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Prayer, Politics and the Trinity: Vying Models of Authority in Third–Fourth-Century Debates on Prayer and 'Orthodoxy'

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Abstract

This article presents a theory about a distinctive, but still neglected, approach to trinitarianism in the early church which was founded explicitly in demanding practices of prayer and personal transformation. The central thesis of the article is that this approach (with its characteristic appeal to Romans 8, and its Spirit-initiated prayer of an elevated or ascetic sort) was set on a course of almost inevitable tension with certain kinds of episcopal authority, and particularly with post-Nicene renditions of 'orthodoxy' as propositional assent. The theory is not to be confused, however, with a rather tired sociological disjunction between institution and 'charisma'; the matter is spiritually more subtle than that, and implies vying perceptions of theological power, 'orthodoxy', and the nature of the ecclesial body. In this article I opt for a focus on the relation between Origen's *De oratione* (one of the finest discussions of the implications of Romans 8 for Christian contemplation), the suggested influence of Origen on early Antonite monasticism, and the still-mysterious motivations for Theophilus' first attack on Origenism and the monks of Nitria in 399. The picture that emerges, once this distinctive prayer-based approach to the Trinity is clarified, is one of a late fourth-century crisis of simultaneous rejection, domestication and attempted assimilation of this elite spirituality of intra-divine incorporation.

Keywords: authority, Holy Spirit, Origen, prayer, Romans 8, Theophilus of Antioch, Trinity.

Introduction: The Trinity, Power and Social and Spiritual Location

In this article I want to bring the themes of prayer, authority and politics together in a fresh way that has both historical instantiation and – I trust – some continuing systematic theological interest.[1] The central issue is the

[1] Originally given as an invited lecture at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, 'Politics and Religion' conference, July 2010; and then (in slightly revised form) as a plenary lecture at the XVIth International Patristics Conference, Oxford, Aug. 2011. My thanks to those who invited me and who gave critical and helpful response at both

doctrine of the Trinity and its connection to what is today – somewhat problematically – called 'spirituality'. The test case for my theory will be the original outbreak of the so-called 'Origenist crisis' in 399 in Egypt.

It has been remarked recently by Columba Stewart OSB that, 'Although ubiquitous in early Christian life, . . . the personal prayer of early Christians is [nowadays] one of the least studied aspects of their experience'.[2] Arguably there may be a paradoxical but correlative relationship between this *theological* lacuna in current patristic studies, and the methodological dominance in recent years of the creative, but implicitly secularised, late antique categories of 'holy man', and of 'ascetic practice' more generally.[3] These latter interests, enormously generative for scholarly advance in the discipline, have nonetheless tended to encourage a primary focus on ascetic *extremes*, on projective societal needs, and on Freudian or Foucauldian accounts of power, energy or control. A theoretic gauntlet that I shall be throwing down in what follows, then, will be the suggestion that the suppression of a robustly *theological* understanding of authority (often residing in the ordinary life and witness of the dedicated Christian pray-er) has caused patristic scholarship in recent decades to fail to notice an important nexus of associations between personal prayer, politics and the Trinity, to which this article is devoted.

I want then to set out a theory about a distinctive, but still neglected, approach to the Trinity in the early church which was from the start founded in Paul's account of the Spirit and prayer in Romans 8 (vv. 9–30), and which focused on the invitation to the pray-er to be drawn by an intervention of the Spirit into an intimate incorporation into the life of Christ. Such an approach to trinitarian thinking, founded in the practices of prayer, was implicitly different in its emphasis and starting point from that which started more extrinsically from the issue of the Son's status *vis-à-vis* the Father (as inflected particularly via the Logos christology of John), and only then turned afterwards to fit the Spirit, as third, into the *homoousian* picture. The former, Romans-based, approach was clearly Spirit-*leading*; and it was to have an exegetical history – as I hope to demonstrate in this article in relation to the third–fourth century – which came to be associated in more than one way with special, even elitist, claims to spiritual authority, and

events; and especially to Norman Russell, Samuel Rubenson and Thomas Graumann for instructive guidance, and to Johannes Börjesson and Philip McCosker for vital research assistance.

[2] 'Prayer', in Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 744.

[3] Peter Brown's earliest, and justly celebrated, articles on 'the holy man' appeared over forty years ago now: see esp. 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), pp. 80–101.

with a social location increasingly in tension, for one reason or another, with episcopal jurisdiction in the post-Constantinian period. The latter, Johannine-based, approach was, after Nicaea especially, to become that more normatively associated with conciliar, and thus episcopally protected, assents to propositional 'orthodoxy'; whereas the approach founded in Romans had its own earlier history, especially in the writing of Origen, of a notion of 'orthodoxy' as a demanding ascetic *project* – in which some are necessarily more advanced than others.

These different forms of trinitarian conceptuality encode different nexuses of association highly relevant to the issue of politics and authority. Each has a particular exegetical strategy; each has an attendant approach to the Trinity (ordered differently as to the 'persons' in the economy); each presumes something about the nature of theological truth (qua 'orthodoxy', however defined); and each has an implied approach to 'power' – whether spiritual or ecclesiastical, or both. We must be careful, of course, not to impose a forced or ahistorical clamp on the inevitable messiness of the ecclesiastical narrative by means of such theorising about 'nexuses' of hermeneutical association. If we were in a Weberian mood, we might call these nexuses 'ideal', or heuristic, 'types'; and this would rightly warn us against assuming that these different sets of association necessarily line up *straightforwardly* with particular authors, or are never to be found in the corpus of the same author writing at different times. There can be, and are, 'mixed' types, as we shall see.[4] And that is an important warning against methodological naïveté, which we shall have reasons to heed as we move through this analysis.

However, I also want to be equally clear at the outset that my proposal cannot be subsumed under the familiar – and by now rather hackneyed and outdated – 'Weberian' theory of 'church' versus 'sect', or 'institution' versus 'charisma'. As we shall see, the picture is more complicated than that, not least because the transition into the period of Constantinian settlement and imperial protection of the faith educed from the episcopate (in this case in Alexandria) a variety of different attempts to respond to the spiritual insights and power of what I have called the Romans 8 'incorporative' approach, as evidenced especially in monastic circles; *and*, in addition, as we shall see, the Romans 8 approach itself was to have more than one monastic manifestation. Moreover, the perceptions of 'authority' at stake here are varied and complex. We shall have reason, then, to reflect briefly again at the end of this article on what *sorts* of theories of power and religion have implicitly been at play in recent 'late antique' studies of religion and power politics, and on whether the thesis proposed here about elite ascetic authority, founded in the practices

[4] Athanasius would be a classic example: see below.

