

## What can modern theologians learn from Origen's School in Caesarea?

**Fr. PhD. Gustaf Hans Gunnar af HÄLLSTRÖM**

Faculty of Theology,  
Åbo Akademi University, Vaasa,  
FINLANDA,  
E-mail: [gunnar.hallstrom@abo.fi](mailto:gunnar.hallstrom@abo.fi)

### ABSTRACT

*Early Christianity could enumerate only a very limited number of higher educational institutions. One of the best known is Origen's "academy" in Caesarea (Palestine). Gregory the Wonderworker wrote a speech of praise, 'Oratio panegyrica', to his professor when leaving the school after many years of study. The speech illustrates a number of interesting facts about the professor, the students, and the curriculum. The low number of students made it possible to achieve a very close relationship between the teaching staff and the students. The teacher was very much a spiritual father and a friend. Gregory thought that Origen was an example of a godlike person, and thus also an example to be followed. The likeness of God consisted first of all in likeness with God's Logos. A person living in accordance with reason lives the life of God. The students participating in the tuition provided by Origen came from respectable classes of the society. Both men and women could participate, both young and grown-up people. Many can be classified as seekers, that is, persons looking for an intellectually acceptable world-view.*

**Keywords:** Origen of Alexandria; Gregory the Wonderworker; Plotinus the Platonist; Biblical hermeneutics; imago Dei;

### INTRODUCTION

The Christianization of millions of former pagans constitutes the greatest miracle in the history of the Early Church. Within a relatively short time people who worshipped pagan gods learned to cite the Creed, to pray the Lord's Prayer, and to recall central parts of Biblical history. This miracle within the realm of religious education may never get a satisfactory scholarly explanation. *Pax Romana*, good communications, and the dominance of the Latin and Greek languages provide only an unsatisfactory explanation: all other religions and ideologies were promoted by the same conditions. The efficiency of the catechumenate with its baptismal teaching is one of the best explanations. But in the Early Church there were also schools, providing advanced teaching in Christian faith. In the second century, Justin the Martyr ran one of them in Rome. Conversion to Christianity was not an obligatory element in the curriculum, but from the trustworthy tract called *The Martyrdom of St. Justin* we learn that Justin's students did follow their teacher even into martyrdom. In Egypt, Alexandria, there was a famous "catechetical school". Modern scholars disagree regarding the nature and status of this school; therefore it is not easy to tell much about it. But we do know a lot about the Christian school that existed in Caesarea, in

Palestine, in the early third century, a school founded by Origen of Alexandria. This school is better known than the Alexandrian school and the other schools within the Empire also, for that matter, since a written description remains: that of Gregorius Thaumaturgus from about 240 A.D. This speech, called *Oratio panegyrica*, is a speech of thanks delivered by a former student to the professor.<sup>1</sup> A panegyric address should not be believed uncritically in all its details, but even so it provides a lot of information how a Christian institution for higher education was run in those days.

After five years of study Gregory was leaving the school and wished to take farewell.<sup>2</sup> The speech shows that Origen's spiritual academy was highly successful - therefore we can expect to learn something from it! Gregory's description is of course not normative for all times in the future: we need not accept everything. But we can learn, either by accepting the useful characteristics of the school, or take warning from other features that we do not wish to copy to our modern theological schools.

It so happens that another speech by a student to his teacher was held perhaps even in the same year: the encomium speech of the philosopher Porphyry (Porfyrios) to his teacher Plotinus, the famous Neoplatonist.<sup>3</sup>

Porphyry, too, describes the teacher and the teaching. A comparison between this secular "university" with Origen's Christian counterpart is therefore possible to make: was there any difference? May be there is something to be learned from Porphyry, too? However, in this short presentation it will not be possible to treat Plotinus' school extensively.

## 1. THE PROFESSOR

We are not told how many teachers there were at Origen's Spiritual Academy in Caesarea. Gregory gives, however, the impression that Origen was the dean, the professor, and the secretary of the school! More important than the number of staff is what we learn about Origen as a professor.

Let's start with the most chocking statement: Origen, the teacher, is a living example of what means the famous biblical expression *homoiosis Theo*, that is, the likeness of God.<sup>4</sup> This sounds terribly pretentious; a modern university professor cannot but feel certain hopelessness in front of such a description! But Gregory understands the *similitudo Dei* in a comforting and interesting way: he interprets it in terms of education. He states that the education performed by such a god-like teacher consists of nothing less than making the students also more and more God-like. That is what Christian education is all about! Origen was the most educated person. He was the one living more than all others according to Logos, the Divine Word. And so, when students get *logikoteroi*, more like Christ the Word and formed by his wisdom, they are educated in a Christian way and closer to the likeness of God. A modern teacher, wishing to practice this principle, needs to concentrate on and imitate Christ first of all as the Wisdom.

