

2014

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This article was originally published as:

Wagner, K. (2014). Theophilus of Alexandria and the Episcopal Ordination of Synesius of Cyrene. *Phronema*, 29 (2), 129-174.

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ISSN 0819-4920

# PHRONEMA

VOLUME 29

Number 2

2014

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# Theophilus of Alexandria and the Episcopal Ordination of Synesius of Cyrene

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***Abstract:** Extant works show that Theophilus was fiercely opposed to the Origenism of the Tall Brothers and their fellow monks. These same works also demonstrate that he was a competent and orthodox theologian. In peculiar contrast to the written proof of Theophilus' anti-Origenism, Theophilus ordained Synesius of Cyrene who had openly declared heterodox views. Norman Russell, in his work *Theophilus of Alexandria*, declares that Theophilus was willing to ordain Synesius and appoint him as bishop of the Pentapolis so long as Synesius kept these heretical opinions private. Given the unusual nature of his ordination, Synesius' relationship with Theophilus thus offers a useful perspective on the character, leadership style, and theology of the Patriarch of Alexandria.*

Synesius was a civic notable and Neo-Platonist philosopher of Cyrene.<sup>1</sup> Born sometime around 370 and living until at least 413, Synesius was married at the hands of Theophilus of Alexandria and later consecrated as Bishop of Cyrene by the same man. Prior to his ordination, Synesius openly declared that he was unable to accept some of the teachings of the Church, particularly regarding the origin of the soul,

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<sup>1</sup> Modern accounts of the life of Synesius can be found in Alan Cameron, Jacqueline Long and Sherry Lee, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Jay Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene: Philosopher – Bishop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, trans. F. Lyra (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1996); Synésios de Cyrène, *Hymnes*, French translation, commentary, and establishment of Greek text by Christian Lacombrade (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003) iii-xlix.

the destruction of the world, and the resurrection of the body. Norman Russell, author of a recent work on Theophilus, claimed Theophilus was willing to ordain Synesius for the see of the Pentapolis on the proviso that Synesius kept his views on these matters to himself.<sup>2</sup> Following his episcopal appointment Synesius showed himself to be an orthodox defender of the Christian Faith. C. J. de Vogel defines Synesius as one of those writers of the early Christian world “who endeavoured to give a rational and more or less philosophical account of their belief, and did so even without mentioning the name of the Person after whom Christians bear their name.”<sup>3</sup> If de Vogel is correct in her categorising of Synesius – and we are not saying here that she is – and if Synesius held unorthodox beliefs, one must question as to whether it was prudent for Theophilus to ordain such a person given that the role of a bishop is first and foremost to proclaim the Gospel, a task which is impossible when one refuses to mention the name of Christ. Synesius’ ordination by the hand of Theophilus therefore raises significant questions regarding the character and behaviour of the latter, if indeed Synesius was both doctrinally suspect and reluctant to mention the name of Christ.

This paper seeks to determine whether Theophilus was right to ordain Synesius given that Synesius seems to have openly rejected some elements of Christian doctrine. His ordination is particularly problematic as Theophilus is widely known for his defence of orthodoxy, which showed itself particularly in his opposition to paganism, anthropomorphism, and Origenism. Theophilus was a strong and capable patriarch. His decisions were calculated and shaped by ideology and politics. We can confidently say then that the ordination of Synesius by Theophilus is not an empty event, but rather, a moment which reveals something of the character of Theophilus.

The first section of this study will set out the three major concerns Theophilus faced as Patriarch of Alexandria – paganism,

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<sup>2</sup> Norman Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) 27.

<sup>3</sup> C. J. De Vogel, ‘Platonism and Christianity: A Mere Antagonism or a Profound Common Ground?’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985) 1-62, 22.

anthropomorphism, and Origenism. The second section will address the doctrinal objections Synesius outlined in his Epistle 105. This is important, as a simple reading of his doctrinal objections in this letter does not necessarily represent Synesius' views faithfully. While it will become apparent that these objections are somewhat typical for Neo-Platonists, we shall also see that Synesius was occasionally innovative in his expression and interpretation of the Neo-Platonic principles underpinning these objections. Having given fuller account of Synesius' objections, the third section will examine the writings of Theophilus to determine, where possible, Theophilus' position on the intricacies of the three objections outlined by Synesius. Our conclusion will bring together the findings of the first and the third sections, in particular, to determine if the act of Theophilus ordaining Synesius is consistent with the actions he took against paganism, anthropomorphism, and Origenism.

Before beginning our analysis proper it is important to acknowledge some points in order to clarify the objectives of this study. Firstly, Synesius was educated by the well-known Neo-Platonist, Hypatia, and his works reveal clearly the influence this formation had on him. In all likelihood, the concerns of Synesius were not necessarily inspired by an affiliation with Origen's writings; they could very plausibly be attributed to his formation in Hypatia's Alexandrian school. Secondly, it would be unwise to try and claim that Synesius ever read Origen's works. Such argumentation would be a novelty and an attempt to re-write Synesian history.<sup>4</sup> Evidence in his own writings proves to some extent that Synesius had little exposure to the writings of the Christian Fathers or other church documents prior to his election.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the object of this examination of Synesius' three

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed Jay Bregman is adamant that there is no evidence to suggest that Synesius ever read Origen. Jay Bregman, 'Synesius, the Hermetica and Gnosis' in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, eds R. T. Wallis and J. Bregman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) 92.

<sup>5</sup> A case in point is his acknowledgement in *Epistle 67* that he has not studied the sacred laws for a long period of time as yet, given that a year previously he was not yet inscribed on the list of bishops. His reasoning then for not studying the laws of the church (understood to mean the canons of the Church), was his lack of time spent as a bishop. One can infer then that at the time of writing *Epistle 105* he had not yet read the synodal documents countering Origenism.

doctrinal objections is not to determine if they are errors that Origen himself had made, but rather, if they were errors that Theophilus could have identified as inspired by Origen.<sup>6</sup> Suffice to say that Theophilus may have misrepresented Origen at times and that his interpretation of Origen's theology may not always have been justified.<sup>7</sup>

### **Challenges during Theophilus' Ministry and his Relationship with Origen and Origenism**

Theophilus faced a number of significant pastoral and theological issues during his time as Patriarch of Alexandria. His influence extended throughout Christendom through his involvement with synods and councils, his efforts to influence the appointment of bishops – most

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See Synésios de Cyrène, *Epistle 67.27-29* in *Correspondance – 2 vols*, Greek text edited by Antonio Garzya, French translation and commentary by Denis Roques (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003) 46 (= Syn., *Ep. 67.27-29* (Roques 188)). For further argumentation supporting the interpretation of these “sacred laws” as Church canons, see Cameron, Long and Lee, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* 25-26. We should note that Denis Roques' dating of the letter to January 412 must be called into question if Cameron *et al.* are correct in dating Synesius' episcopal consecration as 411 (sometime after the reception of Theophilus' paschal letter), as opposed to Roques' dating of his consecration as January 1, 412. Perhaps it is of little consequence for us here; we may be certain that the letter was composed in the year following his consecration. Roques 187 fn.1.

<sup>6</sup> Russell identifies that Theophilus particularly studied Origen's *De principiis*, *De oratione* and *De resurrectione* prior to the publication of his *Second Synodal Letter*. Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* 24.

<sup>7</sup> Russell argues exactly this case, recognising that it is probably right that modern readers should judge most of Theophilus' accusations against Origen to be unjust. Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* 25. I tentatively concur with this view. On the one hand, a fair reading of the preface of *De principiis* alerts us to the fact that Origen recognises the speculative nature of his work, particularly as he lays out the limits of what can be determined directly from apostolic teaching. On the other, however, his belief that careful argumentation and correct method can lead to the construction of “one body of doctrine” suggests that Origen believed that his conclusions could be deemed dogma, not merely theological explorations. Origen, *De principiis* Preface 10:188-196 in *Traité des Principes – Tome I*, ed. Henri Crouzel and Manlio Simonetti (Paris: Cerf, 1978) 88 (= Orig., *De princ.* Pref. 10:188-196 (Crouzel 88)).

significantly, that of John Chrysostom in Constantinople – and in his role as an expert in canon law, resolving ecclesiastical disputations.<sup>8</sup> At a local level in particular, Theophilus was a powerful influence against paganism.<sup>9</sup> In the early 390's, under the orders of Theophilus, the Serapeum was destroyed in Alexandria, promoting great dismay among pagans. Accounts of the event differ in details, but it seems sure that Theophilus sought justification for the destruction of the Serapeum from imperial laws which had been introduced to combat pagan worship. This is a classic case of the Church utilising imperial laws to achieve a theological end; in this case, the correction and conversion of Gentiles.<sup>10</sup> Theophilus did write against paganism and idolatry, but it is clear that his most powerful preaching on

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<sup>8</sup> Theophilus played a significant role in his region in resolving ecclesial disputes, particularly due to the fact that he was renowned as an expert in canon law. His expertise led to him being called upon by other bishops to mediate. For example, he was involved in resolving the issue of the recognition of clergy ordained by schismatic bishops during the Meletian schism in Antioch. Likewise he assisted in resolving a dispute regarding the succession of bishops in the see of Bostra in Arabia. Later Theophilus was called on to resolve significant problems between Jerome and Bishop John of Jerusalem that had led to Jerome and his monks being excommunicated by John. Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* 13-17.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed account of Theophilus' fight against paganism see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992) 52-58, and Stephen Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and its Leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004) 63-66.

<sup>10</sup> There are, unfortunately, many contemporary examples of such misuse of imperial authority by Christians against pagans, Jews and heretics. For example, the suppression of pagan rioters in Calama in 408; the destruction of pagan shrines by Marcellus of Ancyra in 385; and Ambrose's support for the perpetrators of a synagogue burning in the town of Callinicum in 388. Jill Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 88-91, 95. Ambrose, *Epistle LXXIII (40)*, *Sancti Ambrosii opera – Vol. LXXXII – Book 3*, Latin text established by M. Zelzer (Vindobonae: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1982) 54-73.

the subject came not in the form of words, but through deeds such as those related to the Serapeum incident.<sup>11</sup>

Another key concern for Theophilus was the propagation of anthropomorphism.<sup>12</sup> His efforts combating this heresy led him directly into conflict with the desert monks of Nitria. The Nitrian monks took the view that “the immeasurable and simple substance of the Godhead possesses [human] contours and a human shape.”<sup>13</sup> Theophilus opposed the monks on this point, labelling them “rustic and uncultivated” for holding such a belief.<sup>14</sup> His position was entirely orthodox and acceptable in the post-Nicene era. A key objection to anthropomorphism was that attributing human features to God risked attributing to God human passions such as anger, forgetfulness and ignorance. Theophilus’ well-known contemporaries, the Cappadocian fathers, recognised this and opposed any anthropomorphic image of God. For instance, the Nyssan believed

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<sup>11</sup> Clark identifies two homilies by Theophilus on these themes, one of which is of questionable authenticity. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* 55 n.74, 56 n.78.

<sup>12</sup> Cassian records that the letter contained a long discourse that persuasively refuted the anthropomorphism, which had apparently become widespread throughout the Egyptian monasteries. Cassian, *Conf. X, II, 2, John Cassian: The Conferences*, translation and annotation by Boniface Ramsay (New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997) 371 (= Cassian, *Conf. X, II, 2* (Ramsay 371)). The anthropomorphic heresy maintained that God was human shaped. It developed from a misguided interpretation of the scriptural account of the creation of Adam and other passages from the Hebrew Scriptures which alluded to God’s physical features.

<sup>13</sup> John Cassian, *The Conferences X, V, 2* (Ramsay 374).

<sup>14</sup> Defending his actions against the monks later in 403 AD, Theophilus wrote: “We have not only anathematized Origen’s heresies, but also another heresy that attempted to cause serious disturbance to the monasteries. Since certain people of the more rustic and uncultivated sort claimed that it was necessary to conceive of God in human form, we did not remain silent but also refuted this heresy, Christ having lent us vigilance, with written proofs in official ecclesiastical letters.” Theophilus, *Letter written at Constantinople 7*, Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* 141-42 (= Theo., *Const. 7* (Russell 141-42)). Note that unless otherwise stated all future references to works by Theophilus come from Russell’s text.



that, unlike His creatures, God is free from passions.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, he held that analogies and metaphors to describe God in human terms are always limited.<sup>16</sup> For example, in his treatise against Eunomius, Gregory of Nyssa recognised that scriptural language utilised metaphors taken from human life such as fingers, arms and hands to “illustrate symbolically divine things.”<sup>17</sup> These words, however, had both human and divine meanings.<sup>18</sup> Taking for an example the word “Father,” Gregory claims that this human term “hides a distinction between the uttered meanings exactly proportionate to the difference existing between the subjects of this title.”<sup>19</sup> The reasons for this are apparent when one considers that God’s creatures (*ontic* beings) are subject to limit, including the limit of language which is used to describe them. God, on the other hand, is not subject to limit.<sup>20</sup> On Gregory’s view then, positive terms such as fingers, arms and hands must be understood metaphorically as “only the operations of God can be

<sup>15</sup> και τις οὕτως ἄθλιος ὥστε μηδὲ τὴν θείαν τε καὶ μακαριαν φύσιν καθαρεῦειν ἀπὸ τοῦ κατὰ τὸν φθόνον πάθους ὑπολογίζεσθαι. Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I.418:21-23 in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera – Vol. I*, ed. W. Jaeger (Lieden: E. J. Brill, 1960) 148 (= GrNyss, *Eun.* I.418 (Jaeger 148)).

