

THEOLOGY AS ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN GRECO-ROMAN LATE ANTIQUITY¹

Josef Lössl, Cardiff University
(LosslJ@cardiff.ac.uk)

Abstract: Following conventional wisdom Theology as an academic discipline (taught at Universities) is something which developed only in the Middle Ages, or in a certain sense even as late as the 19th century. The present essay in contrast traces its origins to Classical Antiquity and outlines its development in early Christianity, especially with a view to institutions of higher education that existed in Late Antiquity, e. g. in rhetoric and philosophy. It concludes that there were forms of academic theological discourse in Late Antiquity which were to become the basis of later developments in the discipline.

Introduction

The title of this paper may seem problematic in the sense that Classical Antiquity knew neither an academic discipline called “theology”² nor a secular institution of higher education that could be compared with what we understand by “university”.³

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented on 16 April 2013 at a symposium on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main. I thank the organisers of the symposium, in particular Prof. Dr. Knut Wenzel, for inviting me to speak on that occasion.

² Of course, early Christian discourse as reflected in the extant literary remains of early Christianity is generally assumed to be, at least to a large part, also in some sense theology; for a discussion of this point see Chr. Marksches, *Die kaiserzeitliche christliche Theologie und ihre Institutionen* (Tübingen, 2009), now translated as Chr. Marksches, *Christian Theology and its Institutions in the Early Roman Empire* (Tübingen, 2015). Marksches’s concept of theology is largely restricted to early Christianity, but extends on the other hand to a broad spectrum of early Christian activities. It is not only focused on “schools”, or institutions of higher learning, but also on churches and their sacramental, pastoral and social activities. The present paper in contrast concentrates on theology as an “academic” activity in the context of such institutions of higher learning, not only in the context of Christianity, but also of non-Christian (pagan) contexts.

³ There is a reluctance in recent scholarship to refer to institutions of higher learning in Classical and Late Antiquity as “universities”. Expressions such as “schools” or “higher schools” (*Hochschule*) are preferably used. W. Liebeschuetz, “Hochschule,” *RAC* 15 (1991), 858-911, for example, avoids the expression “Universität”; see also K. Vössing, *Schule und Bildung im Nordafrika der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Brussels, 1997), 323; although see P. Gemeinhardt, *Das lateinische Christentum und die antike pagane Bildung* (Tübingen, 2007), 56, who in relation to the decree, documented in *CTh.* 14.9.3, that thirty-one chairs of higher learning be established in the imperial capital Constantinople, speaks of the foundation of a “university” or “school of higher learning” (*Hochschule*). In older studies such as J. W. H. Walden, *The Universities of Ancient Greece* (London, 1912) the expression “university” was sometimes used uncritically, as is pointed out by A. Cameron, “The End of the Ancient Universities,” *CHM* 10 (1966/1967), 653-673, who, however, goes on to say that although there were no universities in Antiquity, there were nonetheless university cities. Similar M. Vinzent, “‘Oxbridge’ in der ausgehenden Spätantike – oder: Ein Vergleich der Schulen von Athen und Alexandrien,” *ZAC* 4 (2000), 49-82, who alludes to the blending of concepts already in the title of his paper, when he speaks of “Oxbridge” (i. e.

Both phenomena originated only as late as the Middle Ages, or even later, in the Age of Enlightenment (if we think of the modern university). Still, the question when these more recent phenomena originated is linked to the question regarding their precursors in Antiquity, especially since these more recent phenomena emerged in the context of renewed interests, or even revivals, of intellectual life forms and contents that go back to Antiquity.⁴ The present paper is therefore relevant, especially if we try to define the concept of theology as an academic discipline and to explore the institutional, social and cultural backgrounds against which the business of such a discipline was conducted in Antiquity. Such an undertaking cannot only be a descriptive one. Rather, we also have to ask in principle to what extent attempts to define the relationship between academic theology and secular university today might have to take account of the fact that both phenomena may in actual fact have originated together, in interaction with each other, in Antiquity.⁵ If this is the case, it could well be detrimental for the understanding of either phenomenon, even today, to neglect this connection, or deny (or suppress) it as an awkward and inconvenient truth.

This paper aims at approaching the topic methodically, in a number of steps which are reflected in the title, and especially in its terminology, in particular the expressions “theology”, “academic discipline”, and “(late) antiquity”. The expression “theology”, to begin with, has to be understood first of all in broad terms. It cannot be narrowed down to a “Christian” theology, since such a Christian theology only emerged during our period in question, in a process of self-definition and definition by others, which resulted in its delimitation, e. g. against Jewish traditions, inner-Christian “heresies”, and traditional Graeco-Roman (“pagan”) philosophies and religious traditions. Even the latter phenomena themselves did not exist before this process but originated only

of universities!) as “schools”. As is emphasized in a volume by U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser and M. Schäfer (eds), *Religiöse Vereine in der römischen Antike* (Tübingen, 2002), it is important not to overlook the institutional and constitutional aspect of many schools, i. e. the fact that they functioned as corporations, something which many of them shared with religious and professional colleges; see in that volume the chapter by Chr. Marksches, “Lehrer, Schüler, Schule: Zur Bedeutung einer Institution für das antike Christentum” (97-121). The lines that are drawn in that chapter as well as other chapters in that volume between professional, religious and educational corporations also cast some light on the problematic nature of the distinction between religious and “secular” institutions in ancient contexts.

⁴ In the Middle Ages it was a rediscovery of Aristotelian philosophy and science which contributed to the emergence and flourishing of medieval universities. In the early modern period it was a renewed interest in classical education generally. In a provocative and as such hardly tenable but nevertheless noteworthy study C. Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters. The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World* (Princeton, 2012) has argued that in the middle of the twelfth century a strict version of the scholastic method was imported to the Latin west from Central Asia via the Islamic Middle East. This “recursive method”, as he calls it, was, he argues, unknown in Classical Antiquity, which for that reason had never produced anything like the medieval university. While Beckwith’s thesis has received mixed reviews (see e. g. J. Black in the *European Review of History* 20 [2013] 503), it is nevertheless relevant in the sense that it illustrates the perceived absence of ancient institutions of higher education and seats of scientific learning that would be strictly commensurate with the kind of institutions which emerged in the west from the High Middle Ages onwards. On the other hand, it also remains odd that the high medieval and early modern western institutions called “universities” should until very recently have defined themselves very strongly in terms of efforts at renewing ancient forms of higher learning and intellectual endeavour. It is against this background that also the emergence of Christian theology as an academic discipline has to be understood.

⁵ The question is therefore not only, “What is theology as an academic discipline in late antiquity?” but, “What is theology as an academic discipline?” Naturally, “theology” is understood here in as wide a sense as possible including exegesis, historical, philosophical, systematic and practical theology.

in contradistinction to a Christian theology, which in turn was then itself only in the process of finding itself.

The underlying question for any research engaging with this process is, “how is it (i. e. this process) to be understood, both in its content and in its various forms?” By asking this question we are not, or at least not necessarily, assuming the existence of some kind of *theologia perennis* in the way this was done in various schools of early modern Platonism.⁶ Rather, what is attempted here is a historical and “foundational-theological” outline of the concept “theology” over against “positivistic” approaches which take the appearance of increasingly distinct forms of Christian thought during the later Roman empire either as just another of many new curiosities that appeared during that period, or as a quasi-, or, indeed, actually, miraculous phenomenon caused by divine intervention. These two latter approaches, while hostile to one another, are nevertheless oddly complicit in stereotyping early Christian thought and attempting to deprive it of any potentially wider significance it might have in the history of human knowledge.

Further terms requiring explanation include “academic”, “academic discipline”, “school” (both as a place of secondary and of higher education), and “university” (as a place of teaching, learning, and research in the sense of an independent intellectual endeavour).⁷

Finally, we shall have to look at the concept of “antiquity” and its qualification as “Greek” and “Roman” (or “Graeco-Roman”) and at the little word “late”.

Following these discussions we shall offer a brief overview of the history of early Christian theology. Our focus shall be especially on the emergence and development of various forms of “academic” theology, i. e. theology produced by the teaching and learning that was practised in schools and institutions of higher learning and study. In this context we shall see that these forms of theology are firmly and rather uncannily rooted in the intellectual culture of Hellenism, i. e. in an educational context that was hostile to the Biblical, Jewish, tradition from which early Christianity as a religious way of life emerged. In other words, academic theology, which was indeed a product of early Christianity, emerged from what one could call a “paganising” context, an educational context of a predominantly pagan character, an intellectual culture that was tendentially critical and fiercely independent of any form of established religion and religious tradition.

In a concluding section Origen and his concept of a Christian scientific discipline (*Christiana scientia*) will be discussed as a paradigmatic example for the possibilities and limitations of such a theology in Late Antiquity.

⁶ It would therefore be a worthwhile undertaking to integrate the early modern attempts to develop such a universal theology into this present endeavour. Arguably among the most advanced attempts of this kind were Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) and Henry More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (1664); for a recent discussion of Cudworth see Chr. Hengstermann, “Platonismus und Panentheismus bei Ralph Cudworth,” in F. Meier-Hamidi and K. Müller (eds), *Persönlich und alles zugleich. Theorien der Alleinheit und christliche Gottrede* (= *ratio fidei* 40; Regensburg, 2010), 192-211.

⁷ See for this e. g. Gemeinhardt, *Das lateinische Christentum* (n. 3), 58-60: Formal education (i. e. education acquired in the context of schools) cannot be understood merely in terms of skills training, but has to be seen as a formation of the ability to think independently. In the present case it would be the ability to think independently about the fundamental meaning and purpose of Greek and Roman intellectual culture, i. e. that which was commonly known by its Greek name as *Paideia*.

1. Terminological reflections

1.1 “Late Antiquity”

Our first question, therefore, is: What in the given context is meant by “Graeco-Roman Antiquity”? This expression has become a problematic one, certainly in the wake of Martin Bernal’s fundamental critique of a concept of Classical (Greek and Roman) Antiquity that excludes African and Oriental (Asiatic) Antiquity and sets up the idea of a superior western culture, of which Graeco-Roman culture would be, so to speak, the cradle.⁸ Such an ideological notion of Graeco-Roman culture is not what is suggested here. In historical terms, however, we have to admit that it was, from our perspective at least, only from the fourth century BCE onwards that a more intensified interaction between Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Nubian, Syrian, Persian and many other cultures developed, i. e. during the Hellenistic period, in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the formation of the successor kingdoms,⁹ and especially in some urban centres around the Mediterranean, Alexandria above all, but also Rhodes, Pergamum, and many other places from the Iberian peninsula to Bactria and beyond, using the medium of a “common” (κοινή) Greek language.¹⁰

There is also the word “late”, as in “late antiquity”. But in the present context this is only to indicate that this period of intense cultural interaction and exchange did not

⁸ M. Bernal, *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Ancient Civilization* (Rutgers University Press, 1987). Despite the partly justified criticism of Bernal’s attempt to link Classical Antiquity to its African and Asiatic roots, not just in terms of mnemohistory but also archaeologically and historically, Bernal’s endeavour to make this link is fundamentally correct. It was only in the late 18th century with the rise of the idea of a “western” supremacy that this link was fatally broken. For 17th century intellectuals such as, for example, Cudworth and More (see above n. 6) a synopsis of African, Asiatic and Graeco-Roman cultures, for example, in view of the way an early Christian theology emerged and developed, was still self-evident; see also J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 143.220-225.250f.

⁹ Of course, this does not mean that there were no earlier encounters between Greek and oriental cultures. Reports of such encounters go back to the Homeric writings and are corroborated and even exceeded by archaeological finds; see e. g. R. Lane Fox, *Travelling Heroes: Greeks and their myths in the epic age of Homer* (London, 2009); see also J. Lössl, “Bildung? Welche Bildung? Zur Bedeutung der Begriffe ‘Griechen’ und Barbaren in Tatians ‘Rede an die Griechen’,” in F. Prostmeier (ed.), *Frühchristentum und Kultur* (Freiburg, 2007), 137-162. What was decisive was that from the fourth century BCE onwards a more intensive exchange developed among cultures that were under Greek (Hellenic) influence and were therefore becoming “Hellenistic”. The influence of Greek reached far into Central and South Asia but concentrated mainly around Western Asia and the Mediterranean. For the concept of “Hellenistic” in this context see J. Lössl, “Religion in the Hellenistic and Early Post-Hellenistic Era,” in J. Lössl and N. Baker-Brian (eds), *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity* (London, 2017), forthcoming.

¹⁰ Analogous developments outside the Hellenistic cultural sphere, for example in Central, East, and South Asia, and in America, and their relationship to the Hellenistic world will not be considered here. What is decisive for the perspective that has been chosen for this enquiry is that within this world of Hellenism different cultures co-existed (e. g. Egyptian, Hebrew, Babylonian, Persian and many others), who all defined themselves against each other and against Greek culture, but did so using the Greek language and relying on the very same Greek culture as a frame of reference. In this respect these attempts at self-definition could be understood, in a certain (very restricted) sense, as “post-colonial”. For these theoretical links see also T. Hunt, “Religion in Late Antiquity, Late Antiquity in Religion,” in Lössl and Baker-Brian, *A Companion* (as n. 9), forthcoming.

end in the first or second centuries CE, but continued for several more centuries, until the sixth, seventh or even eighth century. A possible criterion for determining a period boundary here could be that the relevant authors and other producers of cultural goods understood themselves as belonging to that period which we now think of as Classical Antiquity. In other words, they did not develop an historical or analytical distance to that period as later medieval scholars or early modern humanists would do.

Authors writing in Greek and Latin during the fifth and sixth centuries CE were still concerned about understanding their culture wholly in terms of their ancient founder figures, be it Homer or Plato, Cicero, Virgil, or, in Jewish-Christian contexts, Moses, or Christ. Even though they were transforming this culture, they did not understand themselves to be in a distance to it. This attitude also determined the way they dealt with their tradition. For example, the philosophical movements called Middle- and Neo-Platonism included the teachings of many philosophers whose teachings seem now very disparate and belonging to different schools, above all Plato and Aristotle. The members of those movements, however, did not perceive it that way at all. They were busy harmonising those disparate teachings into one coherent tradition, which, for them, they were.¹¹ In a similar way Jewish and early Christian apologetic authors constructed a Mosaic tradition of a Hellenistic character, from which in their view a “pagan” Hellenistic culture had split off.¹²

The motivation of individual authors or representatives of specific groups who engaged in such activities could be quite different and mutually exclusive. For example, Jewish and Christian authors delimited themselves against a pagan Hellenic culture by defiantly claiming for themselves the status of “Barbarian philosophers”,¹³ pagan authors polemicized against Jews and Christians as “haters of humankind” or “haters of religion” (misanthropes and atheists),¹⁴ Christians tried to gain profile against Jews by depicting themselves as the true heirs of a common tradition,¹⁵ Jews claimed their

¹¹ For a discussion of this phenomenon (i. e. that late-antique thinkers tended to perceive a harmony between the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle) see G. E. Karamanolis, *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement? Platonists on Aristotle from Antiochus to Porphyry* (Oxford, 2006).

¹² The main method used for this constructive effort was the “proof” that the Biblical tradition was of much greater age than the Classical one; see P. Pilhofer, *Presbyteron Kreitton: Der Altersbeweis der jüdischen und christlichen Apologeten und seine Vorgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1990); A. Droge, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture* (Tübingen, 1989); G. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* (Oxford, 2001).

¹³ The expression “Barbarian philosophy” or “Barbarian wisdom” goes back as far as Herodotus and Hekataios: W. Speyer, I. Opelt, “Barbar I.,” *RAC Suppl.* 1 (2001) 813-895, 826-829; for the use of the concept in Jewish and Christian apologetics see Droge, *Homer or Moses* (as n. 12), 82-96; specifically on Tatian’s *Oration to the Greeks* in the context of Christian apologetics in the second century CE see Lössl, “Bildung? Welche Bildung?” (as n. 9); see now also P. Gemeinhardt, “Tatian und die antike Paideia: Ein Wanderer zwischen zwei (Bildungs-)Welten,” in G. Nesselrath (ed.), *Gegen falsche Götter und falsche Bildung. Tatian, Rede an die Griechen* (SAPER 28; Tübingen, 2016), 247-266.