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of prayer, will completely fit the existing secular models, or subtly challenge them.

My way of proceeding will be as follows, for, in one article, I can follow only a selected path through this material. First, I shall supply a very brief overview of some earlier work I have done on the distinctive uses of the Romans 8 nexus in the earliest church, in the period before Constantine, Nicaea and the heated post-Nicene trinitarian debates. Against that backcloth I shall set a more detailed analysis of what Origen does so strikingly with this theme in his *De oratione*, a text which – not insignificantly – was to become one of the main lightning rods for debate much later in 399, in the actual outbreak of the 'Origenist crisis' in Alexandria under Bishop Theophilus. For in the meantime, or so the evidence suggests, this Romans 8 approach had become a special focus for attention in different monastic circles of the fourth century, and it arguably goes back in some form to Anthony himself. Finally, I shall come to discuss the recent scholarly debates about what caused the outbreak of this Origenist crisis in Alexandria in the first place, and how – on my hypothesis of the Romans 8 nexus – we may now see this as a moment both of episcopal attack on, and of attempted episcopal assimilation of, a powerful thematic of prayer and spiritual authority. A coda at the end will indicate that the same project of hermeneutical and political assimilation was still, fascinatingly, at play in Cyril of Alexandria's courting of the monks, a generation later, in the fifth-century debates on christology.

Romans 8:8–30 and its Early Patristic Interpretation

Let me start, then, with a very brief résumé of some earlier research on the place of Romans 8 exegesis in the history of the development of the Trinity as a whole.[5] What is striking, on the whole – and this is borne out by careful reference to *Biblia Patristica*[6] – is the relative *lack* of extended reference

[5] See Sarah Coakley, 'Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity', in Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (eds), *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 29–56; and in revised and expanded form, Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), ch. 3.

[6] See J. Allenbach *et al.* (eds), *Biblia Patristica: Index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature patristique* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1975–), vol. 1, pp. 435–8, vol. 2, pp. 469–72, vol. 3, pp. 367–71, vol. 4, pp. 288–9, vol. 5, pp. 339–41, vol. 6, pp. 290–3, vol. 7, pp. 187–8, for patristic deployment of Romans, and especially pp. for verses 26 ff.; for English trs. of brief selections from patristic commentary on Romans 8, see Kathy L. Gaca and L. L. Welborn (eds), *Early Patristic Readings of Romans* (New York: Continuum, 2005), and J. Patout Burns with Constantine Newman (trs and eds), *Romans: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

to Romans 8 in the formative early patristic discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity in the pre-Nicene period (despite the alluring account there of the Spirit's enabling of prayer, and engendering of redeemed, adoptive, Sonship in the life of believers in their relation to the Father). There are, however, important exceptions to this strange rule of exegetical omission. In Irenaeus (e.g. *Adversus Haereses* 5.20.5), this Pauline 'incorporative' approach, as we might expect, forms one significant strand in Irenaeus' doctrine of 'recapitulation': just as in Adam all die, in Christ, via the operation of the Spirit, we are re-knit into the life of redemption.[7]

But we look in vain for any widespread, or systematic, use elsewhere in the second century of this rich and creative Pauline approach to discussions on the emergent doctrine of the Trinity. Could it be that this distinctive prayer-based reflection on the believer's encounter with the life of God, focusing as it does (i) on a certain loss of control to the *leading* experiential force of the Spirit, and (ii) on an entry into a realm beyond words (whether glossolalic or otherwise), seemed, in the face of second-century debates about Montanism, especially, an essentially problematic starting point for ontological reflection about God? In comparison, the very different speculations about Logos christology, taking off from the Prologue to John and extending into conversation with Stoicism and other forms of Hellenistic philosophy on the theme of the Logos, were of course to be found in abundance in Justin Martyr and others at a similar period.[8] It is as if the second century represents a certain early fork in the theological path: a high pneumatology of charismatic and prophetic gifts, relatively untheorised in terms of proto-trinitarian ontology (and increasingly suspicious in the eyes of Roman central authority), *or* a philosophically enunciated theory of a quasi-divine Son with little explicit or developed doctrine of the Spirit to accompany it.[9]

But it is in Origen, in the third century, that we are to find the most profound and rich early exegesis of the Romans 8 passage – not so much in his own *Commentary on Romans* (which arguably Rufinus may have tamed or altered), but in his text 'On Prayer', written around 233 at Caesarea.[10]

[7] Note that even in Irenaeus the Romans 8 theme is carefully nuanced towards a certain hierarchical arrangement of the persons: see my more detailed discussion of this in *God, Sexuality and the Self*, pp. 122–4.

[8] Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 6.1–2; discussed in *God, Sexuality and the Self*, pp. 120–1.

[9] See *God, Sexuality and the Self*, pp. 115–35.

[10] The only modern edition of the Greek remains *Origenes Werke*, ed. Paul Koetschau (GCS 3; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1899–1955), vol. 2, pp. 297–403. In what follows I utilise the translation in *Origen*, tr. Rowan Greer, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 81–170. Ronald H. Heine's recent analysis of Origen's Caesarean period provides a useful contextualisation: see his *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the*

Since it was this text, in particular, that was to go on to become a strangely important bone of contention in the later Origenist controversy, we must now look at it in some detail, with particular attention to its use of Romans 8. Certain exegetical features stand out which, from the benefit of hindsight, will prove significant for developments in the fourth century.

Origen's *De Oratione*, Romans 8 and Implicit Themes of Power and Spiritual Authority

I would like to draw attention to the following four features of the *De oratione*, and especially to its opening sections.

First, there is the important emphasis on the Spirit-leading nature of authentic Christian prayer, and its implications for a knowledge of God beyond all normal human understanding. The text starts with an insistence on the priority and primacy of the Holy Spirit in understanding the nature and purpose of prayer; and it stresses the capacity of the grace of God to take Christians beyond the 'worthless' 'reasoning of mortals' to a sphere of unutterable mysteries (here 2 Cor 12 is appealed to) where 'spiritual' prayer occurs in the 'heart' (2.5). Already, then, there is the explicit willingness to allow that the Spirit – though from the start a 'fellow-worker' with the Father and the Son – specifically escorts the pray-er to a realm beyond the normal constraints of human rationality, allowing the pray-er even to know 'the mind of the Lord' (1). The very first paragraph of the text puts it thus: 'There are realities that are so great that they find a rank superior to humanity and our mortal nature; they are impossible for our rational and mortal race to understand. Yet by the grace poured forth with measureless abundance from Him to men through that minister of unsurpassed grace to us, Jesus Christ, and through that fellow worker with the will of God, the Spirit, these realities have become possible for us . . .' (Preface). In short, prayer is a *high* Christian calling, open to all and in principle resulting in a unique knowledge of God unavailable through any other means. But it is necessary to follow Paul's stricture here that 'praying as we ought' (Romans 8:26) is the strict requisite for such an endeavour (2.1), and requires the right 'disposition' from the outset.