<sup>16</sup> “The Nature that has no boundaries cannot be accurately comprehended by means of the connotations of words. On the contrary, all the power of concepts [νοημάτων] and all the significance of words and names [ῥημάτων], even if they seem to have about them something grand and worthy of the Divine, cannot attain the nature of the Real itself. On the contrary, it is as if by certain traces and hints that our reason guesses at the Invisible; by way of some analogy [ἐκ τινος ἀναλογίας] based on the things it has comprehended, it forms a conjecture about the Incomprehensible.” Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily 1:38.13-19* in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. and intro. by Richard A. Norris, Jr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012) 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> These examples from human life are used πρὸς τὴν τῶν θείων δήλωσιν δι’ αἰνιγματος ὑπὸ τῆς γραφῆς μετενήνεκται. GrNyss, *Eun.* I.622:29-623:1 (Jaeger 205).

<sup>18</sup> ὥσπερ τοίνυν ἕκαστον τούτων τῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ ἀνθρωπίνως λέγεται καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρωπίνως σημαίνεται. GrNyss, *Eun.* I.623:1-3 (Jaeger 205-6).

<sup>19</sup> οὕτω καὶ τὸ τοῦ πατρὸς ὄνομα κἂν ὡσαύτως ἐπὶ τε τῆς ἡμετέρας καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς θείας λέγεται φύσεως, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ μέτρον τῆς διαφορᾶς τῶν ἐν τοῖς ὀνόμασι ὑποκειμένων καὶ τὰ διὰ τῶν φωνῶν σημαίνοντα τὴν παραλλαγήν ἔχει. GrNyss, *Eun.* I.623:2-6 (Jaeger 206).

<sup>20</sup> Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man – The Divine Presence* (New York: Paragon House, 1988) 95.

spoken of in affirmative terms, but the being of God must be conceived only in negative terms.”<sup>21</sup> It is therefore apparent that anthropomorphism threatened the transcendent nature of the Godhead as it purported to make claims as to its being. This was an unacceptable threat to orthodoxy.

Theophilus’ most well-known attack on anthropomorphism was contained in his *Paschal Letter* of 399. Unfortunately this letter has been lost and one must rely on secondary evidence to determine its content. This letter, which John Cassian referred to in his *Conferences*,<sup>22</sup> seems to have argued for God’s incorporeality in opposition to the anthropomorphic view of God which was held by many Nitrian monks.<sup>23</sup> History has generally deemed the contents of this letter and his theology at the time of writing to be inspired by the writings of Origen. However, while Socrates and others attributed Theophilus’ preference for believing God to be incorporeal to the influence of Origen, Norman Russell argues that it was Athanasius rather than Origen who was the inspiration for Theophilus.<sup>24</sup> While it is perhaps impossible to prove Russell’s thesis comprehensively, it is certainly worth noting that Socrates, Sozomen, and Palladius, each of whom included the Origenist controversy within their respective histories, were not sympathetic to Theophilus and would have tried to show that he

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<sup>21</sup> Gregorios, *Cosmic Man* 222-23. We may likewise say that words “cannot say being, but can say the mode of being, even when it is outside of time.” Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa’s Ad Ablabium* (Leiden, Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007) 105.

<sup>22</sup> Cassian, *Conf.* X, II, 2 (Ramsay 371). We must, of course, be aware that John Cassian was associated with the Origenist monks during his time living in Egypt and perhaps also in Syria. Furthermore, we should note that he was reluctantly ordained deacon by Theophilus’ adversary John Chrysostom. These facts should warn us against placing too much emphasis on the details of this letter and the events it provoked. For chronological details of Cassian’s life see Steven D. Driver, *John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 16.

<sup>23</sup> According to Stephen Davis this *Paschal Letter* of 399 appears to have “reflected his indebtedness to the theology of Origen.” Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy* 66.

<sup>24</sup> Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* 22.

acted out of political, rather than theological, motives.<sup>25</sup> There is no doubt that Theophilus was at times a divisive figure. This is beyond question when one considers such moments as his dispute with the Tall Brothers and the monks of Nitria, the disintegration of his relationship with his former confidant and ambassador Isidore, and the election and deposition of John Chrysostom. Given that it is not possible to map out adequately a truthful account of each of these episodes here it must suffice to say that one must consider the complex background of contemporary accounts of Theophilus' theology before declaring that Theophilus was influenced by Origen at the time of writing his *Paschal Letter* in 399.

Further to this, it is not reasonable to accept uncritically as Socrates did that Theophilus was two-faced in his attitude towards the writings of Origen and Origenism generally. Socrates, who was hostile to Theophilus, claimed the bishop resumed his study of Origen after the controversy. Indeed Socrates purports that Theophilus declared

[t]he books of Origen resemble a field full of all sorts of flowers; if then I find in it something good, I take it, but if something appears to me full of thorns, I avoid it as something sharp.<sup>26</sup>

In the absence of unbiased evidence, it is impossible to prove the veracity of Socrates' claim. What is certain is that Theophilus' relationship with the theology of Origen evolved over time. This evolution had three stages: the time leading up to, and culminating with the writing of the *Paschal Letter* of 399; the period of the Origenist controversy, which lasted from around

<sup>25</sup> “Socrates, Sozomen, and Palladius ... lead their readers to assume that theology was not central to the debate, and the little of it that appears was served up by the bishop of Alexandria as a guise to further his ecclesiastical politics.” Furthermore, these three historians were clearly hostile to Theophilus and sided with “the theological opinions espoused by the suspected Origenists.” Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* 44.

<sup>26</sup> Ἐὰν Ὀριγένους ἔοικε βιβλία λειμώνι <πλήρει> πάντων ἀνθέων· εἴ τι οὖν ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐφεύρω καλόν, τοῦτο δρέπομαι, εἰ δέ τι μοι ἀκανθώδες φανεῖν, τοῦτο ὡς κεντοῦν ὑπερβαίνω. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* VI, 9, Socrate de Constantinople, *Histoire Ecclésiastique – Livre IV-VI*, Greek established by G. C. Hansen, French translation by P. Périchon and P. Maraval (Paris: Cerf, 2006) 334-35.

399 until perhaps 403,<sup>27</sup> and the relatively quiet time which followed this up until his death on 15 October, 412.

Over the period covering his election in 385 until the reception of his *Paschal Letter* in 399, there are too few extant documents to make a thorough analysis of Theophilus' position with regard to Origenism. In the four fragments of Festal Letters dating from 386 to 395 which are translated by Norman Russell in his *Theophilus of Alexandria*, Theophilus gives no indication that he favoured or disapproved of Origen's theology. Furthermore, these texts do not reveal any particular influence of Origen. In the fifth *Festal Letter* Theophilus outlines an orthodox Christology which stresses the incarnation of the "living Word" without diminishing His divinity:

Born of a virgin, he assumed a body in our likeness, appearing outwardly like us in the form of a servant (cf. Phil. 2:7), but proving by his works that he is the lord and creator of all things, since the works he performs are those of God.<sup>28</sup>

The sixth *Festal Letter* echoes the fifth, describing the "supreme artist" and "living and active Word of God" as "coming forth from a virgin as a human being," accepting weak human nature.<sup>29</sup> While the fifth and sixth *Festal Letters* expounded a sound Christology, the first and tenth *Festal Letters* provide a glimpse into Theophilus' soteriology and Eucharistic theology. Echoing the Letter to the Hebrews and drawing an analogy between the Upper Room and the Holy of Holies, the Tenth *Festal Letter* describes Christ as annihilating the "typological practice of the High Priest" through the breaking down of the barrier between God and humanity. Prior to the Incarnation,

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<sup>27</sup> The end point of this period is somewhat difficult to determine with precision. One could argue that the heat went out of the Origenist controversy after the deposition and exile of John Chrysostom and the submission of the remaining Alexandrian monks (Eusebius and Euthymius) at the Synod of the Oak in 403.

<sup>28</sup> Theophilus, *Fifth Festal Letter* in Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* 48 (= Theo., *5<sup>th</sup> Fest.* (Russell 48)). Note that each festal letter will be abbreviated similarly.

<sup>29</sup> Theo., *6<sup>th</sup> Fest.* (Russell 48-49).

...the High Priest alone entered into the Holy of Holies once a year, the people remaining outside because they lacked sufficient power. But the Saviour went in and gave leave for those who wish to enter.<sup>30</sup>

In the brief fragment of the first *Festal Letter*, Theophilus affirms that Christ gave himself up for the sake of humanity and left his very self for Christians who may “consume the whole of him as life.”<sup>31</sup>

The second stage in Theophilus’ relationship with the theology of Origen, the period of the Origenist controversy, is comparatively well documented, with a number of letters – synodal, festal, personal, and otherwise – still in existence.<sup>32</sup> In these letters Theophilus details what he believed to be the erroneous aspects of Origen’s theology. Among his many concerns with Origen’s work, Theophilus believed Origen held the following views on the soul and body: the nature of the soul and God are identical,<sup>33</sup> souls came to be through the fall of rational intelligences;<sup>34</sup> souls pre-existed bodies and “were sent down to earth because of sins previously committed in heaven to be bound to bodies”;<sup>35</sup> the created body is emptiness and the ruin of rational beings;<sup>36</sup> resurrected bodies are corruptible, mortal, will dissolve into aether, and are spherical in shape;<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Theo., *10<sup>th</sup> Fest.* (Russell 49).

<sup>31</sup> Theo., *1<sup>st</sup> Fest.* (Russell 48).

<sup>32</sup> Dates provided by Russell for documents referenced here relating to the Origenist controversy are: *First Synodal Letter* (late 399-early 400); *Second Synodal Letter to the Bishops of Palestine and Cyprus* (Autumn 400); *Sixteenth Festal Letter* (401); *Seventeenth Festal Letter* (402 AD); *Letter written at Constantinople* (403); *Nineteenth Festal Letter* (404); *Third Letter to Dissidents* (currently undated). Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* 89-91.

<sup>33</sup> Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 14 (Russell 129).

<sup>34</sup> Theo., *16<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 17 (Russell 114); Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 15 (Russell 129-30).

<sup>35</sup> Theo., *Third Letter to Dissidents* (= *3<sup>rd</sup> Diss.*) (Russell 101); Theo., *19<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 12 (Russell 154); Theo., *Const.* 9 (Russell 142-43).

<sup>36</sup> Theo., *16<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 18 (Russell 115); Theo., *19<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 12 (Russell 153).

<sup>37</sup> Theo., *Second Synodal Letter to the Bishops of Palestine and Cyprus* (= *2<sup>nd</sup> Syn.*) 2 (Russell 94-95); Theo., *16<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 13, 15 (Russell 110-13); Theo., *Const.* 4, 5, 8 (Russell 139-42).

and, souls reincarnate, will “be restored and will return to their original state.”<sup>38</sup> A final point, regarding the creation of the world, Theophilus believed that Origen taught that God made only as many things as he was capable of conceiving and controlling.<sup>39</sup> We will return to these matters at various times.

The third and final stage in Theophilus’ association with Origen’s theology from 403 till his death in 412 is really un-documented, save for some comments in secondary sources. This is unfortunate as this is the period in which Synesius was ordained by Theophilus. Despite this, our knowledge of Theophilus’ actions against Origenism during other stages of his life provides us with sufficient data for determining Theophilus’ anti-Origenistic feelings during the height of the controversy. Hence, should we find that Synesius held Origenistic views, these feelings will be the standards by which to judge Theophilus’ perception of Synesius’ theology.

### **Clarifying the Doctrinal Objections of Epistle 105**

Some six months prior to his ordination, Synesius wrote an open letter (*Epistle 105*) to his brother Euoptius detailing his objections to accepting episcopal ordination. This letter was not only intended for the eyes of his brother, but for Theophilus and his advisors.<sup>40</sup> Synesius begins the letter by outlining his concern that the priesthood will take him from philosophy. Furthermore, in his mind, he doubts his own strength to keep the divine flame alive within himself. Having mentioned these worries, Synesius goes on to explain the reason behind the writing of this letter – he does not wish to be accused later of having hidden his objections to his ordination

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<sup>38</sup> Theo., *3<sup>rd</sup> Diss.* (Russell 101); Theo., *16<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 9 (Russell 107); Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 11 (Russell 126).

