Prefixed to Avery Cardinal Dulles’s magisterial *A History of Apologetics* is a little poem by C.S. Lewis entitled “The Apologist’s Evening Prayer.” The apologist prays that the Lord deliver him “from all my lame defeats and oh! much more / from all the victories that I seemed to score.” He goes on to observe that “Thoughts are but coins. Let me not trust, instead / of Thee, their thin-worn image of Thy head.” Thoughts are but coins: signs that point toward but cannot fully express a reality greater than themselves. And the more our thoughts of God, whose reality is infinitely and ineffably beyond our own, are indeed our own, the fainter is their resemblance to the truth.

One may ask, then, how apologetics could possibly serve to defend him whose being cannot rationally be spoken of. The trap that Lewis’s apologist prays to avoid is that of attempting to put God within our own rational categories or “thoughts.” To do otherwise is to risk calling “God” what is in fact an entirely human creation. Rather, apologetics “has a more modest task. It seeks to show why it is reasonable, with the help of grace, to accept God’s word as it comes to us through Scripture and the Church.”¹ The defense of faith by reason helps us pave the way

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¹ Avery Cardinal Dulles, 367.
to trusting what is proclaimed in the Christian tradition. Reason leads us to a faith that takes us beyond reason.

In determining how to go about this task, Cardinal Dulles advises apologists to “seek wisdom from the past and [to] profit from the giants who have gone before them.” To that end, I purpose in this essay to highlight an approach taken in the Early Church to demonstrate the reasonableness of believing in God’s word “as it comes to us through Scripture and the Church.” I will examine the apologetic strategy adopted by the Church Father Origen of Alexandria in his great apologetic text *Contra Celsum*.

Origen of Alexandria (c. A.D. 185 – c. 254) is a seminal figure in the development of Christian doctrine. His writings brought significant development both to Biblical textual criticism and interpretation. Known as a brilliant catechist, exegete, and homilist, Origen produced ideas on the nature of Christ, the Trinity, and creation which planted the seeds for what would become both orthodox Christian belief and startling heresies. Most importantly for this paper, Origen wrote an apologetic text that is a key source for our understanding of the interaction between Christianity and ancient Greek religion.

Origen’s *Contra Celsum* is a response to a work entitled *The True Doctrine (Alethes Logos)* written by a Greek philosopher named Celsus (d. c. A.D. 175). Celsus’s work constitutes the first informed critique of Christianity by a pagan.

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Most polemics against Christianity prior to Celsus were *ad hominem* in nature; they caricatured Christians as savages who drowned infants and ate human flesh. Celsus, on the other hand, studied the Scriptures and attempted to demonstrate their fallacies and inconsistencies. The *Alethes Logos* is composed of two parts: in one Celsus takes on the perspective of a Jew and attempts to show how Christ is not the answer to the Old Testament prophecies. In the second part Celsus argues in his own voice against Christianity’s theological pitfalls and the danger Christians pose to the governance of the empire.

Celsus is best described as a Middle Platonist. He believes in one supreme God with many divine intermediaries (including the traditional Greek pantheon). As a Platonist, he believes that ascent to God involves leaving behind the physical world. To him, the contemplation of divine truths is an ability privileged to the few with the intellectual capacity to do so. He despises, therefore, the Christian belief that God became enfleshed as a human being in the person of Jesus; he also looks down on the Christian appeal to the masses, especially the weak and uneducated.

Origen composed his response to Celsus, who had long since died, toward the end of his life around A.D. 248. His style is exactingly thorough: he quotes Celsus directly and then provides a detailed response to each point of the criticism (the copious fragments contained in the *Contra Celsum* have preserved a majority of Celsus’s original text). Although the
style of the book may seem disjointed, we can trace a common strategy throughout the eight books of the text. Origen does not seek to provide a logical proof of Christ’s divinity; such a task would be impossible. Rather, in dialogue with Celsus’s critiques he paints an image of what the person of Christ is. He describes in terms that appeal to Celsus what the nature of Christian belief is. He then offers the examples of the Christian Church and the Scriptures as evidence that the icon he has painted is praiseworthy, believable, and true.