So then, we note that exegesis of Romans 8 is central to Origen's argument from the start, and citations from it are reiterated repeatedly in the opening sections of the work and beyond; it is through prayer in the Spirit, indeed

Church (Oxford: OUP, 2010), esp. ch. 7. Lorenzo Perrone's *La preghiera secondo Origene: L'impossibilità donata* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2011) is now the magisterial treatment of the *De oratione* and its early reception, unfortunately becoming available only after the completion of this text, but rife with important contrapuntal insights.

by being '*mingled* with the Spirit', that pray-ers may become 'partakers of the Word of God' (see 10.2). There is an early lengthy reflection on the meaning of Romans 8:26–7, in particular (2.3): 'the Spirit Himself makes special intercession with God with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God'. Origen's comment here[11] is that the 'sighs too deep for words' are words that 'cannot be spoken, that are not right for a human being to speak'; but he adds that the Spirit's 'making *special* intercession' in them, over and above ordinary intercession, means that 'this is for those who are *specially victorious*' (my emphasis) (2.3). He goes on, a little later, 'Such prayers as were truly spiritual, since the Spirit prays in the hearts of the saints, were . . . filled with secret and marvellous teaching' (2.5). And, 'These prayers, since they were truly prayers made and spoken by the Spirit, are also filled with the teachings of God's wisdom', just as David's psalms were. So not only is prayer a high vocation, but it can lead to special levels of insight and wisdom amongst those who are 'truly spiritual'.

Third, there is an important accompanying subtext in this treatise of the indispensability of sexual metaphor for prayer, combined, seemingly paradoxically, with the implicit call to an ascetic or celibate life. The form of prayer that cedes to the Spirit is here repeatedly, and strikingly, compared by Origen to sexual intercourse and procreation, with of course the insistent proviso that this trope should not be taken literally, but metaphorically. 'Just as it is not possible to beget children without a woman and without receiving the power [*sic*] that serves to beget children, so no one may obtain . . . requests . . . unless he has prayed with such and such a disposition' (8.1). Hannah, remarkably, on this view becomes the supreme type of the pray-er who overcomes sterility through the Spirit, and she is repeatedly returned to in this text (2.5; cf. 4.1–2, 13.2, 4, 14.4, 16.1): her ceding to the Spirit, her ululating in the Spirit, is the source of this 'power' to conceive. This overcoming of 'sterility', however, should according to Origen best be seen as a metaphor for *spiritual* fruitfulness: it is when Christians 'perceive the sterility of their own governing reason and the barrenness of their own mind' that 'through persistent prayer they conceive from the Holy Spirit sa[y]ing words filled with visions of the truth; and they give birth to them' (13.3;

[11] This may be compared with Rufinus' version of Origen's commentary on *Romans*, *ad loc.* (see Origen, *Der Römerbriefkommentar des Origenes: Kritische Ausgabe der Übersetzung Rufins*, ed. Caroline P. Hammond Bammel (Freiburg: Herder, 1990–8), vol. 3, pp. 578–92; Thomas P. Scheck (tr.), *Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Books 6–10* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), pp. 79–83: here the 'groanings' of the Spirit are simply interpreted as a sign of the 'weakness of the flesh'.

see also 13.4). Hence, 'Hannah's soul ... when it was transformed from sterility, bore greater fruit than her body did when it conceived Samuel' (16.1). So a firm disjunction is made by Origen between the erotic and procreative themes in their metaphorical force, on the one hand, and in their normal human physical functioning, on the other. This is not to say that this erotic gloss on Romans 8 is lightly chosen. Its particular 'power' resides, as we know from Origen's slightly later *Homilies* and *Commentary on the Song of Songs*,[12] precisely in the indispensability of the erotic metaphor for describing *mature* intimacy with God; whereas its concomitant dangers lie with those not yet morally prepared for the higher slopes of *enoptic* contemplation. Thus Tatiana, the woman (along with a man, Ambrose[13]) to whom the *De oratione* is addressed, can be trusted with this demanding approach to prayer as abandonment to the Spirit because she is said to be 'most manly' (*andreiotatē*), and to have gone beyond 'womanish things' (*gunēkaia*) 'in the manner of Sarah' (Gen 18, 11) (2.2). The contrast with a passage in *Contra Celsum* 7.2–7 reveals the dangers Origen sees for women, particularly, in the *wrong* sort of 'ecstatic' behaviour and sexual abandonment to 'daemon' spirits. Here he castigates Pythian oracular 'priestesses' who receive impure spirits through their (physical) 'private parts' rather than through 'invisible pores' (7.3) – through 'ecstasy' and 'frenzy', rather than through the 'superior' illumination of the Holy Spirit (7.4).[14] In short, the project in the *De oratione* of becoming 'mingled with the Spirit' in prayer, although in principle for all, is for Origen a high calling, and an ascetically demanding one, involving a set of evolved presumptions about male and female gender roles, human transformation, chastity and celibacy.

Fourth, and finally, the project of ascent through prayer in the *De oratione* therefore also comes for Origen with a certain elite status implied for those who come to give themselves wholly to the task.[15] As already noted, the language of the 'power' of prayer is strikingly used in this text, not only

[12] Origen, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des cantiques*, ed. Luc Brésard and Henri Crouzel, SC 375–6 (Paris: Cerf, 1991–2); Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, tr. R. P. Lawson, ACW 26 (New York: Newman Press, 1956).

[13] Described as 'most religious and industrious' (II. 1).

[14] Origen, *Contre Celse*, ed. Marcel Borret (SC 132, 136, 147, 150; Paris: Cerf, 1967–9); Origen, *Contra Celsum*, tr. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: CUP, 1953).

