

ORIGENIST CONTROVERSIES

The controversies that flared up around certain doctrines propagated by, or attributed to, ORIGEN in his vast written heritage—most of which survives only in fragmentary form—must be studied as a minor aspect of his work rather than as central to the whole of it. Even though condemned by certain synods and general councils, his errors constitute but an infinitesimal part of the life and work of the greatest religious mentor of all time.

It is surprising to read THEOPHILUS, [patriarch](#) of Alexandria from 385 to 412, who was originally a firm adherent of Origen but later wrote in one of his festal letters that Origen was the “hydra of heresies.” This occurred after the condemnation of Origenism by the Council of Alexandria in 400. Notwithstanding the opposition of his erstwhile supporters and pupils, such as [Jerome](#) and Theophilus, Origen was not repudiated by many in the Coptic hierarchy, such as the Tall Brothers, who took refuge in [Constantinople](#) with so eminent a personality as Saint JOHN CHRYSOSTOM. Among his other formidable supporters were Saints Pamphylus, ATHANASIUS, BASIL, and GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, as well as the great DIDYMUS THE BLIND, who attempted to show that Origen was an orthodox trinitarian.

It must be noted, however, that the hostility of the reigning pope at Alexandria, DEMETRIUS I (189-231), was incurred by Origen’s acquisition of priesthood from the Palestinian bishops in a manner contrary to the established tradition of Alexandria. Another reason was his doctrinal differences with the church authorities. He suffered exile from Egypt to Palestine, where he established his own school and concentrated on the [writing](#) of his monumental literary output. The points raised by his opponents came into focus in the Latin [translation](#) of his *De principiis*, translated by Rufinus.

One of the first points raised by the anti-Origenists was Origen’s teaching

that the scriptures should be interpreted only allegorically. His trinitarian [doctrine](#) also aroused opposition by its apparent subordinationism. In his *Treatise on Prayer*, he preached that prayer should be addressed only to the Father, who is the total and absolute truth, whereas the Son and the [Holy Ghost](#) are only relative truths.

He also contended that all spirits are created equal and that, through the exercise of their free will, they become incarcerated in the human body, which, by falling into sin, may turn into a demon. Nevertheless, all will be mystically saved in the end. Origen's philosophical speculations and theological concepts appear to be in a continuous state of flux, and his mystical thinking is often obscured by the fragmentary nature of his pronouncements. His [doctrine](#) of the preexistence of the soul and the dual nature (corporal and spiritual) of all beings aroused much controversy.

Much of Origen's mysticism and theological speculation became the subject of controversy in a number of formal councils held in his lifetime, but the Origenist controversies outlived his time, and in 542 the Council of [CONSTANTINOPLE](#) enumerated what the bishops regarded as Origen's aberrations. His opponents succeeded in obtaining an imperial edict from Justinian, commanding the convening of a [second Council of Constantinople](#) in 543, where again an imperial letter of refutation of Origenist errors was condoned by Pope Vigilius.

All the bishops approved its contents except Alexander of Abila, who was deposed. The Origenist controversies became a closed chapter for all time, and Origen could be examined in a more sympathetic spirit in the light of his immense role as one of the greatest mentors in the development of Egyptian and world Christianity.

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