

MAGICAL POWER OF NAMES IN ORIGEN'S POLEMIC AGAINST CELSUS*

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One of the key accusations that Origen had to deal with in his polemic, *Contra Celsum*, was the belief of the Platonic philosopher Celsus that the Christian faith, which refuses rational justification of its existence, is completely unrelated to religious teachings, and at the same time stems from the worst kind of superstition. Therefore, according to Celsus, those Christians who “believe without a reason” (ἄλογως) do not differ from Metragyrtae, soothsayers, and Mithrae and Sabbadians, and other worshippers of demonic powers: “For just as among them scoundrels frequently take advantage of the lack of education of gullible people and lead them wherever they wish, so also, he says, this happens among the Christians.”¹ From here, it takes only a step to the accusation that Christians use black magic practices: “Christians get the power which they seem to possess by pronouncing the names of certain daemons and incantation,” says Celsus.² He believes that Jesus learnt these magical skills while in exile in Egypt, and applied these after his return to recruit his followers. These achievements raised his self-confidence and en-

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¹ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,9. Unless stated otherwise, the English translation cited in this paper is ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, transl. by HENRY CHADWICK, Cambridge 1980.

² ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,6; cf. *ibid.*, VI,40; VIII,37.

couraged him to declare himself publicly to be God.³ However, Celsus believes that these specific magical demonstrations were the factor that separated Jesus from the gods: “These were the actions of one hated by God and of a wicked sorcerer,” concludes Celsus.⁴

The method used by Celsus to question Jesus’ earthly mission evokes Plato’s warning against the actions of various peddlers who offer religious salvation and who promise various types of ritual cleansing and escape from the threat of God’s punishment to sinners: “Begging priests and soothsayers go to rich men’s doors and make them believe that they by means of sacrifices and incantations have accumulated a treasure of power from the gods,” says Plato. “Since they are masters of spells and enchantments that constrain the gods to serve their end.”⁵ Plato contrasts these charlatans with methods of philosophical theology, trying to define the real character of divine existence, and to find an appropriate way of how they should be addressed. Plato believes that only formulas built on the basis of the correct principles of religious language (τύπου περὶ θεολογίας) can open the door to divine grace.

Celsus evaluates the language of Christian “magic” from the same position. According to him, each person carries an image of god inside himself or herself, and achieves god’s grace through his or her diligent care for the correctness and pureness of this divine icon. Those who have undergone philosophical training and thus achieved virtue on a certain intellectual level, are closest to God for “they desire to hear something of him and to be reminded about him”.⁶ Celsus believes that by rejecting such a rational approach in favour of sole faith in the magical powers of Jesus and his followers, the base and irrational aspects of

³ See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,28.

⁴ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,71. This accusation was all the more serious since Celsus could find certain support for this allegation in the texts of the New Testament. See the well-known accusation of scribes in the *Gospel of Mark*: “He is possessed by Beelzebub. By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.” (*Mark*, 3,22; cf. *Mathew*, 12,24; *Luke*, 11,15) Regarding Hebrew accusations against Jesus related to magic, see for example IRENAEUS, *Adversus haereses*, 32,3; JUSTIN, *Apologia*, I,30. For other sources see especially MORTON SMITH, *Jesus the Magician*, New York 1978 (for Celsus’ arguments see pp. 57–60). Regarding the position of magic in the Old Testament and the New Testament tradition, see for example STEPHEN D. RICKS, *The Magician as Outsider in Hebrew Bible and the New Testament*, in: *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, (eds.) MARVIN MEYER – PAUL MIRECKI, New York 1995, pp. 131–143.

⁵ PLATO, *Respublica*, 364b–c (transl. by PAUL SHOREY, Cambridge 1937).

⁶ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,8.

our existence are reinforced, taking us in the opposite direction. The “incantation of names” in the case of Jesus therefore does not differ from the actions of those who “for a few obols drive daemons out of men and blow away diseases and invoke the souls of heroes”. “Since these men do these wonders, ought we to think them sons of God?” asks Celsus. “Or ought we to say that they are the practices of wicked men possessed by an evil daemon?”⁷

Origen’s defence against this accusation stems from the belief that the divine powers available to Jesus during his earthly mission were actually on a much higher level than daimonic powers at which spells of traditional magicians, wandering exorcists or begging priests are aimed. This became evident already at Jesus’ birth when the power which accompanied him caused a sort of a “blackout” in the transfers of common magical powers. All earthly magicians suddenly discovered that their magic formulas no longer worked, and, after seeing the star that defied all of the established astrological categories, they realised that it is not a locally occurring defect: “Magicians are in communion with daemons and by their formulas invoke them for the ends which they desire,” says Origen, commenting on this energetic blackout, “And they succeed in these practices so long as nothing more divine and potent than the daemons and the spell that invokes them appears or is pronounced”.⁸ What is then the difference between daimonic powers at which incantations and formulas of ancient magicians are targeted and divine powers addressed by Jesus and his followers when performing their miraculous acts?

Incantation of the Platonic soul

It is a known fact that there was not a sufficiently clear distinction between the terms “god” (θεός) and “daimon” in Greek literature. It was not until Plato, that the rather distinctly defined difference emerged be-

⁷ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,68. Celsus’ opinions on the demonstrations of Christian faith do not differ much from the approach commonly taken to these superstitious excesses of folk religion in Greek philosophy (see DALE B. MARTIN, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians*, Cambridge – London 2004, pp. 140 to 159).