[15] Rowan Greer asserts strongly (*Origen*, 27), that 'It is only in the fifth century with Evagrius Ponticus and the pseudo-Dionysius that the notion arises that the contemplative life is higher than the active'. Technically this is surely correct – if what is at stake is a whole life's *vocation* to contemplation; yet as we shall see Origen at least prepares the ground for this with his demanding account of stages of spiritual maturation.

in relation to the analogy to the 'power' of procreation, but particularly in reference to the 'power' of prayer of those who may be called 'saints': 'I believe', writes Origen, 'that the words of the saints' prayers are filled with power, especially [if] when praying with the Spirit they also pray with the mind (cf. 1 Cor 14:15). Then the mind is like light rising from the understanding of the one who prays ... It goes forth from his mouth to weaken by the *power of God* the spiritual poison coming from the opposing powers and entering the governing part of the mind of those who neglect to pray and fail to need the injunction to "pray constantly"' (12.1, my emphasis). In this sense one may say, Origen avers, that 'the entire life of the saint taken as a whole is a single great prayer' (12.2). Such pray-ers as these are accompanied in a special way by Christ and the angels when they pray (10.2, 11.1, 11.3, 11.4); such pray-ers indeed fully receive the 'Spirit of sonship' and of 'adoption', as promised by Paul in Romans 8 (22.2).

These four features of the *De oratione* I have highlighted (the call to a knowledge beyond human knowledge; the insistent appeal to Romans 8 and to its incorporative, Spirit-fuelled vision of life in God; the insistence on moral purity and chastity, if not celibacy, for those in such intimacy with God; and the promise of a special heavenly 'power' vouchsafed to the 'saints' in prayer to confront – with the angels – evil, the negative passions and the world) by no means exhaust the theological themes in this rich text. But I have chosen to accentuate them because I think they are prescient of the nexus of associations which was to become contentious in the focus on this treatise in the opening of the 'Origenist' controversy in Alexandria in the late fourth century. With that future issue in mind, however, it is also pertinent to underscore two other features of Origen's theology which relate to what might be called the *incipient* spiritual elitism of his theology of prayer, here outlined. For this, admittedly, is a nuanced matter of interpretation.

First, it would be misleading, I acknowledge, to say that Origen himself envisaged a church of elite versus ordinary pray-ers. Rather, it is his particular view of the nature of the Christian life that it involves a *movement* from immature to mature response and responsibility, in scriptural meditation, prayer and asceticism. As his commentary on 1 Corinthians (available to us only in revealing Greek fragments[16]) shows with particular clarity, he artfully crafts his teaching to account both for those who are 'babes' in the faith (milk-drinkers, in Paul's terms) and for those who are able to advance to an adult diet of solid food. Of the latter, some will indeed be called to celibacy

[16] Claude Jenkins, 'Origen on 1 Corinthians' (surviving Greek fragments), *Journal of Theological Studies* 9 (1908), pp. 232–47, 353–72, 500–14, and *Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1908), pp. 29–51.

(see 1 Cor 7:25). But as Judith Kovacs comments in an insightful article on this 1 Corinthians material, 'Origen's aim is not to establish an élite group but to challenge *all* of his hearers to live more purely . . . He challenges all to consider sexual abstinence but also warns of the dangers of this path.'[17] In short, all Christians are set on the path to being *teleioi* ('perfect') and *pneumatikoi* ('spiritual'); but, necessarily, not all have yet arrived at that goal. It follows equally (and this is my second qualifying point about Origen's purported spiritual elitism) that the very notion of 'orthodoxy' is for him set along a similarly 'diachronic' path. The *Commentary on John* is particularly instructive on this point, as Rowan Williams has underscored in a telling short article.[18] It is not that some are set apart as 'perfect' by definition (this would smack of gnosticism), but more that all are committed to a course of *progressive* conformation to scriptural truth and to intimacy with the Logos. On this vision, 'the unity and coherence of Christian speech' (i.e. the very project of 'orthodoxy') is 'safeguarded' (as Williams puts it) by '*the life and example of the spiritual exegete*' (not the bishop, note); and, concomitantly, the notion of 'orthodoxy' itself is 'bound up with a commitment to the centrality of a *process* requiring completion'.[19] 'Orthodoxy' for Origen is thus a goal-directed project of spiritual transformation; it is not acquired or guaranteed by mere creedal assent, nor backed up by hierarchical authority.

All this of course may now seem indicative of problems to come between future bishops and monks. Accordingly I turn now to the fourth century and to the fate of the Romans 8 nexus in Egypt, once Christianity had become the imperial religion. But we must first briefly consider the early monastic (Antonite) background and its own response to Romans 8, as well as its relation to the heritage of Origen. Only then can we hypothesise what may have prompted some of the animus against 'Origenism' in the later attacks against his theological tradition by Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria.

[17] See Judith L. Kovacs, 'Servant of Christ and Steward of the Mysteries of God: The Purpose of a Pauline Letter according to Origen's *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*', in Paul M. Blowers, Angela Russell Christmas, David G. Hunter, and Robin Darling Young (eds), *In Dominico Eloquio, In Lordly Eloquence: Essays on Patristic Exegesis in Honor of Robert Louis Wilken* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 167.

[18] Rowan D. Williams, 'Origen: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy', in W. A. Beinert and U. Kühneweg (eds), *Origeniana Septima: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), pp. 3–14.

[19] Ibid., pp. 9, 8 (my emphases). Also relevant is Rowan Williams, 'Does it Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Modern Orthodoxy?', in idem (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), pp. 1–23.

The Power of Monastic Prayer and the Origenist Crisis

The modern historiography of early monasticism has at times liked to promote a romantic vision of rustic or anti-intellectual monks confronting an elite Platonic intellectualism emanating from Alexandria: a sort of early fourth-century variant, as Rowan Williams has put it, on the 'town–gown', or 'sophisticated/unsophisticated' scenario, one purveyed especially by scholars such as Festugière.[20] But this vision was of course more originally fostered not only by the polemics of the late fourth-century Origenist controversy itself, but earlier by no less an authority than Athanasius, since in his *Life of Anthony* he refers to Anthony and his followers as *agrammatoi* – and much depends here on what he might have meant by that.[21] But as Samuel Rubenson has countered,[22] if we take the reconstructed *Letters of Anthony* (originally in Coptic, then in Greek, Syriac and Georgian) as authentic and indicative of the real Anthony's theology, then potentially a completely different picture emerges from that of an unlettered monastic movement with no cognisance of philosophical teaching. The Anthony of the *Letters* is seemingly already steeped in what Rubenson calls a 'popular Platonism'; to be sure, Anthony is no 'high' Origenist, but there are themes he shares with both Plato and Origen (the stress on the 'original unity of all that is spiritual and rational', the stress on 'self-knowledge' and 'spiritual essence', for instance[23]) which might suggest at least a more than passing acquaintance with the main tenets of Origen's theology. Even if we do not subscribe to Rubenson's theory of *direct* Origen-dependence in Anthony (a matter on which I myself prefer to remain agnostic), more telling for the purposes of my own narrative in this article is the extraordinary dominance in Anthony's *Letters* (given the dearth of such examples elsewhere), of the pneumatology of Romans 8. Either this is a sheer coincidence or – more likely – the result of a profound interest shared with Origen about the impact of prolonged and deep prayer.