¹⁴ On anti-Jewish polemic see P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA 1997), on anti-Christian polemic cf. J. W. Hargis, *Against the Christians. The Rise of Early Anti-Christian Polemic* (New York – Washington, DC, 1999).

¹⁵ See for this now P. Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton 2012), 50-92, which focuses on the development of a specifically Christian concept of sin in the second century CE and the fundamentally different view points of Justin and Marcion over against Judaism in that period. Justin engaged in what could be called “cultural appropriation” by claiming pre-Christian Jewish history for Christianity, while Marcion excluded Judaism and presented Christianity as a totally new phenomenon unrelated to Judaism. It has been argued that Marcion’s position was potentially more conducive for a

cultural and ethnic integrity against pagan as well as Christian non-Jews,¹⁶ and pagan authors, from the fourth century onwards and long into the sixth/seventh century, tried to construct, in an increasingly Christian (and, later, Muslim) environment, their ideal of a pagan Classical Antiquity, with which they identified.¹⁷

It was in the pluralistic context of this literary and intellectual culture that theology emerged and developed in Antiquity, and it was this context which produced a wider effect, a whole epoch which is nowadays referred to as “late antiquity”.¹⁸ The end of this epoch can be traced at the point at which it is treated, so to speak, from “outside”, and when its intellectual traditions were studied as fragments from a past, for example from the point on when the Aristotelian *organon* was taught as a kind of theological propaedeutics as in Syriac monasteries of the sixth century,¹⁹ or, in a certain sense, in the case of Boethius,²⁰ or where efforts were made to “grasp” the heritage of classical antiquity as a whole, as, arguably, in the encyclopedic efforts of a Cassiodorus (ca. 485-585) or an Isidore of Seville (ca. 560-636).²¹

positive relationship between Christianity and Judaism; for a critical review on this latter position and a revisiting of the traditional view that Marcion’s position is ultimately the more problematic one, see now J. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic* (Cambridge, 2015), especially 408-410.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Lieu (ed.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London, 1992); J. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (London, 2002); C. J. Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians. History and Polemics, 30-150CE* (Minneapolis, IN, 1989); and more recently also J. Barclay, “‘Jews’ and ‘Christians’ in the Eyes of Roman Authors c. 100CE,” in P. J. Tomson and J. Schwartz (eds.), *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to write their history* (Leiden, 2014), 313-326.

¹⁷ See for this now A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, 2011).

¹⁸ Generally, historians see the beginnings of this era during the reign of the emperor Diocletian, or even later; see for this for example A. Demandt, *Geschichte der Spätantike: Das römische Reich von Diocletian bis Justinian 284-565 n. Chr.* (Munich, 2007), xviii, who has 284, the year of Diocletian’s accession, even in the title of his book. For the historian of ideas the relevant processes leading up to Late Antiquity may be traced back to the end of the Hellenistic age, if not earlier, especially with the above-mentioned intercultural encounters. In this article the expression “late antiquity” will be used in this latter, looser, sense. It will be seen as a part, or phase, of “Antiquity”, albeit its latest phase.

¹⁹ See for this e. g. A. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006) (for the east Syrian development); J. W. Watt, “From Sergius to Mattā: Aristotle and Pseudo-Dionysius in the Syriac Tradition,” in J. Lössl and J. Watt (eds.), *Interpreting the Bible and Aristotle in Late Antiquity: The Alexandrian Commentary Tradition between Rome and Baghdad* (Farnham, 2011), 239-257, 257 (for western Syria); J. Watt, “Von Alexandrien nach Bagdad. Ein erneuter Besuch bei Max Meyerhof,” in A. Fürst (ed.), *Origenes und sein Erbe in Orient und Okzident* (Adamantina 1; Münster, 2011), 213-226; now also J. Watt, “Pensée grecque et controverses syriaques,” in F. Ruani (ed.), *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque* (Paris, 2016), 349-480.

²⁰ See S. Ebbesen, “Boethius as a Translator and Aristotelian Commentator,” in Lössl and Watt, *Interpreting the Bible and Aristotle* (as n. 19), 121-133; S. Ebbesen, “The Aristotelian Commentator,” in J. Marenbon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius* (Cambridge, 2009), 34-55; cf. *ibid.* 105-128 also D. Bradshaw, “The *opuscula sacra*: Boethius and Theology,” who finds that Boethius in a way anticipated the medieval separation of philosophy and theology and that he treated early Christian theology already in a comprehensive way, i. e. as a complete phenomenon of which he himself was no longer part. If this is correct, then Boethius might indeed have been the first philosopher and theologian of the medieval Latin west. Evidence against this view, however, is provided by C. Moreschini, *A Christian in Toga. Boethius: Interpreter of Antiquity and Christian Theologian* (Göttingen, 2014), where Boethius is still presented very much in an ancient context.

²¹ For Isidore and Cassiodorus see, among many others, Th. O’Loughlin, “Isidore of Seville,” in G. Dunphy (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle* (Leiden, 2010), 880-883; R. Burgess, “Cassiodorus,” *ibid.* 259-260; J. W. Halporn and M. Vessey (eds.), *Cassiodorus: Institutions of Divine and*

1.2 “Scientific (or scholarly/academic) discourse”

Now what is “academic discourse” in Antiquity? In order for something anywhere close to such a discourse to become even possible, a number of conditions needed to be fulfilled which could be taken anything but for granted. For example, there had to be, as a kind of (culturally and socially) accepted principle, or ideal, something like a “primacy of rationality”, or at least there had to be institutions in which such an ideal was cultivated.²² While in the past research was often focused on this ideal – as if it was a reality in Antiquity – so that there was a tendency to idealise Antiquity, today scholars tend to notice more the discrepancy that existed between the ideal and reality. Even though a kind of scientific discourse may well have been going on, the point is how it was embedded in political and social contexts which may have fundamentally differed from those of the early modern period in the West. For example, although many conditions were in place during the Hellenistic period for the development of a scientific-technological culture as it developed during the early modern period in the West, the actual development during the late Hellenistic age and in Late Antiquity took quite different directions. In other words, a scientific and industrial revolution as in the 18th and 19th centuries CE did not take place in Antiquity. Such a development had to wait for another one and a half millennia. And there are good reasons for that.

When exploring these reasons it may be less important to be puzzled by the fact that the Hellenistic age produced impressive inventions or made discoveries such as the power of steam or heliocentricity. Rather, what is more important is the question how such inventions and discoveries may have changed society.²³ General references to the potential hostility against science and technology on the part of Roman generals or early Christian bishops are hardly helpful in this context. New perspectives such as

Secular Learning and On the Soul (Liverpool, 2004); M. S. Bjornlie, *Politics and Tradition between Rome, Ravenna and Constantinople. A Study of Cassiodorus and the ‘Variae’, 527-554* (Cambridge, 2013); A. Pronay, *Cassiodorus Senator: Einführung in die geistlichen und weltlichen Wissenschaften* (Hildesheim et al., 2014); more generally also M. Gerth, *Bildungsvorstellungen im 5. Jahrhundert n. Chr.: Macrobius, Martianus Capella und Sidonius Apollinaris* (Berlin, 2013); P. Riché, *Éducation et culture dans l’Occident barbare, vi^e-viii^e siècles* (Paris, 1962).

²² For the concept of discourse (“Diskurs“) cf. Marksches, *Die kaiserzeitliche christliche Theologie* (as n. 2), 14. Marksches defines “Diskurs” following Foucault as “Ausarbeitung und Tradierung von Wissen im Rahmen von Institutionen.” Under the influence of Jan Assmann however he also develops a more open understanding of theology in the Roman imperial era and of the institutions in which such theology was practised. He therefore did not focus specifically and exclusively on the kind of understanding of theology that is familiar in the context of the modern institution of the university. Rather, he looks at a variety of forms of “implicit” theologies (a concept developed by Assmann). These types of theology would have been practised in religious rituals, developments of canons of authoritative texts, religious offices and hierarchies and similar traditions within and between religious groups. In contrast, the present article is intended to focus precisely on the pre-history of that familiar type of theology which in the context of the modern university developed into an academic discipline.

²³ See for this e. g. L. Lavan, “Explaining Technological Change: Innovation, Stagnation, Recession and Replacement,” in L. Lavan, E. Zanini and A. Sarantis (eds), *Technology in Transition AD 300-650* (Leiden, 2007), xv-xl, xx: “Inventions of this kind [steam power, cast iron production] serve to show us, if we had any doubts, that technological innovation through discovery did exist in Late Antiquity, but that it was not a motor for change, out of the context of the needs of the time. There are always new discoveries and ideas in every period. The meaningful study of technology is not the enumeration of inventions, but rather the study of technologies as used.”

Josef Lössl, “Theology as Academic Discourse in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 38-72; ISSN 1754-517X; website:

<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

the heliocentric model proposed by Aristarchos of Samos or the materialistic atomism of a Democritus, Epicurus or Lucretius were culturally and socially marginalised long before the birth of Christianity and regardless of the expansion of the Roman empire. They were generally held to be potentially detrimental to traditional world views such as the general piety of people expressed through traditional worship, or the worship of mother earth as the centre of the universe in particular.²⁴ Practices such as vivisection were only made possible for short periods of extreme scientific enlightenment, and in very specific contexts, notably under Ptolemy II in Alexandria in the years between 285 and 246 BCE.²⁵

The context of a universalist political imperialism at the time and in the sphere of influence of the Hellenistic successor states is still seen as a vital factor contributing to the peak achievements of Hellenistic science, especially in medicine and astronomy,²⁶ although, as just mentioned, a wider social and cultural influence of these peak achievements was hardly perceptible, at least not one of the more profound kind as it would be felt during the early modern period.

If we assume something like systematic or institutionalised scientific training and activity, then we often hear about the “philosophical schools” as places where such scientific discourse was taught and practised. Expressions such as “school”, let alone “university”, especially in analogy to present-day institutions, are, however, badly chosen and potentially misleading. What is especially wrong to assume is a kind of “long duree” of such institutions, as 19th and early 20th century historians of education tended to assume, for example a continuous existence of a “school” like the Platonic Academy in Athens from the fifth century BCE to the sixth century CE.²⁷

²⁴ See for this P. Green, *Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Age* (London, 2007), 119; C. Steel, “The Divine Earth: Proclus on Timaeus 40bc,” in R. Chiaradonna und F. Trabattoni (eds), *Physics and Philosophy of Nature in Greek Neoplatonism* (Leiden 2009), 259-281.

²⁵ Green, *Alexander the Great* (as n. 24), 119-121.

²⁶ See e. g. R. Flemming, “Empires of Knowledge: Medicine and Health in the Hellenistic World,” in A. Erskine (ed.), *A Companion to the Hellenistic World* (London, 2003), 449-463; also *ibid.* 450 (on astronomy) and 451f. on “imperial knowledge”.

²⁷ See the discussion in Y. L. Too, *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden, 2001), 2-10. In the case of the Academy it is possible to postulate a certain institutional continuity until the end of the Hellenistic era. But this came to an end during the early Empire (at the latest). It was “renewed”, with a certain degree of fiction, in Late Antiquity, only to be abandoned in the course of the sixth century; see (for the earlier period) J. Gucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (Göttingen, 1978), 226-379. It has to be admitted that the Academy represents *the* form of institutionalised academic discourse – even the word “academy” is still used in this sense today. However, the “real” life context even of some of the most eminent late-antique philosophers was not that of an “academic”, i. e. one who spent his time at an institution like the academy. For examples of philosophers’ lives see e. g. J. Dillon, “Philosophy as a Profession in Late Antiquity,” in A. Smith (ed.), *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honour of Peter Brown* (Swansea, 2005), 1-17. Schools that were more strongly geared towards developing and maintaining institutional status, as the Academy and the Peripatos, did rely on civic, aristocratic, royal or, later, imperial sponsors for their material and legal bases. School heads emerged from and depended on such ongoing sponsorship, as did their successors. It was only through this, largely generic, system that school traditions emerged. Because of the generic nature of this system it makes little sense to try and distinguish between “domestic”, “popular”, “professional” or “salon” philosophers. The basic structure was very similar in all such cases: There was sponsorship, a leading head, a circle of pupils, and a wider circle of occasional attendants. The quality of a particular school depended very much on the quality of a head, i. e. whether he (or she in some cases) produced high quality teaching, or whether the school meetings consisted merely in banqueting. The distinctions drawn by Markschie, *Die kaiserzeitliche christliche Theologie* (as n. 2),

Josef Lössl, “Theology as Academic Discourse in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 38-72; ISSN 1754-517X; website:

<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

Interesting in this context are the reflections of Carlo Natali,²⁸ who suggests that the activity at the Peripatos, the school founded by Aristotle, were indeed more than just leisured philosophical discussion; that there was serious research going on; that there was a systematic build-up of a library; that there was an institutional structure, which school heads sought to maintain, and that there was a continuous knowledge of Aristotelian science handed down from the time of Aristotle himself, against the idea, which has also sometimes been floated, that Aristotle and his thought were forgotten and had to be rediscovered in the second century CE. However, Natali also cautions that what happened in that school tradition can hardly be called scientific progress. It was rather a process of decline and neglect accelerated by corrupt behaviour on the part of elites and general vagaries of late Hellenistic city life, followed by occasional attempts at renewal.²⁹

The image of an established, well organised, sustainably funded, let alone publicly funded, disciplined educational system does not do justice to the reality of life in the late Hellenistic and early Imperial age. “Schools”, or rather, “sects” (αἱρέσεις),³⁰ as Cynics, Epicureans and Stoics were referred to, did not even particularly strive to become institutionally established. They did not understand themselves as part but rather as an alternative to the traditional, conventional educational system,³¹ which consisted mainly in the practice of grammar and rhetoric for the purpose of functioning as an elite member within a city state, or for the aspiration to acquire such a function. Science and technology, practical matters, even including banking and finances for the purposes of industry and trade, or navigation involving astronomical knowledge for the purpose of seafaring, were in the hands of lower strata of society.³² Our relative ignorance of precisely how these two spheres of “higher”, theoretical, in-

77f., following J. Hahn, *Der Philosoph und die Gesellschaft. Selbstverständnis, öffentliches Auftreten und populäre Erwartungen in der hohen Kaiserzeit* (Stuttgart, 1987), are therefore only of limited use for a more institutional understanding of the philosophical practice. Any philosopher could be a popular philosopher, a domestic or a professional depending on the specific context or situation. Our interest in this paper is in the question to what extent any of these roles involved the philosopher in what can be called a kind of academic or scientific discourse, in a systematic sense. And this question, it should be added, needs also to be put to early Christian teachers and their role as theologians.

²⁸ C. Natali, *Aristotle. His Life and School* (Princeton and Oxford, 2013), 72-95.

²⁹ Natali, *Aristotle* (as n. 28), 93-96.

³⁰ For the origin of this concept in the context of Hellenistic philosophical schools Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (as n. 27) is still fundamental.

³¹ Cf. Ph. Mitsis, “The Institutions of Hellenistic Philosophy,” in Erskine, *A Companion* (as n. 26), 464-476, 473; Diog. Laërt. 6,27f. 73; 7,32 (Diogenes and Zeno are disparaging about Paideia, not so Chrysippus, however, who is in praise of her). In contrast to Hahn and Marksches (as n. 27) Mitsis traces the differences of social role and status among philosophers to the different emphases of their teachings. For example, Stoics are more “domestic” philosophers, Epicureans belong in the “salon”, Platonists and Aristotelians were more “academic” (in the generic sense). A description of the school situation during the transitional period between Hellenistic age and early Empire can also be found in Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (as n. 27), 226-295; see for this also A. Dihle, “Philosophie – Fachwissenschaft – Allgemeinbildung,” in *Aspects de la philosophie hellénistique* (Entretiens sur l’Antiquité Classique 32, Vandoeuvres; Genève, 1986), 185-223. Dihle emphasizes the way in which “philosophy” (mostly of a Platonist-Aristotelian orientation) eventually took over education and was identified as the ultimate goal, or peak, of education (paideia).

