, in his seminal *Ars Critica*, the statement was even stronger: to be able to understand Origen and many Greek Fathers, a previous knowledge of Plato was necessary.²⁹

It is far less straightforward to capture the full breadth of what Le Clerc understood as "Origen's Platonisms" because we find them scattered around his large scholarly production. To start with the concept of "pre-existence", this was surely for him one of the most evident traits of Origen's Platonism.³⁰ The main concept in Origen was that all souls had existed in another dimension before the creation of the world and that only after the sin of Adam they "descended" to physical bodies. This was one of the ways, for Origen, to substantiate his claims of theodicy, in that the actual this-worldly differences among human beings were explained by referring to the sins or merits earned in a time that preceded the earthly birth.³¹ For Le Clerc such an idea was part of Origen's *réveries Platoniciennes*,³² something he dismissed as being without fundament.³³ The concept clashed with Le

²⁸ Le Clerc (1679) præfatio [11-2].

²⁹ Le Clerc (1712a) vol.1, præfatio 5. See also an article in Le Clerc (1703-1713) where Le Clerc found support on this point by reporting that the author he was reviewing had also contended that pagan theology was a must-know to understand the Fathers, because they took it for granted. Id. vol.27 424-25.

³⁰ Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol.7 351 and vol.9 148; id. (1714-1727) vol.22 152-53.

³¹ Martens (2015) 609–13; Crouzel (1985) 205.

³² Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol.7 351.

³³ This dismissal has to be put into context. Le Clerc adopted mostly a Cartesian-rationalist approach to theology that, with the aid of Scripture, aimed to consider "secured knowledge" only those concepts that were clearly and evidently proven either rationally or scripturally. This did not mean that he dismissed speculations, but that the latter could not be as certain as clear and evident knowledge. However, in this specific case, his clear opposition to the idea of pre-existence was, to my understanding, probably less a result of the Platonic heritage of the concept and more an attempt to ward off the possible consequences derived from it. To accept that souls pre-existed and that their embodiment was a consequence of sin would have most possibly meant supporting the Augustinian-Calvinist doctrine of the original depravity of man. From his Arminian standpoint, that was more optimistic on that, such a doctrine was untenable, even if its implicit anti-determinism (own merits or demerits gained during the pre-existent status were responsible for the human condition, not a divine decree) could have been instrumental to their cause. There might be at play here also a concern on the question of the pre-existence of Christ, denied by Socinianism, to which Le Clerc is said to be at time theologically close. The doctrine of pre-existence would have

Clerc's own Arminian theological beliefs and was not given particular relevance by him in theological discussions.

A much more thorny and complex topic related to Origen's Platonism and the doctrine of the Trinity. Here Platonism had strongly influenced Origen and Christian antiquity more in general.³⁴ The Trinity, as we have seen, was very much debated in learned circles in Le Clerc's time and was of particular sensitive nature. Acknowledging the influence of Platonism in the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity would have meant that doubt could be cast on its doctrinal soundness. This was likely to attract strong accuses of heterodoxy, in particular of being a Socinian. Yet, in a review of Eusebius' *Preparatio Evangelica*, Le Clerc highlighted what he considered parallel beliefs shared both by Platonists and by Church Fathers (among which he mentioned Origen³⁵). For Le Clerc, the Fathers had adopted the Neo-Platonic three principles of Beings, Reason and the World Soul to conceive of the doctrine of the Trinity, translating them into God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They had also changed the content of those principles at will: the early Christians believed in the coeternity of the first and the second principle (which they understood as God the Father and God the Son) but Plato (or rather Neo-Platonism) had not admitted it. They also professed monotheism, whereas Plato (or rather Neo-Platonism) conceived of three principles.³⁶

given support to the adherents of the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ. In general, Le Clerc would find Origen's conception of free will and responsibility close to his own Arminian theology, but this specific point, the pre-existence of the soul, had to be rejected nonetheless because of his own Cartesian background.