For repeatedly in Anthony's *Letters* there is a return to the themes of the intervention of the Spirit in prayer; repeatedly the refrain that the 'perfection' to be aimed at here is nothing less than 'adoption as sons'; repeatedly the insistence that the 'power of the Spirit' quenches the power of the flesh

[20] See Rowan D. Williams, *Faith and Experience in Early Monasticism: New Perspectives on the Letters of Ammonas* (Erlangen: Universitätsbibliothek, 2002): see the opening allusions (p. 19) to A.-J. Festugière's *Les Moines d'Orient: Culture ou sainteté* (Paris: Cerf, 1961).

[21] *Life of Antony*, §73: Athanasius, *Vie d'Antoine*, ed. G. J. M. Bartelink, SC 400 (Paris: Cerf, 1994), pp. 322–5; Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, ed. Robert C. Gregg, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 84.

[22] Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990).

[23] See ibid., pp. 185–6.

and of the passions. In all these cases there is an explicit appeal to Romans 8, this clearly being a key proof text for Anthony according to the witness of the *Letters*.[24] One extended quotation from *Letter* 2 must suffice here to make my point about the centrality of Romans 8 and its significance for Anthony's monastic call to 'perfection': 'For as many as are set free by [the Saviour's] dispensation', he writes, 'are called the servants of God. And this is not yet perfection, but in its own time it is righteousness, and it leads to the adoption of sons. And Jesus our Saviour understood that these were near to receiving the Spirit of Adoption, and that they knew Him, having been taught by the Holy Spirit ... Therefore, being made bold in mind, since they knew themselves and their intellectual substance [*ousia noera*: note the Platonising language] ... they received the Spirit of Adoption, and cried out saying, "We have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but we have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom 8:15). Now therefore, O God, we know what Thou has given us – that we are children and heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17).'[25]

So it is impossible to rule out the hypothesis that Origen's thought, and particularly his reflections on Romans 8 in the *De oratione*, were – if not directly influential on the earliest monks in Anthony's circle – then at least congruent with Anthony's own perfection-seeking teaching on prayer and the ascetic life, itself founded in Romans 8. And if this is so, then – as Samuel Rubenson has put it elsewhere[26] – the later outbreak of anti-Origenism in 399 was not so much the result of an untoward and external infiltration of Origenist influence from Alexandria (such as was charged in the original Origenist crisis and still reflected in the Festugière town/gown model), but more truly a novel outburst of *anti*-Origenism against an existing Origenising status quo. One intriguing detail here which may support this hypothesis is that the work of Athanasius himself is devoid of any explicit, let alone vibrant, pneumatology (the *De incarnatione* does not mention the Spirit at all except procedurally in the final exordium) *until* the period after his exile in the desert and his close interaction with the early monastic theology. Thereafter, fascinatingly, the Romans 8 approach does indeed pop up, most explicitly and powerfully in the *Letters to Serapion*, by which time Athanasius

[24] Alongside Phil 2 and Isa 53, his favoured christological proof-texts. See the translation and introduction in Derwas J. Chitty, *The Letters of St. Antony the Great* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975). For allusions to Romans 8, see esp. letters II, III, IV; but a high pneumatology is evident throughout the letters.

[25] Ibid., p. 7.

[26] Samuel Rubenson, 'Origen in the Egyptian Monastic Tradition of the Fourth Century', in W. A. Beinert and U. Kühneweg (eds), *Origeniana Septima: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), pp. 319–37.

is of course concerned to provide explicit arguments for the divinity of the third 'person'.[27] Arguably it may have been the insistent focus on Romans 8 in the Antonite theology of prayer which drew Athanasius' attention to this possible line of argument; yet of course by this time in the anti-Arian debates he is mainly concerned to do away with any hint of Origenistic subordination which may have attended it in the desert context.

One final note about the further exegetical history of Romans 8 in the period closer to the outbreak of anti-Origenism is this. It is striking that Evagrius (building in his own text 'On Prayer' consciously on Origen's *De oratione*) continues the Romans 8 trajectory, now conjoined with his own particular elitist stress on the possibility of the attainment of 'pure prayer' of the mind, and with his particular metaphysical speculations about cosmology: 'The Holy Spirit', he writes in 'On Prayer', 'out of compassion for our weakness, comes to us even when we are impure. And if only He finds our intellect truly praying to Him, he enters it and puts to flight the whole array of thoughts and ideas circling within it, and He arouses it to a longing for spiritual prayer.'[28] Here in Evagrius' rendition of Romans 8, we might say that we see the *incipient* spiritual elitism of Origen's *De oratione* becoming an explicit reality, although it is now conjoined (as Gabriel Bunge has elegantly shown[29]) with a clear commitment to developed post-Nicene trinitarianism, itself freshly explicated through the rich prayer-based model of Paul's account.

Yet it would be misleading, if my narrative has had any force, to see this Evagrian development as a wholly new and alien imposition of philosophical categories on the monastic theology of prayer; rather, it is an intensification of tendencies already present, in different ways, in both Origen and in Anthony's *Letters* (whatever one's view of their relation). The same themes are there: the possibility of ascetic perfection, the vital importance of the Spirit in this process of transformation, the indispensability of the Romans

[27] *Letters to Serapion*, esp. 1.24, 1.28, with special appeal to Romans 8 and the cognate Galatians 4 as evidence for the divinity of the Spirit: *Athanasius Werke*, ed. Dietmar Wyrwa with Kyriakos Savvidis (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), vol. 1/1/4, pp. 510–12, 519–21; Athanasius, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, ed. C. R. B. Shapland (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), pp. 125–8, 133–6. Athanasius does also briefly discuss Romans 8 and the adoption and 'incorporation' themes in *Contra Arianos* 2.59: Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos*, in *Athanasius Werke*, ed. Martin Tetz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1924–), vol. 1/1/2–3, pp. 109–381, here pp. 235–7.

[28] 'On Prayer', p. 63: *Philokalia tōn hierōn nēptikōn* (Athens: A & E Papadēmētriou, 1957–76), vol. 1, p. 182; tr. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), vol. 1, p. 63.

[29] See Gabriel Bunge OSB, 'The "Spiritual Prayer": On the Trinitarian Monasticism of Evagrius Pontus', *Monastic Studies* 17 (1986), pp. 191–208.

