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

Krastu Banev

Final manuscript submitted to OUP
2014
For Esther and for our children
Liliana, Anastasia and Symeon

&

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

This page celebrates the culmination of a journey that began in Sofia where my father Krassimir Banev shared with me his fascination with the world of classical antiquity and spoke, with a moving foresight, of something quite impossible in those communist years, namely, that I should complete my education ‘in the West’. He did not live to see my matriculation at Cambridge but I have always felt that his prayer had been answered in my life, and it is therefore fitting that I dedicate this book to his memory.

In Cambridge, I am particularly grateful to Dr Thomas Graumann, who led me with alternating – and now fondly remembered -- patience and strictness through the maze of graduate research. I am also grateful to Metropolitan Kallistos Ware who, together with the then principal of the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge, Fr John Jillions, acted as referees for my scholarship applications to the AHRC and Trinity College, the two organizations whose financial assistance made my research possible. At an earlier stage of my work, Dr Norman Russell shared with me the manuscript of his book on Theophilus where I could consult his translations of the key sources. The research was carried out in the Cambridge University Library and the libraries of Tyndale House and Trinity College, all in Cambridge.

It was at Durham, however, where a team of friendly and supportive colleagues appointed me to a lectureship and granted me several research leaves, that I was able to complete the book.

Thanks are also due to the scholars who at various stages offered comments on my work: Prof. Malcolm Heath, Prof. Lewis Ayres, Prof. Lorenzo Perrone, Prof. Marcus Pleston, Dr Mihail Neamtu, Dr Stephen Thomas, Dr Yulia Konstantinovky, the anonymous reader, and the publishing staff at Oxford University Press. Many thanks to Kim Richardson for the copyediting and to Dany Christopher for his help with the preparation of the indices. Francis Garcia and Nicholas Birch read patiently through earlier drafts for errors of language and style. Those that remain, linguistic or other, are my own.
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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

and believing Christian’ carefully reconstructed by modern scholars, 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’.

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. 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 Férou: ‘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’. This passionate defence is said with regard to the sixth-century accusations but Férou’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. When trying to explain the root cause of the various accusations, Férou 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’.


\[7\] Férou, *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’.

a ‘researcher’ engaging in new ways with new questions. 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. Their conclusions rehearse the old argument of one of Theophilus’

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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 hypothèse 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

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¹¹ Greek text in Palladius, Dialogus de vita Ioannis Chrysostomi (Cambridge, 1928), 6. ET in R. T.
¹² On Palladius’ hostile attitude towards Theophilus, see D. Katos, Palladius of Hellenopolis
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’. For Elizabeth Clark, his campaign against Origenism was merely ‘a foil for his political machinations’.

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.

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

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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.

drive against the man, what all negative assessments of Theophilus’ share in
canmon 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;\textsuperscript{19} secondly, a more accurate appraisal of the
relationships between monks and bishops as the emerging leaders in the late-
antique city;\textsuperscript{20} and, thirdly, a more refined presentation of the intrinsic
complexity of early Egyptian monasticism.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{23} In what follows, I shall build upon this argument

\textsuperscript{19} On this key development, see now Katos, Palladius of Helenopolis.
\textsuperscript{20} Programmatic here remains the earlier work of P. Rousseau, Asetics, 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
\textsuperscript{21} For collections of seminal articles, see E. Wipszycka, Études sur le christianisme dans l’Égypte
de l’antiquité tardive (Roma, 1996); J. Goehring, Asetics, 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).
\textsuperscript{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.
Episcopal Policy towards the Origenism of the Desert?’, in L. Perrone (ed.), Origentina 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. As we shall see in the final fourth part, these documents offer strong basis for the claim that the eventual

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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.