

# The Concept of Evil in the Anthropology of Origen and Basil the Great

Marina Stojanovic\*

In the writings of the early Fathers, especially the apologists, the questions of theodicy were highlighted sphere of theological reflection, given the fact that evil as a phenomenon in the world was one of the elements that non-Christian or heretical writers willingly included in their critiques and disputes of the Christian concept of God. From a simplified point of view, there seemed to be an objective logical incompatibility, on the one hand of the notion of a good and omnipotent God, the Creator of everything, and, on the other hand, of the evil that accompanies creation. The principled effort of non-Christian writers was to attribute the notion of evil to the Christian notion of God and thus show the Christian ontology, then still in its infancy, as contradictory. Certainly, the issue of evil in the world was not the only topic of controversy among these writers. Evangelical events, and most of all the birth, suffering and resurrection of the Lord, were the target of analytical, but often ill-intentioned re-examination by pagan philosophers.

Perhaps the broadest catalogue of these controversial questions can be reconstructed based on Celsus' critique of Christianity, of which we gain insight from Origen's answer to Celsus<sup>1</sup>. On the basis of Origen's

---

\* Η Marina Stojanovic είναι διδάκτωρ Θεολογίας της Σχολής Ὁρθόδοξης Θεολογίας τοῦ Πανεπιστημίου Βελιγραδίου.

1. More on Celsus critique of Christianity and Origen's apology: G. Stroumsa, "Celsus, Origen and Nature of Religion", in *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 61, Roma 1998, pp. 81-96; H. Chadwick, "Origen, Celsus, and the Stoa", *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1947), pp. 83-102.

apology, it is possible to build a somewhat clear opinion on how serious was the task impended to the Christian theologians of the early centuries, and how complex was the first theologians' attempt to translate the reality of salvation events and Gospel testimonies into a speculative philosophical system with arguments that could answer the challenges of critical questions. Thus, in that defensive swing, the whole brilliant theology of the fathers was developed, which today, although the epoch of the Fathers is over, faces the challenges of the same issues in a new spirit. The issues of ecology, the unity of the Church, human relation to nature to other human beings represent both old and new problems for individuals and society. In these matters, directly and indirectly, the texts of the Fathers serve as a treasury of remedies.

The healing effect of the theology of the Fathers could have a great effect only if, in the multitude of their sacred thoughts and advices, we are able to reach for the one that best suits our circumstances and translate it into a language understandable to modernity. The advice of pastors and preachers of the Church today would not seem powerless in front of the collapsing structure of a civilization that is slowly destroying itself if, although without much theological and scientific knowledge, we would listen to the plain summons of the Church to be hosts and keepers of the nature instead of its consumers. If modern man cannot stop being a consumer at all –which is impossible– then he can at least be a lesser and far more modest consumer than he is used to. This example, which would contribute to alleviating of the burning ecological crisis, is just one of the examples of the application of the patristic theology. In the key notion of this article –the notion of evil from an anthropological point of view– the works of two great teachers of the Church, which in this topic show textual similarities, can serve as an answer, a guideline, and a solution for overcoming the most difficult (alongside with death and nothingness) existential problem.

What is evil in the context of the patristic thought of Basil the Great and Origen, how to interpret it and how to get rid of it? The texts of Basil and Origen have a common thread and similar reflections here, with the remark that for Origen, there is also moreover one specific way of thinking about this topic.

## Evil: Cosmological or anthropological problem?

The reality that people from ancient times sometimes perceive and define as bad, the one that is accompanied by troubles whose objectivity is indisputable, has been interpreted differently by religions and philosophies. Most of these interpretations give one well-known dualistic interpretation of being. In that interpretation, good and evil are principles, sometimes personified in religions, that are in permanent struggle with each other producing in that way a world of opposites. In Serbian folk literature, which dates back to the Middle Ages, we could notice this image of the world in which Christian and pagan-religious elements are mixed in the creation of narratives. On the other hand, ancient tragedies provide a more sophisticated but similar vision of reality. In both literatures, as well as in the Gnostic and other works of Eastern literature, we have the same perception of the phenomenon of evil – as a cosmic principle that, by necessity, incomprehensibly to us, occasionally affects lives of people. In that sense, the idea of necessity, destiny and determinism is directly related to the appearance of evil. The Slavic *destiny* (*судбина, усуд*) and the Greek *Ananke* (*ἀνάγκη*) reflect an identical image of the world – evil is present externally, as a principle, nature or necessity, and an individual is powerless before it, especially in the physical world, which is mostly associated with the action of evil.