<sup>39</sup> Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 17-18 (Russell 131-33).

<sup>40</sup> Synesius finished Ep. 105 with the following command to his brother to inform Theophilus and the *scholastikoi* (advisors of Theophilus who were tasked with juridical duties) of the contents of this letter: “Apply yourself so that the lawyers [*scholastikoi*] are aware of this way of thinking and report it to the great Theophilus.” Syn., *Ep.* 105.143-45 (Roques 241). See also Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992) 138.

from Theophilus and the *scholastikoi* who were tasked with advising him. Synesius continues, mentioning his desire to remain with his wife, who had been given to him by the Law and by the hand of Theophilus himself.<sup>41</sup> What is more, he wishes that they may have many children in the future and that he would not want to sneak around like an adulterer to allow this to happen.<sup>42</sup> At this point Synesius moves from more practical considerations to outline three doctrinal concerns that he believes must be accommodated if he is to accept the episcopacy. These doctrinal objections made by Synesius in *Epistle* 105 are as follows:

Indubitably, I will never want to believe that the soul is born after the body. I will refuse to admit that the world will perish along with all its parts. Regarding the Resurrection, which is a received opinion, I see in it a sacred and mysterious conception on which I am far from sharing the ideas of the masses.<sup>43</sup>

Let us now consider each objection carefully to determine what Synesius really believed. We will leave discussion of the first objection, which is

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<sup>41</sup> Syn., *Ep.* 105.69-70 (Roques 238).

<sup>42</sup> We may infer from Synesius' letter that the current practice in the Alexandrian church was that sexual relations were forbidden for married bishops. Cochini, after extensive study of the manuscript tradition of the fourth century, affirms that bishops of both the East and West were called to practice continence at this time: "Let us conclude that the obligation demanded from married deacons, priests, and bishops to observe perfect continence with their wives is not, in the Church, the fruit of belated development, but on the contrary, in the full meaning of the term, *an unwritten tradition of apostolic origin* that, so far as we know, found its first canonical expression in the 4<sup>th</sup> century." Christian Cochini, *Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) 439. Furthermore, Stickler raises the interesting case of Jerome, who "appealed to the praxis of the Churches of the East, of Egypt and of the Apostolic See, affirming that they all accepted only clerics who were virgins and continent or, if married, those who had renounced the use of marriage." Jerome is perhaps our best source in the matter of Alexandrian practice in Synesius' lifetime, as extant letters sent between he and Theophilus prove that the two men knew each other well. Alfons Maria Cardinal Stickler, *The Case for Clerical Celibacy: Its Historical Development & Theological Foundations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995) 60-61. See also Roques, 365 n.25.

<sup>43</sup> Syn., *Ep.* 105.85-90 (Roques 239). Note that all direct quotes from the works of Synesius are my translations unless otherwise indicated.

ostensibly a question of the pre-existence of the soul, until the end. This is primarily due to the fact that the question of the resurrection of the body is closely linked to the problem of the *telos* of the soul. Hence we will examine one after the other the *telos* and the *archê* of the soul, as discussion of the first will inform our understanding of the second.

### *The Creation and Destruction of the World*

“I will refuse to admit that the world will perish along with all its parts.”<sup>44</sup>

At first glance Synesius seems to be concerned with the *telos* of the cosmos, though as we shall see, it is almost certain that his objection is related also to the *archê* of the cosmos.<sup>45</sup> Indeed Neo-Platonists came to see that it was self-evident that “the concepts of an ungenerated world and an incorruptible world are interdependent and reciprocal”; that is, “[t]he former implies the latter and the latter implies the former.”<sup>46</sup> Porphyry, Plotinus’ biographer, believed that Christian belief in the creation and annihilation of the Cosmos in time was illogical, irrational, and blasphemous, and was therefore unacceptable.<sup>47</sup> On his view, such beliefs imputed weakness or imperfection to the nature of God as they necessitated change in God’s immutable nature.<sup>48</sup> Porphyry’s position is instructive for us, not only for the fact that he is the first interpreter of

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<sup>44</sup> Τὸν κόσμον οὐ φήσω καὶ ἄλλα μέρη συνδιαφθείρεσθαι. Syn., *Ep.* 105.87-88 (Roques 239).

<sup>45</sup> In contradistinction, “the polemical target of the *creatio ex nihilo* was one or another Greek doctrine about the eternity of the world.” Jaroslav Pelikan, ‘Creation and Causality in the History of Christian Thought’ *The Journal of Religion* 40 (Oct., 1960) 246-55, 250.

<sup>46</sup> Niketas Siniouoglou, *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 162-63.

<sup>47</sup> Christos Evangelou, ‘Plotinus’s Anti-Gnostic Polemic and Porphyry’s *Against the Christians*’ in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, eds R. T. Wallis and J. Bregman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) 123.

<sup>48</sup> Evangelou, ‘Plotinus’s Anti-Gnostic Polemic and Porphyry’s *Against the Christians*’ 123. R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2002) 102.



Plotinus, but also because it is quite likely that it was a Porphyrian Neo-Platonism that was taught in Hypatia's school.<sup>49</sup> Consequently we may assume that Synesius' cosmology was inspired by Porphyry.<sup>50</sup> We shall first consider Synesius' cosmological views, drawing on the cosmology of Plotinus as interpreted by his disciple Porphyry. Having done this, we will be better able to determine whether Synesius' objection was compatible with orthodox Christianity of the late fourth/early fifth century.

For both Neo-Platonists and Christians the question of the creation of the Cosmos raised a number of interconnected issues. Some of the more important were: Who or what created the Cosmos and how? From what was the Cosmos created? Was the Cosmos created in time or from eternity? Simply stated, confirmed in their belief in God's role in creation, Christians developed the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* on the basis of both Scripture and philosophy in response to the second and third of these questions. While not expressed dogmatically until the thirteenth century,<sup>51</sup> the doctrine was substantially in place from the second century onwards.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Note that Porphyrian Neo-Platonism is commonly contrasted with its Iamblichian counterpart. Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene* 83.

<sup>50</sup> We may feel confident of this, as there is significant evidence to support the argument that Synesius adopted (and adapted) Porphyry's 'telescoped' triad of *hyparxis*, *dynamis*, *nous* as a model for his version of the Trinity. If Synesius has felt free to take on this important Porphyrian teaching, which is foundational to Porphyry's cosmology, it is not surprising that he should be inspired to take on other aspects of Porphyry's cosmology. Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene* 82-83.

<sup>51</sup> qui sua omnipotenti virtute simul ab initio temporis, utramque de nihilo condidit creaturam, spiritualem et corporalem, angelicam videlicet et mundanam. Lateran Council IV, *Constitutions* 1:10-12, Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils – Vol. 1* (London and Washington, D.C.: Sheed & Ward Ltd and Georgetown University Press, 1990) 230.

<sup>52</sup> For the history of the doctrine and its scriptural, patristic and philosophical roots, see John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. D. Knight (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 83-88; M. C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008) 38-49; P. Copan and W. L. Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004) 93-145; Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine*

According to Plotinus, all of creation has its source in the One.<sup>53</sup> Plotinus explains the generation of multiplicity from the simplicity of the One through the process of emanation. The first Principle (*archē*)<sup>54</sup> generated from the One is *Nous* or Intellectual-Principle.<sup>55</sup> Plotinus describes the generation of *Nous*:

...the One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself. This, when it has come into being, turns back upon the One and is filled, and becomes Intellect by looking towards it.<sup>56</sup>

So *Nous* comes to be through these two phases of procession (*prohodos*) and reversion (*epistrophē*). In the first instance, “a formless, infinite

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*of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 154-56.

<sup>53</sup> That is, the One is “the Source of all the “Reality” of all the “Being” in things.” John Herman Randall, Jr, ‘The Intelligible Universe of Plotinos’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30 (Jan.-Mar., 1969) 3-16, 14.

<sup>54</sup> Note that for the most part I will use the term *archē* rather than *hypostasis* to describe the One, Intellectual-Principle, and the Soul. My motivation for doing this is threefold; firstly, consistency; secondly, Plotinus used the term *hypostasis* in instances when he was not referring to any of these three entities; and thirdly, Plotinus himself preferred to use the word *archē*. Remes’ explanation (drawing on the work of Lloyd P. Gerson) is informative; the One, Intellect, and Soul are “(i) basic principles of explanation or fundamental explanatory categories; (ii) paradigms imitated by the lower levels and entities; and (iii) causes that actually generate everything there is.” Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Stocksfield, U.K.: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2008) 48.

<sup>55</sup> In his translation of the *Enneads*, MacKenna describes this second *archē* variously as: the Totality of the Divine Thoughts, the Intelligible Universe, or The Intelligibles. It should be noted that these examples are not an exhaustive list of the terms MacKenna uses to describe *Nous*. Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1956) xxv.

<sup>56</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* V.2.1, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1984) 59 (= Plot., *Enneads* V.2.1 (Armstrong 59)). Note, all references to the *Enneads* will be from the seven volumes of Armstrong’s edition unless otherwise indicated. Book numbers correspond to volume numbers except for Book VI.6-9 which is found in Volume VII.

stream of life flows forth from the One,” and in the second, *Nous* “turns back, contemplates the One, and so receives form and order.”<sup>57</sup> Plotinus contends that *epistrophē* establishes both Being and *Nous* and that this *archē* is therefore “simultaneously Intellectual-Principle and Being.”<sup>58</sup>

This process of *prohodos* and *epistrophē* is repeated as *Nous* becomes the source of the Soul, the third *archē*.

This activity springing from the substance of Intellect is Soul, which comes to be this while Intellect abides unchanged: for Intellect too comes into being while that which is before it abides unchanged. But Soul does not abide unchanged when it produces: it is moved and so brings forth an image. It looks to its source and is filled, and going forth to another opposed movement generates its own image.<sup>59</sup>

We will return to the product of the Soul’s downward movement momentarily. Before we do, however, we should recognise the two actions which are common to each of the three *archai*. Each of these three principles (the One, *Nous*, and Soul) performs an internal action (*energeia tēs ousias*) followed – in a metaphysical, not chronological, sense – by an external action (*energeia ek tēs ousias*).<sup>60</sup> For instance, the internal action

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<sup>57</sup> Wallis, *Neoplatonism* 66.

<sup>58</sup> “Its halt and turning towards the One constitutes being, its gaze upon the One, Intellect. Since it halts and turns towards the One that it may see, it becomes at once Intellect and being.” Plot., *Enneads* V.2.1 (Armstrong 59). Indeed *nous* is “eternal, true, and essential being.” Peter Manchester, ‘The Noetic Triad in Plotinus, Marius Victorinus, and Augustine’ in eds. Wallis and Bregman, *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* 212.

<sup>59</sup> Plot., *Enneads* V.2.1 (Armstrong 61).

<sup>60</sup> “In each and every thing there is an activity which belongs to substance and one which goes out from substance; and that which belongs to substance is the active actuality which is each particular thing, and the other activity derives from that first one, and must in everything be a consequence of it, different from the thing itself.” Plot., *Enneads* V.4.2 (Armstrong 147). Remes, *Neoplatonism* 51, and Lloyd P. Gerson, ‘Plotinus’s Metaphysics: Emanation or Creation?’ *The Review of Metaphysics* 46 (Mar., 1993) 559-74, 566-70. A useful analogy for imagining these internal and external actions is that of a multi-tiered water fountain; the topmost tier must fill before flowing down to the next, and so

of *Nous* is its gazing upon the intelligible so that it may be perfected by it.<sup>61</sup> The outward directed action of *Nous* which follows intellection is an outpouring which, in a sense, becomes Soul. Soul is comprised of two parts, the upward-looking Celestial Soul which contemplates *Nous*, and the Lower or Generative Soul which generates the material universe.<sup>62</sup> Soul is therefore the proximate cause of the Cosmos.<sup>63</sup>

While modern Christian doctrine is clear regarding the material with which the cosmos is made – God freely created the world out of nothing – the issue was still contentious for both Christians and pagans in the early fifth century. Neo-Platonists believed that the Creator required some type of material with which to create the Cosmos. In the case of Plotinus, the external activity of the Soul generates this formless matter. Plotinus considers it to be “non-being” (*mē on*)<sup>64</sup> or “the contrary of being” (*ousia*).<sup>65</sup> Here Plotinus has preferred the Platonic meaning of *ousia* as “intelligible being, the separate existence of the forms” to the Aristotelian notion of *ousia* as substance.<sup>66</sup> Plotinus’ ‘non-being’ is therefore the negation of

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on. Christian Schäfer, ‘Matter in Plotinus’ Normative Ontology’ *Phronesis* 49 (2004) 266-94, 271-72.