8 model of adoption and incorporation, the utter commitment to a life of continuous prayer – and the particular ascetic 'power' of such.

Moreover, it is even possible to speculate – and here I can only suggest a line of thought perhaps worthy of further investigation – that the line of tradition which runs rather differently out of early Egyptian monasticism to the Macarian Homilies, possibly via the *Letters* of Ammonas, is, albeit very different in tone from the Evagrian theology, nonetheless a different 'branch', as we might put it, of the Romans 8 Spirit nexus found so powerfully in Anthony.[30] Here is a more fiery, and less consciously 'trinitarian', rendition of the Spirit, one conjoined powerfully at points with Jewish Merkebah mystical thinking, and thus seemingly wholly different in its sources and emphasis from the Origenistic train.[31] Yet it may be, as Rubenson has suggested in public debate with Rowan Williams,[32] that what we have in this material is less a case of that other textbook disjunction between rustic/Judaistic (Macarian) and philosophical (Evagrian) parties of monks (a view to which Williams seemingly to some degree still holds), and more an intensification of the theology of Antony in two divergent strands. What conjoins them, however, on my rendition, may be more significant for explaining the vicissitudes of the Origenist controversy than what disjoins them, namely the crucial Romans 8 tradition of Spirit-filled perfection in prayer, accompanied by a strong current of monastic elitism.

So why then was this tradition of Romans 8 and its reception – in, as it turned out, both its branched manifestations – to become so contentious in the first outbreak of the Origenist crisis in Alexandria under Bishop Theophilus? Why did Theophilus particularly target Origen's *De oratione* for attack (alongside elements in Origen's cosmology and eschatology in the *De principiis* and *De resurrectione*), *as well as* countering the so-called 'Anthropomorphites' – who, if they really existed as a conscious group,

[30] Compare Williams' analysis in *Faith and Experience in Early Monasticism*, who argues suggestively that the Ammonas line represents a 'charismatic-apocalytpic strain' (ibid, p. 35) of monasticism which resists the taint of Origenist influence. Williams thus ultimately maintains the Platonist-Origenist-intellectualist versus 'Jewish'-apocalytic-affective binary which I am implicitly questioning here. What seems more important to me in the face of the scattered evidence is what *particular* rendition of the (shared) Romans 8/Antonite theology was at stake.

[31] Homily 11.1: Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies; and, The Great Letter*, tr. George Maloney, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 90, is especially interesting for Romans 8 reception in the Macarian corpus.

[32] Now published in Samuel Rubenson, 'Antony and Ammonas, Conflicting or Common Tradition in Early Egyptian Monasticism?', in D. Bumazhnov, E. Grypeou, T. B. Sailors and A. Toepel (eds), *Bibel, Byzanz und Christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö zum 65. Geburtstag* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), pp. 185–201.

seemed to say the opposite of Origen in claiming that the original image of God in the human was physical as well as mental? We know Theophilus' *declared* reasons for his attack on Origen's *De oratione* (its evidences of supposed 'subordinationism', triumphantly exposed and excoriated in his second Synodal Letter[33]). But one is bound to ask, as Thomas Graumann has also done in an insightful recent article,[34] whether the reasons given by Theophilus were the actual ones animating him. After all, almost any pre-Nicene author could also have come under the same ban of trinitarian 'subordinationism': why then did Theophilus go for Origen's *De oratione* so specifically? Is the Romans 8 nexus perhaps again significant here?

The first thing we have to admit in this complex story of the so-called 'Origenist crisis' is that there is no *one* explanation which can account for every aspect of its unfolding drama; and in any case I am only focusing here on its original *Alexandrian* manifestation.[35] Elizabeth Clark's analysis, in her complex study *The Origenistic Controversy*, maybe suffers from an excess of theorising;[36] but it does at least demonstrate that a number of contentious themes – questions of theodicy, questions of the status of the 'image' of God in the human, questions of what Clark calls the 'cultural coding of the body' – all became intertwined, even after the issues of personal power politicking and animosity between Theophilus and his original opponents, Isidore and the monastic 'Tall Brothers' from Nitria, became implicated in his initial outbreak against Origen. But what has not received sufficient attention up to now, in my view, is the significance precisely of what I have called the 'Romans 8 nexus' in the tension wrought out between Theophilus and his Origenist monastic opponents at Nitria (on the one hand), and also against the so-called 'Anthropomorphites' (on the other), whom he simultaneously countered. Accordingly the last portion of this article will be devoted to a short attempt to throw some fresh light on this double assault.

[33] For the cited translations from Theophilus' Second Synodal Letter, I am reliant on Norman Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* (London, Routledge, 2007), here pp. 93–9. This letter is only fully preserved in Jerome, letter 92: Jerome, *Epistulae*, ed. Isidore Hilburg, CSEL 54–6 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1910–18), vol. 2, pp. 147–55.

[34] Thomas Graumann, 'Reading *de Oratione*: Aspects of Religious Practice in the Condemnation of Origen', in G. Heidl, R. Somos, with C. Németh (eds), *Origeniana Nona: Origen and the Religious Practice of his Time* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), pp. 159–77.

[35] With which we need to compare the slightly earlier impetus from Epiphanius, on which see, *inter alia*, Jon F. Dechow, 'The Heresy Charge Against Origen', and 'Origen's "Heresy": From Eustathius to Epiphanius', in Lothar Lies (ed.), *Origeniana Quarta* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag, 1987), pp. 112–22 and 405–9.

[36] Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

We should note immediately, in anticipation of this account, that if one assumes that the controversy was only about the attempt to purge monasticism of an alien imposition from *Platonic* thought, then it can scarcely explain that other propulsion – against the 'Anthropomorphites', monks supposedly engaged in a quite different sort of theorising about their own role and significance, as physical embodiments of divine life. But if the underlying problem for Theophilus is one of consolidating his political and sacramental role as bishop over against a form of pneumatological power-in-prayer manifested in both branches of monks in question, then what we have here is a crisis precisely of different forms of *theological* power. Here we come then to the heart of my *theoretical* proposal, flagged at the outset of this article. This is not a manifestation of 'institution' versus 'charisma', in the old Weberian model,[37] but rather of episcopal/sacramental power versus monastic/pneumatological power. *And even the 'versus' here is arguably somewhat misleading*: if I am right, Theophilus sought as much to incorporate, or harness, the Romans 8 nexus of monastic, spiritual prayer-power as he did to humiliate or castigate it. For he too revered it, the evidence suggests, while also fearing its potential capacity for institutional destabilisation.