⁸ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,60. In a similar vein, Origen approaches the influence of such personages as Simon Magus (see *ibid.*, I,57; STEPHEN D. RICKS, *The Magician as Outsider*, p. 141).

tween the perfect deities living separately from all mortal beings and the daimonic semi-gods inhabiting the lower spheres of this world who have only an unclear idea of their heavenly origin. This inkling does not allow them to come to terms with their earthly destiny and encourages their desire to return to Olympus to their divine father. And an identical desire forms the foundation of all breeding and creation (ποίησις), be it through creative arts, including philosophy, or a simple human effort to produce progeny. In both cases, they are mortal creatures driven by their desire to win their share of immortality, full possession of which is characteristic only of the gods. The key symbol of this daimonic metaphor in Plato's philosophy is the figure of Eros operating on the borderline between the human and divine world, the mighty "sorcerer and magician", who, on the one hand, presents human requests to gods, and, on the other, executes gods' commands: "Through it are conveyed all divination and priestcraft concerning sacrifice and ritual and incantations, and all soothsaying and sorcery," says Plato.⁹

The difference between the practice of wandering priests, as well as uneducated poets or politicians, and the theological speculation of Platonic philosophers then only consists in the extent of their knowledge of god, which enables a philosophic "magician" to cleanse his soul or the soul of his followers of its bodily passions, and recall the world of immortal gods from which all souls have arisen. Of course, it is not sufficient to know only the name of the god whose powers we want to invoke.¹⁰ Although there is a great number of "divine men", who, through their utterances, are able to invoke many amazing occurrences without actually understanding the daimonic powers they invoke, concedes Plato. Only a real "expert on daimonic matters" can come closer to god, and the effect of similar "incantations" of divine powers is extremely dubious: "And no one who has not been a philosopher and who is not wholly pure when he departs, is allowed to enter into the communion of the gods, but only the lover of knowledge," emphasises Plato.¹¹

⁹ PLATO, *Symposium*, 202e ff. (transl. by W. R. M. LAMB, Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1991).

¹⁰ The name of a thing represents a certain genus or species, *eidos*, and therefore it does not suffice to know the name and not the definition, as repeatedly noted by Plato (see *Sophistes*, 218c; *Leges*, 964a; *Cratylus*, 432e: τύπος).

¹¹ PLATO, *Phaedo*, 82b (transl. by HAROLD NORM FOWLER, Cambridge [Mass.] – London 2005); cf. *Symposium*, 203a.

The principles of Plato's own magical incantations then correspond to these intellectual requirements. From the perspective of Platonic theology, gods are perfect creatures standing outside common physical processes of origin and decay and they represent an immortal and blessed being unencumbered with any hardship. This means that the actions of gods cannot be influenced by gifts or prayers, and those who are familiar with the issue prefer to preserve solemn silence, notes Plato.¹² God's power is not an executive power but it operates through the power of examples, of divine attraction, a general desire of all mortal beings to assimilate themselves to this perfection. All magical operations are therefore directed at a more or less successful regulation of this daimonic desire, nurturing the daimon that thrives as "not an earthly, but a heavenly plant up from earth".¹³

Therefore, philosophy does not relate mythical stories of encounters of gods and men and its associative power is concentrated in its philosophical metalanguage, the language of metaphors, definitions and philosophical terms, which do not elicit any response on the part of the gods, but it serves for the purpose of knowledge and instruction. The daimonic "power" of wandering magicians is based on the same principle, only inverted: "These people display expensive banquets and dining-tables and cakes and dishes which are non-existent and make things move as though they were alive although they are not really so but only appear as such in the imagination," says Celsus describing the skills which, as he believes, were also an inspiration for Christian "magic".¹⁴ Therefore, not even their success lies in the ability of actual manipulation with divine powers but in the effect of their incantations on the souls of their audience, which – as stated by Plato in the *Laws* – is very easily frightened by "moulded wax figures" and may be found, "at doorways, or at points where three ways meet, or it may be at the tomb of some ancestor".¹⁵

¹² See PLATO, *Alcibiades*, II, 149b.

¹³ See PLATO, *Timaeus*, 90a; *Phaedo*, 74d ff. As emphasised by IAMBlichus, *De mysteriis*, 2, 10: "God radiates its true images through the true character of the souls (ἐν τοῖς ἀληθέσιν ἤθεσι πῶν ψυχῶν)." Transl. by E. C. CLARKE ET ALII, Atlanta 2003.

¹⁴ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I, 68: "of a few loaves feeding many people" (see *Matthew*, 14, 19–21).