<sup>61</sup> Plot., *Enneads* V.4.2 (Armstrong 145).

<sup>62</sup> For an outline of how the Lower Soul creates in relation to the Ideas contained in the Intellectual-Principle, see Plot., *Enneads* II.1.5; II.3.17 (Armstrong 21-23, 97-99).

<sup>63</sup> The All-Soul is “the eternal cause of the existence, eternal existence, of the cosmos, or ‘WORLD’, or material or sense-grasped universe, which is the soul’s Act and emanation, image and ‘shadow’.” MacKenna, xxvi. It should be noted at this point that Plotinus and his followers often failed to delineate clearly between the *archai* when describing the cause of the Cosmos. Gerson addresses this problem adroitly in his attempt to determine if Plotinus’ account of creation is truly emanationist. He recognises that Plotinus posits *ousia* in *Nous* giving *Nous* an instrumental role in creation. As a consequence, Gerson prefers to not label Plotinus’ metaphysics emanationist or creationist as he sees that it is not compatible with Christian creationism nor is it strictly emanationist. Gerson, ‘Plotinus’s Metaphysics: Emanation or Creation?’ 572-74.

<sup>64</sup> Plot., *Enneads* III.6.7:12 (Armstrong 240).

<sup>65</sup> Gerd van Riel, ‘Horizontalism or Verticalism? Proclus vs Plotinus on the Procession of Matter’ *Phronesis* 46 (May, 2001) 129-53, 129-30.

<sup>66</sup> Riel, ‘Horizontalism or Verticalism?’ 130.

intelligible being rather than substance. Matter, which is ‘non-being,’ is thus completely undetermined, lacking measure, limit, quality, form, and substance.<sup>67</sup> Consequently, since matter is the contrary of substance and form, it is without quality and is evil.<sup>68</sup>

The fact that Plotinus conceives matter to be ‘non-being’ is consistent with his emanationist cosmology. While both Intellect and Soul are established through the process of reversion, Plotinus contends that matter lacks this capacity of reversion towards Soul. Thus matter is unable to establish itself and cannot receive form. We may wonder then how matter can receive form at all – which it must do to some degree as experience proves it is at least fleetingly intelligible – given that it is reversion which establishes form in both the Intellect and Soul.<sup>69</sup> Schäfer provides a good description of the means by which matter may be influenced by forms:

...amorphous matter, in its powerlessness, begs and bothers soul for the communication of form. But at the same time, matter is not able in any way to receive and to hold and contain form. Rather, [...] forms “come upon matter like a good dream [...]” that seems to bring some order into it.<sup>70</sup>

This dream metaphor alludes to the fact that Plotinus gives material beings an ephemeral status. For him, the appearances of material objects

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<sup>67</sup> Riel, ‘Horizontalism or Verticalism?’ 130. For Plotinus, substantiality is not dependent on matter. Rather, “by itself the form already satisfies the Aristotelian definition of primary substance,” thus the necessity of matter for constituting substance is negated. M. F. Wagner, ‘The Nature of Physical Reality’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. L. P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 130-70, 135.

<sup>68</sup> Plot., *Enneads* I.8.10 (Armstrong 305-6). D. O’Brien, ‘Matter and Evil’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* 171-95, 176. We note that Schäfer disagrees with the traditional interpretation of Plotinus which declares matter to be evil. He writes, “[w]hen Plotinus calls matter evil, he does so metonymically denoting matter’s totally passive potentiality as perceived by the toiling soul trying to act upon it as a form-bringer.” C. Schäfer, ‘Matter in Plotinus’s Normative Ontology’ *Phronesis* 49 (2004) 266-94, 266.

<sup>69</sup> Schäfer, ‘Matter in Plotinus’s Normative Ontology’ 272-73.

<sup>70</sup> Schäfer, ‘Matter in Plotinus’s Normative Ontology’ 274.

are deceiving and only apparent as the forms are not imprinted on matter, but rather remain within the Soul.<sup>71</sup>

We see a similar view of matter in Synesius. An excellent example of this may be seen in *Hymn I*:

May the flow of serpents creep underground,  
may the winged serpent himself creep underground,  
demon of matter (δαίμων ὕλας),  
cloud of the soul (νεφέλα ψυχᾶς),  
friend of the phantoms (εἰδωλοχαρῆς).<sup>72</sup>

Lacombrade identifies the winged serpent with the Johannine serpent of the apocalypse.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, Lacombrade correlates this image with the Pauline description of Satan in Ephesians 2:2, where the author refers to him as the “prince of the empire of the air.”<sup>74</sup> It is not surprising that Synesius refers to Satan as the “demon of matter” given that his hymns are replete with negative images of matter. For example, elsewhere in *Hymn I* Synesius refers to the “darkness of matter”,<sup>75</sup> the “black contamination of matter”,<sup>76</sup> and the sorcery of matter enchaining him “by its artificial magic.”<sup>77</sup> His reference to Satan as the “cloud of the soul” is even more interesting as it is a clear allusion to Synesius’ belief that matter somehow lacks substance and is an evanescent outpouring from the Soul. Lacombrade notes that the final image from this passage, the “friend of the phantoms,” is a common epithet in the Oracles and within the Synesian corpus.<sup>78</sup> According to Lacombrade this epithet (εἰδωλοχαρῆς) characterises

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<sup>71</sup> Plot., *Enneads* III.6.7 (Armstrong 239-43). Schäfer, ‘Matter in Plotinus’s Normative Ontology’ 275-76.

<sup>72</sup> Synésios de Cyrène, *Hymn I* (III) 86-92 in *Hymnes*, French translation, commentary, and establishment of Greek text by Christian Lacombrade (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003) 47-48 (= Syn., *Hymn I* (III) 86-92 (Lacombrade 47-48)).

<sup>73</sup> Lacombrade 48 n.1.

<sup>74</sup> Lacombrade 48 n.1.

<sup>75</sup> Syn., *Hymn I* (III) 264 (Lacombrade 51).

<sup>76</sup> Syn., *Hymn I* (III) 550 (Lacombrade 57).

<sup>77</sup> Syn., *Hymn I* (III) 575-76 (Lacombrade 57).

<sup>78</sup> Lacombrade 48 n.2.

“the insubstantiality of matter.”<sup>79</sup> We can see then that the passage in its entirety presents an image of matter which is airy, illusory, and evil. This is of one accord with the Plotinian view of matter.

The thoughts of Gregory of Nyssa, Synesius’ near contemporary and fellow Christian Platonist, on the subject of matter offer a useful comparison to those of Plotinus and Synesius. Like Plotinus and Synesius, Gregory deemed matter “in its natural state” – which, to avoid a paradox, we must take to mean matter-in-potentiality or primal matter – to be formless and lacking all qualities.<sup>80</sup> It is only in the converging of “intelligible concepts” such as lightness, heaviness, softness, hardness, etc. that matter comes to be in a concrete sense.<sup>81</sup> This, Gregory posits, is the result of God exercising Divine Will to forcibly throw together these “intelligible concepts” to form material objects according to the dictates of Divine Reason.<sup>82</sup> Such a theory of the creation of matter leaves Gregory open to the charge that his perception of matter is overly idealistic. We may note that in this respect his view is similar to that of Neo-Platonists like Synesius. Unlike Synesius, however, Gregory cannot declare matter to be evil as it is a product of God’s Divine Will.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, a key point of difference between Neo-Platonic and Nyssenian thoughts on the subject of matter is the belief that the Logos is the principle of every created being, ordering and shaping it as an act of Divine Will.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Lacombrade 48 n.2.

<sup>80</sup> I am particularly indebted to Doru Costache for his help in identifying Gregory as a useful point of comparison with Synesius on the topic of matter. Doru Costache, ‘Making Sense of the World: Theology and Science in St Gregory of Nyssa’s *An Apology for the Hexaemeron*’ *Phronema* 28:1 (2013) 1-28, 20.

<sup>81</sup> Costache, ‘Making Sense of the World’ 19-21. Costache provides here a translation and analysis of a key passage of Gregory’s *In Hexaemeron* in which he explains the formation of matter through the bringing together of intellectual concepts. Cf. Gregorios, *Cosmic Man* 104-8. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Hexaemeron* 69C, in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 44.

<sup>82</sup> Costache, ‘Making Sense of the World’ 19-21.

<sup>83</sup> Gregorios, *Cosmic Man* 108.

<sup>84</sup> “We have to believe, therefore, that a certain wise and organising principle/reason lies within each of the [created] beings.” Nyssa, *In Hexaemeron* 73A, translated in Costache, ‘Making Sense of the World’ 21.

A final aspect of Synesius' objection yet to be considered is the question of when the world was created. Central to this point is the distinction between the terms eternal (*αιώνιος*) and perpetual (*ἀίδιος*).<sup>85</sup> For Plotinus and his followers, eternity could only be ascribed to that which is; that is, that which is not in the process of becoming. In other words, this term could only be applied to that which is not subject to time. Perpetuity, on the other hand, could be ascribed to that which is not and cannot be; that is, that which is in the process of becoming. Now on Plotinus' view, it was Soul which generated Time in the first stirrings of its generation of the Universe.<sup>86</sup> What is more, Plotinus held that Time is the life or activity of Soul.<sup>87</sup> The Neo-Platonists could therefore attribute eternity to the divine realm and perpetuity to the Cosmos.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the Neo-Platonists believed "that God's eternal actuality necessarily implies the perpetually renewed actuality of the world."<sup>89</sup> Hierocles of

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<sup>85</sup> An excellent account of the history of the problem of distinguishing between perpetuity and eternity may be found in Niketas Siniossoglou, 'Time, Perpetuity and Eternity in Late Antique Platonism' *KronoScope* 5 (2005) 213-35.

<sup>86</sup> Plot., *Enneads* III.7.12 (Armstrong 345). This view was particularly informed by Plato's *Timaeus*, which described the Divine Craftsman who had created the cosmos and then created time as a moving image of eternity. According to Plato, the Craftsman of the universe made the universe (*ouranos*) or world order (*kosmos*) based on a changeless and intelligible model, which is a Living Thing that "contemplates within itself all intelligible living things." Plato believed that the universe was not eternal as "it was the Living Thing's nature to be eternal, but it isn't possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten." To solve this problem, Plato envisaged that the good Craftsman created "a moving image of eternity" – time – thereby permitting the universe to exist perpetually in time. Plato, *Timaeus*, 28b, 29a, 30c, 37d, 41b in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997) 1235-36, 1241, 1244 (= Cooper 1235-36, 1241, 1244). The Platonic cosmos was therefore co-existent with time and held in existence by a good creator, who would keep it in existence forever. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* 102.

<sup>87</sup> Plot., *Enneads* III.7.12 (Armstrong 345).

<sup>88</sup> Boethius is later to express the same view: following Plato, one must say that "God is eternal, the world perpetual." Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. and intro. by V. Watts (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 134.

<sup>89</sup> Siniossoglou, 'Time, Perpetuity and Eternity' 221.



Alexandria, echoing the view of Porphyry and his predecessors,<sup>90</sup> argued for “the *ad infinitum* renewal of the universe”<sup>91</sup> through an appeal to God’s immutability, eternal goodness, limitlessness, and omnipotence, and the order visible in the universe.<sup>92</sup>

Christian opinion on the questions of the temporal beginning of the cosmos and the possibility of its corruption differed from the Neo-Platonic one on a number of points. First, it is possible that Christians were unwilling or unable to accept the distinction between the eternity of the world and the perpetual renewal of the world.<sup>93</sup> Second, the Christian response seemed to demand that God acted when previously He was inactive. This was contentious for the Neo-Platonists as it contradicted belief in God’s immutability. The response of Augustine and others was that time did not exist before God’s act of creation.<sup>94</sup> In other words, time “began with the act of creation.”<sup>95</sup> Consequently one needed to understand this ‘change’ in God in a metaphysical rather than temporal sense. A third point of difference concerned the generation of the world and the perishability of its parts – which is the explicit content of Synesius’ objection. The Neo-Platonist Proclus, who was born around the time of Synesius’ death, put forward the axioms that “everything imperishable is ungenerated” and that “everything ungenerated is also incorruptible.”<sup>96</sup> Hence, Proclus concluded that, as Plato declared the world to be imperishable, then

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<sup>90</sup> Evangeliou, ‘Plotinus’s Anti-Gnostic Polemic and Porphyry’s *Against the Christians*’ 123.

<sup>91</sup> Siniosoglou, ‘Time, Perpetuity and Eternity’ 218-19.

<sup>92</sup> Hermann S. Schibli, *Hierocles of Alexandria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 64-65.

<sup>93</sup> Siniosoglou, ‘Time, Perpetuity and Eternity’ 218.

<sup>94</sup> “If, therefore, there was no time before heaven and earth came to be, how can anyone ask what you were doing then? There was no such thing as “then” when there was no time.” Aug., *Conf.* XI.13.15 (Boulding 231-32).