But let me now fill in some of the details of this supposition. I select only three major points to sketch out the thesis a little further.

First, in his initial show-down with his previously trusted assistant Isidore and the Tall Brothers who defended him, Theophilus was clearly dealing with opponents of considerable public stature and – in the case of the Tall Brothers – monks of known spiritual quality. To turn the theological tables against them was therefore potentially dangerous and could only be done by hoisting them in some way on their own Origenistic petard; but simultaneously this undertaking was done to underscore Theophilus' own hierarchical power as bishop in insisting on a newer, post-Nicene notion of 'orthodoxy' (orthodoxy-by-creedal-assent), which, as we have seen, had never been assumed by Origen himself. Whereas, as we saw, Origen worked with the notion of 'orthodoxy' as a *project* of spiritual transformation, and gave to the *spiritual exegete* a supreme role of authority in that task, we now see in Theophilus' excoriation of Origen an implicit challenge to these very

[37] Norman Russell utilises precisely this Weberian model in his 'Bishops and Charismatics in Early Christian Egypt', in John Behr, Andrew Louth and Dmitri Conomos (eds), *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), pp. 99–110, but tells me he has now repented of it. Earlier, Joseph W. Trigg, playing on the same Weberian heritage, but preferring the earlier theorisation of Rudolf Sohm, had made an attempt to represent Origen as a 'charismatic *intellectual*' (in 'The Charismatic Intellectual: Origen's Understanding of Religious Leadership', *Church History* 50 (1981), pp. 5–19).

presumptions. Theophilus takes Origen to task in his second Synodal Letter precisely for his 'failure' to measure up to Nicene, conciliar orthodoxy in this new sense.[38] In the *De oratione* prayer is addressed to the Father alone, through the Son, and – anachronistic as this charge was against a third-century author – it is sufficient for Theophilus that Origen falls at this first *homoouian* fence: he has indefensibly subordinated Son and Spirit to the Father.[39] It is also revealing that Theophilus uses the opportunity, in his 17th Festal Letter, to critique Origen's doctrine of the Spirit for its supposed failure to do justice to the life of the sacraments. This is not, on my reading, a sign that the Origenist monks had a failed doctrine of the Spirit; on the contrary, it was surely the case – given the Romans 8 nexus – that they had a very vibrant one (perhaps too vibrant), but arguably not one as well-knit into episcopally focused sacramental life as Theophilus wanted.[40] Norman Russell finally sums up the problem thus: 'Theophilus could not afford to have a hostile group close to Alexandria, confident of their moral and intellectual superiority, who could undermine his leadership'.[41] That may make the matter sound entirely political; but on my reading, the theological issues were inexorably entwined with the political, and arguably the more pressing. Pneumatology *was* power for monks of evident spiritual stature.

So now we can return to the puzzle of why Theophilus went for the *De oratione* of Origen, specifically. Thomas Graumann hypothesises that this must have been because the criterion of liturgical life and performance had, in the recent, post-Nicene debates over the divinity of the Holy Spirit (as we know from Basil's *On the Holy Spirit*) become stock in trade. Perhaps this is a slightly different way of saying what I have argued by coming at the Romans 8 nexus more specifically: Origen's *De oratione* was attacked because of the particular sets of association I have outlined. That is, it bespoke a collocation of ascetic and spiritual powers which potentially stood against the episcopal hierarchy; it thus needed both chiding and containing.

The second issue which presses here is the more mysterious one of the so-called 'Anthropomorphites'. How could Theophilus be attacking them and

[38] See again Russell, *Theophilus*, pp. 93–5, 97–9.

[39] Several other charges are also made against the *De oratione*: chiefly in relation to the resurrection body and Origen's teaching on angels (for critical comment, see Russell, *Theophilus*, pp. 25–7).

[40] See also the 'Homily on the Mystical Supper', which repeatedly stresses sacerdotal *obedience* over against eremitical virtuosity: Russell, *Theophilus*, pp. 52–60.

[41] Ibid., p. 27. The case of Synesius, as Norman Russell also highlights, shows that Theophilus was perfectly happy to have even a bishop as an Origenist, as long as he was not on his doorstep (in Libya), and thus not challenging his own patriarchal authority.

the Origenists simultaneously? Was he one minute Origenist and the next anti-Origenist, for purely political reasons, as Socrates was the first to charge and much modern scholarship has echoed? A certain fog descends here given the paucity of consistent evidence from the contemporary sources and the fact that the original Festal Letter of 399 has not survived. But as Norman Russell suggests, essaying a reconstruction from Gennadius' account, it would seem that Theophilus was probably following the new Athanasian insistence on an 'ontological gulf' between God and the human, and with that insisting, again with Athanasius, that the image of God in the human was profoundly lost at the Fall, and in any case did not reside in the physical aspect of the human but in the 'attributes of immortality and incorporeality'.[42] Whether Theophilus sufficiently stressed the regenerative effect on the 'image' of the incarnation, which was also of course crucial for Athanasius, is not clear; but if we suppose that he was addressing an audience of monks committed (*à la* Romans 8 nexus) to the possibility of spiritual perfection in *this* bodily life, of transport with the angels even now to the heavens through prayer and asceticism, we can readily see how Theophilus' rebuke would have cut at their most basic theological commitments.[43]

Finally, it is worth noting some elements of Theophilus' other writings during the controversy which also support my hypothesis of an underlying, albeit covert, shift to a new enforcement of episcopal power over against acknowledged monastic, ascetic authority. Quite apart from the evidence of the second Synodal Letter, already cited, Theophilus' 'Tractate on Isaiah 6' is revealing for its vicious assault on what he called the 'fog' of Origenistic allegory, and its insistence that 'no creature, whether visible or invisible, can apprehend the divine greatness'.[44] Such anti-elitism could score equally well against Evagrian or 'Anthropomorphite' monastic opponents, note, despite their various differences of theology. Or again, Theophilus' 'Homily on Repentance', which probably comes from the same period as that of the problems with the Nitrian monks, repeatedly stresses the importance of the Christian's relationship with the *Spirit* ('It is the shedding of tears of repentance that makes the Holy Spirit quickly enter into you and take up his abode in you'). Theophilus himself even seems to have held the view

[42] Ibid., p. 22.

[43] Theophilus' two sets of opponents thus doubtless had very different views on the vexed issue of what constituted the 'image' of God in the human; but my point here is that what ironically conjoined them in Theophilus' eyes was what I have called the 'Romans 8 nexus'.