³⁴ This mixture of Christian and Platonic thought, even though Le Clerc also believed that Plato's three principles were originally from Parmenides, (and were later adopted by Philo from Plato), had entered Christianity *propter rei difficultatem, & ambiguitatem vocum*. Le Clerc (1712a) pt.2, sec.1, chap.15, 307–09.

³⁵ Id. (1686-1693) vol.10 379-497. Reference to Origen was made at p. 491.

³⁶ Id. (1712a) pt.2, sec.1, chap.15, 308–09. On coeternity, Le Clerc had differed in an earlier writing, stating that the Fathers did not have an agreed upon belief on this point: "Tantôt ils disent qu'il y a eu un temps, auquel le Fils n'étoit pas, tantôt qu'il est éternel aussi bien que le Père". Id. (1686-1693) vol.10 410. In the *Ars Critica*, apart from the statement we have just seen and that seems to express that for Le Clerc Fathers agreed on coeternity, his analysis was more precise and he showed that even this point was problematic, because *αἰδιος*, *aidios*, (eternal), could point to something with no beginning or which existed before time (before the creation of the world). If God the Son was eternal in one or the other sense

The influence of Platonism on the doctrine of the Trinity was also evident in the definition of the relationship between God the Father and the God the Son, specifically on the equality or difference of their status as divinity:

Pour les Peres, que l'on regarde comme Orthodoxes, ils ne se sont pas éloignés des expressions des Platoniciens; & comme ceux-ci on [sic] tantôt dit que la Raison est différente de L'Etre suprême, & tantôt qu'ils ne sont qu'un: les Peres ont parlé dans les mêmes termes. [...] Quelquefois ils soutiennent qu'ils sont égaux; & ailleurs ils disent que le Pere est plus grand. Les uns croient que le Pere & le Fils sont *deux hypostases, deux natures, deux essences* [...] d'autres le nient.³⁷

Le Clerc's claim was thus that the Fathers had appropriated Platonic concepts without finding a unitary agreement.³⁸ Years later, in the *Ars Critica*, Le Clerc proposed a more mature analysis of different debated points on the doctrine of the Trinity in a way which followed closely Cudworth's argumentation as seen in an earlier section - although with a different goal in mind.³⁹ This time Le Clerc not only pointed to the doctrinal discrepancies among the Fathers and the Platonic influence they had received but also claimed that they were so immersed in Platonism that to understand their real teaching we must think in Platonic terms. The nearly polytheistic conception of the Trinity that Le Clerc accused the Fathers of holding, was for him primarily explained by the influence of common practice in ancient philosophy, but especially of Plotinus' Neo-Platonic language. Following the latter,

was debated among the Fathers, with Tertullian and many ante-Nicene who believed that the Son had been generated just before the world was created, but who still call the Son ὁμόδιον. Le Clerc (1712a) pt.2, sec.1, chap.15, 311–12.

³⁷ Id. (1686-1693) vol.10 409–10.

³⁸ By quoting the work of Denis Pétau, Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721) and George Bull (1634-1710) - whom Le Clerc quoted mostly only specifically on this point -, Le Clerc showed how Fathers could be interpreted as support for both Nicene or Arian beliefs. Le Clerc (1714-1727) vol.23 51.

³⁹ The context of such an analysis was the discussion of the *Regula XIV*, a hermeneutic rule that prescribed an awareness that although different philosophical or religious groups preserved the wordings of their doctrines over time, with time these often changed the meaning contained therein. Id. (1712a) pt.2, sec.1, chap.15, 303. "Diversas Sectas iisdem sæpe usas esse vocabulis, ad diversa prorsus dogmata exprimenda; & easdem, servatis iisdem vocabulis, lapsu temporis, sententiam mutasse".

a "hypostasis" (ὑπόστασις) was to be understood as an individual substance, and "ousia" (ουσία) as a common property. To say that God is "one ousia in three hypostases", the official statement of the church at Nicea, meant thus that three distinct substances shared a common property:

Qui unam ουσίαν dicunt, τρεῖς τρόπους ὑπάρξεως, id ipsum hisce verbis expresserunt; ut enim Humanitas, quæ est separatim in Joanne, Petro & Paulo, est una; nec in Paulo differt ab eo quod est in Petro & Joanne, nisi τρώφῳ ὑπάρξεως: ita tres Naturæ divinæ numero diversæ, sed specie eadem differunt tantummodo *existendi*.⁴⁰

On this point, Le Clerc argued, Christians had long debated, because they interpreted "ousia" in different ways, predominantly either as an accident or as a substance. Over time, the original Greek meaning was lost and became more "substantialist":

Tandem inter Græcos quidem convenit, ut dicerent τρεῖς εἶναι ὑποστάσεις *tres esse modos existendi*, μίαν ουσίαν *unam essentia*; inter Latinos verò, *tres personas, unicum substantiam, seu essentiam*; quâ ratione loquendi etiamnum hodie utimur.⁴¹

This is not to say, however, that the Fathers had this latter meaning in mind, because the influence of the way Platonism used the concept of ousia as property, not as substance, was a lot stronger in their time, as we have seen from the above statement.⁴² Here Le Clerc not only

⁴⁰ Ibid. 313. In this occasion he also referred to his fellow Arminian friend Étienne de Courcelles (1586-1659), where he had similarly contended that the term "ousia" had meant for the Fathers a common substrate, like a common rationality, or a common nature, whereas "hypostasis" an individual determination. De Courcelles (1675) 852–53. Contrary to Le Clerc, Courcelles did not mention the Platonic derivation of such a concept.

⁴¹ Le Clerc (1712a) pt.2, sec.1, chap.15, 310.

⁴² One example relating to Origen on the distinction of substance between Father and Son is represented by the contention with Beryllus of Bostra (d. after 244). Le Clerc showed that Origen contended that Jesus had existed even before his birth on earth *discriminatam essentiam*, with his own divinity ("ἐμπολιτεομένην"), whereas Beryllus negated a pre-existent Jesus and thus his own divinity as well. Le Clerc connected this with Origen's *Clo*, especially Origen's statement of "two Gods", a God "with the article" (ὁ θεός) and one "without article" (θεός), the latter being the Son ("participation illius divinitatis Deum factum"), the former the Father ("eum qui est per se Deus") Ibid. pt.2, sec.1, chap.3, 153–55; chap.14, 294–95.

asserted that the Fathers had been terminologically Platonic, but also that later Christianity had misinterpreted the Fathers' Platonism.

A similar case happened also with another key term related to the doctrine of the Trinity. This was the concept of homoousios (ὁμοούσιος), same substance, which the council of Nicea had established as the official definition of the relationship among the persons of the Trinity. In this case, the early Church had used the concept, according to Le Clerc, in the same way as Platonism and ancient Greek philosophy more in general. Once again, this meant that the persons of the Trinity shared the same substance according to their species, but were numerically different.⁴³ The modern way of conceiving of the Trinity, stressing the numerical unity of the divinity, was an inappropriate seizure of a term which originally had had another meaning. In the end, this was Le Clerc's subtle critique: present time Christianity was convinced of a doctrine that was not the way Nicene Fathers intended it.⁴⁴ This was because, as we have seen, later theologians had ignored the Fathers' complete immersion in Platonism.

⁴³ Ibid. pt.2, sec.1, chap.15, 310, 312–13. Both the pre- and post-Nicene, according to the Le Clerc, believed that the Father and the Son were two numerically distinct substances, united by the fact that they pertained to the same species. Le Clerc mentioned that the Nicene creed, stating that the Father and the Son are homoousios, was not to be interpreted as contrary to what Arians believed (the homoiousios, ὁμοιούσιος, similar substance). Nicene and Arians agreed on their conception of consubstantiality, because in Platonic language homoousios meant an equality of species and not of substance - Le Clerc thus equalled the homoousios of Nicea with the homoiousios of Arians. According to him, the dispute between Nicene and Arians was only about the grade of divinity of the two divine essences, Father and Son, but, again, not on the conception of the consubstantiality. Ibid. 313–14. Id. (1712c) 28–9. In this occasion, he mentioned as support the work of Pétau, Courcelles and Cudworth.