³² Cf. J. Andreau, *Banking and Business in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 1999) for banking and finance; M. G. Edmunds, “The Antikythera mechanism and the mechanical universe,” *Contemporary Physics* 55 (2014), 263-285, especially 274-279, for the construction of precision instruments based on detailed astronomical knowledge.

cluding, for example, mathematical and astronomical, knowledge, and practical skills, e. g. on how to translate such knowledge into constructing technically more advanced devices, or utilising it for industrial and profit-making development, were connected and interrelated is one of the main factors preventing us from better understanding in what way the ancient world differed from the modern world.

Only Academy and Peripatos developed something more similar to curricula and syllabi, canonical bodies of literature, comprehensive world views with potential impact on scientific and technological development. But even in their case there was no guarantee for long term institutional continuity.³³ They merely represented teaching traditions. How any of these traditions developed over a period of several generations, or which form any one of them took in each generation, depended strongly on who represented it, and where and when. The differences, for example, between the Academic teaching of a Philo of Larissa (d. ca. 83 BCE), the new Aristotelianism of an Alexander of Aphrodisias (who flourished in the early third century CE), or the Neoplatonisms of a Plotinus, a Porphyry, or a Iamblichus (in the third and fourth centuries CE), illustrate the enormous range of possibilities even within just one strand of philosophical tradition.

However, it was not least the Platonists and Aristotelians who through their sense of tradition and their historical approach to philosophy systematically built up a tradition of teaching and learning philosophy and everything related to it including theology, and who thus integrated systematically all other traditions into a general view of philosophy and of the universal and comprehensive teaching of everything related to the world and the gods, including doctrines of the one true God.

Despite its often razor-sharp, and fundamental, criticism of conventional rhetorical education, often decried as mere sophism, philosophy nevertheless depended on this conventional education in order to develop its own, more elevated, style of education. Obviously, what has just been said about the philosophical schools, especially their tendency to corruption and decline and their lack of reformative vigour (due to lack of support on the part of public institutions as well as private sponsorship), is also true of educational institutions generally. All too often they were not exactly the pride of the civic entities which they inhabited, and their practice was frequently haphazard and prone to decline and corruption. Established teachers preferred feasting and luxurious living to the hard work of the class room and place of study. Non-established tutors suffered poverty, insecurity, lack of esteem and abuse at the hand of rich patrons. In many places public school buildings fell into ruin and had to be periodically restored and the teaching regime therein reformed.

Although there existed a notional tripartite “system” or curriculum,³⁴ which began with the teaching of reading and writing and then went on with the reading and study of literary works and finally culminated in rhetorical training and the systematic study

³³ See above n. 27 on the basic structure of late-antique schools. Any lack of continuity was due to the general situation during that epoch; see for this the literature cited in nn. 2, 27 and 29.

³⁴ Vössing, *Schule und Bildung* (as n. 3), 394 cites Apuleius von Madaura (ca. 125-180 CE), who *flor.* 20,2 (40,23-41,5 Helm) speaks of three cups one has to empty in the course of one’s education, 1) that of the elementary teacher (*litterator*), 2) that of the grammarian and 3) that of the rhetor; compare also Gemeinhardt, *Das lateinische Christentum* (as n. 3), 28 n. 4 and 29: „Der γραμματιστής / *ludi magister* lehrt elementare Kompetenzen im Lesen und Schreiben, der γραμματικός / *grammaticus* befähigt die Schüler dazu, Literatur analytisch zu erfassen, der ῥήτωρ / *orator* führt sie in die Redekunst ein.“

of rhetoric,³⁵ which could also include substantial philosophical study, there was no single type of institution – something akin to a system of primary, secondary, higher and further education institutions – which could have provided a structure for such a course of education.³⁶ How any single individual fared in educational terms depended almost entirely on that (usually male) person’s individual circumstances, though there may have been mitigating circumstances such as living in a city that happened to be a hub of certain types of learning, for example cities like Rome, Alexandria, Athens, or Pergamum.

But there was also another aspect in view of which philosophy and rhetoric were related to each other in a very fundamental way; for education in Antiquity always faced the fundamental question which Plato had already put to the Sophists, namely: Is education, and therefore also science, a purpose in itself, or is its purpose to gain wealth, political influence and power, and social status?³⁷ In a certain sense, asking this question means facing a dilemma: Already the Sophists admitted that a purely pragmatic, utilitarian, approach to education and science risks ultimately a descent into a situation in which mere rhetoric can triumph and potentially favour inferior over superior competence.³⁸ On the other hand, a regime which uncompromisingly pursues “pure” science without concern for the pragmatic use of the knowledge and skill that is acquired, loses its ability to take care of itself, but relies instead more and more on patronage, the support of those who hold political and economic power. This support may then (or may not) be offered. The terms on which it will be offered will be beyond the control of those in charge of science and education, and even if those in power are well-meaning and well-guided, their actions are most probably not based on deeper scientific or philosophical understanding of the nature and purpose of the education and knowledge which they apply. There is, as already Euclid had to explain to his patron, Ptolemy I, no royal road to geometry.³⁹

³⁵ In the above outlined scheme rhetoric still belongs to the elementary school system and not to higher education. Areas of transition varied, however. Apuleius continues in the passage cited in n. 34 that he emptied further cups when he later continued his education in Athens, including those of poetry, geometry, music, dialectic, and finally “the inexhaustible ... cup of allencompassing philosophy”. Thus rhetoric formed the basis of a comprehensive education (ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία). However, beyond that it also offered the possibility to emancipate oneself from the very concept of education by embracing philosophy as a way of life that transcended conventional education.

³⁶ See for this Gemeinhardt, *Das lateinische Christentum* (as n. 3), 33f. Elementary education was for many boys the only school education which they ever attended, while sons of better off families were often able to join directly the teaching of literature offered by the *grammaticus*.

³⁷ *Locus classicus* of this question is Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*, e. g. 318d-319a, where the Sophist Protagoras answers Socrates’ query what he teaches his students as follows: Not arithmetic, astronomy, geometry or music as other Sophists do, but right judgement, so that they can first successfully handle their own, private, businesses, but then also affairs of the state (politics), namely by being able to speak well (in terms of rhetoric) and act competently (when they hold office).

³⁸ It would be wrong to assume that the sophistic movement was not serious about addressing this issue. It repeatedly introduced reforms and attempted renewal. As “second” and even “third” Sophistic it dominated the intellectual landscape of Late Antiquity long into the fifth and sixth centuries, or even later; cf. e. g. T. Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* (Oxford, 2005); A. Quiroga, “From Sophistopolis to Episcopopolis: The Case for a Third Sophistic,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 1 (2007), 31-42; A. J. Quiroga Puertas (ed.), *The Purpose of Rhetoric in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2013).

³⁹ The anecdote can be found in Proclus, *in I Euclid. Elem. prol.* (68,13-16 Friedlein): ...καὶ μέντοι καὶ φασιν ὅτι Πτολεμαῖος ἤρετό ποτε αὐτόν, εἰ τίς ἐστὶν περὶ γεωμετρίαν ὁδὸς συντομωτέρα στοιχειώσεως. ὁ δὲ ἀπεκρίνατο, μὴ εἶναι βασιλικὴν ἀτραπὸν ἐπὶ γεωμετρίαν.

It is therefore all the more remarkable that Hellenistic rulers, and later also Roman Senators and Emperors, used public as well as private means (as far as one can make a distinction here) to finance institutions of higher education that were dedicated not only to teaching but also to “research”, for example libraries, where books were not only collected and kept, copied and edited, but also new books written, not only on philosophy but also on history, chronography, agriculture, medicine, geography, art, architecture, ethnography, religion, zoology and many other areas of knowledge. The concentration of this development in specific centres of learning (Rome, Alexandria, Athens, Pergamum, and others) made it possible to conduct a rational and empirical discourse in many areas.⁴⁰

It was almost a side effect of this development that in Alexandria, in the third and second century BCE, the Hebrew Bible, too, was for the first time translated into the Greek language.⁴¹ In connection with chronology as one of the most advanced forms of Hellenistic science⁴² and philology, combined with exegesis and hermeneutics,⁴³ this led, in the first three centuries CE, to revolutionary developments. For example, the Greek Bible was studied as a translation. Several parallel translations were also compared with each other and with the Hebrew original. Different textual traditions were studied; and all this was also supported by the emergence of the codex in large format as a technical development, which made it possible to study multiple columns alongside each other and to compare textual variants.⁴⁴ The format could also be used to compare different chronological tables and improve chronology, or to compile dictionaries, lexica, concordances and the like. Philologically and historically trained early Christian theologians drove this development forward so that between the third and fifth centuries CE it came to the production of chronicles, commentaries and text

⁴⁰ In Alexandria it was already under Ptolemy I (305-282 BCE) that a *Mouseion* and a great library were erected. Both institutions were linked with the palace, but openly accessible; the main source for our knowledge of this is the so-called Letter of Aristeas, Ps-Arist. *ad Philocr.* 5-6. 24 (2.17-3.6 and 7.7-11 Mendelssohn); though see also Strabo, *Geogr.* 17.1.8 (vol. 8, 34-35 Jones); for the library at Pergamum, erected by Eumenes II in the first half of the second century BCE, see *ibid.* 13.4.2 (vol. 6, 166-167 Jones); for these and many more sources see M. Joyal, I. McDougall und J. C. Yardley (eds), *Greek and Roman Education. A Sourcebook* (London, 2009), 121-150; on the continued funding of educational institutions (by aristocrats, monarchs, princes and others) during the early Empire see L. Nasrallah, *Christian Responses to Art and Architecture. The Second-Century Church amid the Spaces of Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

⁴¹ An ideal-typical reconstruction of this process, which in reality was extended over a long period of time (and much more complex than represented in that source), can once more be found in the Letter of Aristeas (as above n. 40); for the reception of this document and its dominant narrative see A. und D. J. Wasserstein, *The Legend of the Septuagint from Classical Antiquity to Today* (Cambridge, 2006); on contextualising this project in the history of science or scholarship see S. Honigman, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria. A Study in the Narrative of the Letter of Aristeas* (London, 2003); for a comprehensive overview of Hellenistic projects of translating the Bible and (ancient and modern theories concerning these projects) see N. Fernández Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context. Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible* (Leiden, 2000).

⁴² For brief introductions see J. Lössl, “Classical Historical Writing” and “Early Christian Historical Writing,” in Dunphy, *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle* (as n. 21), 466-473 and 553-563; for the Hellenistic period see also K. Geus, *Eratosthenes von Kyrene. Studien zur hellenistischen Kultur- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (München, 2002).

⁴³ See for this e. g. B. Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe*, 2 vols. (Basel, 1987).

⁴⁴ See for this A. Grafton and M. Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book. Origen, Eusebius and the Library of Alexandria* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

editions of impressive proportions, for example in the works of Origen of Alexandria (d. 253), Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339), and, a little later, Jerome of Stridon (d. 419).

1.3 “Theology”

Now what is “Theology” in this context? The word itself is derived from Greek. It originally belongs in the above outlined cultural-historical context. It is used both as a noun and a verb (“to theologize”) by Aristotle. Aristotle uses it in a scientific context, both with positive and negative connotations. In *Metaphysics* 983b29 “to theologize” (θεολογεῖν) means exploring the universe as well as the divine origin of the universe. In *Meteorology* 353a35 Aristotle is dismissive about the ancients who apparently tried to solve the question of the origin of the sea by resorting to “theologies” (θεολογίας); note the use of plural. His point here is that in this case theologies were used in a lazy attempt to provide easy answers to a difficult question. Instead of trying to explore the question scientifically and to do some hard research, the ancients chose easy answers and presented religious explanations for phenomena for which there existed scientific explanations. Aristotle rejected this kind of theologies, used to explain innerworldly phenomena in a superstitious manner. He did not reject theology (in the singular) to address the metaphysical question of the origin of the universe itself. Here, theology is for him almost identical with metaphysics as *prima philosophia*, or cosmology.⁴⁵

In Late Antiquity, for example in Plutarch and in the Neoplatonic commentators, notably Porphyry and Iamblichus, the expression “theology” is not so much found in the context of cosmology or metaphysics, but of the exegesis of the mythical epics of Homer and Hesiod. Here, θεολογία is the philosophical explanation of the myths of the gods with the help of allegory. And it is this use of theology which refers back to its most archaic origins; for it is this form of theology which can be traced back to the beginnings of Greek literature, the time when the myths narrated in the ancient epics were first put in writing, which immediately led to the need to explain them, i. e. to provide an informed exegesis of them. This led, very early, to the earliest forms of rational discourse about the nature of “the gods” including to early forms of criticism

⁴⁵ Cf. Arist. *Met.* 983b27-32: εἰσι δὲ τινες οἱ καὶ τοὺς παμπαλαίους καὶ πολὺ πρὸ τῆς νῦν γενέσεως καὶ πρώτους θεολογήσαντας οὕτως οἴονται περὶ τῆς φύσεως ὑπολαβεῖν· Ὀκεανὸν τε γὰρ καὶ Τηθὺν ἐποίησαν τῆς γενέσεως πατέρας, καὶ τὸν ὄρκον τῶν θεῶν ὕδωρ, τὴν καλουμένην ὑπ’ αὐτῶν Στύγα... Aristotle here seems to allude to Plato (e. g. *Crat.* 402b, *Theait.* 152e, 162d, 180c), who was of the opinion that the “ancients” (i. e. poets such as Homer, cf. *Il.* 14,201.246) were filled with the same spirit of natural scientific endeavour as, for example, Thales of Milet, when they considered Okeanos and Thetis as the parents of the entire creation. Against this Arist. *Meteor.* 353a32-353b5: Οἱ μὲν οὖν ἀρχαῖοι καὶ διατρίβοντες περὶ τὰς θεολογίας ποιοῦσιν αὐτῆς πηγὰς, ἴν’ αὐτοῖς ὧσιν ἀρχαὶ καὶ ρίζαι γῆς καὶ θαλάττης· τραγικώτερον γὰρ οὕτω καὶ σεμνότερον ὑπέλαβον ἴσως εἶναι τὸ λεγόμενον, ὡς μέγα τι τοῦ παντὸς τοῦτο μόνιον ὄν· καὶ τὸν λοιπὸν οὐρανὸν ὅλον περὶ τοῦτον συνεστάναι τὸν τόπον καὶ τούτου χάριν ὡς ὄντα τιμωτάτων καὶ ἀρχῆν. Here Aristotle probably alludes to Hesiod (*Theog.* 282) who produced “theologies” (i. e. myths), according to which, for example, the sea emerged from wells. For Aristotle such theories had not natural-scientific foundations. They were “theologies” in the sense that they made assumptions about the early history of the world which were based on the principle that there had to be a divine cause which designed the world in a certain way, regardless of the scientific evidence. A different strand of ancient sources for an early Christian concept of theology is suggested by Marksches, *Die kaiserzeitliche christliche Theologie* (as n. 2), 11-28, who thinks of theology as originating from the study of (the history of) religion(s).

both of theology and religion, and, in turn, as a response, to the defence or apology of the ancient traditions.⁴⁶

The charge that the allegorical explanation of the epics and the myths narrated in them reduced the gods to forces of nature and was therefore “atheistic”, denying the existence of the gods, exposed the most vocal representatives of allegorical exegesis to vehement criticism and even persecution. Towards the end of the fifth century BCE the comic poet Diagoras of Melos is said to have been charged with the death penalty for atheism by a people’s court in Athens because he was accused of having denied in his poems the religious significance of the Eleusinian mysteries and ridiculed them and their devotees. According to the records he was able to extract himself and flee from Athens. So he did not actually die. But his case became paradigmatic. Throughout the rest of Antiquity and still in sources of the seventh and eighth century CE his case was cited again and again as a deterrent against the dangers of “atheism” and lack of piety. Even early Christian – and Islamic – sources praise the piety (εὐσέβεια, *pietas*) of the pagan Athenians, who had condemned Diagoras to death.⁴⁷ Sympathy thus was on the side of the defenders of established religion. The fact that they were pagans mattered less. What was important was the fact that they had moved against a critic of religion, an “atheistic” theologian. In the early Church similar frontlines were about to emerge, as will hopefully become clearer in the following sections.