<sup>95</sup> Pacioni, *Augustine of Hippo* 185.

<sup>96</sup> Siniosoglou, ‘Time, Perpetuity and Eternity’ 223.

...if the World is incorruptible and if nothing that was created in time is incorruptible [= everything created in time is corruptible], then the world is without a temporal beginning.<sup>97</sup>

Some Christians interpreted these axioms differently. For instance, in the early sixth century both Zacharias and Philoponus took these axioms to mean that “everything imperishable is ungenerated” and everything perishable – including the world – must be generated as it is composed of perishable parts.<sup>98</sup>

While various conflicts sharpened Orthodox views on the eternity of the world in later years, Christian doctrine on the matter was well developed by the late fourth century.<sup>99</sup> This was certainly true regarding both the belief that Creation’s longevity is dependent on God’s Will and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>100</sup> With this in mind, one cannot rule out the possibility that Synesius held some heterodox views regarding the creation and dissolution of the world, remembering of course that to declare him heterodox would demand proof that the Orthodox position was fully developed at the time. We may conclude by recognising that, like Proclus, Synesius was influenced by the Neo-Platonic belief that the Cosmos was ungenerated and that its parts are incorruptible. Furthermore, Synesius’ negative view of matter betrays his tendency to view the material world as

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<sup>97</sup> Siniossoglou, ‘Time, Perpetuity and Eternity’ 223.

<sup>98</sup> Siniossoglou, ‘Time, Perpetuity and Eternity’ 223-24. Siniossoglou also assumes this view was held by Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> Century Christian Lactantius.

<sup>99</sup> For example, in 529 “John Philoponus, an Alexandrian Christian and member of the Neoplatonist school of Alexandria, responded to Proclus’ eighteen arguments against a beginning of the cosmos (*De aetnitate [sic] mundi contra christianos*, a lost work) with his *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*. All of this indicates that despite the grand effort of St Basil the Great, St Ambrose, and St Augustine, the temporal beginning of the world was still an issue for Christians engaged in classical learning.” T. T. Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2012) 118.

<sup>100</sup> For more on the complex issues of contingency and Divine Will in Plotinian metaphysics and Christian theology, see Gerson’s persuasive article, ‘Plotinus’s Metaphysics: Emanation or Creation?’ 559-74.

a privation and a mere image of the Soul. So while Synesius' cosmology is thoroughly pagan in these regards, it is not certain that they would have been considered heterodox at the time.

### *The Resurrection of the Body*

“Regarding the Resurrection, which is a received opinion, I see in it a sacred and mysterious conception on which I am far from sharing the ideas of the masses.”<sup>101</sup>

There are two key aspects to consider in relation to this objection. Not only does Synesius disagree with common beliefs regarding the Resurrection, but we also find that he is unwilling to share his personal views on the doctrine with the masses. Synesius follows the aforementioned objection with a passionate argument for protecting the unlearned from mysteries that are beyond them.<sup>102</sup> On this point we should note that Origen took the same view regarding the Resurrection.<sup>103</sup> In fact arguments for shielding the uneducated from profound philosophical, religious, or theological doctrines can be found in both Hellenic and Christian traditions.<sup>104</sup> Synesius' position, which was founded on his formation as

<sup>101</sup> τὴν καθωμιλημένην ἀνάστασιν ἱερόν τι καὶ ἀπόρρητον ἡγήμαι καὶ πολλοῦ δέω ταῖς τοῦ πλήθους ὑπολήψεσιν ὁμολογήσαι. Syn., *Ep.* 105.89-90 (Roques 239).

<sup>102</sup> Syn., *Ep.* 105.90-108 (Roques 239).

<sup>103</sup> While we do not claim that Origen directly influenced Synesius in this matter, it is curious that Synesius shares with Origen a disinclination to share on the Resurrection. In an attempt to account for the obscurity of 1 Corinthians 15:48-49, a key passage for understanding Paul's teaching on the resurrection of the dead, Origen gives a key for preaching about divine mysteries. Quoting the Apostle he begins: “Behold, I tell you a mystery.’ This word is usually applied to the deeper and more mystical doctrines which are rightly concealed from the multitude. Thus it is also written in Tobit, ‘it is good to hide a king’s mystery’; but with reference to that which is glorious and suitable for the multitude it goes on ‘it is good to reveal the works of God gloriously’, the truth being expressed by terms which are on their level.” Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.19, trans. and ed. by Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1980) 278-79.

<sup>104</sup> Rahner gives examples from the Hellenic tradition, particularly in the Orphic sayings, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and later Pythagoreanism. Hugo Rahner,

a Hellenised philosopher, no doubt dovetailed neatly with the Christian customs of reserve and the *disciplina arcana*. Synesius' works reveal that he was firm and consistent in his opposition to sharing on mysteries, be they of a Christian or pagan nature. For instance, he was unwilling to commit discussion of the mysteries of the Godhead to writing.<sup>105</sup> Elsewhere he censured his friend Herculian for divulging philosophical secrets to those who had not worked to acquire them.<sup>106</sup> While it is not possible to discern Synesius' primary motivation for refusing to speak of the mysteries of the Resurrection with the masses it seems quite certain that Synesius would

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*Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (New York: Biblio & Tannen Booksellers and Publishers, Inc., 1971) 38-39.

<sup>105</sup> For example, in *Hymn I* (III) Synesius clearly declares discussion on the inner life of the Godhead to be forbidden:

Regarding that which is prior to Being (προούσιον)  
it is not permitted to speak, of this second issue from you;  
it is not permissible to speak of the third, issue from the first.

Syn., *Hymn I* (III) 220-30 (Lacombrade 50). This is, of course, a very Neo-Platonic way of describing the Godhead. A second example, from *Hymn IX* (I), is more revealing as it occurs in the context of a discourse on the Trinity:

Stop, audacious lyre, stop, do not reveal the mysteries  
To the crowds of the non-initiated. Go, sing the things  
Below and let those above remain shrouded in silence.

Syn., *Hymn IX* (I) 71-73 (Lacombrade 102-3).

<sup>106</sup> See in particular *Epistle* 143, addressed to his friend and fellow student Herculian, where Synesius sternly reminds Herculian to guard carefully the philosophical mysteries from the uninitiated. Syn., *Ep.* 143.32-3 (Roques 286). As a means for instructing Herculian on the reasons for keeping the mysteries from the mob, Synesius refers Herculian to a letter written from the Pythagorean Lysis to a certain Hipparchus. This letter warns against the disclosing of Pythagoras' doctrines to the masses: "[I]t is nothing less than a sacred duty to guard his divine precepts, and to communicate none of the treasures of philosophy to those who have not been regenerated by purification of the spirit. It is not fit to hand over to them what we have achieved with such great effort. Just as it is not permitted to divulge the arcana of the Goddesses at Eleusis to the profane, those who do the one or the other must be held equally impious and sinful." As quoted by Copernicus in the Dedication of *De Revolutionibus*. For a partial translation of the letter, see Thomas W. Africa, 'Copernicus' Relation to Aristarchus and Pythagoras' *Isis* 52 (Sep., 1961) 403-9, 407.

not have insisted on speaking ‘mythologically’ to the mob in *Epistle* 105 if he believed his position to be Christian.<sup>107</sup>

Returning to consideration of Synesius’ personal beliefs regarding the doctrine of the Resurrection we must accept that Synesius offers little on which to base our study. He does, however, provide a solid account of his attitude towards matter, his theory of the pneumatic soul-vehicle, and the process by which the soul may ascend to the heavenly realm. Taken together these elements allow us to construct the foundation on which Synesius would have developed his thoughts on the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection. Synesius is notoriously pessimistic in his disposition towards matter (*hylē*). We have seen already that in *Hymn* I Synesius refers to the “darkness of matter;”<sup>108</sup> the “demons of matter;”<sup>109</sup> the “black contamination of matter;”<sup>110</sup> and the sorcery of matter enchainning him “by its artificial magic.”<sup>111</sup> Such a disposition towards matter is standard in Neo-Platonism, stemming as it does from matter’s lowly position in the hierarchy of being.<sup>112</sup> Matter is not regarded by Synesius, however, as “an anti-god” opposed to a good creating God.<sup>113</sup> Rather, it is deemed to be a demonic nature whose action is limited to the world here below.<sup>114</sup> With such a view of matter, we must ask how Synesius could even entertain the possibility that the body could survive death.

<sup>107</sup> τὰ μὲν οἴκοι φιλοσοφῶ, τὰ δ’ ἔξω φιλόμυθος εἰμι διδάσκων. Syn., *Ep.* 105.90-108 (Roques 239).

<sup>108</sup> Syn., *Hymn* I (III) 264 (Lacombrade 51).

<sup>109</sup> Syn., *Hymn* I (III) 541 (Lacombrade 57).

<sup>110</sup> Syn., *Hymn* I (III) 550 (Lacombrade 57).

<sup>111</sup> Syn., *Hymn* I (III) 575-76 (Lacombrade 57).

<sup>112</sup> Noël Aujoulat recognised this as an ongoing concern for Plato and his followers, “Cette recherche d’un intermédiaire entre deux états aussi différents que la matière et l’esprit avait été une préoccupation constante de Platon et de ses fidèles.” Synésios de Cyrène, *Opuscules I*, Greek text established by Jaques Lamoureux, French translation and commentary by Noël Aujoulat (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2004) 215 (= Syn., *De Insom.* (Aujoulat 215)).

<sup>113</sup> Lacombrade 40-41.

<sup>114</sup> Lacombrade 40-41. Synesius writes of the demon, or demons, of matter (δαίμων ὑλης) in *Hymn* I (III) and II (IV). Syn., *Hymn* I (III) 90; 541 (Lacombrade 48; 57) and Syn., *Hymn* II (IV) 258 (Lacombrade 66).

Hymn IV (VI), in its use of the word *pneuma*, provides a clue to answering this question. This Christological hymn, while not strictly orthodox, describes the Son dividing his breath (*pneuma*) “around the earth,” reuniting “once more at the source this that the source has given, in delivering mortals from the necessity of death.”<sup>115</sup> Here *pneuma* has the characteristics of having a divine origin, being shared among individuals, and reuniting mortals at the end of their earthly sojourns. *De insomniis* takes up this concept of the divine *pneuma* and lays out a fairly standard Neo-Platonic analysis of the pneumatic soul-vehicle (*ochema-pneuma*). The theory of the soul-vehicle was key to understanding how the Neo-Platonist could account both for meaningful interaction between the immaterial soul and material body, and thus for the resurrection of the body.<sup>116</sup> The theory of the soul-vehicle, or *ochema-pneuma*, can be found in the *Chaldean Oracles*, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the writings of both Christian and pagan Neo-Platonists.<sup>117</sup> Its origins are found in both the Platonic and Aristotelian corpus.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Syn., *Hymn IV (VI)* 21-23 (Lacombrade 75).

<sup>116</sup> Bregman makes the poignant observation, that “[a]ny doctrine which dealt with contact between *nous* and the material world had to be somehow understood *immaterially* by a philosopher” such as Synesius. Hence, the doctrine of the soul-vehicle is an attempt to attribute to an immaterial entity (i.e. the soul vehicle) the role of intermediary between the purely spiritual soul and the material world. Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene* 160-61.

<sup>117</sup> Bos notes that along with Origen, “the doctrine of the soul-vehicle is also found in Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syrianus, Hierocles, Augustine, Boethius, Philoponus, Macrobius, and Synesius.” Abraham P. Bos, “Aristotelian’ and ‘Platonic’ Dualism in Hellenistic and Early Christian Philosophy and in Gnosticism” *Vigiliae Christianae* 56:3 (Aug, 2002) 273-91, 274. Schibli goes further, identifying the doctrine in the *Chaldean Oracles*, Origen, Didymus of Alexandria, Proclus, Hermias, Aeneas of Gaza, Simplicius, Damascius, and Olympiodorus. Hermann S. Schibli, *Hierocles of Alexandria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 98-99.