This brief review of non-Christian, religious and philosophical dualism is important for us to point out the understanding of evil that is different from the patristic one. At the same time, in Origen we find traces of precisely this kind of dualism, which he later reshaped and modified in accordance with Christian revelation. So, in pre-Christian, but also gnostic interpretations of the world, evil is a cosmological problem. It has a cosmic foundation and a cosmic dimension – either as a principle, a force or an essence, it has no cause in the person or individual but in the external, objective being. As such, evil affects individuals depending on their mental strength, predestined circumstances, and the like. We remember that in the tragedy of Oedipus, he fails to avoid committing evil even though he has no personal tendencies to do so. Although in ancient philosophy we already have the notion of moral responsibility,

also in Aristotle the possibility of rational choice – *προαίρεσις*, in the Stoics an apology of virtues and rationality, in principle evil remains a phenomenon outside man, cosmically grounded, from which one defends himself. In that sense, the calm state of the soul was conceived by Greek philosophers as a way of fighting against evil.

In the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and this is first defined by Origen, evil is not a cosmic phenomenon nor does it represent some general, superhuman principle that affects the life of the world like a plague. First, we notice that evil as such has no essence-nature, nor represents anything nor stands as a principle that organizes nature. In response to Celsus' critique, he says: "Here too, I think, because he has failed to make clear what are evil things, although even among Greeks there are many differences of opinion about good and evil, he jumps to the conclusion<sup>2</sup> that from our affirmation that even this world is the work of the supreme God it follows that we believe God to be maker (*εἶναι ποιητήν*) of what evil is. Whatever the truth may be about evil, whether God made it, or whether, if He did not (*αὐτά, πεποίηκεν ἢ μή*), it has come into being as a by-product of the primary creations (*ἐκ παρακολουθήσεως γεγένηται τῆς πρὸς τὰ προηγούμενα*), we are not concerned with that now"<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, Origen concludes that the false assertion that God created evil as well as the world itself follows from Celsus' own words and it is not the consequence of Christian belief that God created all that exist. He wants to say that any claim that everything that exists was created by God raises the question of whether evil was also created. In that sense, he makes a terminological distinction – evil is not created, nor does it have an essence of its own. The verb *ποιέω* -*ω* (*to create, to do*) cannot be used to create a concrete essence and to describe the appearance of evil. This is a conceptual problem in our (modern) languages as well – *to exist* and *to do* are, for example, verbs that we equally use to denote what has an essence, what exists, and we often use them to denote that what does not really exist exists, that is, *does (acts)* something although it *does not do*, but *devastates (annihilates,*

2. Origen considers Celsus' argumentation as a kind of logical fallacy – *petitio principii* (cf. R. Somos, "Strategy of Argumentation in Origen's *Contra Celsum*", p. 215).

3. *C. Cels.* 6, 53 (transl. H. Chadwick).

destroys what exists). Origen says that evil arose through upbringing, so that “many men have become evil by upbringing and by perversion and by environment”<sup>4</sup>. Evil has no essence in the sense that some essence is bad in itself, that is, something *non-good*, although the effect of evil is most, according to Origen, manifested in matter (material reality). What is characteristic of both Origen and the whole of Greek theologians is that they identify God as an absolute good in the categories of already existing metaphysics. He is one, transcendent, absolute, inconceivable, spiritual, good. These are all the qualities which are attributed to the essence of God even before the fourth century, that is, to the God as an eternal essence. Although it is incomprehensible, some facts can be stated about it - that it is simple, incorporeal, different from everything empirical, etc. He is “simple intellectual being” (*intellectualis natura simplex*)<sup>5</sup> and “in all things, *μονάς* [unity], or if I may say, *ένάς* [oneness], and the intellect and source from which all intellectual being and intellect takes its beginning”<sup>6</sup>. As eternal good, God cannot be the cause of evil in any sense. Origen explains this through metaphor, and then explicitly: “We, however, maintain that just as that which is naturally sweet, by the very fact of its sweetness, cannot make anything bitter because it only has the power to sweeten (*οὐ δύναται τὸ πεφυκὸς γλυκαίνειν τῷ γλυκὸν τυγχάνειν πικράζειν παρὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ μόνην αἰτίαν*), and as nothing which naturally illuminates can darken anything because it is light (*οὐδὲ τὸ πεφυκὸς φωτίζειν τῷ εἶναι φῶς σκοτίζειν*); so also God can do nothing wrong (*οὕτως οὐδὲ ὁ Θεὸς δύναται ἀδικεῖν*). For the power to do wrong contradicts His divinity and all His divine power (*ένάντιον γάρ ἐστιν αὐτοῦ τῇ θειότητι καὶ τῇ κατ’ αὐτὴν πάσῃ δυνάμει ἢ τοῦ ἀδικεῖν δύναμις*)”<sup>7</sup>. This argument is taken over by Basil, one of the authors of Origen’s *Philocalia*, and he repeats it in his texts – “It is equally impious to say that evil has its origin from God (*παρὰ Θεοῦ τὸ κακὸν τὴν γένεσιν ἔχειν*); because the contrary cannot proceed from its contrary (*διὰ τὸ μηδὲν τῶν έναντίων παρὰ τοῦ έναντίου*)