2. Ancient Christian theology – origins, developments, forms

2.1 “Discontent” in the way theology is included in Hellenistic intellectual culture

How did early Christian theology emerge and develop from the context which has so far been outlined? And how did it contribute to the academic-scientific discourse of its time? To summarise once more the most important points, and to begin with those last mentioned: 1) Hellenistic philosophy had already developed a notion of theology, albeit an ambivalent one. 2) In the context of a critical and allegorical exegesis of the myths narrated in the ancient epics one aspect of this type of theology was that it was critical of religious belief.⁴⁸ Both aspects, the philosophical one on one hand and the

⁴⁶ Fundamental on this topic remains R. Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian. Neoplatonic Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley, CA, 1986); in addition see now also M. Erler, “Interpretieren als Gottesdienst,” in G. Boss and G. Seel (eds), *Proclus et son influence* (Zürich, 1987), 118-217; R. M. van den Berg, *Proclus’ Commentary on the Cratylus in Context* (Leiden, 2008); and L. Brisson, *How Philosophers saved Myths. Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology* (Chicago, 2004).

⁴⁷ See J. Lössl, “Poets, Prophets, Critics and Exegetes in Classical and Biblical Antiquity and Early Christianity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 1 (2007), 1-16 at 2; for Diagoras see also E. Robbins, “Diagoras [2],” *Der neue Pauly* 3 (1997), 509; L. Woodbury, “The Date and Atheism of Diagoras of Melos,” *Phoenix* 19 (1965), 178-211; M. Winiarczyk, “Diagoras von Melos: Wahrheit und Legende,” *Eos* 67 (1979), 191-213 and 68 (1980) 51-75; T. Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 2015), especially 128-138; and now also M. Winiarczyk, *Diagoras of Melos* (Berlin, 2016).

⁴⁸ The fact that some early Christian apologists tried to distance themselves from precisely these very properties of pagan theology and to postulate a fundamental difference between pagan, mythological, exegesis and early Christian Biblical exegesis, merely underlines this observation; see, for example, Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 21,5.8 (142f. 144f. Trelenberg; 78-81 Nesselrath): Πείσθητέ μοι νῦν, ὅ

Josef Lössl, “Theology as Academic Discourse in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 38-72; ISSN 1754-517X; website:

<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

critical-allegorical-exegetical one on the other, are also characteristic of the theology of early Christianity. In addition early Christian theology could be historiographical, and it resorted to the use of literary-rhetorical dialectics.

Not least these latter two characteristics, especially in combination, turned out to be highly important for the initial formation of an early Christian intellectual culture with its own distinct identity. Some of the earliest Christian theologians asserted their identity by resorting to historiographical explanations delimitating the history of their religious culture, as they themselves perceived it, from those of “other” cultures and religions, which they defined as “Jews” and “Greeks” (pagans).⁴⁹ They reinforced this narrative rhetorically by developing polemical strategies against “others” (e. g. Jews, Greeks, heretics) and techniques of affirming their “own”, e. g. through hagiography and panegyric.⁵⁰

Backdrop to all these techniques was the Greek language and its cultural history. It was the crucial medium for any discourse which emerged from the transformation of the Hellenistic age during the early Roman empire. The discourse of Greek-speaking Judaism was one of those discourses. Others included the Egyptian, Babylonian and Assyrian, Persian and Sogdian cultures and religions, and others beyond that. It is not possible to include all possible cultures in what might otherwise amount to a kind of global cultural and religious history of the ancient world.⁵¹ But what is significant in this context is the fact that during the Hellenistic period and in many cases for some time beyond that the self-assertion of these cultures happened in opposition to Greek culture and, at least partially, in the medium of the Greek language and under the influence of Greek culture. Any literary works that were produced in this process were at least in some respect cultural-historical and apologetic in character.

Among the main known representatives of these cultural movements were, e. g., the Egyptian priest Manetho and the Babylonian Berossus (both third century BCE), and Jews such as Eupolemus, Artapanus, Aristobulus and the already mentioned Philo of Alexandria (third century BCE to first century CE).⁵² Paul of Tarsus (Saint Paul) as well as, for example, the author (or authors) of the Gospel according to Luke and the New Testament Acts of the Apostles also fall under this category⁵³ as well as early

ἄνδρες Ἕλληνας, μηδὲ τοὺς μύθους μηδὲ τοὺς θεοὺς ὑμῶν ἀλληγορήσητε ... Ταῦτα δὲ ἡμεῖς προετείναμεν ὡσπερ ἐπὶ ὑποθέσεως· τὴν γὰρ ἡμετέραν περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ κατάληψιν οὐδὲ συγκρίνειν ὅσιον τοῖς εἰς ὕλην καὶ βόρβορον κυλινδουμένοις. Tatian calls upon the Greeks (by which he means, in this case, the pagans) not to allegorically interpret their myths; for that precisely degrades them to mere fables. Such exegesis strips the gods of their divinity (θεότης ... ἀνήρηται). On the other hand Tatian rejects any links between the Biblical (Jewish-Christian) deity and the pagan gods. The former is sublime, he argues, the latter wallows in filthy matter; see J. Trelenberg, *Tatianos. Oratio ad Graecos – Rede an die Griechen* (Tübingen, 2012), 142-144; Nesselrath, *Gegen falsche Götter und falsche Bildung* (as n. 13), 78-81. 154f.; J. Lössl, “Hermeneutics and Doctrine of God in Tatian’s Ad Graecos,” *StPatr* 45 (2010), 409-412.

⁴⁹ See for this now also M. Wallraff, “The Beginnings of Christian Universal History. From Tatian to Julius Africanus,” *ZAC* 14 (2011), 540-555.

⁵⁰ On the origins of early Christian hagiography see now T. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen, 2010).

⁵¹ For an example how a comprehensive cultural development over a long distance, for example by reaching from central-Asian via early Islamic to medieval Latin culture, could look like, cf. Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters* (as n. 4).

⁵² On the authors listed here see Pilhofer, *Presbyteron Kreitton* (as n. 12), 143-220.

⁵³ Compare e. g. B. W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists. Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (Cambridge, 1997); G. E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-*

Josef Lössl, “Theology as Academic Discourse in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 38-72; ISSN 1754-517X; website:

<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

Christian apologists of the second century such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch and Clement of Alexandria. The basic underlying position of these authors was that their own religion and theology was superior over against “Greek” religion and theology, especially with regard to age (antiquity) and philosophical truth value. At the same time, by engaging with Greek history, philosophy and culture, including religion and theology, these works testified to the entanglement of their cultures with Greek culture, which also made them intellectually more respectable, and it demonstrated that they were signed up to the enlightenment agenda which was commonly associated with Greek culture.⁵⁴ In other words, it made them Hellenistic.

The method which all these authors had acquired in the context of a literary-rhetorical school education to employ it in their works can be called literary-exegetical; i. e. in all these works we find numerous citations from classical literature, alongside allusions and paraphrases, literary explanations and historical exempla, topographic, ethnographic and chronographic elaborations and many more. The texts are to be read and studied accordingly, taking into account their intertextual nature; and this is how they are still studied, even in modern research. Their reception process is thus still ongoing. The close proximity of classical, biblical, ancient near-eastern, Egyptian and much other material in them makes them “clash” with other, “purer” forms. There is an element of “discomfort” that is caused by these writings. They create a certain air of “discontent” not unlike the cultural discontent famously observed by Freud in his work in relation to modern culture.⁵⁵ For early Christian works from Late Antiquity it has to be kept in mind that they include this wide range of materials and thus belong, in this sense, to the varied body of Hellenistic literature.⁵⁶

One of the most obvious ways in which said discontent is manifest in this literature is in the polemic which characterises at least part of it. Outstanding polemical authors, especially from the second century CE, include the pagans Lucian of Samosata (d. ca. 180 CE), a satirical writer, and Celsus (writing ca. 180 CE), a philosopher of Platonist orientation, and the Christian Tatian (who flourished in the 170s CE).⁵⁷ Tatian and

Definition. Josephos, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography (Leiden, 1992); T. Vegge, *Paulus und das antike Schulwesen. Schule und Bildung des Paulus* (Berlin, New York, 2006).

⁵⁴ For the early Christian apologists listed here see again Pilhofer, *Presbyteron Kreitton* (as n. 12), 221-284.

⁵⁵ For the aspect of “discontent” in this context see J. Stenger, *Hellenische Identität in der Spätantike. Pagane Autoren und ihr Unbehagen an der eigenen Zeit* (Berlin, New York, 2009). Stenger sees this aspect of discontent with their own culture among pagan authors of the fourth and fifth centuries CE in connection with their marginalisation by an increasingly dominant and intolerant Christianity. In terms of history of culture, however, this was merely a symptom of a deeper and wider discontent, which had already taken hold in the Hellenistic age in connection with the disconcerting encounter between Greek culture and other cultures and the process of Hellenisation, from which Christianity emerged in the first place.

⁵⁶ On the transitions between pagan, Jewish and Christian intellectual culture during that period see e. g. Honigman, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship* (as n. 41).

⁵⁷ For Lucian see the well resourced entry by P. P. Fuentes González, “Lucien de Samosate,” in R. Goulet (ed.), *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques*, vol. 4 (Paris, 2005), 131-160; for Lucian’s anti-Christian polemic cf. P. Pilhofer, M. Baumbach, J. Gerlach, D. U. Hansen (eds), *Lukian. Der Tod des Peregrinus. Ein Scharlatan auf dem Scheiterhaufen* (Darmstadt, 2005), especially 97-110; also M. J. Edwards, “Satire and Verisimilitude. Christianity in Lucian’s *Peregrinus*,” *Historia* 38 (1989), 89-98; for Tatian cf. Trelenberg, *Tatianos* (as n. 48) and Nesselrath, *Gegen falsche Götter und falsche Bildung* (as n. 13); for Celsus H. E. Lona, *Die „wahre Lehre“ des Kelsos* (Freiburg i. Br., 2005); J. Arnold, *Der wahre Logos des Kelsos* (Münster, 2016).

Josef Lössl, “Theology as Academic Discourse in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 38-72; ISSN 1754-517X; website:

<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

Lucian have in common a marginal upbringing on the eastern border of the Roman empire, in Syria. They both seem to have struggled with the Greek language and its established literary culture, but at the same time excelled in it. As a result they both developed into relentless critics of society, culture and religion, though in Lucian's case the criticism was directed, among others, against credulous and self-absorbed Christians, while in Tatian's case the target were pagan defenders of the – in Tatian's view – indefensible ills of Greek (religious) culture (including polytheism, animal and human sacrifice, pederasty, prostitution, astrology and many more).⁵⁸ In his "oration to the Greeks" Tatian presents himself as an adherent of a "barbarian" (in the sense of "non-Greek") philosophy, by which he means Christianity. He sets out to demonstrate that his philosophy is not only older than Greek philosophy, religion or culture by any measure, but also that it is the only true philosophy. Celsus in contrast ridicules the Christians as newcomers, social upstarts who do not even dare to speak openly of their philosophy on the forum. Instead they approach susceptible youths and poor people in secret and lead them away to their secret gatherings.⁵⁹ It is possible that Tatian and Celsus were reacting against each other, though it cannot be said with certainty which of the two authors wrote first. But Tatian might have been keen to demonstrate that there were Christians who were competent to defend their faith in public displaying excellent command of the Greek language, education, and philosophical acumen in the process. Vice versa, Celsus' account may be an expression of the discomfiture (or discontent) such an attitude may have caused among educated pagans. Be that as it may, what matters most in the present context is the observation that this "war of books",⁶⁰ this continuous stream of newly produced polemical and apologetic works, was carried out on either side at an increasingly high literary and scholarly level.⁶¹ In other words, a literary, intellectual and in a certain sense also academic discourse of (Christian) theology in Late Antiquity was well under way.

2.2 The "scientific" (or academic) imperative – ideal and reality

Polemic in this context could also be used as a means to demand that the opponents should engage in rational and scholarly (academic) discourse. It could also expose the

⁵⁸ For a comparison between Tatian and Lucian in this respect see J. Lössl, "Sprachlich-ästhetische Darstellung und 'Anwendung' von Gewalt in Texten frühchristlicher Apologeten. Das Beispiel der Rede Tatians an die Griechen," in: *ZfR* 20 (2012), 196-222 at 211-212.

⁵⁹ See Pilhofer, *Presbyteron Kreitton* (as n. 12), 285-289; also J. Lössl, "Amt als Lehramt. Kirche und Schule im zweiten Jahrhundert," *ZkTh* 137 (2015), 366-384, 376-379.

⁶⁰ Cf. Droge, *Homer or Moses?* (as n. 12), 7. Droge coined the expression "war of books" in view of the historiographic apologetic literature of the Hellenistic age: "The publication of Hecataeus' history of Egypt began a 'war of books' among the Hellenistic monarchies, and this phenomenon continued long after the kingdoms of Alexander's successors had dissolved under Roman hegemony."

⁶¹ For Celsus this was demonstrated long ago by C. Andresen, *Logos und Nomos. Die Polemik des Kelsos wider das Christentum* (Berlin, 1955). Andresen situates Celsus in the context of the schools of Middle-Platonist philosophy. He even ascribes to him a kind of philosophy of history. For Lona, *Die „wahre Lehre“* (as n. 57), 61f. this goes too far. Still, the decisive insight here is that the polemic of Celsus against the Christians (as well as the counter-polemic of a Tatian) is not to be understood as an outbreak of a temperamental amateurism of some lay literatti. Rather, it is a constitutive element of a growing culture of an increasingly scientific-academic theological discourse during the second century CE. See now also Arnold, *Der wahre Logos* (as n. 57).

opponent, or the method employed by the opponent, as unscientific, unscholarly, even altogether uneducated, lacking in Paideia. Pagan philosophers of the first and second centuries CE such as Epictetus, Fronto, Marcus Aurelius and even Galen,⁶² criticised Christians not so much because they were lacking moral integrity or because of their doctrines. It was the fact that in the view of these critics the Christians assumed their positions without accounting for them rationally. Like the Cynics they did not even seem to care about whether others thought they were mad. “Madness”, “obstinacy”, “arrogance”, “ignorance”, these are epithets which were thrown against Christians by critics such as those mentioned above and which were at that time, in the 170s, when Celsus was writing, or in the 190s, when Galen was writing, no longer justified in their generality.

For during that period Christian schools had already been firmly established for several generations, especially in Rome, but probably also in Alexandria, Antioch, and other urban centres, and there were educated Christian bishops, like Irenaeus, writing in Lyons in Gaul (in the 170s), who were able to author works of Christian-theological thought which were at the height of contemporary philosophy.⁶³ At the same time, however, something else was happening as well. There were now more and more Christians educated enough to participate themselves in a discourse which in the view of their leaders (like Irenaeus) needed to be regulated. These educated Christians were interested to find rational arguments to justify their beliefs and to develop doctrines which expressed their beliefs in adequate ways. As this led to a variety of solutions and a plurality of teachings, discussions erupted as to which were the most adequate ways of expressing the faith. At the same time suspicions grew that

⁶² On Epictetus see Arrian. *Diss. Epictet.* 4,7,6 (367f. Schenkl): Εἶτα ὑπὸ μανίας μὲν δύνανται τις οὕτω διατεθῆναι πρὸς ταῦτα καὶ ὑπὸ ἔθους οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι... Epictetus concedes to the Christians (Γαλιλαῖοι) that they realised the same indifferent and thus highly ethical attitude to life as the Stoics. However, their mistake was that they did not do this from reason but from madness (μανία) and from mere habit (ἔθος). In contrast, the pagan interlocutor in the dialogue by Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, who probably represents the pagan, anti-Christian, orator and polemicist Marcus Cornelius Fronto (ca. 95-166 AD), views the foolish arrogance of the Christians (*audacia*), which he even compares with the “atheism” of a Diagoras of Melos (ἄθεος), as caused by the total moral depravity of the Christians; cf. Min. Fel. *Oct.* 8,1; 9,6; 31,2 (14, 17, 58 Schöne). Marcus Aurelius, in turn, a sponsor of Fronto, once more concedes to the Christians, like Epictetus, a morally outstanding attitude, though he criticises the Christians for holding this attitude out of obstinacy (ψιλὴ παράταξις) and with a tendency to outrageous, theatrical, behaviour; Marc. Aurel. *Med.* 11,3: Οἷα ἐστὶν ἡ ψυχὴ ἢ ἔτοιμος ... τὸ δὲ ἔτοιμον τοῦτο, ἵνα ἀπὸ ἰδικῆς κρίσεως ἔρχηται, μὴ κατὰ ψιλὴν παράταξιν, ὡς οἱ Χριστιανοί, ἀλλὰ λελογισμένως καὶ σεμνῶς καὶ ... ἀτραγῶδως. Lucian, *Alexander* 25 and 38 sees the Christians once more in close proximity to ἄθεοι and Epicureans (though he actually finds that rather amusing), while in *Peregrinus* 11-13 he ridicules the alleged lack of education of the Christians, their credulity and hypocritical behaviour, which makes them prone to become victims of impostors and charlatans; see P. Pilhofer, “Das Bild der christlichen Gemeinden in Lukians *Peregrinos*,” in: Pilhofer et al., *Lukian* (as n. 57), 97-110. Galen too sees the Christians, to whom he refers as “adherents of Moses and Christ”, unlike the adherents of established philosophical schools, as credulous and too easily persuaded by innovations and outlandish theories; for they were not guided by scientific principles but accepted everything in good faith. Still, Galen too had to concede that some among their ranks had achieved the same level of learning and philosophy as “real philosophers”; see R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford, 1949), 11-16.