The Scriptures: Adhesion to Christ

Origen’s apology depends on the presupposition of Christ’s divinity. To illustrate this principle, he quotes the charge of Celsus that the Christians’ “faith has prejudiced [their] soul to make so great an adhesion to Jesus”\(^3\). Origen, perhaps surprisingly, responds that “Although, in truth, our faith makes such an adhesion, nevertheless see if that very faith does not prove to be praiseworthy”\(^4\). He freely admits that the Christians are “prejudiced” (προκαταλαβοῦσαν) by their “adhesion” (συγκατάθεσιν) to Christ – that is, they form their entire worldview through the lens of Jesus. Origen’s challenge to Celsus indicates the course that his apology will take. He will attempt to show why an adhesion to Christ is a “praiseworthy” (τὸ ἐπαινετὸν) presupposition to hold. He does not set out to

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3 πίστιν... συγκατάθεσιν, 3.39.
4 Ἀληθῶς... παρίστησιν, id.
prove definitively that Christianity is true, but merely to show that its claims are reasonable and worthy of praise (and also of faith).

This adhesion is not baseless but is reasonable to take on. Origen often makes the case for adhesion by defending seemingly thorny biblical episodes. One such instance is his defense of Jesus’s agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Celsus sees Christ’s agony in the garden as an example of his mundane weakness: “Why therefore does he cry and lament and pray to escape from the fear of death, saying something like ‘Father, if it is possible to escape this cup?’” Origen begins his response to this criticism by drawing attention to its errors: “[Celsus] did not accept the honesty of the writers of the gospel, who could have been silent on these matters which Celsus regards as a ground for criticism… no statement is to be found that Jesus cried. And he alters the original text ‘Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me (Matt. 26:39).’” Rather than playing down Jesus’ struggle, Origen points out how the evangelists included this detail, despite its potential for misinterpretation. He goes on to say, “the way to conceal tales of this sort is easy – not to have recorded them at all. For if the gospels had not included them who could have reproached us because Jesus said such things

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5 In his Preface, Origen goes so far as to say that his arguments may weaken the “apology in the facts and the power of Jesus that is manifest to those who are not senseless” (τὴν... Ἰησοῦ), P.3.  
6 Τί... παρέλθειν; 2.24  
7 τι... τοῦτο», ibid. adapted from Chadwick.
during his incarnation? ...Either therefore they did not invent them, but really did hold these beliefs and recorded the narratives without any deception, or they lied in their writings and did not in fact hold these beliefs, and were not deceived into regarding him as God.”

The evangelists could easily have omitted the details of Jesus’s agony in the garden and might well have had a good motivation to do so. They chose to include it despite the difficulties it would cause in the eyes of those like Celsus. Its very inclusion, Origen argues, is an argument for its veracity and the reliability of the Gospels. Moreover, it forces us to reconsider our notions of what the Incarnation entails.

Faith in Christ is not a blind assent or ungrounded prejudice, as Celsus claims, but reasonable and defensible. The reasonability of Christian belief can be argued directly from the scriptures, as Origen did above. It can also be defended by pointing to the visible example of Christians in the world at large.

**The Church: The Icon of Christ Displayed**

Origen believes the “manifest power of Jesus” is itself entirely convincing evidence of Christianity’s truth. Again and again he points toward the unique righteousness of Christian communities and the singular wisdom they possess as evidence of the divinity of Christ. Take, for example, this passage from book three. He has quoted a line from *The True Doctrine* where

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8 *Kαὶ... ἐνόμιζον*, 2.26; Chadwick
9 *τὴν ἐπιφανὴ... δύναμιν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*, P.3
Celsus argues that a mythological figure, Cleomedes the Astypalean,\textsuperscript{10} shows as much evidence of divinity as Jesus. After expressing doubt at the myth’s historicity, Origen replies:

No sign is found in the life of these men of the divinity told about them, but about Jesus there are the churches of those who have been helped and the prophecies spoken about him and the cures provided in his name and the understanding and wisdom there are according to him and the reason that is found in those who have thought to ascend beyond simple faith, and to discover the sense of the divine scriptures.\textsuperscript{11}

Cardinal Dulles remarks that this passage indicates “the grounds of credibility supporting [Origen’s] own faith.”\textsuperscript{12} As such, we should examine each of the elements here as they pertain to being a “ground of credibility.” Before doing so, however, we should first note how the evidence is framed. Observe how Origen depicts Celsus’s “divine” figures: “No sign is found \textit{in the life of these men}” (οὐδὲν...ἐν τῷ βίῳ τῶν ἀνθρώπων σύμβολον εὑρίσκεται) of their supposed divinity. If there is any “sign” (σύμβολον) of the pagan heroes’ divinity, it is confined to the depictions of their lives handed down in myth and tradition. If there is any proof at all, it is intangible and invisible. The sign

\textsuperscript{10} A figure who, after he was disqualified from a boxing match in Astypalea, in his rage brought down a school-house roof and killed a group of children. The townspeople threw stones at him and he fled to the sanctuary of Athena where he hid inside a chest. When the people opened the chest, they found it empty, and the oracle of Delphi told them to honor Cleomedes with prayers and sacrifices. See Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum}, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1980), 149-150, note 7.

