

**Theophilus of Alexandria and the First Origenist
Controversy: Rhetoric and Power**

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*For Esther and for our children
Liliana, Anastasia and Symeon*

&

*To the bright memory of my father
Krassimir Banev (1941 – 1996)*

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

In the age of the Theodosian dynasty and the establishment of Christianity as the only legitimate religion of the Roman Empire, few figures are more pivotal in the power politics of the Christian church than archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria (385-412). The present monograph pioneers a contextualized literary-historical approach in offering new insights into the life and reputation of this remarkable figure. It examines the *Festal Letters* of Theophilus and identifies the importance of classical rhetorical theory as a methodological tool for the interpretation of relevant historical data. The discussion is focused on the so-called First Origenist Controversy, the condemnation of Origen in AD 400 in Alexandria, and the punishment and expulsion of his monastic followers from the Egyptian desert.¹ The long historical record which fills the time separating scholars today from these past events is populated by friends and enemies of Origen's who have bequeathed to posterity numerous, radically different accounts seeking either to defend or to condemn him.² As is well known, the historian Eusebius had remembered him as an exemplary Christian who had died as a result of the 'dreadful cruelties he endured for the word of Christ' during the Decian persecution (c. 251).³ In the early fifth century, however, this positive appraisal was reversed and Origen received a formal condemnation for heresy at a pan-Egyptian council presided by the archbishop Theophilus. Far from being the 'orthodox

¹ 'First' to distinguish it from the 'Second' when Origen was again discussed, and condemned, at the highest level in the sixth century. E. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: the Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, N.J., 1992). D. Hombergen, *The Second Origenist Controversy. A New Perspective on Cyril of Scythopolis' Monastic Biographies as Historical Sources for Sixth-Century Origenism* (Rome, 2001).

² Summarised in M. Fédou, *La sagesse et le monde. Essai sur la christologie d'Origène* (Paris, 1995), 373–414.

³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 6, citing chapter 39 on Origen's death. ET in G.A. Williamson (London, 1989).

and believing Christian' carefully reconstructed by modern scholars,⁴ Origen was condemned here in exactly the opposite light, as the teacher of every theological error or, in the words of Theophilus, as the 'hydra of all heresies'.⁵

In terms of historical accuracy, Origen's condemnation presents a problem of the first magnitude as virtually all modern scholars have now reached an agreement that he cannot be considered guilty of the charges raised against him after his death.⁶ As an illustration of the intensity of this conviction on the part of modern defenders of Origen's innocence, we may quote the forceful conclusion of Michel Fédou: 'He had never presented Christ as a simple *intellect* He had never accepted that Christ should be considered as a creature among other creatures.... He had never preached the slightest separation between Christ and the Word'.⁷ This passionate defence is said with regard to the sixth-century accusations but Fédou's verdict on the earlier accusations by Theophilus is identical, although less vigorously expressed: in their majority, the charges are entirely 'foreign' to the inner coherence of Origen's thought.⁸ When trying to explain the root cause of the various accusations, Fédou attributed it to the 'forgetfulness' on the part of his accusers; they no longer knew how to read Origen's works as the exercises of

⁴ J. Quasten, *Patrology*, 3 vols (Utrecht, 1962), vol. 2, 40: 'It was Origen's destiny to be a sign of contradiction during his lifetime as well as after his death. There is hardly anyone who made so many friends or so many enemies. True, he committed errors, but no one can doubt but that he always wanted to be an orthodox and believing Christian'.

⁵ Theophilus, *Festal Letter* of AD 402: 'Sciant igitur se huius sollemnitatis alienos non posse celebrare nobiscum dominicam passionem, qui Origenem – ut loquar aliquid de fabulis poetarum – hydram omnium sequuntur haereseon et erroris se habere magistrum et principem gloriantur', preserved in Jerome's Latin translation as *Ep.* 98:9; in I. Hilberg (ed.), *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, CSEL 55/2 (1912), 193. ET in Russell, *Theophilus*, 124.

⁶ For a recapitulation of this development, see H. Crouzel, 'Les condamnations subies par Origène et sa doctrine', in U. Kühneweg (ed.), *Origeniana septima* (Leuven, 1999), 311–315.

⁷ Fédou, *La sagesse et le monde*, 391: 'Jamais celui-ci [i.e. Origen] n'avait présenté le Christ comme un simple *intellect*.... Jamais il n'avait admis que le Christ fût considéré comme une créature parmi d'autres.... Jamais il n'avait établi la moindre séparation entre le Christ et le Verbe'.