⁴⁴ Id. (1712a) pt.2, sec.1, chap.15, 310–12. An even stronger critique on the doctrine of the Trinity is found in an earlier passage of the *Ars Critica*, where Le Clerc discussed the *Regula VIII* or "Voces esse, quibus nulla subjecta est potestas". Here Le Clerc discussed terms like fortune or chance and, among the examples, was also the doctrine of Trinity. Drawing from Augustine, he expressed the impossibility of talking about this doctrine into words. Although he did not expressly argue that the doctrine itself is a chimera, but that it is incommunicable, still the fact that he included it in such a chapter could be taken as a further proof of his Socinianism. Ibid. pt.2, sec.1, chap.9, 235–36. For the moment we can say that Le Clerc considered the trinity an obscure doctrine. On the one hand Church Fathers expressed themselves unclearly, but also the nature of the disputed doctrine itself was said to be *incomprehensible*. Id. (1686-1693) vol.10 411, 415.

How did Le Clerc's discussion of the Trinity compared to other contributions from his contemporaries? Pétau's analysis was kept in very high regard by Le Clerc and he edited Pétau's *De theologicis dogmatibus* (1700). As mentioned earlier, Le Clerc had followed Pétau in what concerned the heterodoxy of Fathers (Le Clerc had also quoted Daillé in other circumstances) but it seems also valid to say that the Arminian was more nuanced on the linguistic analysis. It was the similar terminology that ultimately contributed for Le Clerc to the appropriation of Platonisms in early Christian theology and doctrinal confusion in subsequent centuries.⁴⁵ This applied to early Christianity in general, but Origen was obviously one of the most obvious targets of that critique.

Apart from the concept of pre-existence and the doctrine of the Trinity, two more "Platonisms" that Le Clerc saw in Origen are worthy of mention: the first was about the eternal revolution of time.⁴⁶ This doctrine foresaw that all things would eternally and cyclically return to their initial state at a set time and was connected to one of the most known Origenian doctrines, such as the one of apocatastasis (ἀποκατάστασις). Apocatastasis was a very "optimistic" eschatological outlook rather than being a clear-cut system of arguments. In its most radical form, Origen believed that the whole of creation (including all human beings and even evil daemons) will be eventually saved and will return to God and that the original condition of being one in God will be restored.⁴⁷ According to Le Clerc, this doctrine was inherited by Clement of Alexandria, Origen's teacher, but

⁴⁵ Le Clerc (1712a) pt.2, sec.1, chap.15, 307-15; Le Boulluec (1993) 422-23.

⁴⁶ This concept of "les révolutions de tout", besides the doctrine of the pre-existence that we have seen above, was considered by Le Clerc in one occasion as typical of Origen's Platonic background. Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol. 7 351.

⁴⁷ Sachs (1993) 617-40. It is sometimes disputed that such a reading of Origen's work understands his thought in a way that is contrary to what Origen had intended. That is: it is claimed that Origen never expressly said that the Devil will be saved. Although this is true, Prinzivalli has claimed that scholarship mostly agrees that this interpretation is correct. The Alexandrian, who had claimed in *Prin* 3,6,5 that the "ultimate enemy" will be destroyed, not in its being, but in its evil will, and that this this enemy will eventually return to God, had intended the Devil. For a discussion of this point see: Prinzivalli (2000) 24-9. For the present analysis it is relevant to note that such interpretation, that the evil human beings and the Devil, notwithstanding their actions, will be ultimately saved, was commonplace in Le Clerc's time and was surely the main problem with accepting such a doctrine. See also: Walker (1964) 11-8.