[44] Russell, *Theophilus*, p. 163.

that monks had the possibility of becoming sinless;[45] but the laity needed serious forms of repentance in order to receive the Holy Spirit with similar conviction and depth. The same homily comes to a climax, significantly, with the insistence on the importance of the reception of the eucharist in order to meet the angels face to face. As I read it, this text represents a simultaneous *vindication* of the 'Romans 8 nexus' of prayer in the Spirit (including the quest for perfection and angelic participation), artfully combined with an equal insistence on submission to episcopal authority in the rites of appropriately ordained sacramental participation.

In short, Theophilus did not really change his mind about 'Origenism'. In one sense he continued to admire the Origenist monks and their elitist theology as much as he needed to bring them to episcopal heel.

Conclusions and Coda: Hierarchy and Monastic Authority, 'Power' and Prayer

Let me now conclude this article with some theoretical and systematic suggestions, as promised.

I have argued in what I have presented here that the build-up to the so-called 'Origenist crisis' had a long history. An increasingly elitist spirituality of intense commitment to prayer had developed out of Origen's rendition of Romans 8, and it conjoined with the social propulsion of early Antonite monasticism – which in turn bifurcated into more than one theological trajectory. The monastic power-of-prayer manifested here was a spiritual and ascetic one; and it was set on a course of complex tension with the new forms of episcopal power mandated both by imperial support, and by the emergence of a post-Nicene understanding of orthodoxy as submission to creedal assent.

Now texts, as such, do not have intentional histories, nor do sociological theories dictate historical developments. But when modern theorists come to talk about 'power', as they have done a great deal recently in so-called 'late antique' studies of this period,[46] they do not always do sufficient justice to either the hermeneutical or theological imaginations of the time, except

[45] I am grateful for a correspondence with Norman Russell on this point, relating to his translation of 'The Homily on Repentence' (retrieved from the Coptic), ibid., p. 76. There is no direct connection between this moment of Alexandrian discussion about the restoration of the 'image' and the later 'Isochristoi' debate, as far I can tell.

[46] Consider, for instance: Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); Richard Lim, *Public Disputation, Power and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging*

as subsumed under some other reductive category. Peter Brown's rich but rather fuzzily conceived notion of 'holy man' (socially needed, somehow, in a period of political instability),[47] or Claudia Rapp's analysis of various powers of the imperial bishop ('pragmatic', 'ascetic', 'spiritual'),[48] perhaps come as close as is possible, on basically secular presumptions, to theorising what I have been attempting to describe in this article. But frankly a reductively secular or 'political' account will not capture the full significance of what was at stake in this late fourth-century paroxysm at the outbreak of the Origenist controversy. For here one sort of theological power (the power of prayerful perfection, tending to elitist enclavism) confronted another (the power of the bishop, insisting on sacramental and ecclesial incorporation, and increasingly backed by imperial authority). The latter ploy, as I read it, did not seek to obliterate the former (indeed it secretly continued to admire it). It sought rather to tame and utilise its force. This is not, then – to repeat – a new form of Weberian stand-off between charisma and institution. Rather, it is sacramental institution attempting to harness and own the irreducible power of personal prayer.

It is worth reminding ourselves that, well before Theophilus, Athanasius had already attempted, after his return from monastic exile, to take on the role of monastic adviser and bring very personal issues of monastic supervision (advice about nocturnal emissions, no less)[49] under his episcopal train, even as he utilised the monks' Romans 8 theology, as I have hypothesised, for his new pneumatological agendas. And much later Cyril of Alexandria, Theophilus' nephew and descendant in the see of Alexandria, would continue this episcopal supervision of the monks by writing to them on christological issues and yet again appealing to Romans 8, and its attendant pneumatology, to bring them on board with his current theological concerns.[50] In short,

Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[47] In his *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), ch. 3, Peter Brown does in fact subject his own earlier theory to some considerable critique and clarification.

[48] See Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

[49] For an astute discussion of this dimension of Athanasius' career, see David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

[50] Cyril of Alexandria, letter 1: *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, ed. Eduard Schwarz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1927–30), vol. 1, pp. 10–23, here pp. 21–2; *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Letters 1–50*, tr. John I. McEnerney (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), pp. 30–1. Relevant here also is Cyril's retroactive identification with Athanasius in his role as bishop: see Thomas Graumann, 'Kirchlicke Identität und bischöfliche Selbstinszenierung: Der Rückgriff auf "Athanasius" bei der Überwindung

we see in the fourth–fifth centuries in Alexandria a complex negotiation and development of episcopal power, one wrought out with equal cognisance of imperial forces *and* of monastic, pneumatologically infused, spiritual impact. In my view these developments cannot be accounted for effectively in purely secular categories, however illuminating those categories and forms of analysis may be as accompanying means of insight.

Finally, I promised a concluding reflection as a systematic theologian, and it is this. If we learn anything from this particular trajectory of church history it is that the Romans 8 approach to the Trinity (through deep prayer, by the leading efficacy of the Spirit, and in increasing union with Christ) brings its exponents into the danger of at least some tension with ecclesiastical authority. Its 'orthodoxy' (the orthodoxy of spiritual transformation) comes with cost; its orthodoxy therefore, and paradoxically, sits at the edge of what is more generally regarded as 'orthodoxy', that is as obedient creedal assent. Yet its orthodoxy more convincingly internalises, through prayer and pain and practice, the logic of the divine economy.[51]

I have not been in the business in this article, as some scholars have been lately, of exonerating or extolling Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria's response to his Origenistic monks.[52] I do not in any way find him an attractive figure, least of all for his later (and frankly thuggish) part in the deposition of John Chrysostom. But I hope I have thrown some new light on what exegetical, ascetical and theological issues he may have been up against in the Alexandria of his day. As a late fourth-century bishop accommodating himself to his new churchly position under Roman authority, and yet also simultaneously fearing and admiring his monastic subjects, he certainly knew what he was up to: his response was in that sense entirely 'rational'. If my theologically inflected account is correct, there was nothing inconsistent in his project at all, no *volte face*. In short, the 'Origenist crisis' in Alexandria was in one sense asking to happen, and Theophilus negotiated it with just as much theological acumen as political canniness.

des nachephesinischen Schismas und in Kyrills Propoganda', in Barbara Aland, Johannes Hahn and Christian Ronning (eds), *Literarische Konstituierung von Identifikationsfiguren in her Antike* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 195–213.

[51] I spell out this argument in much more detail in Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, ch. 3.

[52] See esp. Norman Russell, 'Theophilus as a Forensic Practitioner', *Studia Patristica* 50 (Leuven, Peeters, 2011), pp. 235–43.