⁸ Fédou, *La sagesse et le monde*, 383: 'étrangères à sa pensée profonde'.

a 'researcher' engaging in new ways with new questions.⁹ The claim here, in other words, is that later generations, that of Theophilus included, had failed to understand both Origen's quest and his answers as belonging exclusively to discussions in his own third century, when there were still large sections on the theological map awaiting their first cartographer. Thus, Origen had suffered at the hands of people engaged in a deplorably anachronistic reading of his works. It is this lack of historical awareness that caused the condemnation of Origen's theological explorations as incompatible with the later codification of imperial Orthodoxy. Yet, if it were possible to imagine a Theophilus forgetting what Origen had actually said, it does not follow that those who accepted the patriarch's judgement had also forgotten the true words of the great teacher. Or simply put, it is not methodologically sound to presume that a whole generation was suffering from amnesia. If the condemnation was an unjust one, why was it accepted? When we consider, in other words, how Theophilus put the blame squarely on Origen, what we will be asking is why and how *this* presentation was accepted by the fifth-century church.

This question has not been examined by scholars whose approaches have been too narrowly fixated on Theophilus' tainted reputation. Giuseppe Lazzati and Agostino Favale, for example, who authored the first scholarly biographies of Theophilus in the twentieth century, both dismissed his anti-Origenist efforts as political machinations on the part of an evil church leader.¹⁰ Their conclusions rehearse the old argument of one of Theophilus'

⁹ Ibid.: 'Sans doute avait-on pour une part oublié que, sur certaines questions encore débattues dans la première moitié du IIIe siècle, l'auteur du *Peri Archôn* n'avait pas prétendu apporter des conclusions définitives mais avait seulement voulu proposer des hypothèses de recherche'.

¹⁰ G. Lazzati, *Teofilo d' Alessandria* (Milano, 1935), 82: 'La lotta conclusa, possiamo dire che le armi di Teofilo ottennero ottimi risultati ed esse rimangono testimonianza sicura del carattere

fifth-century opponents, Palladius of Helenopolis, who called him ἀμφαλλάξ ('weather-cock').¹¹ This appellation, as Demetrios Katos has recently shown, was part of a carefully constructed forensic argument intended to slander the patriarch's character and portray his whole career as aimed solely at his own personal gain, both in terms of political ambition and monetary reward.¹² Palladius was ultimately very successful in shaping historical memory and his argument has travelled unchecked through the centuries. Theophilus has been described in similar terms in English scholarship beginning with Edward Gibbon who labelled him 'the perpetual enemy of peace and virtue, a bold, bad man, whose hands were alternately polluted with gold and with blood'.¹³ More recently, he has been portrayed as 'the artful and violent patriarch of Alexandria, a sorry figure of a bishop' (Johannes Quasten);¹⁴ as 'a man of huge ambition, eager to enforce his authority by whatever means he could' (Owen Chadwick).¹⁵ These remarks are echoed in Jerome's English biographer, John Kelly, who although recognising the patriarch's anti-Origenist letters as 'magnificently eloquent in their indictment of Origenism', still dismissed them because 'the theses selected were often absurdly

del nostro.... Ci voleva infatti una mente ricca di risorse quale è quella del nostro per far dire ad Origene simili enormità'. Two decades later, the patriarch's arguments were again rejected as simply 'interessate deduzione polemiche aliene alla mente di Origene'. A. Favale, *Teofilo d' Alessandria* (Torino, 1958), 183.

¹¹ Greek text in Palladius, *Dialogus de vita Joannis Chrysostomi* (Cambridge, 1928), 6. ET in R. T. Meyer, *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom* (New York, 1985), 41.

¹² On Palladius' hostile attitude towards Theophilus, see D. Katos, *Palladius of Hellenopolis* (Oxford, 2011). Id., 'Socratic Dialogue or Courtroom Debate? Judicial Rhetoric and Stasis Theory in the *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom*', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 61/1 (2007): 42–69. The accusation of simony with which Palladius crowns the argument in his *Dialogue* is discussed by S. Acerbi, 'Palladio contro Teofilo: una testimonianza sull' episcopato del tempo attraverso un' accusa di simonia', *Vescovi e pastori in epoca teodosiana* (Roma, 1997), vol. 2, 371–381.

¹³ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (2nd ed. 1776, repr. London, 1993), vol 1, 103.

¹⁴ J. Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht, 1959), vol. 3, 100–106.

¹⁵ O. Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1968), 34.

distorted'.¹⁶ For Elizabeth Clark, his campaign against Origenism was merely 'a foil for his political machinations'.¹⁷

Set it in the context of the emerging new alliance between the *imperium* of Rome and the *sacerdotium* of the Church – where bishops were called to exercise the immense powers conferred on the Church by the new imperial legislation of Theodosius I (379-395) – the charges of evil-natured leadership, mass amnesia and wilful miscarriage of justice raised against Theophilus and his generation acquire some particularly grim qualities. More than just a testimony of the evil character of a church leader, they seem to foretell the first dark steps of a totalitarian shadow creeping over the lives of many a generation to come. Indeed, it has been suggested that the spell cast by this shadow has continued even until our own days with the Nazi 'experiment', where ideology and power were combined in the hands of single men to produce the most hideous results.¹⁸ Yet, research into twentieth-century totalitarian leadership is not content with simplifying explanations of the kind that 'evil men' do 'evil deeds'. Rather, the need to investigate the reasons behind the support this person received from his own people is generally acknowledged. In the same way, the currents defining the social and political climate of Theophilus' time provide the necessary backdrop for the apparent 'success' of his actions. If in the study of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, where we see a similar identification of ideology and power, the importance of 'mass manipulation' has been fully realized, in the period under discussion there is a clear need for a study that will focus on Theophilus' use of rhetorical argumentation. Beside a somewhat instinctive

¹⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London, 1975), 261. Kelly's Theophilus was also 'powerful, ambitious, and entirely ruthless, more interested in power politics than in dogmatic truth', 243.