Clement had taken it ultimately from Plato so that it could be justly considered another Platonic element in Origen.⁴⁸ A second and relatively minor facet of Origen's cosmological Platonism was the notion that the heavenly bodies have a soul and free will, a concept probably more famous in Aristotelianism, but that Le Clerc considered Platonic. According to Le Clerc, Origen believed in this as well.⁴⁹

The elements just shown represent the most relevant contours of the "Platonic Origen". They are common elements within the discussion of the Platonism of the Early Church and we have already encountered most of them in the initial panoramic section of this paper. Yet, we saw already a peculiarity in Le Clerc, his attention for the linguistic basis of the influence of Platonism. In the next section, a further peculiar side of Le Clerc will emerge in this debate. Before we move on, as a final remark, it is important to notice that Le Clerc had considered the influence of Platonism and of Greek philosophy and religion more in general on some other areas of Christianity as well. Because these other areas did not necessarily include a discussion of Origen's thought or of early Christianity more specifically, they are excluded from the present analysis.⁵⁰ We now turn to the way Le Clerc considered the more general influence of the Origenian "Platonisms" presented so far, and of Platonism more in general, on the self-understanding of Christianity.

The Hellenization of Christianity

Le Clerc recognized that the encounter of Christ's message with the pagan world could not have happened without some sort of philosophical mediation and it seemed for a number of reasons that Platonic concepts had been the most suitable to the encounter. Platonism proved as a good bridge between the revealed message and the pagan world. The value of Platonic philosophy for Le Clerc could be mainly considered in its character of a "*prisca theologia*", or of a sort of precursor of the Christian message that, after revelation, was perfected. This early form of theology had inadvertently contributed to

⁴⁸ Le Clerc (1712b) 14-5.

⁴⁹ Id. (1716) 584, 585 n25; Id. (1731) 539 n3.

⁵⁰ This has been observed by Walther Glawe in an in-depth analysis. Further influences of Greek thought in Christianity included for Le Clerc ascetic ideals, the large number of liturgical ceremonies and the *disciplina arcani*. Glawe (1912) 57-8.

the spread of revealed religion: "*des Philosophes, qui sans y penser ont beaucoup contribué à l'établissement de la Religion Chrétienne; soit en réfutant les opinions vulgaires, soit en disant bien des choses conformes au Christianisme*".⁵¹ Platonism had reinforced monotheism,⁵² had also favored an acceptance of the Christian Trinity,⁵³ strengthened the argument for the immateriality of God,⁵⁴ his goodness,⁵⁵ and firmly established the immateriality and provided the basis for the argument in favor of the immortality of the soul.⁵⁶

That some elements of Platonism contributed to an acceptance of Christian revelation among pagans was a belief in Le Clerc that did not exclude, however, a more poisonous and less visible side of this philosophy. Le Clerc rejected directly some single items of Platonism, like the existence of a multiplicity of inferior Gods, of evil demons⁵⁷ or the idea of the Platonic "highest good" (*souverain bien*) which for Le Clerc was unattainable, because it included also "exterior goods" (*biens extérieurs*).⁵⁸ These beliefs, according to him, were incompatible with revelation. In a similar manner, most of the Platonisms of Origen reviewed in the previous section were without Scriptural fundament and thus risked to corrupt the true essence of Christianity. An emblematic example we have already encountered was the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus, the problem behind the Platonism of Origen was a concern with the core of Christian teaching and so his refusal of Platonism in Christianity was more concerned with a fundamental approach than with single doctrines. The biggest

⁵¹ Le Clerc (1714-1727) vol.5 290-382; Id. (1716) 323-24.

⁵² Id. (1714-1727) vol.5 290-382; Id. (1716) 324. Here Le Clerc seems to contradict himself, as we saw from an earlier statement on Plato's three principles, where he had contended that Plato rejected monotheism.

⁵³ Id. (1716) 63. Platonism, one could say from the example of the previous section, had crafted such doctrine, so this was not surprising.

⁵⁴ Id. (1714-1727) vol.22 129-30. In this case, the reviewed book was the *Histoire de la philosophie payenne, ou sentimens des philosophes et des peuples payens les plus célèbres, sur Dieu, sur l'ame et sur les devoirs de l'Homme* (1724) by Jean Lévesque de Burigny.