¹⁵ PLATO, *Leges*, 933a–c (transl. by R. G. BURY, Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1984). As noted by Fritz Graf, Plato "considers magic to be a psychological, and in

Gods' names

This is in line with Celsus' account of the theological quality of Christian faith. If he is willing to acknowledge any of its force at all, it is classified in the spirit of Platonic principles as a not too effective kind of religious delusion. This conviction would probably not have been shaken even by Origen's reference to the number of believers who, under the influence of Jesus' miracles, extricated themselves from their web of sins, without examining their attitude using rational arguments. According to Celsus, these people were "seduced by Jesus" (ἐψυχᾶγωγῆσθαι ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ) to abandon the laws of their fathers, and thus most ridiculously (παντὶ γελοίως) deceived, they became deserters to another name and another mode of life (εἰς ἄλλο ὄνομα).¹⁶

Celsus is convinced that such a stigma of superficial faith based on religious deceit has permeated the whole biblical tradition: "The goatherds and shepherds who followed Moses as their leader were deluded by clumsy deceits (ἀγροίκους ἀπάταις) into thinking that there was only one God." Like in the case of Christians, uneducated Hebrews also abandoned the worshipping of their gods "without any rational cause" (ἀλόγως), deceived by a man, who – instructed presumably by theologians of much more educated nations – declared himself to be the God's representative from among the Jews: "The goatherds and shepherds thought that there was one God called the Most High, or Adonai, or the Heavenly One, or Sabaoth, or however they like to call this world, and they acknowledged nothing more (καὶ πλεῖον οὐδὲν ἔγνωσαν)."¹⁷ This implies that their prayers too cannot have any real impact. Celsus maintains that it is not important "whether one calls the supreme God by the name used among the Greeks, or by that, for example, used among the Indians, or by that among the Egyptians".¹⁸ The actual relationship

the final result a social problem", where gods do not play any role (FRITZ GRAF, *Theories of Magic in Antiquity*, in: *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, [eds.] MARVIN MEYER – PAUL MIRECKI, Leiden – Boston – Köln 2002, p. 99).

¹⁶ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, II,1.

¹⁷ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,23.24.

¹⁸ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,24. Regarding Celsus' "linguistic monotheism" see NAOMI JANOWITZ, *Theories of Divine Names in Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius*, in: *History of Religions* 30, 1991, pp. 359–372, here pp. 361–362.

with God can only be established through spiritual means, and the Jewish means are apparently not sufficient to address the highest of gods.¹⁹

Nevertheless, this is where Origen finds the greatest weakness of Celsus' thoughts on Christian "magic". After all, he too has to be aware of the "serious problem of the nature of names which is difficult to solve" (βαθὺς καὶ ἀπόρητος λόγος περὶ φύσεως ὀνομάτων), which has to be taken into consideration by everyone who explores the nature of religious language: "The problem is whether, as Aristotle thinks, names were given by arbitrary determination (θέσει); or, as the Stoics hold, by nature (φύσει), the first utterances being imitations of the things described and becoming their names."²⁰ Origen says that it is obvious that divine names cannot be the result of any conventional agreement regarding their meaning. These names are certainly not of human origin and, if they are really supposed to address someone, they cannot be further modified, specified or translated. The reason is that if they represent some original "imprint" of a thing in a language, any similar change would disrupt this natural bond, preventing any real communication.²¹

¹⁹ See PLATO, *Cratylus*, 392c (transl. by H. N. FOWLER, Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1977): "Do the wise or the unwise give names more correctly?"

²⁰ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,24; see V,45. Aristotle expresses his theory on the conventional origin of names rather explicitly in his *Organon* (see *On Interpretation*, 16a19).

²¹ See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, V,45. According to JOHN DILLON, *Magical Power of Names*, in: IDEM, *The Golden Chain*, Aldershot 1990, p. 213, Aristotle's opinion on the conventional origin of names is rejected in favour of the interpretation of Plato's *Cratylus*. However, the problem is somewhat more complicated. Although when arguing in favour of "powerful names", Origen finds support also in Plato (see *Contra Celsum*, I,25, with reference to the Socrates' statement on divine names in the introduction to *Philebus*), the key interpretation of the Platonic concept of the "correctness of names" in *Cratylus* is completely put aside. Plato's theory really stems from Hermogenes' belief that the "correctness in names is nothing other than convention and agreement (συνθήκη καὶ ὁμολογία)", corrected by Plato's Socrates in the following text. However, in the second part of the dialogue, he takes the same approach to *Cratylus*' "natural correctness of names". In any case, Plato believes that names are pronounced "with a view of instruction" (διδασκαλίας ἔνεκα), and their correctness "is the quality of showing the nature of the thing named" (*Cratylus*, 428e). Plato would therefore certainly have agreed rather with Celsus that it is not important whether the highest of gods is called Zeus or Adonai. It is important that the name in a particular language expresses the substance of the matter: "For the name of Zeus is exactly like a sentence; we divided it into two parts, and some of us use one part, others the other; for some call him Zena, and others Dia; but the two in combination

This also implies that the “so-called magic” that is able to use this fundamental relationship between names and their holders, “is not utterly unsystematic (ἀσύστατον πρῶγμα)”, as believed by the majority of Greek philosophers. On the contrary, experts in these matters believe that this is a highly consistent system whose principles are known to very few, explains Origen. “The name Sabaoth, and Adonai, and all the other names that have been handed down by the Hebrews with great reverence, are not concerned with ordinary created things, but with a certain mysterious divine science that is related to the Creator of the universe.”²² Those, like Celsus, who are not very well versed in this magical science, can very easily apply the name of something more powerful (κρείττων) to that which is less powerful (ἥττων) and vice versa.