<sup>118</sup> A reasonably comprehensive history of the doctrine of the *ochema-pneuma* may be found in Dodds’ essay on the Neoplatonic astral body. E. R. Dodds, ‘The Astral Body in Neoplatonism’ in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, translation, introduction and commentary by E. R. Dodds (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964) 313-21. Dodds draws extensively on the very useful work of Robert Christian Kissling, ‘The Oxhma-PNEUMA of the Neo-Platonists and

The Platonic roots of the doctrine are varied. For example, commentators on *Phaedrus* 246-47 came to interpret the analogy of the soul to a team of horses and their charioteer as confirmation that the soul was carried to and from the celestial realm and through life in some sort of chariot or vehicle. Elsewhere, in *Timaeus* 41e, Plato describes the mythical mounting of individual created souls in stars, installed as if on a vehicle (*ochema*) in order to discover the nature of the universe.<sup>119</sup> To these two examples we may add a reference in *Phaedo* 113d to vessels (*ochemata*) provided for the dead.<sup>120</sup> For later Platonists, the soul-vehicle came to be understood as that vessel which carried the soul in its journey from the noetic realm to the material world.<sup>121</sup> This vehicle was not simply an insensitive envelope or sheath. Rather, the descent of the *ochema* into the world entailed its interaction with matter, which was liable to weigh down the soul in its chariot and bind it to mundane concerns. The Aristotelian tradition contributed the notion of the *pneuma*, the “warm, airy substance transmitted by semen in the procreative act and serving as the locus of the nutritive, sensitive and imaginative soul.”<sup>122</sup> This seminal substance was held by Aristotle to be “analogous to the element which belongs to the stars.”<sup>123</sup> Adapting the Aristotelian concept, the Stoics came to teach that “the soul was a hot  $\piνεῦμα$ , composed of fire and air” which served as the seat of “sensation, imagination and reasoning” in the human person.<sup>124</sup>

By the end of the third century AD the Platonic *ochema* came to be amalgamated with the Aristotelian-Stoic *pneuma*. While the soul-vehicle

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the De Insomniis of Synesius of Cyrene’ *The American Journal of Philology* 43:4 (1922) 318-30.

<sup>119</sup> Plato, *Timaeus* 41e, *Platone – Tutte le opere*, ed. Enrico V. Maltese (Roma: Grandi Tascabili Economici/Newton, 2010) 2220.

<sup>120</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 113d, *Platone – Tutte le opere* 216.

<sup>121</sup> John F. Finamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985) 1.

<sup>122</sup> Schibli, *Hierocles of Alexandria* 98. Kissling, ‘The Oxhma-PNEUMA of the Neo-Platonists’ 319.

<sup>123</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. A. L. Peck (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1943) 171 [736b36-737a1].

<sup>124</sup> Schibli, *Hierocles of Alexandria* 98.

was fairly standard Neo-Platonic doctrine by this time, terminology to describe it was not fixed. Hermann S. Schibli notes, for instance, that the soul-vehicle was “variously described as ‘luminous’ (ἀγγοειδέες), ‘astral’ (ἀστροειδέες), ‘ethereal’ (αιθεριώδες/αιθέριον), ‘congenital’ (συμφυέες), or ‘pneumatic’ (πνευματικόν).”<sup>125</sup> Variety in the terminology to describe the vehicle was indicative of the origins of the doctrine and the particular concerns and influences of the individual philosopher.

The theory of the *ochema-pneuma* makes possible interaction between the purely divine and immaterial soul, and the world of matter.<sup>126</sup> What is more, the theory opens the path for developing a plausible explanation for the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection. For Synesius, the *ochema* is the mobile aspect of the spiritual body.<sup>127</sup> The soul borrows the *ochema* from the spheres so that it may act as an intermediary between matter and soul, bearing the soul on its journey to the world below.<sup>128</sup> Enclosing the soul like an oyster shell, the imaginative *pneuma* is imprinted with impressions projected onto it through its interaction with matter.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Schibli, *Hierocles of Alexandria* 99. We shall see that Synesius too was not consistent in his vocabulary when referring to the soul-vehicle. Aujoulat notes, for instance, that Synesius used the terms *phantasia*, *pneuma* and *ochema* in reference to the soul-vehicle, but that all three concepts are intimately mixed and constitute one nature. Syn., *De Insom.* (Aujoulat 216).

<sup>126</sup> “In short, it is a milieu between the irrational and the rational, the incorporeal and corporeal, of which it constitutes the common frontier. By its intermediary, divine things are in rapport with the elements that are totally opposed to it.” Syn., *De Insom.* 6.4 (Aujoulat 279). More generally, after having examined various accounts of the *ochema-pneuma* in Plato, Aristotle and their interpreters, Kissling concludes that the *ochema-pneuma* “was fundamentally connected with the functions of sense-perception and imagination.” Kissling, “The Oxhma-PNEUMA of the Neo-Platonists” 320-21.

<sup>127</sup> Aujoulat 216.

<sup>128</sup> “The first soul borrows this imagination from the celestial spheres in the course of its descent, and mounted upon it as on a skiff, unites itself to the corporeal world.” Syn., *De Insom.* 7.4 (Aujoulat 281).

<sup>129</sup> The imaginative *pneuma* is “une enveloppe qui revêt l’âme comme une gaine et la surface sur laquelle les images de la réalité se reflètent.” Lucia Suadelli, “Un dit d’Héraclite dans le traité Sur les Songes de Synésios de Cyrène” in *Synesios von Kyrene: Politik – Literatur – Philosophie*, eds H. Seng & L. Hoffmann (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013) 231-46, 233.



Indeed, for Synesius the imaginative *pneuma* is the seat of the imagination (*phantasia*) and the organ of sense-perception and imagination whose surface reflects the images of reality.<sup>130</sup> In Synesius' words,

... the imagination is the sense of the senses, because the imaginative *pneuma* (*phantastikon pneuma*) is the most comprehensive sense and it constitutes the first body of the soul.<sup>131</sup>

More precisely, the imagination (*phantasia*) is the perfect sense as it gathers the other senses in it.<sup>132</sup> The interaction of the soul with material realities is thus managed by the imaginative *pneuma* through the sensorial organs.<sup>133</sup> These organs – the eyes, the ears, etc. – act as gatekeepers for the imaginative *pneuma*, sending sensible impressions from the exterior world to their master.<sup>134</sup>

The imprinting of images onto the imaginative *pneuma* through the sensory organs can weigh a soul and its vehicle down, hindering the soul in its quest to rise again through the spheres. To counteract the effects of interaction with the material, that is, to purify the soul and its vehicle, Synesius recommends philosophy.<sup>135</sup> Alongside the practice of philosophy, Synesius recommends the performance of good actions which improve the state of the soul and can etherealise the imaginative *pneuma*.<sup>136</sup> Despite one's best efforts however, the imaginative *pneuma* retains the imprints it receives during its sojourn into the material world. Quoting the *Chaldean*

<sup>130</sup> Finamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul* 1. Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013) 165. Suadelli, 'Un dit d'Héraclite' 233.

<sup>131</sup> Syn., *De Insom.* 5.2 (Aujoulat 277).

<sup>132</sup> Syn., *De Insom.* 5.2 (Aujoulat 277). It should be noted that for Synesius the imaginative *pneuma* contains the *phantasia* and is somehow more material than it. Aujoulat 209.

<sup>133</sup> Syn., *De Insom.* 5.2 (Aujoulat 277).

<sup>134</sup> Syn., *De Insom.* 5.2 (Aujoulat 277).

<sup>135</sup> Syn., *De Insom.* 10.4 (Aujoulat 287-88). Synesius also believes that philosophy was the best tool for preparing the *pneuma* to be used for dream divination as it calmed the passions. Syn., *De Insom.* 16.1 (Aujoulat 300).

<sup>136</sup> Syn., *De Insom.* 6.3 (Aujoulat 279).

*Oracles*, Synesius raises the possibility that these imprints or stains may remain on the soul-vehicle as it rises to the heavens: “And you will not leave behind the dregs of matter on a precipice, but there is also a portion for the image in the place surrounded with light.”<sup>137</sup>

We may better understand the ramifications of this oracle when we consider that the soul and its vehicle form a unity. It is only in the vehicle that the soul may pass from the celestial to terrestrial realm, and return there. Therefore, the images which mark the imaginative *pneuma* during its earthly journey come into a close relationship with the soul itself. When and if the soul-vehicle is etherealised through good works or philosophy, the images remain on the vehicle. When the soul and its vehicle return to the summit from which it came, the residue left on the vehicle is, in the words of Bregman, “converted to the “imagination” through the activity of the *pneuma*, and thus become “image” (*eidolon*) or spiritualised elements of the empirical personality.”<sup>138</sup>

It is in this process of conversion that we discover what may be a uniquely Synesian contribution to the theory of the soul-vehicle. While others claimed that the image was attacked by the *pneuma*, thereby annihilating the effects of material interaction, Synesius believed that “the *pneuma* actually becomes an *eidolon*.”<sup>139</sup> The net result would therefore be that the soul and its vehicle, marked with all the stains incurred during the earthly life, would become a spiritualised body. Bregman is right to note that the Christian Platonist may have reasonably interpreted this spiritualised body to be equivalent to the Christian resurrected body.<sup>140</sup> Certainly there was no clear consensus regarding the details of Christian belief in the resurrection of the body among the early Fathers. There was, however, a firm belief among the majority of the Fathers that the resurrected body was composed of matter and spirit, and it is this fact that makes the

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<sup>137</sup> Synesius, *De insom.* 9.1. Translation taken from Ruth Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles* (Wiltshire, UK: The Prometheus Trust, 2013) Fragment 158 at 109.

<sup>138</sup> Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene* 150.

<sup>139</sup> Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene* 150.

<sup>140</sup> Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene* 151.

doctrine of the *ochema-pneuma* a possible bridge between Neo-Platonism and Christianity on this point.<sup>141</sup>

The doctrine of the soul-vehicle was not, however, fully compatible with Christianity. This was confirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 553 where aspects of the doctrine of the soul-vehicle were condemned as Origenism.<sup>142</sup> Having examined Synesius' theory of the *ochema-pneuma* and the possibility that he had some belief in the resurrection of the body, it seems that one must conclude that Synesius did not have an orthodox belief in the resurrection of the body, even if, at the time, his view was not deemed unorthodox. Such a conclusion is consistent with Synesius' insistence that the belief was "a sacred and mysterious conception."

### *The Pre-existence of the Soul*

"I will never want to believe that the soul is born after the body."<sup>143</sup>

What precisely is Synesius objecting to in this instance? The simple explanation is that Synesius is arguing for the pre-existence of souls, a well-known Neo-Platonic view with clear roots in the works of Plato himself.<sup>144</sup> In fact, we could almost declare the case closed when we consider that Synesius considered the soul borrowed the *ochema* from the

<sup>141</sup> For a summary of the nuances in belief in the resurrected body among the fathers of the first five centuries, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978) 463-79. Caroline Walker Bynum offers a comprehensive account in her book *Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>142</sup> Wallis, *Neoplatonism* 104.

<sup>143</sup> Ἀμέλει τὴν ψυχὴν οὐκ ἀξιώσω ποτὲ σώματος ὑστερογενῆ νομίζειν.

<sup>144</sup> An important example of Plato's extrapolation of this belief can be seen in the dialogue between Cebes and Socrates in *Phaedo* wherein they discuss the theory of Recollection. This theory is founded on the premise that the soul pre-exists the body. Plato, *Phaedo* 72e-77a (Cooper 63-67). That this Platonic view persisted in Plotinian Neo-Platonism, see for example Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy – Volume One: Greece and Rome* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 468, and O'Brien's commentary in Plotinus, *The Essential Plotinus*, translation and commentary by Elmer O'Brien (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1964) 59-61.

celestial spheres for its descent. While it is true that Synesius describes the soul as descending from the heavens before entering corporeal nature, he does not explicitly declare the pre-existence of the soul to be specifically a temporal or an ontological pre-existence. Although some argue that Plato – and later Plotinus – believed only in the ontological priority of the soul to the body and not in the chronological priority of the soul, the traditional reading of Plato is that he believed the soul was created earlier than the body in time.<sup>145</sup> Returning to Synesius’ objection, if we re-frame the statement positively – I believe that the soul is created before, or at the same time as, the body – new intricacies of his view appear. Such a re-framing of his objection does not necessarily diminish the probability that Synesius believed in the pre-existence of the soul, but it does suggest that his position may have been closer to the Christian view than generally thought.

The Fathers of the Church began discrediting the pagan doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul from at least as early as Justin Martyr. While Justin never explicitly explained the soul’s origin, he clearly stated that souls were begotten and could exist apart from the body; a position that stood in opposition to the Aristotelian view that the soul can only exist with the body.<sup>146</sup> Justin also held that souls come into existence when God wills this and that “they were created for the sake of men and other living creatures.”<sup>147</sup> Irenaeus developed a tri-partite anthropology of body-soul-spirit (*trichotomism*) which stressed the “indissoluble unity of

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<sup>145</sup> De Vogel argues that Synesius’ first doctrinal objection has been misunderstood and is actually consistent with the orthodox position. For de Vogel, Synesius was merely in agreement with Plato and Plotinus, who he believes viewed the soul as ontologically, rather than temporally, prior to the body. De Vogel, ‘Platonism and Christianity: A Mere Antagonism or a Profound Common Ground?’ 25. Reynolds, in seeking to prove that Plato did not believe in the temporal priority of the soul to the body, leaves open the possibility that the traditional reading is still valid. John Mark Reynolds, *Towards a Unified Platonic Human Psychology* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2004) 69-73.