⁵⁵ Le Clerc (1714-1727) vol.22 145-46.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 149.

⁵⁷ Id. (1716) 61.

⁵⁸ Id. (1714-1727) vol.5 327. So material wealth was destined for Le Clerc to be lost at the latest at the point of death and therefore the Christian idea of the good, which did not require "external goods", was superior.

reproach that he made to early Christian writers, especially Origen, in their use of Platonic philosophy, was that they had made obscure the original simplicity of the evangelical message and thus distorted the real meaning of revelation. A message, the one of Christ, that was intended for the illiterate, had been transformed into an obscure theology.⁵⁹ It was because Jesus had envisaged a simple message to be given to everyone without the intrusion of philosophy that he had passed on his teaching to illiterate apostles.⁶⁰

The negative side of this process of Hellenization, according to the Le Clerc, was most easily recognized in the many theological disputes of his own time. The early Christians, stemming originally from a pagan milieu, imported philosophical concepts into the Christian message and started reading the texts left by the apostles as if the apostles had been philosophers, in this way distorting the very essence of revelation:

Plerique è scholis Philosophorum exeuntes scripturam parum triverant, sed audacter, ut solet id hominum genus, omnia ex ingenio definiebant. Et cum in scriptura voces ad opiniones suas satis, ut videbatur, aptè exprimendas non inveniebant, statim ad Philosophos confugientes ex horum libris cum novis vocibus advehebant ideas quæ veteribus additæ paulatim eas corruerunt.⁶¹

The confusion of original and imported meaning as a result of terminological affinities caused a "war of words" that split Christianity and that became the origin of inter-confessional debates in his time.⁶² This fundamental accuse that Le Clerc moved to the early Church originated, according to him, in their scriptural ignorance, something they supplemented with the use of Platonic philosophy and allegory.⁶³ That philosophical concepts crept in so that most of revelation became "obscure" was further a result of the lack of critical discernment and hermeneutical skills in early Christian writers.⁶⁴ A total confusion on

⁵⁹ Id. (1712c) 27.

⁶⁰ Id. (1716) 639.

⁶¹ Le Clerc (1679) præfatio [8].

⁶² Ibid. [12]. Le Clerc also supported his claim in another writing by referring to Erasmus who, according to him, had argued that Platonism and Aristotelianism had been intermixed with the message of Christ and that this had sparked controversies in Christianity. Id. (1703-1713) vol.6 8.

⁶³ Id. (1679) præfatio [9].

⁶⁴ Id. (1716) 530–31.

the real message of Scripture was later exacerbated by the fact that also what the early Church had thought was misunderstood, resulting in further layers of "encrusting" of the original message.⁶⁵ Within this context, as we have seen in the previous section, Origen was considered as one of the principal culprits of the Hellenization of Christianity, even more so because of his influential role in the Eastern Church.⁶⁶ Not that Origen (or, for instance, the early Church) had wanted to fully establish a sort of "Christian Platonism", since the Alexandrine had rejected much from Plato, for example, the pagan superstition of the philosopher,⁶⁷ but for Le Clerc this effort had not been enough. Although Platonism provided a good basis to encounter the Greek-speaking pagan world and was philosophically useful at times, Origen had abused of this bridge, appropriating too much from Plato.⁶⁸

It seems coherent to say that Le Clerc's judgment of the early Church and so of Origen was harsher than both in Pétau and Daillé, reviewed in the first section.⁶⁹ Where Pétau had ultimately considered the thought of the early Christian writers as a step in the development of dogma, and Daillé had limited his critique to weakening their authority in confessional debates, Le Clerc's claim was a fundamental condemnation of their work, which for him had encrusted the real essence of the Christian message. Le Clerc's critique of the Platonism of the early Church was not fully original, but its peculiarity came, apart from the linguistic considerations of the previous section, from the radicalism with which it was expressed. Glawe also added that it was peculiar to Le Clerc's critique that he saw Platonism already at work during the Gospel time,⁷⁰ but this last point will be analyzed in future research. The next section of this paper will also discuss another side of the story, where some value to Platonism and to Origen's thought is finally recovered.