⁶³ For a general survey containing specific chapters on Rome, Alexandria, Carthage and Syria, see U. Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer im zweiten Jahrhundert: Ihre Lehrtätigkeit, ihr Selbstverständnis und ihre Geschichte* (Leiden, 1989); for Rome see also P. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen, 1989); cf. also Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus* (London, 2003); for Alexandria see also A. Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellenreligion* (Stuttgart, 2007).

an over-reliance on reason and rational arguments undermined the whole principle of faith in God, which underpinned the Christian approach. A cleft appeared, as Norbert Brox once put it succinctly, between “the simple faith and theology”.⁶⁴ Now this was not a problem which threatened, or questioned, Christianity from outside, as the pagan polemic was doing. This was a genuinely inner-Christian problem.

What was at stake here is illustrated well by a case of which Eusebius reports in his *Church History*.⁶⁵ It can be dated in the years between 160 and 180 CE and located in Rome. It concerns a disputation, apparently in public, between Rhodon, a pupil of Tatian, and Apelles, a pupil of Marcion. The subject of the discussion according to Eusebius’ report was a series of questions which arose from Marcion’s teaching and which were controversial even among Marcion’s own followers. Eusebius’ account includes a verbatim report by Rhodon on the disputation in which Rhodon writes that “the old Apelles” (γέρων Ἀπελλῆς) – in the given context a somewhat dismissive reference to his opponent’s age – got muddled. He needed several attempts to explain himself and got repeatedly tied up in contradictions, which his opponents mercilessly exploited. In the end he gave up and conceded that “it was not necessary to get to the bottom of the argument at stake (μὴ δεῖν ὅλως ἐξετάζειν τὸν λόγον), but each one should hold firm to their existing beliefs (ἀλλ’ ἕκαστον, ὡς πεπίστευκεν, διαμένειν).” As long as they kept their faith in the Crucified and were committed to doing good works, they would be saved: σωθήσεσθαι γὰρ τοὺς ἐπὶ τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον ἠλπικότητας ἀπεφαίνετο, μόνον ἐὰν ἐν ἔργοις ἀγαθοῖς εὕρισκονται.

Rhodon continued his report saying that when he heard Apelles talk like this he ridiculed him for his inability to set out his position rationally and systematically, by means of an ἀπόδειξις, a systematic exposition of arguments and method of proof. Clearly, Rhodon, who seems to have been quite a bit younger than Apelles, did not lack in intellectual confidence. But Rhodon also represents more generally a new generation of early Christian thinkers with a growing confidence in their ability to set out their doctrine as a rational discipline while at the same time holding on to it as true in a principled defence. Their principled stance had already characterised earlier teachers like Justin and Tatian. But Rhodon clearly thought that he could offer more. In relation to his teacher Tatian, for example, he had announced that he was going to respond to Tatian’s work entitled Προβλήματα, a list of obscure passages from the Old Testament, which Tatian had been unable to solve. Rhodon announced that he would easily solve them and thereby put the faith on a firmer footing.⁶⁶ One could

⁶⁴ N. Brox, “Der einfache Glaube und die Theologie. Zur altkirchlichen Geschichte eines Dauerproblems,” *Kairos* 14 (1972), 161-187; also N. Brox, *Das Frühchristentum. Schriften zur historischen Theologie* (Freiburg i. Br., 2000), 305-336. A frequently cited example which shows how theological thought might have clashed with practised faith is the so-called Monarchianist controversy in the early third century CE, when early trinitarian concepts were attacked by some Christians as heretical because they seemed to divide up the oneness of God; for a good description see F. Dünzl, *Kleine Geschichte des trinitarischen Dogmas in der Alten Kirche* (Freiburg i. Br., 2006), 38f.; see also F. Dünzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (London, 2007), 26-34.

⁶⁵ Euseb. *H.E.* 5,13,2-7 (GCS 9.1, 455-459). What we have here, therefore, is a discussion between second century Christian “school theologians” of the second and third generation. Apelles was a pupil of Marcion, who had come to Rome ca. 140 CE. Rhodon was a pupil of Tatian, who had been active in Rome as a teacher around 170 CE and had himself been a pupil of Justin Martyr, probably in the 150s or 160s; cf. Lössl, “Amt als Lehramt” (as n. 59), 366-384.

⁶⁶ Euseb. *H.E.* 5,13,8 (GCS 9.1, 458f.); cf. Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer* (as n. 63), 186.

interpret this attitude as progressive: Rhodon as an early Christian teacher and thinker whose concern it was to establish theology as a rational discipline.⁶⁷ But there is also another way of looking at this: Eusebius dwells heavily on Rhodon's boisterous self-presentation. But one can also ask whether Apelles' low-key performance was really down to his old age or his weakness as a theologian. Perhaps his reluctance to claim that transcendent truths can easily be answered once and for all by applying rational principles was grounded in a life-long practice of critical exploration and methodical ἐποχή, the withholding of rushed judgment in complex matters.⁶⁸ Much points to the likelihood that Apelles knew very well what he was doing. When still in his youth he had emancipated himself from his teacher Marcion when studying the Old Testament. With his assumption of one cosmic principle (μία ἀρχή) he had somewhat distanced himself from Marcion and leaned more towards a Platonist position. His insight that such an assumption was axiomatic and could therefore not be proved rationally but only intuitively, i. e. by responding to an inner movement of the self (κινεῖσθαι), was an original contribution to philosophy.⁶⁹ It was probably on the basis of this insight that he concluded that it was not possible to make definitive and logically compelling statements about matters of faith, but that a plurality of views was preferable, as long as there was unanimity about the imperative of a moral life in the image of Christ, the Crucified. With views like these Apelles was in fact closer to the culture of ancient philosophy and even ancient critics of religion than to the more militant forms of late-antique Christian theology.⁷⁰ And yet, despite Rhodon's criticism of him, he is one of the most important Christian theologians of the second century CE.

Eusebius' report about the dispute between Apelles and his opponents showcases only one example of such an exchange, of which there were undoubtedly many more. It evidences the emergence of an academic discourse in early Christian theology, the existence of a plurality of Christian schools and disputes between representatives of these schools. We have seen that in the Hellenistic context the different philosophical schools had been referred to, neutrally, as "heresies". Now, in the context of the early Church, the existence of a plurality of such heresies, for example in the cosmopolitan environment of the city of Rome during the second century CE, began to be seen as a hallmark of destructive division and decline.⁷¹ In reality, however, it was this heretical

⁶⁷ This seems to be suggested by Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer* (as n. 63), 35-37; and, even more emphatically, by K. Greschat, "'Woher hast du den Beweis für deine Lehre?' Der altkirchliche Lehrer Rhodon und seine Auseinandersetzung mit den römischen Marcioniten," *StPatr* 34 (2001) 82-87.

⁶⁸ This is suggested by A. von Harnack, "Rhodon und Apelles," in: *FS A. Hauck* (Leipzig, 1916), 39-51; cf. W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen, 1963), 136: "Apelles wird vermutlich sich für den Sieger gehalten haben."

⁶⁹ Cf. A. Harnack, *Marcion. Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Leipzig, 1924), 184-196; E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formgeschichte religiöser Rede* (Leipzig, 1913), 19-21; see also J. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic. God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge, 2015), 93-113. 309-321.

⁷⁰ For examples of polemics against the Christian argument for unity in the second century in the work of Kelsos see (cf. especially Origen. *c. Cels.* 5,25 [GCS 2; Origenes 2, 26] et al.) see A. Fürst, "'Wer das glaubt, weiß gar nichts' – Eine spätantike Debatte über den Universalanspruch des christlichen Monotheismus," *Orientierung* 68 (2004), 138-141; reprinted as A. Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus. Studien zur antiken Theologiegeschichte* (Berlin, New York, 2011), 185-194.

⁷¹ See for this N. Brox, "Glauben und Forschen in der Alten Kirche," in: Prostmeier, *Frühchristentum und Kultur* (as n. 9), 9-18 on the early Christian rejection of *curiositas* (περιεργία), the curiosity of the academic researcher, which also included theological research; see especially p. 13: "Die Wissenskritik

plurality which boosted the vitality and intensity of theological activity. A “catholic” (i. e. unifying and universal) attitude like that displayed by Rhodon, or, in a stronger sense, by Irenaeus, who in his work “Against the Heresies” described all those other teachings in order to hold against them his own, synthetic, version of the orthodox, apostolic, tradition, very much relied on impulses from the experimental approaches set out by those earlier teachers (Marcion, Valentinus, Justin, and their pupils).⁷² It is a truism to say that innovation in theology is usually generated by heresies.

And this is not only true of the beginnings of Christian theology in the early second century.⁷³ Well into the fifth century CE a convert such as the Neoplatonist Synesius, who in 410 became bishop of the Libyan Ptolemaïs, was able to develop his theories of the origin of the soul and the eternity of the cosmos without facing any sanctions,⁷⁴ though it is true that in 415, shortly after his death, his pagan teacher Hypatia fell victim to a Christian lynch mob,⁷⁵ and another century later the pagan philosopher Simplicius advised his fellow pagans not to provoke Christian violence by teaching anything provocative, using the words: “Do not stir fire with a sword.”⁷⁶ Around that same time, at the beginning of the sixth century, also further changes occurred, when the philosophy of the pagan Neoplatonist Proclus (d. 485 CE) was transformed by a Christian author under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite into a Christian theology, which in turn was to exert enormous influence on Greek as well as Latin theology throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.⁷⁷

This latter process of a blending of ancient philosophical (Platonist) and Christian tradition, especially in the context of late-antique Platonism, had already begun in the

als solche ist eines seiner [Irenäus'] zentralen Themen gewesen,” especially in the context of Irenaeus’s anti-Gnostic polemics. Rhodon’s above-mentioned polemic against Apelles seems to aim in a similar direction (see above nn. 65-67): According to Rhodon the Marcionites are to be rejected because they are divided, and they are divided because they allow their members to entertain different theological opinions (ἀσύμφωνοι ... ἀσυστάτου γνώμης ἀντιποιούμενοι).

⁷² On this symbiosis of catholicity and heresy see M. Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church* (Farnham, 2009), 11-56.

⁷³ Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy* (as n. 72), 7 refers to the civic character of institutions throughout Antiquity and concludes in view of Late Antiquity, as late as the fifth century CE: “If by orthodoxy we mean an opinion which was held without demur by the entire body of the faithful, there was no orthodoxy.” Or to cite another example: The suspicion held against theologians who promoted Trinitarian thinking (cf. above n. 64) lasted well into the fourth century CE; Dünzl, *Kleine Geschichte* (as n. 64), especially 77-82.

⁷⁴ S. Vollenweider, *Neuplatonische und christliche Theologie bei Synesios von Kyrene* (Göttingen, 1985); T. Schmitt, *Die Bekehrung des Synesios von Kyrene. Politik und Philosophie, Hof und Provinz als Handlungsräume eines Aristokraten bis zu seiner Wahl zum Metropolit von Ptolemaïs* (München, 2001); then also, with a particular focus on the Christian character of Synesius’ tendency to formulate a symbiotic understanding of the relationship between pagan Neoplatonism and Christian doctrine, J. A. Bregman, “Synesius of Cyrene between Neoplatonism and Christianity,” *CHR* 79 (1993), 704-709.

⁷⁵ Ch. Lacombrade, “Hypatia,” *RAC* 16 (1994), 956-967; H. D. Saffrey, “Hypatie d’Alexandrie,” *DPA* 3 (2000), 814-817; E. J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley, CA, 2006), 193-196; Vinzent, “Oxbridge” (as n. 2), 53.62-64; M.A.B. Deakin, *Hypatia of Alexandria* (Bristol, 2007); and A. Belenkiy, “The Novatian Indifferent Canon and Pascha in Alexandria in 414: Hypatia’s Murder Case Reopened,” *VigChr* 70 (2016), 373-400.

⁷⁶ Simplic. *In Epictet.* 32,211-20 (66.7-16 Dübner); cf. Iamblich. *Protrept.* 133,18; 138,32-139,12; Πῶρ μαχαίρη μὴ σκάλυε.

⁷⁷ For Dionysius see B. R. Suchla, *Dionysius Areopagita. Leben, Werk und Wirkung* (Freiburg i. Br., 2008); S. Coakley / Ch. Stang (eds), *Rethinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford, 2009); Ch. Stang, *Aphorism and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: ‘No longer I’* (Oxford, 2012).

Josef Lössl, “Theology as Academic Discourse in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 38-72; ISSN 1754-517X; website:

<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

second century CE, but was not yet completed four to five hundred years later, when its institutional basis (in the form of the ancient [pagan] schools) was withdrawn and replaced by Christian institutions (such as monasteries or schools attached to sees of bishops). But this latter development is beyond the scope of this paper. What needs to be asked once more in the present context is: What was the ancient pagan institutional context which provided the basis for the development of a Christian theology?

2.3 The “pagan” character of the (social-cultural) context of institutional education

The “pagan” character of ancient education in view of its influence on or rejection by early Christians has long been a matter of discussion.⁷⁸ Christians who attended a school did not only learn about the religious world of classical antiquity from outside, as, for example, pupils in a school today would do, when they “learn about” Graeco-Roman civilisation. Rather, the early Christians would have entered that world and actively participated in it, potentially as practitioners of that religion, which was then still very much a live tradition.⁷⁹ The attendance of such schools by Christians, and, even more so, their involvement as teachers, was therefore controversial.⁸⁰ There is evidence that Christian leaders raised concerns about this problem and that churches prohibited their members from practising as teachers (in a similar way, for example, as Christians were prohibited from becoming soldiers or actors). The most vociferous voices against Christian involvement in schools, however, come either from extreme authors such as Tertullian, or they result from the creation of legends such as that of Saint Babylas of Nicomedia, whose historical value is very limited.⁸¹ The overwhelming impression is that Christians, although they suffered, just as other groups in society, from the structural weaknesses of the ancient education system, were, as those other groups, on balance positively disposed towards education. The fact that highly educated Christians may have been a rare phenomenon is simply due to the fact that highly educated people generally were a rare phenomenon. A very small percentage of the population had access to good education. Taking this into account one could even argue that the number of well educated Christians was disproportionately high compared to other groups in society, if we consider the early Christians as a distinct social group. Early Christians certainly valued education, aspired to it, and saw its social and cultural benefits, just as their non-Christian contemporaries.⁸²

Christians who shared such views did not ask whether their Christianity was compatible with ancient (pagan) education. Rather, their Christianity was also mediated by such an education: They acquired it and were intellectually formed in it through

⁷⁸ See e. g. Marksches, “Lehrer, Schüler, Schule” (as n. 2), 112.

⁷⁹ For examples see Marksches, “Lehrer, Schüler, Schule” (as n. 2), 100f.