Celsus’ misunderstanding of the fundamental principles which form the basis of the effect of magic incantations, then evokes the question of whether the accusation of Christians of magic has any weight at all. And as his likening of Jesus and his followers to various charlatans and begging prophets relies on traditional Platonic approaches to this issue, his ignorance compromises, to a certain extent, also the very “principles” of Platonic theology, regardless of whether the subject of its reverence is Zeus, Sun or the “First God”. Eventually, this theology, like the teachings of the Epicureans or Stoics, connects divine names with unrelated objects.²³ Celsus, who draws on the tradition of the Platonic “care for the soul”, is, however, of a different opinion. He views the Christian belief in God, who can be addressed easily and directly, as a product of a false idea planted in the souls of the believers by Jesus’ skilfully applied *psychagógia*.²⁴ So who is correct?

express the nature of the god, which is just what we said a name should be able to do” (*Cratylus*, 396a). As far as Plato himself is concerned, he, similarly to Aristotle, was the supporter of the conventional origin of names (see PLATO, *Epistle VII*, 343b). Other comments on this issue are provided by ROBERT M. VAN DEN BERG, *Does it Matter to Call God Zeus*, in: *The Revelation of the Nature YHWH to Moses*, (ed.) GEORGE H. VAN KOOTEN, Leiden – Boston 2006, pp. 173 ff.

²² ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,24.

²³ See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,24. “And it is not surprising if the demons attribute their own names to the first God (ἐπὶ τὸν πρῶτον θεόν), in order to be worshiped as the first God,” says Origen explaining the possible reasons for this theological confusion (*Exhortatio ad martyrium*, 46).

Principle of imitative magic

When taking a closer look at the key differences between both concepts of the magic language, it is immediately obvious that by pronouncing the terms of the religious metalanguage, on which the Platonic metaphor of magic incantation of the philosophical soul is built, it is actually difficult to address a god or a daimon in a way which would provoke any real response.²⁵ Plato's "god mingles not with man" (οὐ μείγνυται), and the connection with God's perfect being is only virtual. Therefore, even those who, like the Lacedaemonians, prefer solemn silence to loud prayers can establish such a connection. However, if such a type of association is to be projected in the form of real magic performance, it could be called a product of some imitative magic based on the belief that supernatural forces work on the basis of similarity. This means that "like produces like", and that an "effect resembles its cause", or, in the words of the Platonic philosopher, "similar is known by the similar".²⁶ The key is therefore the imitation; magic operations can only be initiated on the condition that one has an image or a symbol of an object which one wants to address.²⁷ The scope is rather wide. This does not

²⁴ See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, II,1; I,23, on Moses; regarding Plato's concept see *Timaeus*, 71d ff.; *Leges*, 909b; *Phaedrus*, 261a: "Is not rhetoric in its entire nature an art of enchanting the soul (ψυχραγωγία) by means of words?"

²⁵ Some historians believe that this aspect of classical history of religion is characteristic for the entire Greek religion: "Greeks were rationalists. It is really striking how little faith they had in the efficient power of images and names in comparison with other nations" (MARTIN P. NILSSON, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, I, München 1967, p. 81). Similarly also in SIMON PULLEYN, *The Power of Names in Classical Greek Religion*, in: *The Classical Quarterly* 44, 1994, pp. 17–25.

²⁶ See JAMES G. FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*, Cambridge 1978, pp. 16 ff.; MARCEL MAUSS, *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie*, in: IDEM, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris 1966, pp. 60 ff. Regarding the Platonic concept of *sympathy* "stemming from similarity" see for example IAMBlichus, *De mysteriis*, 4,10; PLOTINUS, *Enneades*, IV,4,40: "But how do magic spells work? By sympathy and by the fact that there is a natural concord of things that are alike and opposition of things that are different" (transl. by A. H. ARMSTRONG, Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1984).

²⁷ In the context of the biblical tradition, this may be illustrated by the typical example of Jacob's trick with Laban's flocks of sheep, through which he was entitled to a remuneration in the form of all spotted and speckled sheep: "Then Jacob took fresh

include only the well-known manipulation with wax figures, referred to by Plato, or various imitations aimed at the birth of a desired heir, but oftentimes also extensive and costly actions imitating events of a cosmic importance.

Images used for the purposes of imitative magic are not realistic “portraits”, and they are connected with the objects that are to be invoked through the use of images in a purely conventional way, without affecting the perfection of the resulting reproduction.²⁸ Magic figures or sketches have a schematic character and the similarity between them and the object is therefore purely theoretical and abstract. However, that means that the individual images are interchangeable and that magic operations can be initiated merely by pronouncing a name or even by conceiving a thought about a more or less “arbitrarily” chosen symbol (animal, instrument or a ring) representing the object of the magic spell.²⁹ As stated by Plato in the *Seventh Epistle*, “None of the objects, we affirm, has any fixed name, nor is there anything to prevent forms which are now called ‘round’ from being called ‘straight,’ and the ‘straight’ ‘round’; and men will find the names no less firmly fixed when they have shifted them and apply them in an opposite sens.”³⁰

sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks. He set the sticks that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, the flocks bred in front of the sticks and so the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted.” (*Genesis*, 30,37–39).