---

4. *C. Cels.* 3, 69.

5. *Princ.* 1, 1, 6 (transl. J. Behr).

6. *Princ.* 1, 1, 6.

7. *C. Cels.* 3, 70.

γίνεσθαι). Life does not engender death (οὔτε γὰρ ἡ ζωὴ θάνατον γεννᾷ); darkness is not the origin of light (οὔτε γὰρ τὸ σκότος ἐστὶν φωτὸς ἀρχή); sickness is not the maker of health. In the changes of conditions there are transitions from one condition to the contrary; but in genesis each being proceeds from its like (ἐκ τῶν ὁμογενῶν), and not from its contrary”<sup>8</sup>.

In Origen, therefore, evil is an inner problem of the soul – it is, above all, an anthropological phenomenon, but as such it certainly has an impact on the existence of rational beings. Origen’s well-known idea of falling from a state of perfect goodness and blessedness to a state contrary to good is not as such a part of patristic tradition, since the very idea of pre-existence is not grounded in Christian cosmology. However, if we ignore this fact, the mere consideration of evil, as designed by Origen, shows interesting and significant elements. Namely, if evil is not a metaphysical entity and has a cause in the free (and rational) will of the individual, then it is, above all, a psychological phenomenon – neither physical nor spiritual. The very root of evil is in thoughts, more precisely in those intentions of the heart known only to us – “But the judgment of men is uncertain. They do not know whether I once sinned in the hidden depths of my heart whether I looked at a woman and desired her, and adultery was born in my heart”<sup>9</sup>. And adds: “When men see me giving alms according to my means, they do not know whether I am doing it because of God’s commandment or because I am seeking human praise and applause”<sup>10</sup>. We can presuppose that Origen does not mean here any thought that passes through the soul of an individual even beyond his will, but those thoughts that are permanently “inhabited” in him with, of course, the consent of the person himself. Healing from sin would be healing from thoughts that cause wrong actions and the wrong way of existence in general. However, when it comes to the primary, first, most important cause of evil in the soul, it would, according to Origen, be a kind of satiety, neglect, negligence, laziness towards good and divine grace. Regardless, therefore, of the

8. *Hom. Haex.*, 2, 4 (transl. B. Jackson).

9. *Hom. Luc.* 2, 3 (transl. J. T. Lienhard).

10. *Hom. Luc.* 2, 4.

fact that he puts the idea of negligence in the context of pre-existence, the idea itself is significant and very valuable. It's about the term in the phrase *κόρος λαβεῖν* in the *Principles*, which is found in other texts – *ῥαθυμήσαντος*<sup>11</sup> and *δι' ἀμέλειαν τοῦ καλοῦ*<sup>12</sup>. Origen presents the idea that God feeds souls with spiritual (intellectual) food, and if one of them lacks something, it is because of its own negligence and neglect of the graceful life and relationship with God<sup>13</sup>. In the *Principles*, on the other hand, he says that what is “lost through negligence” (*per negligentiam*) can be restored if the soul recalls to its foundation in God again<sup>14</sup>.

The notion of negligence (carelessness, indifference, laziness), exempt from the context of pre-existence, Basil recognizes as a very key notion that well explains the cause of evil from the anthropological point of view. In the *Homilies on Hexaemeron* he states: “What shall we say then? Evil is not a living animated essence (*οὐσία ζῶσα καὶ ἔμφυχος*); it is the condition of the soul opposed to virtue, developed in the careless on account of their falling away from good (*διὰ τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ καλοῦ ἀπόπτωσιν τοῖς ῥαθύμοις ἐγγινομένη*)”<sup>15</sup>. Elsewhere, he argues similar to Origen – a soul has a possibility to abide with God and to contemplate the divine, but evil is generated when it turns away from this contemplation of divinity. Soul can fall from God thanks to its free will, but concrete reason of evil action could be described by notion of negligence and satiety – “Because of the impulse of free choice (*αὐτεξούσιον ὀρμήν*), especially befitting a rational nature (*λογικῆ φύσει*). For having been freed from all necessity, and receiving self-determined life from the

11. *C. Cels.* 6, 44.