\textsuperscript{11} ἐκείνων... νοῦν[,], 3.33.

\textsuperscript{12} Dulles, \textit{A History of Apologetics}, 43-44.
of Jesus’ divinity, on the other hand, is readily visible in the phenomena that Origen lists. Each of these elements, furthermore, is a visible sign of divinity in Christ’s life. The nature of these different elements, then, will set up the qualities of divinity to be found in Christ.

Origen first lists “the churches of those who have been helped” (αἱ τῶν ὠφελουμένων ἐκκλησίαι) as evidence of Christ’s divinity. He appeals to the Christian churches that contain members who have benefited from the charity within their community. After the churches, Origen lists the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and miracle healings as evidence for the divinity of Jesus. Notice the arrangement: prophecy and thaumaturgy are secondary to the charitable work of the early Christian community. Origen’s privileging of the churches suggests that he considers Christian charity the most eminent sign of the divinity of Christ. Furthermore, the arguments from prophecy and miracles must be rooted in charity in order to provide distinct evidence for Christianity. Pagans are equally capable of both. The selfless love that is highly visible in Christian churches, and that animates the prophecies and the miracles “done in his name” (αἱ ἐν ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ γινόμεναι), is the singular “sign” of the divinity of Christ.

13 Origen makes this very argument about prophecies in 2.30, when he argues that the prophecies have been proven true because they foretold a time of righteousness and peace, which Christians have brought to fruition.
14 As Wilken (The Christians as the Romans Saw Them, 100) notes, pagans were capable of performing miracles as well, and Jesus could easily have been perceived as simply one more magician.
Origen next says that Christianity provides a rational framework that proceeds from its faith. His next evidence of Christ’s divinity is “the understanding and wisdom there are according to him and the reason that is found in those who have thought to ascend beyond simple faith” (ἡ κατ’ αὐτὸν μετὰ σοφίας γνώσις καὶ λόγος εὐρισκόμενος παρὰ τοῖς φροντίσασιν ἀναβῆναι μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς ψιλῆς πίστεως). We first see that faith in Christ is reasonable because of the remarkable charity displayed by his churches. Yet Christianity does not end in “simple faith” (ψιλῆς πίστεως). Rather, from that faith one “ascends” (ἀναβῆναι) to “understating and wisdom” (μετὰ σοφίας γνώσις). Those who understand things “according to him” (κατ’ αὐτὸν) see in Christ a vision of the world that most clearly speaks to reality and to the nature of the human person. Origen points to the many whose “simple faith” in Christ has grown into a perception of the underlying principle (λόγος) of the universe and human purpose. Likewise, he points to those who find the “sense of the divine scriptures” (τὸν ἐν ταῖς θείαις γραφαῖς νοῦν) – those who find that there is a comprehensive view of reality within the Bible which reveals human purpose and destiny. The wisdom

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15 I find it distinctly possible that Origen means for his own apology to demonstrate some of these latter qualities – that is, an understanding of wisdom according to Christ and the sense of the Scriptures.

16 This argument would have had a special appeal in antiquity. In 4.38, Origen remarks that the Pandora story from Hesiod is ridiculous if read literally. Both Platonists and Christians looked to the “sense” of their religious texts to find meaning. Origen here is showing that there are those who have found a “sense” to the Bible that speaks to reality more than any pagan text.
these individuals find, moreover, will necessarily be rooted in the distinct Christian charity to which Origen first appealed.

Origen will make similar appeals to the righteousness and wisdom of the Christian community throughout the *Contra Celsum*. He uses these external evidences of Christian love and charity as signs of Christ’s divinity. Based on this empirical proof, Origen will present what John Cavadini calls an “icon” of Jesus, an image of what the Incarnation entails that explains the remarkable charity of the Christians and the reason that Christians have this “adhesion” to Christ. He will show that, in Christ, there is a pattern of perfect self-sacrificing love that unites Jesus to the divine nature, and that participation in Christ allows humans the same share in divinity.