²⁸ Here, I draw on the analysis of mimetic magic by MARCEL MAUSS, *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie*, p. 61: “La similitude mise en jeu est, en effet, toute conventionnelle; elle n'a rien de la ressemblance d'un portrait.”

²⁹ See *ibid.*: “On peut, d'ailleurs, se passer d'images proprement dites ; la seule mention du nom ou même la pensée du nom, le moindre rudiment d'assimilation mentale suffit pour faire d'un substitut arbitrairement choisi, oiseau, animal, branche, corde d'arc, aiguille, anneau, le représentant de l'être considéré. L'image n'est, en somme, définie que par sa fonction, qui est de rendre présente une personne.”

³⁰ PLATO, *Epistle VII*, 343b (transl. by R. G. BURY, Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1981). In this context it is noteworthy to focus on Augustine's interpretation of magical signs in his *On Christian Doctrine*. Entirely in the spirit of the Platonic agenda, Augustine perceives this conventional aspect of magical *mimésis* as a result of the “agreement with demons”, on the basis of which people established their principles (or “signs”, *signa imaginaria*) for worshipping various models (see AUGUSTINE, *De doctrina christiana*, II,20,30): “For it was not because they had meaning that they were

This is also in line with Plato's concept of philosophical ascent to god whose homeopathic effect is based on the "wax" matter of the human soul. This very matter, using various symbols of beauty and goodness (beautiful body, soul, conduct or laws), allows for the creation of a relationship to a temperate and just deity, thus adding real power to our prayers and sacrifices: "Wherefore the temperate man is the friend of God, for he is like him; and the intemperate man is unlike him, and different from him, and unjust," says Plato in explanation of the efficiency of these symbols.³¹ God therefore naturally does not respond to incantations and prayers of such men and the sacrifices of sinners, who try to escape God's punishment using various magic practices, are of no avail. Divine names which are pronounced are only seemingly powerful and their power stems from the more or less successful manipulation with the minds of ordinary believers.

Principle of contagious magic

Origen, an expert on mysterious theology of divine names, sees it in a completely different light. When looking at the large number of people of various characters and education, whom Jesus and his followers managed to turn to Christian faith, it has to be clear to all that Jesus was not a leader of any rhetoric or philosophical school and, through the incantation of divine names, they tried to invoke another power which the philosophical terms abounding in images cannot denominate.³² A Christian "magician" does not attempt to make his clients "recall" the real image of God in their souls, but he uses "powerful names" (ὀνόματα

attended to, but it was by attending to and marking them that they came to have meaning." (ibid., II,24,37, transl. by MARCUS DODDS, Edinburgh – Grand Rapids 1886).

³¹ PLATO, *Leges*, 716d, transl. by R. G. BURY. Plato can argue against Jacob's sticks using the idea of philosophical soul that through various physical and noetic images ascends to god, in which all of this imagery is based: "Do but consider, that there only will it befall him, as he sees the beautiful through that which makes it visible, to breed not illusions but true examples of virtue, since his contact is not with illusions but truth. So when he has begotten a true virtue and has reared it up he is destined to win the friendship of Heaven; he, above all men, is immortal" (*Symposium*, 212a; transl. by W. R. M. LAMB). See APULEIUS, *Apologia*, 26,1: "Do you hear, you who so rashly accuse the art of magic? It is an art acceptable to the immortal gods."

³² See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,62; III,39.

ἐνεργά), whose power (δύναμις) arises from the context in which they are pronounced: “And so also with other names in use in Egyptian which invoke certain daemons who have power only to do certain particular things; and other names in Persian which invoke other powers, and so on with each nation. So also the names of the daemons upon earth, which have possession of different localities (διάφοροι τόποι), will be found to be related to the languages used in each respective locality and nation.”³³ Origen’s mysterious theology (θεολογία ἀπόρητος) thus does not deal with a classification of divine powers according to their genus and species, but with a question by which name they can be addressed and set in motion.³⁴

Each effort to make these “powerful names” generally comprehensive using translation or a definition of their meaning will, on the contrary, result in a disruption of the magic contact. If one attempts to replace the Hebrew term Sabaoth in a magic formula with the “Lord of Powers” (Κύριος τῶν δυνάμεων) or “Almighty” (Παντοκράτωρ), as translated in the Septuagint, we will achieve nothing when pronouncing the formula or prayer containing these expressions, notes Origen.³⁵ Celsus’ attempt to replace the names Sabaóth or Adonai with the name of the Greek Zeus in this magic mode is thus completely pointless, as this name comes from a totally different religious context.³⁶ “Thus it is not

³³ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,24.

³⁴ Similar thoughts may also be found in the works of other Neo-Platonic philosophers. This, however, does not mean that they would be actually employed by Platonic authors, as indicated by JOHN DILLON in *Magical Power of Names*. They mostly tried to “translate” them into their own language.

³⁵ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, V,45. In this case, Origen obviously focuses mainly on the allegoric interpretations by PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, who calls for a similar analysis of divine names as that which is used in Platonic theology (see *De vita Mos.* I,75–76). A similar enumeration of “explanatory” divine names can also be found in pseudo-Aristotelian treatise called *De mundo*, 7. For other evidence, see NAOMI JANOWITZ, *Theories of Divine Names in Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 362.