12. *C. Cels.* 6, 45.

13. Cf. R. P. Rivas, “Negligence as the Cause of the Fall of Souls in Origen and its Reinterpretation by Evagrius Ponticus”, in: *Platonic Inquiries*, C. D’Amico, J. F. Finamore, N. Stroke (eds), 2017, pp. 233-242.

14. “But if satiety (*satietas*) should ever take hold of any one of those who stand on the highest and perfect stage, I do not think such a one would be removed and fall all at once, but he must descend gradually and by degrees (so that it may sometimes happen that if a brief lapse takes place, the person quickly recovers and returns to himself), not come crashing down utterly, but retrace his steps and return (*redire*) to his former state and be able to re-establish that which had been lost through negligence (*per negligentiam*)” (*Princ.* 1, 3, 8).

15. *Hom. Haex.*, 2, 4.

Creator, because it came into being according to the image of God (διὰ τὸ κατ' εἰκόνα γεγενῆσθαι Θεοῦ), it understands the Good and knows his joy and possesses authority and power, abiding in the contemplation of the beautiful and the enjoyment of spiritual things (ἐπιμένουσα τῇ τοῦ καλοῦ θεωρίᾳ καὶ τῇ ἀπολαύσει τῶν νοητῶν), guarding carefully in itself the life according to nature. Yet it also had authority to turn away from the beautiful at any time. And this happened to it when it received a satiety of blessed delights (κόρον λαβοῦσα τῆς μακαρίας τέρφωσος) and was as it were weighed down by a kind of sleepiness and sank down from things above (καὶ οἷον νυσταγμῶ τινι βαρυνθεῖσα καὶ ἀπορῶρεισα τῶν ἄνωθεν), being mixed with the flesh through the disgraceful enjoyment of pleasures<sup>16</sup>.

Basil here follows Origen in the conceptual sense, just as in the explanation of the psychology of evil and sin. For an individual to be deprived of evil, it is necessary for his mind to reach a state of calm (calmness, serenity). He mentions this term, for example, in the *Letter to Gregory*, where, quite like Origen and a similar ascetic tradition, he says that escaping from the chaotic daily life and worries and pleasures of this world is a way of purifying the soul: “We must strive after a quiet mind (Ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ τὸν νοῦν ἔχειν πειρᾶσθαι προσήκει) ... Now solitude (ἐρημία) is of the greatest use for this purpose, inasmuch as it stills our passions (πάθη), and gives room for principle to cut them out of the soul (αὐτὰ τῆς ψυχῆς)”<sup>17</sup>. He goes on to list the specific weaknesses that threaten the soul: “Quiet (ἡσυχία), then, as I have said, is the first (step) (ἀρχή) in our purification of soul (καθάρσεως τῆ ψυχῆς); the tongue purified from the gossip of the world; the eyes unexcited by fair color or comely shape; the ear not relaxing the tone or mind by voluptuous songs, nor by that special mischief, the talk of light men and jesters”<sup>18</sup>. Similar to Origen, the soul needs to be fed divine thoughts – “Pious exercises nourish the soul with divine thoughts (Ἀσκησις δὲ εὐσεβείας τὴν ψυχὴν τρέφει τοῖς θείοις διανοήμασι)”<sup>19</sup>.

16. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 6 (transl. N. V. Harrison).

17. *Epist. (II) Greg.*, 2.

18. *Epist. (II) Greg.*, 2.

19. *Epist. (II) Greg.*, 2.

## The role of the biblical text in the evil-virtue dichotomy

It is interesting that Basil pays special attention among the biblical writings to the Psalms as a God-inspired text par excellence, a text which, in his opinion, can lead the soul into the mentioned calm and defense against passions, bad influences inside and out: “A psalm suggests serenity to the soul (*ψαλμός γαλήνη ψυχῶν*). It is the author of peace, which calms confused and angry thoughts. Because it soothes the anger of the soul, and what is not bridled it rebukes. A psalm makes friends (*φιλίας συναγωγός*), brings together those divided (*ἔνωσις διεστῶτων*), makes peace between those at enmity. Who can still think as a foe him with whom he has said the same prayer to God? So that psalmody, making a chorus singing, a bond, as it were, to a united whole (*οἰοεὶ σύνδεσμόν τινα πρὸς τὴν ἔνωσιν τὴν συνωδίαν ἐπινοήσασα*), and bringing together the people into a peaceful association of one chorus (*εἰς ἑνὸς χοροῦ συμφωνίαν*), makes also the greatest of blessings, love (*τὸ μέγιστον τῶν ἀγαθῶν τὴν ἀγάπην*)”<sup>20</sup>. Origen’s *Homilies on the Psalms*, especially those newly discovered, share and, it seems, leave for Basil and others Church writers a special admiration for the book of Psalms and all its soul-beneficial teachings, which he analyzes extensively and in detail. Numerous passages that speak of the special metaphysical and moral significance of the whole of Scripture are part of the well-known facts about Origen and his understanding of Scripture<sup>21</sup>.