¹⁷ Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 9, 105–120.

¹⁸ C. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (New York, 1980), 135.

drive against the man, what all negative assessments of Theophilus' share in common is a marked reserve to address with appropriate rigour the question which is central to the present inquiry, namely why such a 'distorted' presentation of Origen was constructed in the first place, and why it could find any reception in the fifth-century church.

The investigation which follows is made possible by scholarly advances on several fronts. These include, firstly, a renewed awareness of the rhetorical character of our sources;¹⁹ secondly, a more accurate appraisal of the relationships between monks and bishops as the emerging leaders in the late-antique city;²⁰ and, thirdly, a more refined presentation of the intrinsic complexity of early Egyptian monasticism.²¹ Above all, however, my analysis draws on the seminal contributions of Norman Russell, to whose labours we are indebted for the first ever complete presentation and translation of the works of Theophilus in a single volume.²² In assessing the overall agenda of the patriarch, Russell has mounted a convincing argument for a consistent policy aimed at harnessing the energy of the monastic movement to serve the wider need of the church.²³ In what follows, I shall build upon this argument

¹⁹ On this key development, see now Katos, *Palladius of Helenopolis*.

²⁰ Programmatic here remains the earlier work of P. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford, 1978). Recent discussions in: E. Rebillard and C. Sotinel (eds.), *L'évêque dans la cité du IVe au Ve siècle: image et autorité* (Rome, 1998); M. F. Patrucco, 'Bishops and Monks in Late Antique Society', *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, 8/2 (2004): 332–345.

²¹ For collections of seminal articles, see E. Wipszycka, *Études sur le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive* (Roma, 1996); J. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, 1999); as well as the papers presented at the 2011 Oxford Patristic Conference, in S. Rubenson (ed.), *Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia* (Leuven, 2013).

²² N. Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* (London, 2007). Unless otherwise indicated, throughout the monograph I have used his translations which are referenced as ET in Russell, *Theophilus*.

²³ N. Russell, 'Theophilus and Cyril of Alexandria on the Divine Image: A Consistent Episcopal Policy towards the Origenism of the Desert?', in L. Perrone (ed.), *Origeniana octava* (Leuven, 2003), 939–946. Id., 'Bishops and Charismatics in Early Christian Egypt', in J. Behr, A. Louth and D. E. Conomos (eds.), *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West: Festschrift for*

by a detailed examination of what I see as the two key ingredients in the pastoral polemic of the archbishop – masterly use of the conventions of Hellenistic oratory, and in-depth knowledge of current monastic ideas – both of which, I will argue, were vital for securing the eventual acceptance of Origen’s condemnation.

The monograph is divided into four parts. The first will introduce the background by highlighting the fact that prior to Theophilus’ coming to the historical scene the legacy of Origen had already become a prize topic for debate. The patriarch’s pre-eminence here comes from the fact that he was the first to succeed in persuading the church as a whole to agree to his reservations. The pages that follow will seek to explain how this aggressively negative interpretation could acquire the status of universally accepted position. The second and the third part will advance the main hypothesis of the research, namely that the wide circulation and overt rhetorical composition of Theophilus’ anti-Origenist letters allow for a new reading of these documents as a form of ‘mass-media’ unique for its time. The rhetorical analysis here will focus on Theophilus’ letter to Epiphanius in 400 and the *Synodal Letter* after Origen’s condemnation at the Nitrian synod of 400, as well as the three main *Festal Letters* for the years 401, 402 and 404 respectively which cover the subsequent controversy.²⁴ As we shall see in the final fourth part, these documents offer strong basis for the claim that the eventual

Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 99–110. Id., ‘Theophilus of Alexandria as a Forensic Practitioner’, *Studia Patristica*, 50 (2011), 235–243.

²⁴ On the corpus of Theophilus, see the entries 2580–2684 in M. Geerard (ed.), *Clavis patrum graecorum*, vol. 2 (Turnhout, 1974), and the updates in vol. 6: *Supplementum* (1998). The key anti-Origenist letters have reached us in Jerome’s translations with only a few fragments of the original Greek, in Jerome, *Epistulae* 90, 92, 96, 98, 100, Latin text in I. Hilberg (ed.), *CSEL* 55/2 (1912), 143–145, 147–155, 159–181, 185–211, 213–232. ET and commentary in Russell, *Theophilus*, 89–159. On Jerome’s role as a translator, see below Chapter 4 (c).

acceptance of the condemnation of Origen should be related to the success with which the patriarch had managed to meet the expectations of his audience, and especially of the monks who in this case formed such an important majority.