³⁶ See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,24. After all, Moses does not say anything similar about God as the Greeks about Zeus: “No one ever ventured to commit such crimes as Cronus did against Uranus, or Zeus against his father” (ibid., I,17). “But he will not be able to show, from any actions of theirs, (ἀπό τῶν πραγμάτων) that these fictitious representations of the Greeks, which have the appearance of being invested with bodies, are (really) gods” (ibid., I,23). As Plato says in *Cratylus*, the fact that “it might seem, at first hearing, highly irreverent to call him the son of Cronus and reasonable to say that Zeus is the offspring of some great intellect (*dianoia*); and so he is, for *ko-*

the significance of the things (τὰ σημαίνόμενα τῶν πραγμάτων) which the words describe that has a certain power to do this or that, but it is the qualities and characteristics of the sounds (αἱ τῶν φωνῶν ποιότητες καὶ ιδιότητες),” explains Origen. “The name of our Jesus is also connected with the same philosophy of names; for it has already been clearly seen to have expelled countless daemons from souls and bodies, and to have had great effect on those people from whom they were expelled.”³⁷

This, however, implies that such a sort of magic powers can hardly be connected through a system of associative relations employed by the Platonic incantation of the soul on the principle of similarity.³⁸ Names which are used in Christian formulas do not apply to a type of a personal idea whose perfection is to be “reproduced” in the magical act of Platonic *poiésis*, but they refer to a certain event in which particular persons participated and during which certain names were uttered. And these names do not lose their effect even in the case when they are used as a part of another language. The magic connection therefore does not have a character of any “association”; it is rather a transfer, the aim of

ros signifies not child, but the purity and unblemished nature of his mind (*nús*)” (*Cratylus*, 396b, transl. by H. N. FOWLER). ROBERT M. VAN DEN BERG, *Does it Matter to Call God Zeus*, p. 175, in this context refers to arguments, used by Aristeas in relation to the preparation of the translation of the Septuagint: “They (Hebrews) worship the same God, the Lord and Creator of the Universe, as all other men, as we ourselves, though we call him by different names, such as Zeus or Dis. This name was very appropriately bestowed upon him by our first ancestors, in order to signify that He through whom all things are endowed with life and come into being, is necessarily the ruler and lord of the Universe” (ARISTEAS, 16, transl. by R. H. CHARLES, Oxford 1913; see PLATO, *Cratylus*, 396a–b).

³⁷ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,25.

³⁸ I leave aside the question to what extent may this objection be also applied against Greek physiologists. Although Origen contrasts Aristotle’s concept of the conventional origin of names with the Stoic or Epicurean belief in the natural origin of names “imitating things” – “names were given by nature, the first men having uttered certain words varying with the circumstances in which they found themselves” (*Contra Celsum*, I,24; cf. above, p. 13) – He refuses the “theology” of those “who mistakenly apply the name of God to lifeless matter”. Cf. IAMBlichus, *De myst.* 7,4: “It is essential, therefore, to remove all considerations of logic from the names of the gods, and to set aside the natural representations (ἀπεικασία) of the spoken word to the physical things that exist in nature (πρὸς τὰ ἐν τῇ φύσει πρᾶγματα)”. Transl. by E. C. CLARKE ET ALII.

which is not a representation of a “substance”, but a transfer of a particular situation, state or even mood of the actors to the present moment.³⁹

The principle, on which a similar type of magic performance relies, stems from the belief that things which once were connected preserve this relationship even after they have been separated. On the level of this sympathetic relationship it applies that anything that happens to one of the parts of the original whole will be reflected in some way in the other. Unlike the homeopathic concept, this model requires some “material conductor” that is able to transfer this type of magic “touch”. The most known example is the bond, which, according to the assumptions of this “contagious magic” exists between a person and any separated part of his or her body, such as hair or nails. This can also be established through traces which people leave behind, such as used pieces of clothing or an imprint of the body, at a place where a particular person slept.⁴⁰

Origen apparently assumed that there is a similar relationship also between the divine or demonic powers and their natural names. If we hold an original part of a thing that we wish to affect in the hand, we can achieve the desired effect through a manipulation with this fragment. However, if we try to only use this part to reproduce or imitate the whole, for example by translating its name into Greek in the same way as allegorical interpreters of biblical stories in an attempt to uncover their deeper theological or ethical meaning (τὸ σημαινόμενον), we achieve no effect.

Magic of biblical history

The principles of contagious magic could have been a factor that led to Celsus’ accusation of Christians of “improper practices”. It does not only stem from his fear of physical blemish, but also from the questioning of a large number of deeply rooted ethical paradigms which Greek philosophy associated with the concept of divine perfection. The situation is even worse because whereas Platonic theologians did not have an

³⁹ See MARCEL MAUSS, *Esquisse d’une théorie générale de la magie*, p. 60.