The very process of understanding the spiritual meaning of Scripture in Origen already requires a certain “purification” of passions and bodily insights<sup>22</sup>. For Basil, reading a God-inspired text is not only a way of purifying the soul from passion, but also participation in the community. It is *a bond, as it were, to a united whole, and bringing together the people into a peaceful association of one chorus, makes also the greatest of blessings, love*. In Basil’s writings, this step forward can be noticed regarding Origen – the community, that is, the Church is set as a way and criterion of existence in good, and at the same time as only good.

---

20. *Hom. Ps.* 1,2

21. *Princ.* 4, 1, 6; *Hom. Jer.* 28, 2, 3.; *Hom. Luc.* 35, 7; *Comm. Ser. Matt.* 27; *Hom. Lev.* 1, 1.

22. Cf. *C. Cels.* 4, 50.

Here the theologically developed evangelical and pauline idea – love – *κοινωνία* is the greatest virtue and equivalent of the notion of good. The same insight is given by the following passage: “He wishes that the claspings of love, like the tendrils of the vine, should attach us to our neighbours and make us rest on them, so that, in our continual aspirations towards heaven, we may imitate these vines, which raise themselves to the tops of the tallest trees”<sup>23</sup>.

The common task of Origen and Basil was to illuminate and explain those biblical passages which provide an opportunity to be interpreted as arguments against God’s eternal goodness. These are mainly some Old Testament statements – Origen often mentions some of them. For instance, when darkness (*σκότος*) is mentioned in Scripture, we must distinguish the “good” sense of this term from the opposite one. Although in some passages darkness refers to bad, evil (spiritual) things, sometimes it is also used in relation to God or in a neutral context – “But while we are occupied in these matters, we must observe that not every time something is named ‘darkness’ is taken in a bad sense; there are times when it has also been used in a good sense. It is because the heterodox did not make this distinction that they accepted the most irreverent doctrines concerning the creator and withdrew from him and abandoned themselves to the fictions of myths. We must now point out, therefore, how, and when the term darkness is understood in a good sense. Darkness, storm clouds, and thunderstorms are said to surround God (*περὶ τὸν Θεὸν εἶναι λέγεται*) in *Exodus*, and in Psalm 17 it says, *God made darkness His hiding-place, His tent round about Him, dark water in clouds of the air (Ps 17, 12)*<sup>24</sup>. Similar argues Basil – when we read that God created darkness, here we should not understand darkness as a principle opposite to good. “But to one who understands the mind of Scripture, none of these verses contains an accusation against God as a cause and creator of evils, for the one who says, *I fashion light and make darkness (Is 45,7)*; presents himself as artisan of the creation through these things, not as a creator of evil. Therefore, that you may

23. *Hom. Haex.*, 5, 6.

24. *Com. Jn.* 2, 23 (transl. R. Heine).

not consider one principle to be the cause of light, another of darkness, he has declared himself to be the Creator and Fashioner who has made the things that appear to be opposites. So do not seek one artisan of fire and another of water, nor one of air and another of earth since they seem in a certain way to lie opposite to each other because of their contrasting properties”<sup>25</sup>.