<sup>146</sup> L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 113.

<sup>147</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* VI.1 in *Selections from the Fathers of the Church (Vol. 3)*, translated by T. B. Falls, revised by T. P. Halton, edited by M. Slusser (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2003) 12.

body and soul” to which life is given through the working of the spirit.<sup>148</sup> Like Justin, Irenaeus too believed that the soul was created by God and continues in existence through an act of God’s will.<sup>149</sup> Tertullian sharpened the doctrine on the soul, contending that “the soul did not pre-exist at all but was transmitted to the child through the semen of the father in the act of conception.”<sup>150</sup> Ever the materialist, Tertullian diverged from the Platonist line, viewing the soul as “corporeal, having shape, simple in substance.”<sup>151</sup> He believed that the soul has a corporal nature (*corporalitas animae*) and therefore had the normal characteristics of a body, such as location, confinement, and the threefold dimensions of length, breadth and height.<sup>152</sup> Though he saw the soul as corporeal, Tertullian believed it to be immortal and “born of God’s breath,” though not “self-existent and divine” as Plato taught.<sup>153</sup> According to Tertullian, soul was breathed into Adam in the beginning. Consequently, all of humanity shares in this original

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<sup>148</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus against the Heresies*, trans. by John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) 94.

<sup>149</sup> Irenaeus declares “all things that have been made have their beginning through being made, but they continue to exist as long as God wills them to do so.” Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 2.34.3 in *Against the Heresies-Book 2*, translated and annotated by D. J. Unger, revised by J. J. Dillon, introduction by M. Slusser (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: The Newman Press, 2012) 109. Waszink has identified a fragment in Syrian attributed to Irenaeus that shows he assumed the “simultaneous genesis of body and soul.” J. H. Waszink, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani De Anima* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010) 347.

<sup>150</sup> McGuckin, ‘Soul’ in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 318. Cum igitur in primordio duo diversa atque divisa, limus et flatus, unum hominem coegissent, confusae substantiae ambae iam in uno semina quoque sua miscuerunt atque exinde generi propagando formam tradiderunt, ut et nunc duo, licet diversa, etiam unita pariter effluent pariterque insinuata sulco et arvo suo pariter hominem ex utraque substantia effructicent, in quo rursus semen suum insit secundum genus, sicut omni condicioni genitili praestitutum est. Tertullian, *De Anima* 27.8:12-19 in Waszink, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani De Anima* 39 (= Tert., *De Anima* 27.8:12-19 (Waszink 39)).

<sup>151</sup> Eric Osborn, *The Beginning of Christian Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 100-1.

<sup>152</sup> Tert., *De Anima* 7.1:5; 9.1:24-27, 9.5:24 (Waszink 9, 10, 11).

<sup>153</sup> Osborn, *The Beginning of Christian Philosophy* 100-1.

soul through the physical transmission of the seed of Adam. In the act of conception the father not only fertilises the egg to produce a new body, but he also ‘plants’ the ‘germ’ of Adam’s soul into the new person, wherein it becomes a new soul.<sup>154</sup> Tertullian’s claim therefore, that the body and soul were created simultaneously at the moment of conception can thereby be reconciled with his belief that each individual soul shares in the soul of Adam.<sup>155</sup> This last view<sup>156</sup> (traducianism) was opposed to the creationist belief that the soul “was directly created by God at conception ... and put into the conceived embryo as God’s direct consecration of each life.”<sup>157</sup>

Origen challenged the views of his Christian predecessors with his innovative hypotheses on creation. On his view, as it is laid out in his *Peri archon*, creation took place in two stages. The first was the creation of rational beings which are united to God through their own free will.<sup>158</sup> Following their creation, all but one of these rational beings ‘fell’ from union with God to become angels, demons, other spiritual beings, and human souls. The one being that did not fall was “the human soul of the incarnate Christ.”<sup>159</sup> Drawing on some rather dubious etymology, Origen posited that human souls (*psuchai*) are so called as their “once ardent love of God has “cooled” (*psuchesthai*).”<sup>160</sup> This brings us to the second stage of creation, which was that of the material world. According to Origen,

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<sup>154</sup> A primordio enim in Adam concreta et configurata corpori anima, ut totius substantiae, ita et condicionis istius semen effecit. Tert., *De Anima* 9.8.19-21 (Waszink 12). Tertullian also adopts the analogy of the soul being like a newborn sprout from the roots of Adam. Tert., *De Anima* 19.6.27-31 (Waszink 27).

<sup>155</sup> Simulne conflata utriusque substantia corporis animaeque an altera earum praecedente? Immo simul ambas et concipi et confici, perfici dicimus, sicut et promi, nec ullum intervenire momentum in conceptu quo locus ordinetur. Tert., *De Anima* 27.1.14-18 (Waszink 38).

<sup>156</sup> It is important to recognise that Tertullian’s belief that all souls were offshoots from the soul of Adam influenced Augustine as he tried to formulate his doctrine of original sin. Aspects of his theory remain problematic, particularly his belief in the materiality of the soul.

<sup>157</sup> McGuckin, ‘Soul’ 318.

<sup>158</sup> Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) 26.

<sup>159</sup> Trigg, *Origen* 26.

<sup>160</sup> Trigg, *Origen* 26.

the material world was created by God as a means by which to allow humanity to return to unity with God through “a process of moral and intellectual purification.”<sup>161</sup> It is clear that this radical re-writing of creation theology, which drew together elements from the Scriptures, Stoicism, and Platonism, revitalised the pagan view that the soul pre-existed the body by giving it a pseudo-Christian dimension. Later, in an effort to refute Origen’s teaching on the pre-existence of souls the martyr bishop Methodius of Olympus seems to have contended that the soul was created after the body.<sup>162</sup> In opposition to this view Bishop Nemesius of Emesa “goes close to embracing an Origenist view of the soul’s pre-existence.”<sup>163</sup> Synesius and other Platonists would have found Methodius’ view difficult to accept as “the spiritual nature of man would appear to be in some way inferior to his corporeal nature,” a view previously criticised by Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>164</sup>

Having examined some major currents of thought regarding when the soul is created in relation to the creation of the body, it is now easier to judge Synesius’ view. Both the creationist and traducianist positions situate the creation of the soul at the point of conception, either through

<sup>161</sup> Trigg, *Origen* 26.

<sup>162</sup> This is the view of Marrou. Henri Irénée Marrou, ‘Synesius of Cyrene and Alexandrian Neoplatonism’ in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) 126-50, 146. Methodius also opposed Tertullian’s traducianist position: “one would not be believed if he were to teach that the soul’s being, too, is sown together with the mortal body.” Methodius, *Symposium 2.7 in The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, translated and annotated by H. Musurillo (New York, N.Y. and Ramsey, N.J.: Newman Press, 1958) 56. This passage should not be taken to suggest a belief in the pre-existence of souls. L. G. Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus: Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom, and Life in Christ* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997) 138.

<sup>163</sup> Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London: SCM Press, 2010) 226. In contrast to Young, Marrou claims Nemesius “professed openly the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul.” Furthermore, Marrou posits that the case of Nemesius is proof that the Church had not yet dogmatised teaching on this matter. Marrou, ‘Synesius of Cyrene and Alexandrian Neoplatonism’ 146.

<sup>164</sup> Marrou, ‘Synesius of Cyrene and Alexandrian Neoplatonism’ 146 and 146 n.3.

the transmission of the ‘germ’ of the soul from the father, or through a direct act of God.<sup>165</sup> The Neo-Platonist position is clear, that the soul pre-exists the body. Given Synesius’ training in a Neo-Platonist school and the proliferation of Hellenic influences in his works, it is more than reasonable that most commentators conclude that Synesius holds to a belief in the pre-existence of the soul. However, as we have seen, by re-framing his objection it is possible to claim that Synesius believed that the soul was created at the same time as the body, thus making his view perfectly acceptable for a Christian. Logic dictates however that Synesius would only make his view known if current Christian belief on the soul was that it was created after the body. While the animation of the body after conception was a belief held by Aristotle and the Stoics, it is not clear that this was a position held by Christians at the time. In sum, it seems that we must conclude with the majority of commentators that Synesius believed in the pre-existence of souls.

### **Theophilus on Synesius’ Objections**

Let us now examine each of Synesius’ three doctrinal concerns to determine if they could have been viewed as Origenistic errors by Theophilus.

#### *The Pre-existence of the Soul*

Theophilus argued that Origen taught the pre-existence of souls.<sup>166</sup> In this, Theophilus was well justified. Origen’s creation theology posited that

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<sup>165</sup> For a contemporary view supporting the creation of the soul at the moment of conception, see Gregory of Nyssa in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, where Macrina rules out the possibility of the soul being created after the body; “...no one with good sense would imagine that the origin of the souls is later and younger than the formation of the bodies, since everyone knows that none of the soulless beings has in itself the power of movement and growth. But there is no disagreement or doubt that those which are being nourished in the womb have growth and spatial movement.” Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993) 99-100. Note that Kelly sees in Gregory’s view a hint of traducianism. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* 345.

<sup>166</sup> See for example, Theo., *First Synodal Letter (= 1<sup>st</sup> Syn.)* (Russell 92). Declerck has also identified relevant fragments from two documents written



intelligences (*noes*), or rational minds, were created before the existence of the material world. As we have mentioned previously, these intelligences later cooled to become souls, which afterwards were allocated material bodies. The claim that Origen believed in the pre-existence of souls must be nuanced by the fact that before souls became thus, they were intelligences. It was only after the fall that intelligences became souls and were then given bodies.<sup>167</sup> The exception to this was one soul, which was to become the soul of Jesus, which certainly did not ‘cool’ due to falling away from God. Origen’s Christology, which was to prove problematic in later ages, saw this soul as pre-existently chosen by the divine Logos, waiting for the time of salvation.<sup>168</sup> Theophilus knew Origen’s theory of the creation of souls and refuted it vigorously.<sup>169</sup> In particular, he contested Origen’s Christological innovations, declaring of Christ, “that neither his flesh nor his soul existed before he was born of Mary, nor did a soul previously dwell in heaven which he subsequently united to himself.”<sup>170</sup>

Despite the overwhelming proof that the pre-existence of souls was rightly seen by Theophilus as an error in Origen’s theology, it is not possible to attribute Synesius’ probable belief in the pre-existence of souls to the influence of Origen rather than Neo-Platonism. However, if Synesius really believed in the pre-existence of souls, as we have previously determined was likely, Theophilus could have seen this as an Origenistic error even if Synesius’ view was inspired by Neo-Platonism or some other source.

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after the condemnation of Origen’s work which, he argues persuasively, were either written by Theophilus or on behalf of him. José Declerck, ‘Théophile d’Alexandrie contre Origène: Nouveaux Fragments de L’*Epistula Synodalis Prima* (CPG, 2595)’ *Byzantion* 54 (1984) 495-507, 507.

<sup>167</sup> Theophilus discovered this heretical view in Origen’s writings: “What prophet has taught him to think that God was compelled to create bodies on account of souls falling from heaven?” *Theo., 17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* (Russell 125).

<sup>168</sup> *id est anima uerbo dei Christus efficitur.* *Orig., De princ.* 2.6.4: 140-41 (Crouzel 316). Charles Kannengiesser, ‘Christology’ in *The SCM Press A-Z of Origen*, ed. J. A. McGuckin (London: SCM Press, 2006) 76.

<sup>169</sup> For a particularly clear and forceful explanation and refutation of Origen’s theory of intelligences, souls and bodies see *Theo., 17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 15 (Russell 129-30).

<sup>170</sup> *Theo., 17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 8 (Russell 124).

*The Creation and Destruction of the World*

Origen's account of creation was compatible with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In his *Commentary on John*, contrasting his belief with that of the Aristotelians and Neo-Platonists, Origen declared that "God has created beings from non-being."<sup>171</sup> Furthermore, Origen affirmed a beginning for the world while denying it would have an end.<sup>172</sup> It seems that Theophilus did not take exception to this aspect of Origen's view that God created from nothing. Theophilus was more concerned with Origen's claim that God created only as many rational creatures as he could govern and the logical consequences of such a position.<sup>173</sup> Countering Origen, Theophilus posited that God created only as much as was necessary and that He is not limited by "measure and number."<sup>174</sup> While this may not be a just interpretation of Origen's *De principiis* 2.9.1, Theophilus nevertheless concluded that Origen believed that God is not omnipotent. Additionally, Theophilus accuses Origen of "claiming that God was limited by the material (*materia*) available to him for the execution of his work."<sup>175</sup> One

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<sup>171</sup> ὅτι ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων τὰ ὄντα ἐποίησεν ὁ θεός. Origen, *Commentary on John, Book 1* 103 in Origène, *Commentaire Sur S. Jean – Tome I*, Greek text established and translated into French by Cécile Blanc (Paris: Cerf, 1966) 114. Tzamalikos identifies two keys to understanding Origen's creation theology: first, creation is an act of providence whereby all potentialities come into existence from non-being; and second, fallen and spatio-temporally limited creation actually becomes *outside* of God. P. Tzamalikos, *Origen: Philosophy of History & Eschatology* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007) 337.