⁸⁰ Marksches (ibid.) cites the late-antique legend of Saint Babylas of Nicomedia (BHG 2053), who suffered martyrdom because he allegedly taught his pupils hymns and psalms instead of Ἑλληνικὰ παιδεύματα, and Tertullian, *idol.* 10,1.5.7 (CCSL 2, 1109f.), who polemicised against conventional teaching in schools, which was tainted by Paganism, as well as against involvement of Christians as teachers in such schools (Marksches, ibid. 104).

⁸¹ Cf. Marksches (ibid.), 102f. on Tertullian as an extreme individual case and on the legendary character of the Babylas story; on Tertullian see also Gemeinhardt, *Das lateinische Christentum* (as n. 3), 63-81.

⁸² For examples and references see Marksches, “Lehrer, Schüler, Schule” (as n. 2), 104-108.

well written books (written in Greek). They wrote and read such books and shared therefore in the same literacy as their pagan contemporaries. Rather than withdrawing from that world they engaged with it and began to “Christianise” it, i. e. they brought their own understanding of themselves and their world to it and used its institutions for their own purposes. The fact, for example, that Jesus of Nazareth is depicted as a teacher – διδάσκαλος, καθηγητής – is of no mean significance here, so much so that Lucian of Samosata could cite as an identifying characteristic of Christianity the fact that Christians were people who worshipped a “crucified sophist”.⁸³

What should not be forgotten at this point is that, as has already been mentioned,⁸⁴ the early Christian attitude to education was not only influenced by any immediate pagan social environment, but also by an already existing, longstanding, tradition of Hellenistic Judaism (a Greek Bible, rabbis trained in rhetoric, their biblical exegesis influenced by classical Greek philological traditions etc.). Parallels between a figure like Jesus and a similar figure in pagan tradition such as Apollonius of Tyana (ca. 40-120 CE), as it was presented by the sophist Flavius Philostratus at the beginning of the third century in his “Life of Apollonius”, have long been noticed in scholarship, even though the similarities of the two figures in regard to their characterisation as teachers has only been fairly recently highlighted. In the past the emphasis was more on their characterisation as miracle workers (for example by healing people, and even raising people from the dead).⁸⁵

The depiction of Jesus as a teacher and the similarity of this image with that of a pagan philosopher or sophist such as Apollonius are indicative for the embedding of ancient Christian culture in its pagan environment. “Christian philosophers” such as Justin Martyr, his pupil Tatian, a self-professed “sophist”, “Gnostic teachers” such as Valentinus and Apelles, even Tertullian, behaved in very similar ways as their pagan counterparts. They were interested in the opinions of others, they commented on these opinions with more or less competence, they resorted to criticism and polemic. They dressed like philosophers.⁸⁶ They taught in private rooms, in rented flats or houses, in rooms adjacent to public baths, but also outside, in public places. Belying the claim made by the pagan polemicist Celsus they did take part in public discussions.⁸⁷ They

⁸³ For the expressions διδάσκαλος and καθηγητής see Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (as n. 27), 424-448. While in the canonical Gospels Jesus is called διδάσκαλος more than forty times, the expression καθηγητής is found only twice, in the same verse, Mt 23:10. Glucker believes that both expressions are relevant (ibid. 448): “The men who later became known as the Apostles ... provided themselves a ‘rav’. With one notable provision – that, as a Jewish teacher, Jesus naturally did not teach for a fee: he was, in contemporary Greek terms, their καθηγητής.” For Lucian’s reference to Jesus as a “crucified sophist” (ἀνεσκολοπισμένος σοφιστής) in *Peregr.* 13 B. Wyss, “Der gekreuzigte Sophist,” *Early Christianity* 5 (2014), 503-527.

⁸⁴ See for this above, for example nn. 52-54.

⁸⁵ In the past the focus used to be more on the representation of the miracle working of both figures as expression of their divine authority; for the more recent perspective see now E. Koskenniemi, “The Philostratean Apollonius as a Teacher,” in K. Demoen and D. Praet (eds), *Theios Sophistes. Essays on Flavius Philostratus’ Vita Apollonii* (Leiden, 2009), 321-334; also K. Demoen, *Apollonios von Tyana in der neutestamentlichen Exegese* (Tübingen, 1994).

⁸⁶ See for this for example Eusebius, *H.E.* 4,11,8 (GCS 9.1, Eusebius 2.1, 324.10f.): Justin taught the divine doctrine in the guise of a philosopher, ἐν φιλοσόφου σχήματι; compare Tertullian, *De pallio* (CSEL 76, 125), addressing the pallium: *Melior iam te philosophia dignata est ex quo Christianum uestire coepisti.*

⁸⁷ For examples see Marksches, “Lehrer, Schüler, Schule” (as n. 2), 115.

offered their advice and counsel⁸⁸ and sought to inspire others through their conduct of life.⁸⁹ They gathered pupils around them and recruited successors.⁹⁰ They ultimately founded teaching traditions, “schools” in that sense.⁹¹ These reflect the plurality of the intellectual landscape of that time (second and third century CE). And when the time was ripe, in the first few decades of the third century, Christianity produced its first learned philosopher of the very highest calibre, Origen of Alexandria.⁹²

Christianity was therefore not, as it has often been presented, excluded from the pagan world by belonging to a sphere of low or non-education vs. an educated pagan elite. Rather, Christians and non-Christians shared much of a common educational background. The polemic between pagan and Christian philosophers, for example, can only be understood in the context of this common frame of reference.⁹³ One could even say that it was the sharper the closer the opponents were to each other in terms of their philosophical orientation.⁹⁴ To the extent that Christians “christianised” pagan

⁸⁸ Cf. Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer* (as n. 63), 215-229; especially for Justin: *Act. Iust.* 3,3 (44.7-10 Musurillo): Καὶ εἴ τις ἐβούλετο ἀφικνεῖσθαι παρ’ ἐμοί, ἐκοινωνοῦν αὐτῷ τῶν τῆς ἀληθείας λόγων. – “And when [occasionally] someone turned to me [for advice], I familiarised him with the doctrine of truth.” H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, 1972), 10.

⁸⁹ Justin, for example, died a martyr. His pupil Tatian, still far from propagating a “martyr cult” (which developed much later), cites Justin’s contempt for death as an argument for the high level of credibility of his Christian philosophy, even by the standards of pagan philosophy; see Tatian, *orat.* 19,2f. (134-137 Trelenberg; 74f. Nesselrath); Lössl, “Sprachlich-ästhetische Darstellung und ‘Anwendung’ von Gewalt” (as n. 58), 210; Nesselrath, *Gegen falsche Götter* (as n. 48), 149f.

⁹⁰ The *Acta Iustini* list no fewer than six co-accused alongside Justin, who were all referred to as his pupils: Chariton, Charito, Euelpistos, Hierax, Paion und Liberianos; *Act. Iust.* (42-47 Musurillo). In addition there was Tatian, who is not listed in the *Acta Iustini*, and his pupil Rhodon. Of Marcion, too, a number of pupils are known by name: Apelles, Syneros, Potitus, Basilikos, Prepon und Lucanus; cf. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen* (as n. 63), 351. Eusebius, *H.E.* 5,11,2 (GCS 9.1, 452.9f.) and 6,13,2 (GCS 9.2, 546.13f.) names for Alexandria Pantainos as the first head of a Christian school and Clement as his successor, followed by Origen. This version is historically doubtful, although the way in which Eusebius is constructing his case is significant; for the arguments against Eusebius’s account see the discussion in Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellen-Religion* (as n. 63), 39-41.

⁹¹ This is particularly obvious in the case of the “Alexandrian” school, or tradition (of thought – i. e. a form of Jewish-Christian [Middle- and Neo-] Platonism), from Philo via Clement to Origen; for the meaning of the expression “school” in this context see above nn. 27-30. Teachers like Valentinus and Marcion, too, founded school traditions, as is suggested by the heresiological attacks on them, which try to represent them as divided among themselves and therefore in decline, not sustainable (for more examples see above n. 71).

⁹² See for this more extensively in the next section of this article; for the “project” that is addressed in this section see also W. Löhr, “Christianity as Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives of an Ancient Intellectual Project,” in: *VigChr* 64 (2010), 160-188.

⁹³ See for this above nn. 57-62.

⁹⁴ A poignant example from the sixth century is the polemic of the pagan philosopher Simplicius against the Christian John Philoponus. Both had been pupils of the pagan Neoplatonist Ammonius, who was teaching in Alexandria. The poignancy of Simplicius’ polemic against John Philoponus is intensified by the fact that Philoponus was a Christian *and* a Platonist and developed in his works a Christian cosmology that met the highest scientific standards of the time. It was also innovative and forwardlooking in that it responded to challenges arising from the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. In this respect it actually anticipated some of the early modern criticisms – as voiced, e. g., by Galileo – which led to the development of the modern scientific worldview. But in Late Antiquity it was rather the combination of Christian (Biblical) and Platonic-Aristotelian elements which intensified pagan as well as Christian polemic (the latter coming from Biblical literalists, e. g. Philoponus’ contemporary, Cosmas Indicopleustes). What was provocative about Philoponus’ way of thinking was 1) that, as a Christian, he was a Platonist, and 2) that he transformed his Platonism in a way that led to a new form

institutions,⁹⁵ this happened in the course of a development which transformed what had been a philosophy, a full way of life, in its own right (usually of an Aristotelian-Platonist orientation) into a propaedeutic for a higher theology. Thus what happened here was not so much only a Christianisation but rather a “secularisation” of pagan philosophical school traditions. These had previously included a religious element in their own right. Now, instead of providing an entire worldview they began to serve as “handmaidens” of a new worldview based on the Biblical message.⁹⁶

What is interesting, however, is that Christianity did not create for its theology in the long term, i. e. beyond the third century CE, institutions of learning which would have been comparable to the pagan philosophical, or indeed rhetorical, schools. But rather, in the fourth and fifth centuries CE, the so-called “golden age” of Patristics,⁹⁷ doing theology was, with a few exceptions,⁹⁸ the domain of outstanding bishops.⁹⁹ These had usually completed their excellent education in pagan institutions, and in many cases they only converted to Christianity, or rather, to a more radical, ascetic, form of Christianity, during or after completing their education.¹⁰⁰ There were some,

of Platonism as well as Christianity; specifically for these aspects of Philoponus’ thought see, among others, W. Wieland, “Die Ewigkeit der Welt,” in: D. Henrich, W. Schulz, K.H. Volkmann-Schluck (eds), *Die Gegenwart der Griechen im neueren Denken. Festschrift für Hans-Georg Gadamer zum 60. Geburtstag* (Tübingen, 1960), 291-316; R. Sorabji (ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (London, 1987); H. Baltussen, *Philosophy and Exegesis in Simplicius. The Methodology of a Commentator* (London, 2008), especially 176-188.

⁹⁵ See for this Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom* (as n. 19).

⁹⁶ According to Watt, “From Sergius to Mattā” (as n. 19), 257, for example, in Syrian monasteries, in which theological programmes of teaching were developed, the propaedeutic programme was adopted from the Alexandrian schools, i. e. mainly the Aristotelian organon, or programmes derived from it, while the theological programme of the pagan schools (i. e. of pagan Neoplatonism) was replaced by the study of the Bible and Corpus Dionysiaca.

⁹⁷ For the expression “golden age” see A. Di Berardino, J. Quasten, *Patrology 3/4: The Golden Age of Greek/Latin Patristic Literature* (Allen, TX, 1995).

⁹⁸ These exceptions are mainly ascetic figures, male and female, for example Pelagius and Jerome and their (female as well as male) correspondents, or laymen such as Marius Victorinus, or later, in the sixth century, Boethius; see e. g. J. Lössl, “Hieronymus – Ein Kirchenvater?” In J. Arnold, R. Berndt, and R. M. W. Stammberger (eds), *Väter der Kirche: Ekklesiales Denken von den Anfängen bis in die Neuzeit* (Paderborn, 2004), 431-464; W. A. Löhr, *Pelagius: Portrait of a Christian Teacher in Late Antiquity* (Aberdeen, 2007); B. Feichtinger, *Apostolae Apostolorum. Frauenaskese als Befreiung und Zwang bei Hieronymus* (Frankfurt a. M., 1995); S. Cooper, “Philosophical Exegesis in Marius Victorinus’ Commentaries on Paul,” in Lössl and Watt, *Interpreting the Bible and Aristotle* (as n. 19), 67-89; for Boethius s. above n. 20; and now also C. Moreschini, *A Christian in Toga. Boethius: Interpreter of Antiquity and Christian Theologian* (Göttingen, 2014).

⁹⁹ In comparison with the overall number of Christian bishops in Late Antiquity there were very few who can be counted as theologians (in the sense that they had a more advanced education). According to Marksches, “Lehrer, Schüler, Schule” (as n. 2), 108, some bishops seem to have been illiterate, even as late as the third and fourth centuries. The average theological competence of bishops during the so-called “golden age” of Patristic thought was thus surprisingly low.

¹⁰⁰ Typical examples include Athanasius of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, the “three Cappadocians” (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa), John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo, to name but a few. The cultural shift, or even rupture, which was implied by the secularisation of institutions of ancient (i. e. pagan, classical) learning and which made Christians in later centuries far more relaxed in dealing with ancient culture than in the first three to four centuries of Christianity, can be traced in documents such as the correspondence between Augustine of Hippo and Memor (who was probably bishop in Aeclanum), the father of Julian of Aeclanum, who later became one of the most vociferous opponents of Augustine. This can be dated in the first years of the fifth century. Augustine,

Josef Lössl, “Theology as Academic Discourse in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 38-72; ISSN 1754-517X; website:

<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

like Athanasius, whose education seems to have taken place entirely in an ascetic (or monastic) context, but even in those cases the question has been asked how a more refined rhetorical style could have been acquired in such a context. The monasteries did eventually provide the main new alternative higher education system, but even they adopted major elements of the old pagan schools.

Those bishop-theologians of the golden age of Patristics excelled as theologians largely outside an educational system, as ecclesiastical and public intellectuals. They did not perform “school theology” but “practical” or “pastoral” and in many respects also “political” theology, in letters, sermons and homilies, commentaries, polemical treatises, quasi-legal edicts and other official documents. These latter characteristics are especially to be found in the documents of the doctrinal controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries CE.¹⁰¹ Alternatively, theology could be practised as an individual intellectual endeavour from philosophical or scholarly (“scientific”) interest, which did exist, but in a context that lacked to a large degree a framed academic discourse (comparable e. g. to that in the Middle Ages).¹⁰²

ep. 101 (CSEL 34.2, 539-542). According to this letter Julian, who had already been ordained deacon, was still engaged in the study of the liberal arts and developed the idea that philosophical methodology could be used to solve theological problems. Augustine could not disagree more. Clerics should focus on the study of the Bible and should move firmly within the precincts of ecclesiastical authority rather than devising a rational framework for theology; see for this J. Lössl, *Julian von Aeclanum. Studien zu seinem Leben, seinem Werk, seiner Lehre und ihrer Überlieferung* (Leiden, 2001), 83-86, especially 85. Later, when Julian demanded that the issues that had provoked the Pelagian controversy – and led to his exile – should be put before a general church council and rationally discussed, Augustine replied with contempt. Perhaps, he wrote, Julian was thinking of a “council of Peripatetics” (*Peripateticorum ... concilium*), i. e. Aristotelian philosophers, rather than bishops. Julian’s idea, according to Augustine, could not be further from reality. Late antique colleges of bishops and church councils did anything but resemble institutions of higher education (in the sense of places where free academic discourse could take place). To be fair to Julian, he had thought of councils more as courts, where he and his proposals could expect a fair trial. Nevertheless, Augustine’s reaction is telling; see for this J. Lössl, “The Bible and Aristotle in the Controversy between Augustine and Julian of Aeclanum,” in Lössl and Watt, *Interpreting the Bible and Aristotle* (as n. 19), 110-120, 113; and already J. Lössl, “Sallust in Julian of Aeclanum,” *VigChr* 58 (2004), 179-202.