Another relevant example concerns the verse about hardened heart – *I will harden Pharaoh’s heart (Exod 4, 21)*. Both Origen and Basil develop apologetic exegesis: the cause of Pharaoh’s hardened heart is not God, but Pharaoh himself although syntactically God is the subject of the sentence. God is here just someone who allows Pharaoh to manifest his evil will and postpones a just punishment. Origen explains: “For if he hardened by God and through being hardened sins (*Εἰ γὰρ ὑπὸ Θεοῦ σκληρύνεται καὶ διὰ τὸ σκληρύνεσθαι ἀμαρτάνει*), the cause of the sin is not himself (*οὐκ αὐτὸς ἑαυτῷ τῆς ἀμαρτίας αἴτιος*). And if this is so, it will appear that Pharaoh does not possess freedom of will (*οὐδὲ ἀντεξούσιος*), and it will consequently be maintained, by this example, that neither do others who perish have the cause of perdition in the freedom of their own will (*οὐκ ἀντεξούσιοι*)”<sup>26</sup>. The exegetical explanation is developed further by Basil: “And he hardened him by long suffering and the delay of the punishment, increasing his evils so that as his wickedness grew to the farthest extreme, the justice of the divine judgment upon him would be manifest. Therefore, as he was led from smaller blows to increasing plagues, he did not relent in his rebelliousness, but he despised the forbearance of God and by habit found training in the calamities inflicted on him”<sup>27</sup>. Free will, manifested in deeds of free choice, is the cause of someone’s praise or punishment. Although almighty, God is not the only one who guides the events – he gave humans the same power. In his homily about origin and structure of humanity, the notion of *likeness* is explained in such way that human kinship to God lies in his ability to *rule* over himself – over his own

---

25. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 4.

26. *Princ.* 3, 1, 7.

27. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 5.

soul, desires, passions, acts<sup>28</sup>. The *inner* man (both for Origen and Basil) is one who makes his own being like a *vessel* – “It is as in a big house, where some vessels are of gold, some of silver, some of earthenware, and some of wood. The free choice of each provides the likeness in the material”<sup>29</sup>.

We see that Basil, like in some previous examples, takes over important incentives from Origen, developing them further. Thus, he dedicates an entire sermon to the defense of the view that God is not the creator of evil. Here he emphasizes the role of human free will as a free being in creating his decisions and actions. He says: “For the cause and root (ἀρχὴ καὶ ῥίζα) of sin is our freedom (ἐλευθερία) and self-control (αὐτεξούσιον). Because those who do not do evil will not be able to have any accidents”<sup>30</sup>. Basil classifies the manifestations of evil – those that originate from us and those that occur as a global or personal disaster. For the first evils – various sins that destroy interpersonal relationships and the human soul, only man is responsible. The second type of evil, evil as an unfortunate circumstance of a nation or individuals, also occurs because of the accumulated bad actions of individuals, and by God’s permission, in order to prevent the further spread of evil. Basil explains: “Moreover, what our senses perceive as evil is one thing, while what is evil in its own nature is another. What is evil by nature has been produced by us, namely, injustice, licentiousness, folly, cowardice, envy, murder, poisoning, laziness, and passions akin to these, which defile the soul that has come into being according to the image of the Creator and have caused a shadow to pass over the soul’s own beauty. On the contrary, we call what is toilsome and painful to our sense perception evil, bodily illness, and blows to the body, and lack of necessities, and disgrace, and financial setbacks, and loss of property... Each of these is brought to us by the wise and good Master for our advantage. For

28. “Therefore you have become like God through kindness, through endurance of evil, through communion, through love for one another and love for the brethren, being a hater of evil, dominating the passions of sin, that to you may belong the rule”; *De hominis structura* (I), 22.

29. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 5.

30. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 3.

wealth is taken away from those who have used it badly, thus destroying the instrument of injustice. He sends illness to those for whom it is more profitable to have their limbs constrained than to move unhindered toward sinning”<sup>31</sup>.

Here, too, Basil goes a step further than Origen and gives one, we would say, eschatological vision of the dialectic of evil-good and the change of different states of being in history. Thus, evil itself is not a product of God, but occurs because of the freedom of created beings and the permission for them to express themselves. However, as evil affects not only the one who intentionally does it, but also many innocents around him, so the whole context is left to be resolved in the future. It is only the eschatological event that will separate the *chaff from the wheat*, that is confirm as good what is good. In that sense, for some events, which seem to us to be bad, it is too early to judge, since even though individuals do evil, the whole creation is directed towards its good end (purpose). “This one thing must be held firmly in our mind, that since we are a creation (πλάσμα) of the good God and are welded together by him (ἀπὸ αὐτὸν διατηρούμεθα), as he manages (οἰκονομεῖ) smaller and greater things concerning us, neither can we undergo anything that is not God’s will, nor do we truly suffer anything that is unless it can be understood to bring us something better”<sup>32</sup>. Basil ends his sermon recalling the final eschatological joy when every struggle will stop and good will be the only existence of the world: “For not one wrestling or contest will remain for us on high, nor will anyone be set against us and turn us aside from the blessed life. But we will have an uninterrupted existence without pain and enjoy the tree of life, from which we were prevented from partaking since the beginning through the plot of the serpent”<sup>33</sup>. When it comes about the relation between human free will and divine foreknowledge, both Origen and Basil represent an attitude according to which there is no causal connection between divine knowledge of future and certain future events. In other words, God knows what we do and what will happen but that does not mean that he is the cause of

---

31. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 3.

32. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 3.

33. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 10.

future events. Both writers were strong defenders of teaching about free will and independence of human action on predestination or destiny. Although there are facts in life, a man has a way to manifest his will and choice, and this is also within a soul. According to them (and Nemesius), human actions depend not on providence “but on the human mind deciding to take an action. Providence would deal with the effects or consequences of these actions”<sup>34</sup>. Free will, expressed also through the Aristotelian notion of *προαίρεσις*, is one of the crucial points in expounding the Christian theodicy, further developed by Didymus and other writers, especially in polemics against Manicheism<sup>35</sup>.

## Conclusions

From various implicit and explicit reviews of the notion of evil in the texts of Origen and Basil, some principled views can be singled out. Namely, evil is a psychological phenomenon – for both authors. “Thus also evil is not in itself an existence but arises following the maiming of the soul (Οὕτω καὶ τὸ κακὸν οὐκ ἐν ἰδίᾳ ὑπάρξει ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ τοῖς τῆς ψυχῆς πηρώμασιν ἐπιγίνεται)”<sup>36</sup>, as Basil defines. Then, evil as a psychological phenomenon is caused entirely and only by the free will of the soul, when it is expressed as the opposite of God, that is good. Third, in some thoughts there is an idea of a certain constitutive, “good” role of evil. There are different interpretations of this role according

34. Cf. V. Baranov, “Human Destiny and Divine Providence in Two Byzantine Authors of the Early Eighth Century”, *Scrinium* 15 (2019), p. 5. Basil’s arguments have found further implementation in works of John of Damascus. John paraphrases some important insights of Basil: for instance, the distinction between an act which is really evil and events that might seem evil, but actually are not; comprehension of evil as a corruption of substance and not as substance or essence itself; causal relation between free will, on the one side, and virtue or sin, on the other (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 15-24).

35. More on this topic: J. B. Bennet, *The Origin of Evil: Didymus the Blind’s “Contra Maichaeos” and its Debt to Origen’s Theology and Exegesis*, Toronto 1997. The author suggests that the content of the notion of free will in Origen and Didymus is similar. Didymus, obviously, took the term from Origen and elaborated it in his arguments against the Manicheans.

36. *Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum*, 5.

to Origen and Basil. For Origen, the evil deed of the soul is evil and remains so, but the very defeat of evil, which is inevitable, is something that confirms good as such. “If you consider what is dark, the things which are bright will appear more pleasing to you. And, to put it briefly, from the consideration of evil things the glory of good things is indicated more brilliantly”<sup>37</sup>. So, although someone’s bad deed is actually bad, in the whole context, contrasted to what should not be so, it emerges as a good one. In a way, according to Origen, evil as opposed to good highlights good itself by making it “more brilliant”. We all seem to have experienced such cases. It is a famous motif, also known from *Faust* – “I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good”. This can be interpreted as a certain dualism that Origen inherited from the non-Christian philosophical tradition, but also it may be explained in another way. Namely, if evil is only a psychological phenomenon, it remains evil at the level of the psychology of the individual. God did not establish the cosmos as a substance that contains evil. It is therefore inevitable that evil in its attempt to thwart creation remains inactive. Thus, it remains within individuals – rational souls who have fallen away from God, but its action has no consequences for the outcome of creation and its essence. The consequences of evil action on the cosmological plane are transformed into good. In that sense, the individual who does evil is indeed the bearer of evil, but his actions cannot achieve their goal at the level of being in totality. Creation – history walks towards salvation and moves from non-being to being. In Basil, as mentioned, the explanation of evil also has an eschatological foundation. According to him, nothing is bad except sin as a voluntary opposition to God. Everything else is a temporary state of created being moving towards its ultimate well-being. Suffering and tribulation are an expression of sacrificial love that precedes the final eschatological fullness of being. In that sense, the suffering of Christians is not evil for them, but a proof of free commitment to God and readiness to sacrifice for the sake of living with him. Pain and suffering in this context are a kind of necessary and passing trouble that is there only as an expression of freedom. Since freedom is good in itself and the greatest

---

37. *Hom. Gen.* 1, 10.

gift, it is what makes a certain bad action good. In the case of sacrificial suffering, freedom transforms suffering into future joy and grace. From this experience came many testimonies of Fathers and Saints, recorded in hagiographies and other texts. It is about that feeling of readiness for sacrificial love, which apostle Paul speaks about, as well as other early Christian martyrs – Saint Ignatius of Antioch during the days of his preparation for suffering and many others. Exactly the same concept, as Metropolitan Zizioulas notes, exists in works of Dostoevsky<sup>38</sup>. So, it is a matter of suffering which is willingly accepted, and which is a feat crowned with joy.