**Painting the Icon in Dialogue with Celsus**

Origen’s icon of Christ is rooted in his understanding of humanity’s union with God. Origen quotes Celsus arguing against the resurrection of the body by asserting that “God does not will what is contrary to nature”\(^\text{(18)}\). Celsus assumes here that God operates within the same natural laws to which the rest of the universe is beholden. This God does not will “what is contrary to nature” (\(\tau\alpha \piαρά φόσιν\)) – the God’s will must conform to a preexisting natural order; he is not master over it, and in his perfection he can only do what is “of a right and just

\(^{17}\) Cavadani, *A Brief Reflection on the Intellectual Tasks of the New Evangelization*

\(^{18}\) τὰ παρὰ φόσιν ὁ θεὸς οὐ βούλεται, 5.23
nature”\textsuperscript{19}. His concept of divinity is not that of a transcendent source and sustenance of reality, but of a supremely powerful entity that sits atop (but not outside of) the rest of the natural world.\textsuperscript{20} Since it is the nature of a body to become corrupted and ugly, God (as Celsus sees it) is incapable of granting eternal life to such an unseemly entity.

In so describing the world, however, Celsus begs the question: \textit{why} are these laws of nature so? He assumes a Platonist view of reality in which God does not mingle with material matters, and from that perspective concludes that the resurrection of the dead is contrary to the divine nature. Although his conclusion follows from his premise, Celsus does not defend his assumption. Origen then proceeds to present a different image of reality that both challenges and answers Celsus’s Platonist image of the world.

In his reply to Celsus’s objection, Origen presents a view of God that does not restrict Him to natural limitations. He replies:

\begin{quote}
If he says things are done according to the Word of God and His will, clearly it is not contrary to nature. For things are not done by God contrary to nature, even if they are paradoxical or seem paradoxical to some. If it is really necessary to call things in this way, we say how God sometimes might do things that are, contrary to nature as it is more commonly perceived, beyond nature, such as lifting humanity
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} τῆς ὀρθῆς καὶ δικαίας φύσεως, 5.14
beyond human nature and making it change to a better and more divine nature.\footnote{\textit{el... \[5.23\] \[5.23\]}}

At the first, Origen defines “nature” not as a preexisting system but as something that must be in accord with “The Word of God and His will” (\textit{κατὰ λόγον θεοῦ καὶ βούλησιν αὐτοῦ}). Nature exists according to God’s \textit{logos} and ordinance. It depends on Him, and its goodness flows directly from His design. Because of this contingency, Origen can assert that the elements of “nature” can be (or at least seem to be) “paradoxical” (\textit{παράδοξα ἢ δοκοῦντά τισι παράδοξα}). God’s actions need not adhere exclusively to a predetermined rationalism, but can easily appear supernatural. Yet we can already sense a certain discomfort on Origen’s part with this division between “nature” and “paradox,” and only grudgingly (\textit{Εἰ δὲ χρὴ βεβιασμένος ὀνομάσαι}) does he present God’s act of “lifting man beyond human nature” (\textit{ὑπὲρ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν ἀναβιβάζων τὸν ἄνθρωπον}) to a “more divine nature” (\textit{θειοτέραν}) as something “contrary to nature as it is more commonly known” (\textit{πρὸς τὴν κοινότερον νοουμένην φύσιν}). Origen’s hesitation here indicates that he actually does not see a division between what is natural and what is “beyond nature” or “against nature.” Rather, for Origen nature is paradoxical and anything that is contrary to nature only seems to be. Everything within nature, due to its contingency and its unity with “the Word of God and His will,” has the paradoxical quality of being both natural and beyond nature. Applying this principle
to Origen’s final statement, God’s act of “raising up”
(ἀναβιβάζων) humankind is not the imposition of a celestial
quality on an inherently earthly humanity, but the gratuitous
restoration of the divine nature to a humanity that is, by nature,
divine.

The special genius of this reply is Origen’s depiction of
his understanding of created nature in terms that a Platonist can
find agreeable. The vision of reality he presents is distinct from
Celsus’s, but it also shows that Christians are not the base
materialists that a Platonist might imagine them to be. Indeed,
Origen argues that the resurrection of the dead proceeds from a
profound union between God and creation. God’s “drawing
toward divinity” speaks to the Platonist desire for union with
God. Origen incorporates that desire into a vision of reality that
leaves room for the deification of material as well as spiritual
nature.

Conclusion

In the case of the bodily resurrection, Origen paints an
image of a God whose relationship with creation is one of love.
He restores what he has made to his divine life out as the
gratuitous gift of a father. This example is not a logical proof,
but an explanation. Were one to accept this explanation of reality
as true, one could then understand why Jesus is so willing to
accept suffering in the garden of Gethsemane. One could also
understand why the communities of Christians can demonstrate
the kind of charity, wisdom, and love that they possess. If God is
love, as the Christians profess, then Christians themselves should
demonstrate the same love in whose image they were created.
Where this evidence abounded, and guided by the intelligence of
the Alexandrian’s arguments, we can discern the path to faith
that Contra Celsum lays out and which can serve as a model for
apologetics in any age.