<sup>172</sup> Origen's unwillingness to believe the world can come to an end is based on his doctrine of *apokatastasis*, which has its roots in Acts 3:21, where Peter preaches a universal restoration, and 1 Cor 15:21-28, which explains that in the end times God will be all in all. *Apokatastasis* is the eschatological goal of "becoming into God" whereby all of creation will be restored in and returned *into* God. Tzamalikos, *Origen: Philosophy of History & Eschatology* 331, 338.

<sup>173</sup> Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 17-18 (Russell 131-33). See Orig., *De princ.* 9.1:1-30 (Crouzel 352-55) which is clearly the source of Theophilus' objection.

<sup>174</sup> Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 17 (Russell 132).

<sup>175</sup> Note that the ambiguity is due to the absence of the original Greek text. We are left with the Latin; quod tantum possit deus, quantum ei ad operandum materia ministrarit. Hieronymus, *Epistle XCVIII, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 55, ed. I. Hilberg (Vindobonae - Lipsiae: F. Tempsky and G. Freytag, 1912) 203. Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 18 (Russell 133).

could perhaps see this as an accusation against Origen of not holding to *creatio ex nihilo*. Given the original Greek text has been lost it is only possible to speculate on what Theophilus was really accusing Origen of believing. Putting the sentence in context, we see that Theophilus reproves Origen for not recognising that the nature of created things and the nature of the creator are different.<sup>176</sup> Furthermore, Theophilus points out that matter – that “from which something comes into being” – cannot be as great as the creator – “he who makes something from it.”<sup>177</sup> The context suggests that Theophilus is accusing Origen of ascribing to the nature of God limits which are appropriate to creatures, not to the creator. Nevertheless, Theophilus’ accusation that Origen believed God to be limited by *materia* is curious and cannot be dismissed so simply. Further investigation into this question must wait for another occasion.

Returning to the case in point, Theophilus was not concerned with Origen’s views on the destruction of the world. Furthermore, Theophilus did not critique Origen’s beliefs on *creatio ex nihilo*, which aside from the curiosity mentioned in the *Seventeenth Festal Letter*, seem to have been orthodox. Given, (a) the ambiguity we have identified in knowing precisely whether Synesius’ view on the creation and destruction of the world would have been seen as heterodoxy in his day, and (b) the lack of evidence of heterodoxy with regard to Origen’s beliefs on these issues, it is not possible to describe Synesius’ second doctrinal objection as something Theophilus should have seen as an Origenistic heresy.

### *The Resurrection of the Body*

In his *Second Synodal Letter to the Bishops of Palestine and Cyprus*, which Russell dates to the autumn of 400, Theophilus claims that Origen taught that

...after the passage of many centuries our bodies will gradually be reduced to nothing and will dissolve into thin air, and, in case

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<sup>176</sup> Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 18 (Russell 133).

<sup>177</sup> Theo., *17<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 18 (Russell 133).

we should think this is a small matter, adding that ‘the resurrected body will not only be corruptible but also mortal.’<sup>178</sup>

Trigg identifies two stages in Origen’s *De principiis* through which the soul must pass in its return to God.<sup>179</sup> Firstly, souls “must first of all remain in bodies which are more subtle and more pure.”<sup>180</sup> Secondly, “the material nature diminishes progressively, death will be absorbed and finally destroyed and its sting will be completely dulled by the divine grace of which the soul has become capable of receiving, meriting to obtain incorruption and immortality.”<sup>181</sup> According to Trigg, it is likely that Origen did not change his opinion on these matters given that they are echoed in works written much later in his life.<sup>182</sup>

Like Synesius after him, a key element of Origen’s views on the resurrected body was his adoption of the Platonic *ochema*. Origen identified the *ochema* both with the Pauline *σῶμα πνευματικόν*<sup>183</sup> and angelic bodies.<sup>184</sup> Blosser believes Origen used the *ochema* to emphasise the corporeality of the soul.<sup>185</sup> This, however, does not explain Origen’s view that incorporeal life is “the privilege of the Trinity alone.”<sup>186</sup> Origen therefore required the *ochema* to fulfil the role of embodying the immaterial soul both prior to earthly life, and between death and the resurrection. Indeed, in the words of Crouzel and Simonetti, the translators of *De principiis*, for Origen “est

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<sup>178</sup> Theo., *2<sup>nd</sup> Syn.* 2 (Russell 94-95). This theme is repeated again in Theo., *16<sup>th</sup> Fest.* 13 (Russell 110-11).

<sup>179</sup> Trigg, *Origen* 32.

<sup>180</sup> Orig., *De princ.* 2.3.3:111-12 (Crouzel 256).

<sup>181</sup> Orig., *De princ.* 2.3.3:113-18 (Crouzel 256).

<sup>182</sup> Trigg, *Origen* 32.

<sup>183</sup> “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.” 1 Cor 15:44 (NRSV).

<sup>184</sup> B. P. Blosser, *Become Like the Angels: Origen’s Doctrine of the Soul* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012) 252-53.

<sup>185</sup> Blosser, *Become Like the Angels* 253.

<sup>186</sup> solius namque trinitatis incorporea uita existere recte putabitur. Orig., *De princ.* 2.2.2:31-32 (Crouzel 248).

impossible d'imaginer qu'une créature puisse vivre sans corps."<sup>187</sup> For Origen the *ochema* was the soul's glorious and luminous body, which enveloped it even up to the "final restoration of all things into God."<sup>188</sup> Consequently, in response to Blosser it is more accurate to state that Origen recognised the immateriality of the soul, but needed the *ochema* to account for the very possibility of bodily resurrection and the continuity of bodily form, both before and after terrestrial life. One must question though, as with Synesius' version of the theory, how Origen's *ochema* is corporeal in any real sense. Indeed Brian E. Daley notes that Origen was widely criticised, perhaps unfairly, for making the resurrected body so spiritualised that it lacked any real corporeality.<sup>189</sup>

Returning to Theophilus' interpretation of Origen's writings on the resurrection of the body, it is apparent that Theophilus has faithfully represented Origen's assertion that bodies will disappear. As a consequence he is right to say that for Origen the body is corruptible as the material nature disappears. Furthermore, as the body will one day cease to exist, Theophilus is correct to conclude that Origen believed the resurrected body to be mortal. It is curious, however, that Theophilus did not pick up on Origen's theory of the *ochema* if indeed it was seen as an unorthodox addendum to contemporary Christian pneumatology. Additionally, Theophilus' assertion that Origen believed resurrected bodies to be spherical<sup>190</sup> – a theory posited by Plato in the *Timaeus*<sup>191</sup> – seems to indicate that Theophilus was not just in his analysis of Origen's views on the

<sup>187</sup> Origène, *Traité des Principes – Tome II*, ed. Henri Crouzel and Manilo Simonetti (Paris: Cerf, 1978) 141.

<sup>188</sup> Blosser, *Become Like the Angels* 254.

<sup>189</sup> Brian E. Daley, 'Resurrection' in *The SCM Press A-Z of Origen* 184.

<sup>190</sup> In a letter written in Constantinople in 403, Theophilus accuses Origen of believing that "resurrected bodies were spherical in shape." Theo., *Const.* 8 (Russell 142).

<sup>191</sup> The argument for this is that the resurrected body should take the perfect shape; the perfect shape is the sphere; therefore, the resurrected body should be spherical. For a comprehensive explanation of why the spherical form was deemed the most perfect for Platonists, see Thomas Taylor's translation of Proclus' commentaries on Plato's *Timaeus*. Thomas Taylor, *The Commentaries Of Proclus On The Timaeus Of Plato* (London: The author, 1820) 445-47.

resurrected body.<sup>192</sup> Indeed modern scholarship has concluded that there is little compelling evidence to support Theophilus' claim on this matter.<sup>193</sup> Having briefly dissected Theophilus' perceptions of Origen's theories regarding the resurrected body, it can be concluded that for the most part Theophilus has been fair. He has, however, misrepresented Origen's views on the resurrected body being spherical and he should have investigated Origen's theory of the *ochema* more fully.

Synesius' actual objections to what he believed to be orthodox views of the doctrine of the resurrection are clouded in ambiguity. Given it cannot be assumed that Theophilus had read *De insomniis* – in which Synesius lays out his own developments on the theory of the *ochema-pneuma* – we must conclude that Theophilus could not have been expected to form an accurate judgement of Synesius' position on the resurrection. If, however, Theophilus did read *De insomniis* and if he had understood the implications of Origen's theory of the *ochema*, then it is clear that he should have objected to Synesius' views on the *ochema-pneuma* because (a) they are a key element of Synesius' beliefs regarding the resurrected body, and (b) they are similar to those held by Origen. We should note that, regardless of what Theophilus actually knew of Synesius' opinions on the resurrection of the body, it is possible that he appreciated Synesius' preference to mythologise on the topic with the masses.

### **Concluding Remarks**

We must now consider how it was possible for Theophilus to ordain Synesius, given the patriarch's well-known desire to combat paganism and heterodox views, and the Cyrenian's public admission of disagreements with doctrinal points. We have determined that Synesius probably believed in the pre-existence of souls. Furthermore, we have found that Theophilus should have seen this as either an Origenistic error or a sign of Synesius'

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<sup>192</sup> Theophilus' response to the theory that the resurrected body is spherical was "that for each body its own body is best." Theo., *Const.* 8 (Russell 142).

<sup>193</sup> For example, Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* 472; Alois Grillmeier and Theresia Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition – Vol 2*, trans. by Pauline Allen and John Cawte (London: Mowbray; Louisville, KY: WJK, 1995) 397.

paganism. Regarding Synesius' beliefs concerning the annihilation of the world and its parts and the associated question of the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, we have shown that one cannot convincingly prove that Synesius' opinion was heterodox at the time or that Theophilus should have seen this as a heresy of Origen. Finally, Synesius' rather ambiguous difference of opinion to the masses concerning the Resurrection and the likelihood that Theophilus was not exposed to Synesius' philosophical musings on the topic, leads us to conclude that Theophilus could not have been expected to have regarded Synesius' beliefs in this matter to be Origenistic. Certainly Synesius' opinions on the matter could not have been pagan as the idea of a bodily resurrection was abhorrent to the Neo-Platonists. All things considered, the collective weight of Synesius' doctrinal objections should have provoked Theophilus to question the legitimacy of consecrating him.

History has tended to regard Theophilus as being scheming and calculating. In this paper we have sought to clarify Synesius' doctrinal objections to ordination in order to see if he displayed an affinity with paganism, anthropomorphism or Origenism, thus confirming or denying the view that Theophilus was duplicitous. It remains rather plausible that history has remembered Theophilus correctly as one who put power before orthodoxy; that is Theophilus knew of Synesius' unorthodoxy yet ordained him anyway in order to shore up his power base in the Pentapolis. Indeed Theophilus may have believed that it was worthwhile to concede to Synesius' demands, knowing that Synesius would fight for the most important doctrines and would be able to use his political connections to help Theophilus maintain power in the Pentapolis. Further to this, as we see in *Epistle* 105, Synesius could be relied upon by Theophilus to keep his heterodox opinions to himself;

I have, for my part, the taste of speculation, and outside, in doctrine, the taste of speaking in fables, without modifying the doctrine and in leaving each one to stick to his previous notions.<sup>194</sup>

This declaration could very well have satisfied Theophilus that he would not face a further threat to orthodoxy from the Pentapolis. Consequently,

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<sup>194</sup> Syn., *Ep.* 105.101-4 (Roques 239).

Russell's claim that Theophilus ordained Synesius on the proviso that he remains silent on his heterodox opinions is surely correct and is the most likely reason why Theophilus ordained Synesius. Not only does this scenario allow for the fact that Synesius was not orthodox in his views – which seems very likely from our investigation into his objections – but it also recognises that Theophilus was aware of the dangers of ordaining Synesius, but was shrewd enough to see that Synesius could be a good and faithful servant, even if he was not orthodox in all areas of Christian doctrine.

In summary, we have shown that it is highly probable that Synesius was not orthodox according to modern benchmarks in his understanding of the soul, the creation of the world, and the resurrection of the body. Furthermore we have seen that the collective weight of Synesius' objections should have caused Theophilus concern as they reflect the influence of paganism and had some parallels in notions found in Origen's works. Finally, we can declare that the most plausible reason for Theophilus choosing to ordain Synesius is that the patriarch knew of Synesius' objections, but saw that he could be more useful than detrimental in the fight to maintain orthodoxy in the Pentapolis.