⁴⁰ See JAMES G. FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*, p. 49. In this manner, for example *Acts*, 19,11–12 refer to Paul’s “powerful deeds” (δυνάμεις): “handkerchief and apron, which he touched”.

access to the above outlined system of manipulation with biblical names, it can apparently be used by those who do not have a clue of the history of salvation: “For many also of those who chant incantations for daemons use among their formulas ‘the God of Abraham’; they do this on account of the name and the familiarity between God and this righteous man. It is for this reason that they employ the expression ‘the God of Abraham’ although they do not know who Abraham is,” points out Origen. “The same may be said of Isaac and Jacob and Israel; although these names are generally known to be Hebrew they have been inserted in formulas in many places by the Egyptians who claim them to produce some magical effect.”⁴¹

Even more distinctly, this aspect of the formulas of contagious magic manifests itself in the “incantations”, which gains its power “by the name of Jesus with the recital of the histories about him” (τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ μετὰ τῆς ἀπαγγελίας τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν ἱστοριῶν): “For when these are pronounced they have often made daemons to be driven out of men, and especially when those who utter them speak with real sincerity and genuine belief.” But this is not all. “In fact the name of Jesus is so powerful against the daemons that sometimes it is effective even when pronounced by bad men,” emphasises Origen.⁴² Such belief, however, contradicts all ethical instincts of Celsus, who believes that the power of a prayer to God is directly proportional to the education and character of the man who pronounces it. His opinion on the character of Jesus’ followers is clear: “Jesus collected round him ten or eleven infamous men, the most wicked tax-collectors and sailors and with these fled hither and thither, collecting a means of livelihood in a disgraceful and importunate way.”⁴³ Even if these “scoundrels” (πονηροτάτοι) really disposed of some supernatural powers, it could hardly come from the God at whom prayers of Platonic philosophers are directed.

⁴¹ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,22. This statement by Origen was verified by JOHN DILLON, *Magical Power of Names*, p. 213, who in this relation quotes for example *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, XII,285 ff. or XIII,817.

⁴² ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,6.

⁴³ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,62. At the same time, Origen notes that Celsus is unable to even distinguish between common terms referring to the fishing and marine professions. A deficiency of this kind naturally raises the question to what extent can this Platonist work at least with common terms when he is not able to “discern a god from a man” (see PLATO, *Sophistes*, 216a ff.; 218e ff., on the term “fisherman”).

This implies that the difference between formulas of ancient magicians containing various *barbara onomata*, or “sounds full filled with deeds,” as classified in one of the hermetic texts,⁴⁴ and a language, which was used by Jesus and his followers to talk to divine powers, cannot be specified in a similar way as used by Plato to distinguish between traditional Greek prophets and philosophical theologians. At several points, Origen emphasises the difference in the motivation of traditional magic and the actions of Christian preachers who do not work for their own profit but try to bring benefit to their fellow men.⁴⁵ However, they use an identical method to address divine or daimonic powers and the only difference consists in the extent of their effect. The “deeds” of Greek, Persian or Egyptian daimons, through which their names are accomplished, are not commensurate with the actions of God, who created this world and sent his own son to extract mankind through “powerful acts” from the power of lower demonic powers and bring them back to their creator. Those who believe in these actions become a part of the history of God’s creation regardless of the extent of their virtues, education or correct understanding of biblical texts. God will, in any case, provide a reply according to their faith like in the case of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁴⁶ And the same applies to the mysterious “magic” of

⁴⁴ *Corpus hermeticum*, XVI,2.

⁴⁵ See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,68; VII,69. This is a classic objection found as early as in Sophocles, in Oedipus’ accusation against Tiresius: “this juggling charlatan, this tricky beggar-priest, for gain alone keen-eyed, but in his proper art stone-blind!” (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, 386–390, transl. by F. STORR, Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1912). See also APULEIUS’ objection in *Apologia*, 40; FRITZ GRAF, *Theories of Magic in Antiquity*, p. 95.

⁴⁶ In this respect also the references to Moses’ magical performances are typical. See for example ORIGEN’s mention of the use of the formula “the God who drowned in the Red Sea the king of Egypt and the Egyptians”, which is “frequently employed against demons and certain wicked powers” (*Contra Celsum*, IV,34). Regarding the occurrence of similar *historiolae* in Greek incantations see PIETER W. VAN DEN HORST, ‘*The God Who Drowned the King of Egypt*’: *A Short Note on an Exorcistic Formula*, in: *The Wisdom of Egypt: Jewish, Early Christian, and Gnostic Essays in Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuisen*, (eds.) ANTHONY HILHORST – GEORGE H. VAN KOOTEN, Leiden – Boston 2005, pp. 135–139. For a general characteristic of these magic formulas see for example DAVID FRANKFURTER, *Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical Historiola in Ritual Spells*, in: *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, (eds.) MARVIN MEYER – PAUL MIRECKI, New York 1995, pp. 457–476, who, however, focuses mainly on their “mythic dimension where actions are completed and tensions have been resolved” (p. 466).