The relationship between Origen, the teacher, and his students is described in detail. It is like the relation of a father to his sons.<sup>5</sup> Allow me to interpret this as follows: not only the bishop is a father. The professor is a father, too, at least in Origen's academy. Origen was

[1] The original Greek text is edited and translated into French by Henri Crouzel s.j., in the series *Sources chrétiennes*, vol. 148.

[2] According to some scholars Gregory stayed no less than seven years in Origen's school.

[3] The text is edited by Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwytzer 1964.

[4] *Oratio* II.

[5] *Oratio* XVI.

ordained a presbyter, but denied presbyterial status by the Alexandrian church. But his being a father is not a consequence of his disputed clerical status. He has a heart for his students. And he seems very different from modern professors and other academic teachers who tend to be remote lecturing machines!

The relation between a father and a son has a hierarchical one, and it contains a ring of difference in authority. Gregory corrects this impression by providing another example of his relation to his professor, an example less traditional than that of a father and son. His feelings for Origen were those of king Saul's son Jonathan towards king David (1 Sam. 18:1).<sup>6</sup> Anyone familiar with this Old Testament couple will understand how close Origen and Gregory in fact were: "Jonathan had given his heart to David and hand grown to love him as himself." Both David and Jonathan were royalties, and no difference in hierarchical status existed in that relationship. How strong emotional ties there can be between modern students of theology and their professors, and how these ties should be handled, is too vast a topic to be discussed here.

From other sources we know that Origen wrote biblical commentaries (e.g. on St. John) during his Caesarean period. These were erudite and large pieces of intellectual work. He also preached to ordinary people in the church. These remain in homilies illustrating great pedagogical skill from Origen's part. In them, the professor presents to simple believers understandable explanations of biblical texts. Origen also wrote an apology for those outside the borders of the church.

Modern theologians are thus reminded: teaching, writing and preaching are traditionally activities attached to a Christian "*doctor ecclesiae*". These activities ought to be undertaken in all directions: towards the learned experts, towards simple people, and to the opponents of Christian faith. In the Neo-Platonic academy run by Plotin we notice that the professor was an exegete also there. But instead of commenting on the Bible, he commented upon the works of Plato. Modern natural sciences may not be benefitted from such an exegetic method, but within theology, and philosophy, the importance of explaining tradition, the Bible included, was vital, and still is.

## 2. The Students

Gregory the Wonderworker came from a wealthy home in Pontus. His aim was to become a lawyer; therefore he studied jurisprudence for many years in Berytus (Beirut). But he met a Christian sage, the famous Origen, in Caesarea. And so he left his previous life behind, homeland, friends and relatives. This is what he says, but it was not altogether true: his brother was also studying at Origen's Academy, and his sister lived in town as well. All the same: a new life began for Gregory when he began his theological studies. This does not mean that he suddenly decided to study for the priesthood. After five years of study he does not yet know what to do next, but he imagines that he will be doing something "secular." We may dare the conclusion that Gregory was a student for personal, or perhaps better, existential reasons, and not for the bread that would follow a good education.

As for the students at Plotinus's philosophical school, the same facts apply. Many "seekers" attended. Thus the theologians were not alone on the market, there were others wishing to take care of young people looking for spiritual values! *Vita Plotini* tells about a certain Rogatianus, who had achieved almost everything possible in the secular world: he was a Roman senator, elected praetor, both rich and influential. But then one day he notes

---

[6] *Oratio VI.*

that all this is worth nothing: he renounces it all, sells his belongings, frees his slaves, and starts looking for something deeper in life in the school of Plotinus.

To be sure, there were often young persons among the students of Origen, persons just beginning to shape their world view and values. But surprisingly often the “students” were somewhat older persons with a professional carrier behind them. Among them were also high-ranking persons, perhaps fed up with fame and material welfare, in need of something deeper, something spiritual. From the imperial house, persons such as Julia Mamaea, the mother of Emperor Alexander Severus, visited the school of Origen. And the emperor Gallienus with wife Salonina attended Plotinus’ school.

Our faculties should be prepared to accept such “seekers.” Those who have experienced everything and reached all there is to reach in this world. Today’s values are hard. What matters now is economic growth, share markets, personal progress. But theological faculties have always been frequented by persons wishing to find something more and deeper. Professors should be prepared to provide something more to them than a language course and an ocean of facts. Thus, when the well-off student Gregory with a diploma from the faculty of jurisdiction comes to us, what will we offer? Let’s see what Origen had to give them.