⁶⁵ Id. (1679) *præfatio* [14].

⁶⁶ Augustin was also a culprit, for Le Clerc, of the Platonism in Christianity, as well as other Church Fathers. Specifically on Augustine, see for example his letter to Pierre Allix of 6 April 1684. Sina and Sina Zaccone (1987) letter 43 159.

⁶⁷ Le Clerc (1716) 64.

⁶⁸ Id. (1703-1713) vol.13 209-10. Here Le Clerc also shared his belief that there was a large consensus that Origen was highly Platonised. See also: Id. (1686-1693) vol.1 50-1.

⁶⁹ This is also in agreement with the judgment of Le Boulluec (1993) 422–23.

⁷⁰ Glawe (1912) 59.

Saving Origen

According to the analysis we have conducted so far, Origen's Platonism must surely be understood as a stain, in the sense of its contribution to the obfuscation of the original message of Christianity. Mainly Origen, but also other early Christian authors, as we have seen, were culpable of having brought upon the Church such a confusion of truth and falsity that large parts of the message itself have been misinterpreted. Over the centuries, the ideas which spread from the Alexandrine and others have brought the Christian Church in the state of inter-confessional disputes in which it was in Le Clerc's time. Yet this is only part of the story. We have also briefly seen that for Le Clerc significant portions of Platonism and of philosophical arguments more in general have contributed to the establishment and the acceptance of Christian religion, have allowed it, so to say, to "incarnate" in history. Philosophy, in particular Platonic philosophy, was not necessarily considered negatively overall. Surely the points, drawn from Platonism, in which Origen stirred or just contributed to the doctrinal confusion of the centuries to come cannot be neglected. Origen's Platonism was a mark that could not be washed away, but the adherence to this philosophical school was not an unforgivable sin, because Le Clerc, as we have said, was also aware of the reasons that could lay behind the favor that such an approach had had.

This recovery by Le Clerc of the positive value of Platonism for Christianity and the rejection by Origen of parts of Platonism, as we saw in the previous section, were not the only way to rehabilitate Origen's thought. More subtle and nuanced was Le Clerc's attempt to re-establish Origen's thought by "de-Platonizing" it. Save for those doctrines that were clearly Platonic and that we have presented in the first section, such as the pre-existence of the souls, Origen could be considered as mainly an orthodox Christian writer:

ceux qui ont bien examiné les sentimens d'*Origene*, ont reconu qu'à quelques rêveries Platoniciennes près, que l'on peut retrancher de son systeme, sans y faire aucune brèche; comme la préexistence des ames, les révolutions de tout en certains periodes reglez, & autres choses semblables; le reste a été généralement reçu & estimé de tout l'Orient; [...] d'ailleurs *Origene* a toujours passé pour un membre de l'Eglise Chrétienne, dans laquelle il est mort; après avoir été dans le nombre des Confesseurs, du tems de la persecution de Decius, & témoigné

beaucoup de constance & de disposition à souffrir le Martyre. Bien des gens l'ont défendu autrefois, & même dans ces derniers tems; on les pourra consulter, si l'on veut.⁷¹

This long quote shows that not only Le Clerc believed that Origen's theology could stand on its own without its Platonist ideas, thus re-establishing part of it, but also that Origen was generally considered as having been a member of the church, not a heretic.⁷² His suffering in prison during the persecution of Decius was proof of his genuine faith.