¹⁰¹ H. Strutwolf, *Die Trinitätstheologie und Christologie des Euseb von Caesarea* (Göttingen, 1999), 44-61 has impressively shown how – to the shock of many participants in the Council of Nicaea in 325 – the direction of the discourse on faith in the Church had taken a radical turn. The function of “creeds”, summary statements of individual believers to assure their position to themselves and their communities, changed in the sense that the precise wording became much more of an issue within a context which had become much more legalistic and centralised. This had led, as Th. Graumann has further shown, to a new understanding of the “canon” and the authority of faith; cf. Th. Graumann, *Die Kirche der Väter. Vätertheologie und Väterbeweis in den Kirchen des Ostens bis zum Konzil von Ephesus* (431) (Tübingen, 2002); and more recently, Th. Graumann, “The Conduct of Theology and the Fathers of the Church,” in Ph. Rousseau (ed), *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (London, 2009), 539-555; for the fourth century see now also various chapters contained in the volume edited by G. M. Berndt and R. Steinacher (eds), *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (Farnham, 2014).

¹⁰² In Alexandria, for example, Synesius remained in contact with his pagan teacher Hypatia, but was no longer among her closer circle. It was possible for Christians, even clerics, to belong to circles of educated pagans, but it was considered problematic, on both sides; see for this Vinzent, “Oxbridge” (as n. 3), 71. N. McLynn, “Disciplines of Discipleship in Late Antique Education: Augustine and Gregory Nazianzen,” in K. Pollmann and M. Vessey (eds), *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions* (Oxford, 2005), 25-48, unfavourably compares Augustine’s formal education in Carthage with that of Gregory of Nazianzus in Athens. While Gregory was networking with the intellectual and political top brass of the empire (a future emperor was among his fellow students) in what was clearly

Josef Lössl, “Theology as Academic Discourse in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 38-72; ISSN 1754-517X; website:

<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

Looked at from this perspective the great and impressive development of Christian theology during the Patristic age did not occur in a context of strong and established (Christian) institutions of higher education, in which it could have been practised as an academic pursuit with established methods, a sense of progress and with a wider societal impact in education. To be sure, the methods were there and were practised (e. g. in Biblical exegesis, philosophy, philology, rhetoric, homiletics etc.), but not in a context of viable and sustainable institutions, which would have guaranteed their continuity beyond the end of Antiquity. In other words, the end of Antiquity also marks the end of early Christian theology, or the theology of ancient Christianity, including Patristic theology.

3. Origen: Theology as “Christian science”

In the second and third centuries CE this latter development could not be predicted. At that time it was still possible to project the development of a genuinely Christian form of higher, including theological, education in Antiquity; for despite doctrinal disputes and tensions there was a strong and widespread interest in theological education. There was also an institutional context, a network of schools, and their most well educated representatives did not only focus on questions of cultural and religious history, or cultural philosophy and criticism, as mentioned earlier, but also on critical disciplines.¹⁰³ Philological and linguistic analysis, grammar, rhetoric, text criticism and literary criticism. This applies to authors such as Justin, Tatian and Marcion as well as to their pupils. We could add to this list Theodotus and Heracleon,¹⁰⁴ besides a number of others, who in this respect did not lag behind their pagan counterparts such as the “philosopher-philologue” Longinus¹⁰⁵ or the philosopher-physician-philologue Galen of Pergamum, editor of a critical edition of the works of Hippocrates.¹⁰⁶

Of Heracleon, a pupil of Valentinus, who was probably, as most of the above-mentioned early Christian teachers, active in Rome, perhaps also in Alexandria, fragments are extant of a commentary on the Gospel of John, which are resorting most strongly

*the centre of ancient philosophy, with a unique *genius loci*, Augustine’s Carthage may have been far more “self-consciously second-rank” (p. 37). While Gregory literally walked in the steps of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, Augustine dreamt of Rome as a more illustrious place than Carthage. His opinion of his teachers seems to have been low, and while Gregory processed publicly in the city alongside his fellow students, dressed in academic gown, Augustine lived a far more private life, with – at least for some of the time – his partner, child and mother. However, what McLynn’s account does not consider is that both Gregory and Augustine wrote their great works of theology outside a framework of higher education institutions. As bishop neither of them belonged to an educational establishment. But both of them were perhaps more like public intellectuals in that regard; see for this above n. 100.*

¹⁰³ See for this also R. M. Grant, *Heresy and Criticism. The Search for Authenticity in Early Christian Literature* (Louisville, Kentucky, 1993).

¹⁰⁴ Cf. A. Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon Philologus. Gnostische Johannesexegese im zweiten Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 2002).

¹⁰⁵ See I. Männlein-Robert, *Longin. Philologe und Philosoph. Eine Interpretation der erhaltenen Zeugnisse* (München-Leipzig, 2001).

¹⁰⁶ On Galen as a literary and text critic see Grant, *Heresy and Criticism* (as n. 103), 59-73; and H. von Staden, “Staging the Past, Staging Oneself: Galen on Hellenistic Exegetical Traditions,” in Ch. Gill, T. Whitmarsh, J. Wilkins (eds), *Galen and the World of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 2010), 132-156, 146-150.

to philological methods.¹⁰⁷ The style of these fragments suggests that they probably originate from a school context. They could be lecture notes, written up either by a student or by the teacher. The word with which Origen, who cites them in his own commentary on John's Gospel, refers to them, ὑπομνήματα,¹⁰⁸ "commentaries" or "notes", too, suggests this. The word "commentary" here still has to be taken with a pinch of salt. Considering the further development of this genre it was still a rather rudimentary form of commentary which Heracleon had produced. It was Origen, a generation or two after Heracleon, who in his commentary on John's Gospel and in several other key works¹⁰⁹ developed the concept of a "Christian science" (*scientia christiana*) in the sense of a systematized body of Christian theological knowledge based on a methodical study of the biblical text. This was probably the most elaborate design of an academic (or "scientific") Christian theology in Antiquity.¹¹⁰ And it took its point of departure from philological and philosophical commentary techniques. It was, in many ways, Origen who stands at the beginning not only of the biblical but also the philosophical commentary tradition of Late Antiquity.

Born around 185, most probably (but not certainly) in Alexandria, from a Christian family, Origen can in the first instance be situated in the wider educational context of the late second century CE. It was his father who taught him systematically, not only in the pagan Paideia, but also in Christian-biblical knowledge.¹¹¹ And already in his youth Origen was keen to hand on his comprehensive knowledge.¹¹² Both pagans and

¹⁰⁷ Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon* (as n. 104).

¹⁰⁸ Orig. *Comm. Ioh.* 6,15,92 (GCS Origenes 4, 125.19); Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon* (as n. 104), 32-34; A. Fürst, "Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria," in Lössl and Watt, *Interpreting the Bible and Aristotle in Late Antiquity* (as n. 19), 13-32, 13f. n. 4; see also *ibid.* n. 5 on some other pre-Origen commentary projects similar to Heracleon's.

¹⁰⁹ One could mention here especially "On principles", *De principiis* (περὶ ἀρχῶν), *Contra Celsum* and the commentary on the Song of Songs, *In Canticum Canticorum*. In particular the introductions or prooemia to important works and especially to commentaries are important for the theoretical design of a "Christian science"; see for this now especially M. Skeb, *Exegese und Lebensform. Die Proömien der antiken griechischen Bibelkommentare* (Leiden, 2007), 1-11.137-278.

¹¹⁰ For this and what follows see especially Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellenreligion* (as n. 63), 50-68; also Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus* (as n. 70), 45-114; and Fürst, "Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria" (as n. 108).

¹¹¹ Thus Eusebius, *H.E.* 6,2,7f.15 (GCS 9.2, 520.524): Already as a boy Origen was instructed in the Holy Scriptures (ταῖς θείαις γραφαῖς ἐξ ἔτι παιδὸς ἐνησκημένος). His father pushed him to high achievement in "pagan learning" (ἐν τοῖς Ἑλλήνων μαθήμασιν), but he also looked that he did not neglect Biblical studies, so Eusebius (τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶ πρὸς τῆ τῶν ἐγκυκλίων παιδεία καὶ τούτων οὐ κατὰ πάρεργον τὴν φροντίδα πεποιημένου). Fathers' direct involvement in the academic training of their sons is also attested elsewhere. In early Christianity, for example, Basilides and Carpocrates trained their sons Isidore and Epiphaneas, as is reported in Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 2,113,3; 3,5,2f.; 6,53,2 (GCS Clemens 2, 174.197.458), or among pagans, as we can see from an inscription, Alexander of Aphrodisias, a contemporary of Origen, and son of an Aristotelian philosopher of the same name; see A. Chaniotis, "Epigraphic Evidence for the Philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 47 (2004), 79-81; R. Sharples, "Implications of the new Alexander of Aphrodisias Inscription," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 48 (2005), 47-56.

¹¹² Eusebius, *H.E.* 6,3,3 (GCS 9.2, 524). According to Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellenreligion* (as n. 63), 57-63, and Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus* (as n. 70), 63-79, Eusebius' testimony can be understood as follows: Origen began to be active as a teacher when he was still very young. His circle comprised pagans as well as Christians. Some of his pupils suffered the martyrdom under the persecution of Aquila (sometime between 206 and 211AD). This persecution was targeting especially new converts. The "catechetical school" (τὸ τῆς κατηχήσεως διδασκαλείον), which Eusebius

Christians were among his students. While he was already teaching, he still continued his studies and became a pupil of the pagan Platonist philosopher Ammonius,¹¹³ who a few years later also taught such well-known pagan figures as the already mentioned Longinus and Plotinus.¹¹⁴

Origen did not merely want to be an expert of pagan and biblical knowledge who happened to be Christian, and a Christian philosophical teacher besides. He saw this combination of expertises as an opportunity to draw all of it together to a systematic, theoretically grounded, methodologically framed, comprehensive science, but from a Christian perspective,¹¹⁵ i. e. not only the study of the Bible, Christian doctrine and (a Platonist type) philosophy, but also mathematics, geometry, astronomy, meteorology, physics, botany, zoology and medicine.¹¹⁶

At a certain level this was nothing new. In fact, it was typically Alexandrian. It had a certain tradition in Alexandria, where the idea of a “total science” encompassing the entirety of human knowledge had already been developed a few hundred years earlier, under the Ptolemies.¹¹⁷ It had been through the engagement with pagan exponents of this kind of thinking that allegorical interpretation of Biblical history and apologetic historiography had developed in Hellenistic Judaism. Among the representatives of this movement it was especially Philo who, in part via his Christian epigon Clement, exerted great influence on Origen.¹¹⁸ But Origen aimed far beyond the achievements of a Philo or Clement.¹¹⁹ This was not only due to his superior mind, but also to much

refers to, is nothing else but a philosophical school in the above outlined style of a typical school of the second century. It was at that school that Origen taught his “Christian science”. That this school was also accredited by the church under bishop Demetrius, as is reported by Eusebius, *H.E.* 6,3,8 (526), was a secondary development. Origen had not set out to run an official church school. He just was a Christian school head who taught a Christian philosophy. As is also argued by C. Scholten, “Die alexandrinische Katechetenschule,” *JAC* 38 (1995), 16-37, 31, Demetrius merely lent his church approval to what was originally Origen’s project.

¹¹³ Thus according to a testimony of Porphyry, a pagan pupil of Plotinus, transmitted by Eusebius, *H.E.* 6,19,5-8 (GCS 9.2, 558-561); cf. especially *ibid.* 6,19,6 (558): ἀκροατῆς γὰρ οὗτος Ἀμμωνίου ... γεροντός. A more extensive passage is cited and discussed by Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellen-Religion* (as n. 63), 63-67. Fürst also discusses the question of the chronological relationship between the Christian Origen and a later pagan philosopher of the same name, who was a fellow student and friend of Plotinus; see for this Porphyry, *De vita Plotini* 3 (6.9-12 Volkmann).

¹¹⁴ On Longinus see Männlein-Robert, *Longin. Philologe und Philosoph* (as n. 105), 183-185.223; for Plotinus see above n. 113.

¹¹⁵ His fundamental insight in this regard was that there was an analogy between the way in which God revealed himself to humanity through creation and the way in which he does so through Scripture. As a consequence, there is an inner relationship, a connection between spirituality, philosophy, exegesis of Scripture, and study of specialist (including natural scientific) disciplines; Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 108), 29-31.

¹¹⁶ Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus* (as n. 70), 86.

¹¹⁷ Compare above nn. 38-44, for example the case of Eratosthenes.

¹¹⁸ For Philo cf. above n. 53; for Clemens nn. 90-92; see also Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus* (as n. 70), 76-79.85 on Philo; A. van den Hoek, “Origen and the Intellectual Heritage of Alexandria. Continuity or Disjunction?” in R. J. Daly (ed.), *Origeniana Quinta* (Leuven, 1992), 40-50 on Clement.

¹¹⁹ In the view of M. Edwards, *Image, Word and God in the Early Christian Centuries* (Farnham, 2013), 101, Philo anticipates Origen’s exegetical method, but ultimately falls short of Origen because he was only rarely as “industrious” as Origen. According to Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus* (as n. 70) 76-79.85, Philo was prevented by the political circumstances that prevailed in his time from developing his programme more elaborately. However, it seems that during the third century

better conditions for systematic study and research during his lifetime compared to the lifetime of his predecessors. Pagan philosophers and scientists too benefited from this improvement, Galen, Longinus, Plotinus, or, in Athens, Alexander of Aphrodisias, the leading Aristotelian commentator.¹²⁰

It was around 200 CE that Alexander became the head of the Aristotelian school in Athens.¹²¹ Traditionally he is seen as the first “commentator philosopher”,¹²² a pagan counterpart, so to speak, of Origen, the leading Christian Biblical commentator. It is theoretically possible, though unlikely, that the two men once met each other, when Origen visited Athens on church business.¹²³ However, they would not have learnt a lot from each other. Alexander’s commentarial techniques were at that time still very much rooted in second century practices.¹²⁴ It was only gradually that he and Origen advanced these practices, not so much by influencing each other, but independently, in parallel to each other. The fact that late-antique philosophy was to consist mainly in the commenting of works of great philosophers, that is, in the first instance, of Plato and Aristotle, constitutes a major point of departure for science and learning during that period. It was a development which had its advantages and disadvantages.¹²⁵ A comparable development in Christian theology towards the development of Biblical commentary ran parallel. Because of the role of Origen, who excelled in philosophy

there was also a better – if one may call it that – “research infrastructure” in Alexandria for historical, philological and philosophical research, especially into the Bible, than there was in the middle of the first century CE: better libraries, better research tools, higher quality of teaching, higher concentration of good researchers. A similar assessment can be made of Caesarea in Palestine, where Origen worked from ca. 230 CE; cf. Grafton and Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book* (as n. 44), especially 22-132 on Origenes and the conditions in Caesarea in connection with Origen’s method of research, especially concerning his work on the Hexapla.

¹²⁰ On Galen see above nn. 63 and 106; on Longinus and Plotinus n. 114; on Alexander of Aphrodisias R. W. Sharples, “Alexander of Aphrodisias: Scholasticism and Innovation,” in H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.36.2 (Berlin, 1987), 1176-1243; see also R. W. Sharples, “Peripatetics,” in Ll. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2010), 140-160.

¹²¹ Cf. Sharples, “Implications of the new Alexander of Aphrodisias Inscription” (as n. 111); also R. W. Sharples, “The Peripatetic School,” in D. Furley (ed.), *The Routledge History of Philosophy 2: From Aristotle to Augustine* (London, 2003), 147-187, especially 153f.

¹²² See R. W. Sharples, “The School of Alexander,” in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed: The Ancient Commentators and their Influence* (London, 1990), 83-111; more elaborately on Alexander’s “commentary technique” P. L. Donini, “Alessandro di Afrodisia e i metodi dell’ esegesi filosofica,” in C. Moreschini (ed.), *Esegesi, parafrasi e compilazione in età tardoantica* (Naples, 1995), 107-129.

¹²³ In reality it is not very probably that such an encounter took place. Eusebius, *H.E.* 6,23,4 (GCS 9.2, 570f.) reports that during the episcopate of bishop Pontian of Rome (ca. 230-235 CE) Origen was sent on ecclesiastical business from Palestine to Greece (χρείας ἐκκλησιαστικῶν ἔνεκα πραγμάτων ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα στείλᾶμενος). Whether this left him time and opportunity to meet the head of the Peripatos in Athens remains the question. The other question is whether Alexander was still alive at all during that period.