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ἡ ἔννοια τοῦ κακοῦ στὴν ἀνθρωπολογία τοῦ Ὁριγένη  
καὶ τοῦ Βασιλείου τοῦ Μεγάλου

Marina Stojanovic, δρ. Θεολογίας  
Πανεπιστήμιο Βελιγραδίου

Ἡ παροῦσα μελέτη παρουσιάζει καὶ ξεχωρίζει τὰ βασικὰ στοιχεῖα στὶς διδασκαλίες τοῦ Ὁριγένη καὶ τοῦ Βασιλείου τοῦ Μεγάλου σχετικὰ μὲ τὴν ἔννοια τοῦ κακοῦ. Σὲ αὐτὸ τὸ σημεῖο, μεταξύ τους ὑπάρχει ἡ ταυτότητα ὀρισμένων κινήτρων, ἐξηγήσεων καὶ ἐπιχειρημάτων ποὺ χρησιμοποιοῦν. Ἀντιμετωπίζοντας αὐτὸ τὸ θέμα, ὁ Βασίλειος λαμβάνει ὡς βάση ἓνα σημαντικό μέρος τῆς ἐξήγησης τοῦ κακοῦ ἀπὸ τὸν Ὁριγένη, ἀναπτύσσοντάς το περαιτέρω. Ἡ ἀνάλυση τῆς ἔννοιας τοῦ κακοῦ σχετίζεται μὲ τὴν ἀνάλυση τῶν σχετικῶν ἐννοιῶν: ψυχὴ, ἐλεύθερη βούληση, ἀμέλεια, παντοδυναμία τοῦ Θεοῦ κ.λπ.

38. Cf. J. Zizioulas, “Dostoyevsky and Ethics” (Serb.): *Sabornost* 3-4 (2006), pp. 53-55.

## Bibliography

### Origen:

- Commentaria in Evangelium Joannis, Patrologia Graeca* XIV.  
*Commentariorum Series 1–145 in Matthaum, Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* 11, E. Klostermann, E. Benz (ed), Leipzig 1933.  
*Contra Celsum, Patrologia Graeca* XI.  
*De Principiis, Patrologia Graeca* XI.  
*Homiliae in Genesim, Patrologia Graeca* XII.  
*Homiliae in Leviticum, Patrologia Graeca* XII.  
*Homiliae in Lucam, Patrologia Graeca* XIII.  
*Homiliae in Jeremiam, Patrologia Graeca* XIII.

### Basil:

- De hominis structura* I, *Patrologia Graeca* XXX.  
*Epistola II Basilius Gregorio, Patrologia Graeca* XXXII.  
*Homiliae in Hexaemeron, Patrologia Graeca* XXIX.  
*Homiliae in Psalmos, Patrologia Graeca* XXIX.  
*Quod Deus non est Auctor malorum, Patrologia Graeca* XXXI.

### Translations

- Basil. Letters and Selected Works*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 8., B. Jackson (transl.), Christian Literature Publishing Co., Buffalo, NY, 1895.  
*Commentary on the Gospel according to John. Books 1-10*, R. Heine (transl.), The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1989.  
*Origen. Contra Celsum*, H. Chadwick (trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1980.  
*On the First Principles* (t. 1 t 2), J. Behr (transl.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.  
*St. Basil the Great. On Human Condition*, N. V. Harrison (transl.), St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood New York 2005.

### Secondary Literature

- Baranov V., "Human Destiny and Divine Providence in Two Byzantine Authors of the Early Eighth Century", *Scrimum* 15 (2019), pp. 3-29.  
 Chadwick H., "Origen, Celsus, and the Stoa", *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1947), pp. 34-49.  
 Rivas R. P., "Negligence as the Cause of the Fall of Souls in Origen and its Re-interpretation by Evagrius Ponticus", in: *Platonic Inquiries*, C. D'Amico, J. F. Finamore, N. Stroke (eds.), 2017, pp. 233-242.  
 Somos R., "Strategy of Argumentation in Origen's *Contra Celsum*", *Adamantius* 18 (2012), pp. 200-217.

Stroumsa G., “Celsus, Origen and Nature of Religion“, *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 61, Roma (1998), pp. 81-96.

Zizioulas J., “Dostoyevsky and Ethics“, *Sabornost* 3-4 (2006), pp. 47-62.