Le Clerc's effort of de-Platonisation was connected to a famous dispute between Le Clerc and Pierre Bayle (1647-1706). The controversy debated the rationality of religion and discussed mostly on theodicy. Le Clerc had put forward a defense of God's goodness and justice by explicitly using some of Origen's ideas⁷³ and later, as in the previous quote, contended that Origen's theodicy, "purified" of its Platonisms, would still stand the ground.⁷⁴ The Arminian had later developed this position further and argued that one could provide a still better basis for theodicy than the one of Origen: "*parce qu'Origene assure ce qu'il ne sait point comme s'il le savoit, & qu'il mêle à la doctrine Evangelique mille pensées de Platon, qui, pour n'en rien dire de pire, sont sans fondement*".⁷⁵ The solution he proposed was to take for granted that God would not do anything that goes against his goodness and justice.⁷⁶ In response, Bayle had objected that Origen's Platonic ideas did not weaken the position of the Alexandrine on theodicy so that a de-Platonized Origen was no stronger opponent to his objections than a "normal" Origen.⁷⁷ We may agree with Bayle's answer, because Le Clerc Origenist defense in *Parrhasiana* (1699) was

⁷¹ Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol.7 351.

⁷² Id. (1699) 313.

⁷³ Ibid. 301-14.

⁷⁴ Id. (1703-1713) vol.7 351.

⁷⁵ Ibid. vol.9 148.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 148-49.

⁷⁷ Bayle (1707) 26-7. Bayle discussed Origen's Platonism as a response to the just mentioned passage in Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol.9 148, that he explicitly quoted. However, his argument seems to be directed to Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol.7 351, or where Le Clerc distinguished between Platonic arguments (for example pre-existence) and commonly accepted doctrines (like that evil is caused by the freedom of human beings), because in Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol.9 Le Clerc attempted to move beyond Origen's ideas. The latter position, I believe, could not be anymore considered a form of "purified Origenism".

mainly centered around the notion of human freedom, and such a notion was *not* dependent on Origen's Platonism. However, I would also agree with Le Clerc that a "de-Platonizing" action would work to strengthen Origen's theodicy, but only if it was not a matter of correcting single ideas but the approach. Origen should have stayed at what he knew for sure without "philosophizing" (and here comes the Platonism). In any case, Origen's thought was, in the end, regarded as very valuable, even though Platonism was an imperfection.

A last passage might show even more clearly the positive attitude he had towards Origen's thought, despite the Platonic influence:

S'il y avoit des rêveries Platoniciennes, en divers endroits de ses Ouvrages [the works of Origen], comme on ne peut pas en douter; il y avoit aussi des endroits si excellens & si bien tournez, qu'on ne pouvoit pas empêcher de les lire, sans faire tort aux Chrétiens. Mais la violence des Egyptiens, pressez par leur Patriarche, ne souffroit aucune moderation.⁷⁸

In this last passage, Origen's thought was thus fully rehabilitated, even if caution was needed on some parts of it which had been influenced by Platonism. Even more clearly in this last example, but also in conjunction with all of the other aspects reviewed in this section, it appears evident that Le Clerc attempted to "save" some form of Origenian thought and re-establish the trustworthiness of the Alexandrine, with the obvious caution needed with his Platonic background. A clear answer as to the reasons behind Le Clerc's interest in "saving" Origen would require further analysis, but it appears in the controversy with Bayle, for example, that Origen was fundamental as the fountainhead of (apologetic) rational arguments.

Conclusion

Origen's thought can be appreciated and read with benefits, can be useful in rational debates, although caution is needed to avoid those parts of his thought which have been influenced by Platonism. This could be, in a few words, the conclusion we can reach from the previous sections on Le Clerc's appraisal of Origen's theology and philosophy. Although for the Arminian the doctrine of the Trinity or of the pre-existence of the soul, for example, were clear signs of a partially unchecked Platonic influence in Origen, a conception shared

⁷⁸ Le Clerc (1703-1713) vol.8 283.

by others in Le Clerc's century, the process of Hellenization of Christianity had had its historical meaning and significance. Platonism had been almost as a needed scaffolding to which Christianity, however, was still clinging and which meant a loss of part of its essence. In any case, Platonism did not exhaust Origen's doctrine, so that the thought of the Alexandrian could be separated from Platonic elements and be very valuable in theological and philosophical debates.

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