¹²⁴ Perhaps there is an analogy here to Heracleon’s technique, which Origen had heavily criticised; on Alexander’s technique see Donini, “Alessandro di Afrodisia” (as n. 122); Sharples, “The Peripatetic School” (as n. 121), 154. Sharples describes Alexander’s commentaries as “discursive and open-ended, presenting alternative interpretations ... They seem to reflect the results of teaching ... Some ... take the form of problems ... followed by solutions; others are expositions of particular passages, or summaries of texts and doctrines.”

¹²⁵ For a brief historical outline on the origins and development of pagan philosophical exegesis see P. Hadot, “Théologie, exégèse, révélation, écriture, dans la philosophie grecque,” in M. Tardieu (ed.), *Les règles de l’interprétation*, Paris 1987, 13-34.

as well as in Biblical studies, it remains an open question who preceded whom in this development, pagan philosophers or Christian Biblical commentators.¹²⁶ But Origen was an exceptional phenomenon. His elaborate programme of a “scientific” Christian theology did not come to fruition in the way it was intended by him and the scientific standard of his commentating was hardly ever reached again by later commentators, although he remained a model for many. The similarities between philosophical and Biblical commentaries of the fourth to sixth centuries CE, however, can be explained by their institutional background, which they had partly in common, namely the late-antique schools of grammar and rhetoric, where Christians and pagan tended to mix, both as teachers and students, and to share common methodologies and attitudes to certain fundamental scientific, philosophical and ethical issues.¹²⁷

Regarding Origen it remains to be said just once more that similar to Alexander of Aphrodisias he spent his young years still very much in an atmosphere dominated by the educational culture of the second century schools (as outlined above), while in his later years this culture had progressed to a much higher “scientific” or scholarly level, with bigger libraries, more access to books, much more advanced methods of storing and accessing historical knowledge efficiently, and of reading, translating, analysing and commenting much larger amounts of texts than ever before. It was in these later years (ca. 220-250 CE) that Origen developed into the great Biblical commentator as which he acquired lasting fame. By the standards of what it meant to be scientific in Late Antiquity, however, the fact that he was a “scientific” commentator of the Bible meant that he was *the* “scientific theologian” of early Christianity par excellence.

Let us just ask once more briefly what exactly it meant that Origen’s commenting was scientific. What were its aims and objectives? By which methods did he proceed? – What he did was apparently fairly similar to what Alexander of Aphrodisias did in his philosophical commentaries.¹²⁸ He began by systematically listing in the prologue to each commentary the topics which he thought needed to be discussed with regard to the texts to be commented.¹²⁹ These included the topic of the work, its position in the canon, its structure and outline, perhaps also the meaning of the title (if that was obscure), the literary genre of the work, the most important themes developed in it, or the main characters appearing in it. Finally, questions relating to the intellectual and ethical challenges posed by the work to its readers.¹³⁰ This level of systematic study exceeds anything that is known from the second century. At the same time it is not yet

¹²⁶ Against the view, predominant in the past, that Christian commentators followed the models of pagan commentaries, see now especially Skeb, *Exegese und Lebensform* (as n. 109), 2-6 and 184-186.

¹²⁷ On this topic extensively Skeb, *Exegese und Lebensform* (as n. 109), 13-135.

¹²⁸ For examples see Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 109), 19 n. 25f.

¹²⁹ See for this Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 108), 19-21. The relevant technical term, τὰ πρὸ τῆς συναγωγῆς, questions to be treated in class “before going through” the relevant works, could also be translated with the better known term “prolegomena”. Here it becomes obvious that with these “scientific” commentaries which Origen embarked on a new type of scientific literature and culture was emerging, of a kind that went beyond that which used to be “normally” practised in the second and third century CE. During the second century, it seems, these techniques were sporadically practised in the classrooms and also developed in written form, but by far not in such a critical and systematic way as Origen suggests for his time.

¹³⁰ The most frequently studied text in this regard (by modern scholars) is the prologue to Origen’s commentary on the Song of Songs, *prol. Cant.* (SC 375, 80-166); the most extensive study of this text is offered by Skeb, *Exegese und Lebensform* (as n. 109), 201-264.

as rigid as the schematic approach of commentaries from the fifth century onwards.¹³¹ Origen was after all a pioneer. He was exploring unknown territory. A lot of what he did had never been done before him. He therefore developed different sets of criteria for the different works which he commented upon.¹³² Each of his commentaries is a bespoke piece, a kind of its own. And yet, there is nevertheless a unifying element in Origen's entire oeuvre, which makes each of the commentaries also part of a whole, namely the Biblical canon and – as a key to understanding Origen's Christian faith – the person of Christ.¹³³

Interestingly, this tendency to focus in all his work on one single unifying principle which also lay at the centre of his personal (inner) life, was something which Origen had in common with the pagan commentators of Late Antiquity. For example, when at the beginning of his commentary on John's Gospel he refers to his scientific work as “dedicated to God” (ἀνακειμένης θεῷ) and addresses, time and again, including by way of prayer, God, Christ and the Holy Spirit that He may illuminate his exegesis and guide him in the truth,¹³⁴ then we can find similar, comparable, passages in the works of commentators such as Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius and Simplicius.¹³⁵ While in modern scientific or scholarly works such language would be considered out of place, in those late-antique commentaries it was not mere convention. Knowledge (*gnosis, scientia, theoria*) was after all aspired to as the ultimate goal of intellectual endeavour. There was a continuous path from the first mundane steps of commenting a text such as ascertaining its topic, outlining its structure, determining its genre etc. to understanding its deeper, philosophical, and perhaps also mystical, transcendent, meanings, and perhaps transcending even those. It is interesting how phrases such as those cited above are often closely interwoven with very basic, pragmatic, questions such as: What is the purpose of the work at hand? What is its genre?¹³⁶ How do we have to understand its title? And so on.¹³⁷

And this “existential” or “mystical” dimension of the commentaries does not only extend to their authors. Origen tries to closely involve his readers as well. Although he warns his readers not to understand what is said about God in an “anthropomorphic” sense but to keep in mind the ultimate otherness of the subject matter, he nevertheless invites them to understand it “literally”, i. e. in its “historical” meaning, as related to their own existential situation, their life in the here and now. And they should try to intensify this understanding by applying their (spiritual) senses,¹³⁸ i. e. to feel, hear,

¹³¹ See for this Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 109), 21 n. 45.

¹³² Cf. Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 109), 22: “The only thing Origen had in mind in writing a preface was the particular text.”

¹³³ Edwards, *Image, Word and God in the Early Christian Centuries* (as n. 119), 101 with reference to *Philocalia* 5 (11f. Robinson).

¹³⁴ *Comm. Ioh.* 1,1,1-15,89 (GCS Origenes 4, 3-20), especially 1,2,12 (5f.), 10,1,2 (171); 6,2,7 (107); 20,1,1 (327); 1,15,89 (20); cf. Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 108), 22-24.

¹³⁵ For examples see Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 108), 23 n. 52; compare also above n. 46.

¹³⁶ *Comm. Ioh.* 1,3,18 (GCS Origenes 4, 7): τί τὸ ἔργον τοῦ εὐαγγελιστοῦ;

¹³⁷ *Comm. Ioh.* 1,15,88 (GCS Origenes 4, 19): τί τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν ἐστι λόγον;

¹³⁸ *Comm. Ioh.* 20,43,405 (GCS Origenes 4, 386): ὡς περ γὰρ ἐπὶ τοῦ σώματος διάφοροι αἰσθήσεις εἰσὶν γεῦσις καὶ ὄρασις, οὕτως κατὰ τὰς λεγομένας ὑπὸ τοῦ Σολομῶντος θείας αἰσθήσεις ἄλλη μὲν τις

see and even taste or smell that which is put before them in the texts. For Origen these “spiritual” or “divine senses” (θείας αἰσθήσεις) were a form of allegorical knowledge and as such rationally and scientifically grounded and therefore methodologically well founded hermeneutical categories.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, already in Antiquity this form of “literal” exegesis became heavily criticised,¹⁴⁰ and until today it is cited as evidence that Origen held a reductionist view of the historical sense of Scripture.¹⁴¹ Whether or not such criticism is justified, it has to address Origen’s methodology in its own right and to start from the preposition that Origen set out his theology as a rational method, meeting the “scientific” standards of its time.

Origen did not only face Christian but also pagan criticism.¹⁴² Pagan philosophers were obviously aware that Origen’s comprehensive concept of a Christian “science” could potentially replace the ancient pagan scientific world-view. And Origen seems indeed to have intended to introduce a new kind of philosophy, subdivided according to the classical disciplines, ethics, physics and “epopicts” (i. e. the application of the intellect to itself),¹⁴³ in which certain books of the Bible would replace pagan works as reference texts for the traditional disciplines.¹⁴⁴ In his commentary on the Song of Songs, for example, he suggested that the three books traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, could become “textbooks” for these three fundamental disciplines of ancient philosophy.

What Origen here did was to equate the content of the Bible with the content of philosophy as a holistic science. Whoever scientifically investigates the Scriptures, he once wrote, encounters questions which are as fundamental as the questions of those who explore the origin of the universe.¹⁴⁵ While the scientific methods of his theology were those of grammar, literary rhetoric and exegetical philosophy, which he applied to the interpretation of the Bible, the anticipated outcomes of his research involved a new and essential understanding of God, the world and oneself. This new knowledge could manifest itself in significant bits of detailed specialist knowledge presented in scientific writing, or it could involve fundamental, life-changing, existential insights.

ἀν εἶη ὁρατικὴ τῆς ψυχῆς δύναμις καὶ θεωρητικὴ, ἄλλη δὲ ἡ γευστικὴ καὶ ἀντιληπτικὴ τῆς ποιότητος τῶν νοητῶν τροφῶν.

¹³⁹ Nevertheless, what we may have here is one of the sources of Christian mysticism; cf. Edwards, *Image, Word and God in the Early Christian Centuries* (as n. 119), 102.

¹⁴⁰ See e. g. J. F. Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism in Early Christianity. Epiphanius of Salamis and the Legacy of Origen* (Leuven, 1988), 315-332, for Epiphanius’ of Salamis criticism.

¹⁴¹ But see against this now Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus* (as n. 70), 125-162.

¹⁴² Porphyry, for example, argued that he had forced a Greek, scientific, cosmology on to a “foreign”, i. e. Biblical, myth; see Euseb. *H.E.* 6,19,7 (GCS 9.2 560f.); cited by Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 108), 25 n. 63; note also Simplicius’ polemic against Philoponus, above n. 94.

¹⁴³ Theo Kobusch referred to this aspect of Origen’s thought as the “discovery of subjectivity”, „die Entdeckung der Subjektivität“: T. Kobusch, *Christliche Philosophie. Die Entdeckung der Subjektivität* (Darmstadt, 2006), especially 58-63.

¹⁴⁴ *Comm. Cant.* 3,1 (SC 375, 128); for an extensive discussion of this passage Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus* (as n. 70), 97; on the tripartite division of philosophy in pagan sources see Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 108), 26-28.

¹⁴⁵ *Philoc.* 2,5 (39 Robinson): Χρὴ μέντοι γε τὸν ἅπαξ παραδεξάμενον τοῦ κτίσαντος τὸν κόσμον εἶναι ταῦτας τὰς γραφὰς πεπεισθαι, ὅτι ὅσα περὶ τῆς κτίσεως ἀπαντᾷ ζητοῦσι τὸν περὶ αὐτῆς λόγον, ταῦτα καὶ περὶ τῶν γραφῶν; cited and discussed by Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria” (as n. 108), 29-31 with nn. 93f.

For Origen, at a certain level, the outcomes of Biblical research and of research in the origin of the universe were essentially the same.

The difference between a Christian Platonist such as Origen and a pagan Platonist such as Plotinus, or, later, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Ammonius, Proclus, Damascius or Simplicius, was that the latter sought and found the Divine in the works of Plato while the former did so exploring the Bible. It was for this reason that in the sixth century CE Christian Platonists, adapting the curriculum of their pagan predecessors, began to study the works of the Aristotelian Organon in their own right as propaedeutics for a scientifically grounded theological exegesis of the Bible.¹⁴⁶ And perhaps it was also for this reason that this development, for example in Syria in the sixth century CE, was viewed by contemporaries with suspicion, as potentially “Origenistic”.¹⁴⁷ (Origen had by that time already assumed the notoriety of an heretic and would soon, in the middle of the sixth century, be utterly condemned and his works largely destroyed.)

4. Summary, conclusion, outlook

To summarise once more: The concept of an early Christian “scientific” theology in the sense of a theology involving a disciplined academic discourse is problematic, but nevertheless desirable, since even in the present day any attempt at formulating a methodology or historical-theoretical framework for a “scientific” theology relies at least in some respects on concepts and intellectual devices which originated from or are rooted in the intellectual culture of Classical Antiquity. Already in pre-Christian times Classical Antiquity had developed notions of science and theology. Versions of the latter can be traced on the one hand in Aristotle’s philosophy of science, on the other in the philological exegesis of the myths narrated in the ancient epics. Further strands of transmission include the historical theologies of the Jewish apologies of the Hellenistic age, the translation and exegesis of the Septuagint Bible, and the Second Sophistic. From all these influences a network of Christian schools emerged in the second century CE which modelled themselves on pagan exemplars and developed a multitude of theological teachings. In so far as their leading representatives managed to communicate with each other they engaged in what can be called in a rudimentary way a “theological discourse”. In the figure of Origen these strands are bundled into an ideal-typical manifestation of an accomplished early Christian scientific theology.

This type of theology did not survive Antiquity. The further development (from the fourth century CE) did not consist in a “Christianisation” of the ancient schools, or in a Christian synthesis of all the elements of ancient science. What happened instead was a “paganisation” or “secularisation” of ancient pagan knowledge. Some of this knowledge, grammar, literary rhetoric, the Aristotelian Organon, could be used for propaedeutic purposes, other parts were discarded. Instead of replacing the study of Plato with the cosmological, ethical and epoptic study of the Bible itself, as Origen had intended, it was replaced with the study of a synthesis of Pauline and Proclean theology as extant in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius. This type of theology was then also soon translated into Latin and bridged the gap to the Latin Middle Ages, notably

¹⁴⁶ Cf. above nn. 19f.

¹⁴⁷ See for this D. King, “Origenism in Sixth Century Syria. The Case of a Syriac Manuscript of Pagan Philosophy,” in Fürst, *Origenes und sein Erbe in Orient und Okzident* (as n. 19), 179-212.

through the remarkable work and thought of John Scot Eriugena. During the fourth and fifth centuries CE, however, the “golden age” of Patristic theology, the time of the Church of the Church Fathers, theology remained a domain of bishops, who had acquired their education in largely pagan institutions and developed their theologies on that basis for practical, pastoral and political purposes. They did not engage in a scientific discourse but were involved in political debate producing letters, polemic treatises, memoranda, creeds, legal texts etc. The outcomes of these processes were transmitted to their audience in sermons, homilies and liturgical texts. This is not to say that these processes did not result in deep and in many ways also complex and analytically challenging forms of theology, as many researchers today can confirm. But the point is that no wider institutional educational basis was developed in Late Antiquity which would have enabled Christians of that time to engage with all these complexities in an open and constructive way. Perhaps one could recognise this as a structural deficit of late-antique Christian theology, or the late-antique Church (or, for that matter, wider society; but considering the dominant role the Church played in that society, this can hardly be an excuse). Of course, it needs to be taken into account that there are also many other fundamental differences between the late-antique world and the world of today. Nevertheless, it might be useful to consider this aspect today, as the role of an academic discourse in theology and religion, especially at universities, but also in wider society, is once more called in question, and the ability even of an educated public to engage in such a discourse seems to be waning.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ It may also be recalled once more that the tendency to shut down debates through authoritarian interventions and thereby stifle debate was already recognised as a deficit even in Late Antiquity, for example by Julian of Aelclanum in the context of the Pelagian controversy; cf. e. g. Lössl, “Sallust in Julian of Aelclanum” (as n. 100).