### 3. CURRICULUM

It all starts with training in critical thinking. In the first phase, however, Origen is listening carefully to his students, in order to define what is needed. Like a farmer, Gregory says, like a peasant analyzing his fields in order to know what needs to be done in order to get a harvest, so Origen analyzed his students.<sup>7</sup>

A kind of “first test” took place before the studies began. Thereafter came what is called the “*Socratic method*” of questioning. Socrates used to ask people simple looking questions in order to show, step by step, that the “knowledge” people had was no real knowledge, but simply beliefs. Origen, the Christian Socrates, used “upsetting argumentation” - it was unpleasant, the student admits, and it caused “pain.”<sup>8</sup>

What a strange first year of theological studies! Part of this training of the mind consisted in processing/analyzing statements: the students should not assent to any statements without critical analysis, nor should they reject statements straight away, but they should take their time, and analyze whether there was some truth in the statement that appeared stupid when first heard. “*Origen exposed us as men who are ridiculously deluded,*” Gregory the Wonderworker writes.<sup>9</sup> It was just too easy to deceive the students by beautiful rhetoric or intimidating authority. What would this “painful” part of the curriculum mean today? The professor should, I think, teach the students not to approve or reject his statements but to attend the courses and seminars with the mind trained to think critically. Love for the teacher, so vividly portrayed in the speech of Gregorius, does not mean that the teacher becomes an infallible person, and even if he were infallible, the student should not start from that assumption.

In Origen’s academy all known philosophies were used as training materials. Without prejudice the student should accept or reject what was said by them. The intellectual

---

[7] *Oratio VII.*

[8] “And that was at first an unpleasant position for us, and one not without pain, as he dealt with persons who were unused to it, and still all untrained to submit to reason, when he plied us with his argumentations; and yet he purged us by them.” *Oratio VII.*

[9] *Oratio VII.*

freedom was remarkable, even in comparison with theological schools of our times. “Therefore to us there was no forbidden subject of speech; for there was no matter of knowledge hidden or inaccessible to us, but we had it in our power to learn every kind of discourse, both foreign and Greek, both spiritual and political, both divine and human; and we were permitted with all freedom to go round the whole circle of knowledge, and investigate it, and satisfy ourselves with all kinds of doctrines, and enjoy the sweets of intellect.”<sup>10</sup>

Origen himself liked Plato most, but the others were also studied in order to exercise the critical mind. As a consequence of this training, the students will “know themselves.” In this context it means that they will learn their own assets and limits, intellectually and ethically.

In the curriculum, natural science followed. It included geometry, which had a place of honor among the subjects studied, but astronomy was also important. The study of related subjects such as physics and chemistry are still important in our education today, but the goal was different in Origen’s school: the natural sciences were “natural philosophy.” They provided the students not only with mere facts concerning the structure of the world and the universe, but they also gave an impulse to meditate upon nature and, as a consequence, upon the Creator of nature and the whole cosmos.

Next on the schedule followed something we may call “*ethical science*.” However, purely theoretical ethics without a practical dimension was strongly criticized and out of the question in Origen’s school. “Doctrine without deeds” is vain and profitless, Gregory concludes after having passed the examination. In the moral teaching introspective self-observance was surprisingly central. “*Know yourself*” means also that one should know the impulses and affections and passions in one’s mind. But in a more constructive sense it means exercise in prudence, temperance, fortitude and righteousness. These cardinal virtues were followed by exercises in the even more religious virtues such as patience and godliness. Again it seems that the curriculum was not that much concentrated on instruction about different moral theories, or providing details, but on the training of the soul (mind) in general. The logic seems to be that when the student’s soul is well educated, it follows that the intellect of the student will be also be prepared and open to instruction.

## CONCLUSIONS

The great importance of the theological school in Caesarea was not immediately evident. But it was known as one of the rather few institutions providing the highest possible training in Christian theology. Its great *alumnus* Gregory the Wonderworker carried its fame beyond the times of Origen. Later the Cappadocian fathers were to get inspiration from Origen and Gregorius. And from Cappadocia theological wisdom is still spreading all over the Christian world. To me this means the following: an educator never knows what consequences his/her activity has. It may take centuries for the harvest to ripen, and by then we are not here to see it. Educating means to work in faith, accepting the Pauline wisdom: we plant the seed, we water it, but God makes it grow (1 Cor. 3:6).

---

[10] *Oriatio* XV. Translation: Ante-Nicene Fathers.