Jesus' followers pronouncing his name or the account of his actions: "Even if it seems impossible to prove how Jesus did these things, it is clear that Christians make no use of spells, but only of the name of Jesus with other words which are believed to be effective, taken from the divine scripture."⁴⁷

Conclusion

This naturally does not imply that Origen would refuse any philosophical reflection on the biblical history, including the allegorical interpretation of biblical names, as known from Philo of Alexandria.⁴⁸ However, they are built on entirely different foundations than those employed in the metaphors of Greek philosophers. In one of his homilies preserved as part of the *Philocalia*, he repeats his theory that thanks to the character of the pronounced sounds (κατὰ τὴν φύσιν τῶν φθόγγων τῆς ἐπιφθόνης), magic incantations dispose of a certain natural power (φυσικὴ δύναμις) which take effect even in the cases when the one who pronounces them is not aware of the meaning of the words: "The more it must be acknowledged that it is with the giving of names in the Divine Scriptures, only they are stronger (δυνατωτέρα) than any charm. For there are certain faculties in us, the best of which (αἱ κρείττονες) are nourished by these 'charms,' as I may call them, being akin to them."⁴⁹ At that time, if our mind is fruitless (ὁ νοῦς ἡμῶν ἀκαρπὸς ἔστω), says Origen, the reading of the Holy Scripture can strengthen these "invisible principles" controlling our soul and body through rational food that stems from the Scripture, and the names specified therein, and make their powers mightier (ισχυρότερα) than those opposing them.⁵⁰ "On

⁴⁷ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,6; see *ibid.*, I,18: "For it became the Creator of the universe, after laying down laws for its government, to confer upon His words a power which might subdue all men in every part of the earth."

⁴⁸ See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,9: "For in the Christian system also it will be found that there is, not to speak at all arrogantly, at least as much of investigation into articles of belief, and of explanation of dark sayings, occurring in the prophetic writings, and of the parables in the Gospels, and of countless other things, which either were narrated or enacted with a symbolical signification."

⁴⁹ ORIGEN, *Philocalia*, 12,1,17–19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12,1,23 ff., with reference to *Psalms* 102(103),1. It is characteristic that JOHN DILLON translates the key term τινὰ ἐν ἡμῖν ἀόρατα as "certain invisible forms within us" (*Magical Power of Names*, p. 214).

this account are they who hear the word powerfully proclaimed (οἱ λόγου τοῦ μετὰ δυνάμεως ἐπαγγελομένου ἀκούοντες) filled with power, which they manifest both by their dispositions and their lives, and by struggling even to death on behalf of the truth.”⁵¹

At the first sight it might seem that Origen after all finally agrees with the above cited Celsus’ belief that “there is something in man superior to the earthly part, which is related to God”, and “those in whom this part is healthy always long for him to whom it is related”.⁵² The commentary on the “effective” nature of divine names, however, implies that the Christian “magician”, who undoubtedly also tries “to hear something of him and to be reminded about him”, comes closer to God from a completely different angle than the Platonic mimesis does. The reason is clear. Each attempt for a more precise definition of the nature of the powers that control the Christian movement opens up the threat of the return of a no longer functioning system of Greek theological sciences. Also the “wisdom of this world” reveals a certain power (τι μέγεθος), admits Origen.⁵³ According to Platonic philosophers, philosophical terms filled with ideal images of divine being affect the daimon who “stems from the heavenly ground” and who, if properly nurtured, elevates us to the divine models of that sphere. However, neither these “universal powers” finally enabled Greek philosophers to achieve a real knowledge of God. On the contrary, its imitative magic attempting to “recollect” our heavenly origin effectively hinders any efficient connection with divine powers. The attempt to use the same means to advocate the divine authorisation of Jesus’ mission would eventually rather “weaken the force of the defence that is in the mere facts, and detract from the power of Jesus which is manifest to those who are not quite stupid” – “and the faith, like the faith of the philosophers of this world in their doctrines, would have been ‘in the wisdom of men’, and not in the ‘power of God’.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,62; cf. I,70; II,13: “word being uttered with power (ὁ μετὰ δυνάμεως λαληθεὶς λόγος)”. Therefore, unlike those who are controlled by the “vain deceit” of Greek philosophy: “Although they do not possess divine power they believe that they were brought to the word of God.” In PLATO’S words, they become righteous and holy (only) through wisdom (μετὰ φρονήσεως)” (see *Theaetetus*, 176b).

⁵² ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,8; see above, p. 8.

⁵³ See ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, praef. 5.

⁵⁴ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, I,62; see *ibid.*, praef. 3.

Summary

One of the important topics of Origen's treatise *Against Celsus* is a defence of Christians from accusations of magical practices, seen primarily in their incantation of Christ's name. In his appraisal, Celsus draws on the Platonic principles of the "care for the soul", according to which every contact with the world of divine is carried out on the basis of philosophical knowledge, accomplished by the assimilation of the soul to the image of god. For Celsus, there is no other way of getting in connection with the divine, and thus the Christian faith in Jesus' miracles is only a product of religious charlatans who implant false notions of divine powers into the human soul. The ignorance of the soul is thereby only reinforced, and it cannot reach any connection with divinity whatsoever. The similarity principle brings the Platonic "incantation of the soul" closer to the model of imitative magic that achieves its effect merely by virtue of an idea. Origen, on the contrary, defends the real impact of uttering of Jesus' name, which, according to him, has its power regardless of a degree of our theological knowledge. In this regard, Origen draws attention to the Egyptian magicians who include biblical names into their magical formulas even though they do not realise whom they address. In his account, then, it is rather the principles of contact magic that come into play, operating with corporeal parts of things or bodies or with their traces and fragments of events that are somehow connected to certain names.

Keywords: Origen; Celsus; magic; divine names; *Contra Celsum*

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