

Reply to Professor Michael McClymond

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I am grateful for the interest in my monograph. I entitled it *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* to distinguish its focus from non-Christian theories of *apokatastasis*, which will be the subject of a future monograph about “pagan” philosophical doctrines of *apokatastasis*. This will be the second volume of a trilogy, the third volume of which will be, God willing, an investigation into the historical, theological, political, and pastoral causes for the rejection of *apokatastasis* in late antiquity by the “Church of the Empire.” Thus the thematic division of my trilogy is this: Christian *apokatastasis*, “pagan” philosophical *apokatastasis*, and the rejection of *apokatastasis*. Also, in my monograph’s subtitle, “critical assessment (of)” means “scholarly investigation (into),” not necessarily “denigration (of).”

I am not interested in the categories of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” except from a historical perspective. I do not “appeal to” statements by Carlton Pearson, Hilarion Alfeyev, Kallistos Ware, Murphy O’Connor, or Pope John Paul II; I simply cite them in a footnote in the introduction as examples of the debate on soteriological universalism in the contemporary Christian panorama to show how universalistic ideas are lively and discussed in various confessions. I do not cite Pearson “favorably” or “unfavorably,” nor do I subscribe to his views or condemn them; my critical enquiry focuses on patristic thinkers.

The dichotomy between Origen’s exegesis (good) and his theology (bad) suggested by Comestor (and cited approvingly by Professor McClymond [hereafter McC]) comes from Jerome after his U-turn against Origen (*Epistle* 84.2). This dichotomy is the same as that which obtained in the reception of Evagrius. In both cases, the best recent scholarship is correcting the dichotomy. In the case of Origen, the alleged dichotomy does not take into account his heuristic method, well known and overtly

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defended by the likes of Athanasius—who regarded (and quoted) Origen as an authority in support of the Nicene faith—and Gregory Nyssen and Gregory Nazianzen, who deemed Origen’s “zetetic” method (i.e., philosophical investigation or *zētēsis* applied to Christian exegesis and theology) the only one admissible in matters left unclarified by Scripture and tradition. Origen in *Peri Archōn* is much more zetetic/heuristic than (as Jerome and Comestor would have it) “dogmatizing.”

Origen certainly knew “gnostic ideas”—far from my being ignorant of it, I referred to Strutwolf’s book in a separate essay ten years ago¹—and of course both Origen and most “gnostics” shared some (broadly conceived) Platonic ideas applied to Christianity. But Origen was professedly antignostic, as is evident in all his extant writings, even in the recently discovered Munich homilies (see below). Origen spent his life refuting what he deemed gnostic tenets such as predestinationism, different natures among rational creatures, the separation between a superior God and an inferior—if not evil—demiurge, the severing of divine justice from divine goodness, Docetism, the notion of aeons as divine and the whole “gnostic” mythology, the refusal to interpret the OT spiritually and the NT historically, and more. Origen regarded “gnostic” Platonism as a bad Platonism, while he intended to construct an “orthodox” Christian Platonism, not only against other, non-Platonic philosophical schools, and “pagan” Platonism, but also against what he regarded as the unorthodox Christian Platonism of “gnosticism.” I argued for this seminally in the chapter on Origen in the book under review, and will support this interpretive line further in a forthcoming monograph.²

On “gnostic” theories of *apokatastasis*, after my preliminary work in the *Journal of Coptic Studies*—to which I referred in my monograph under review (this is why I devoted only a few pages there to *apokatastasis* in “gnosticism”)—further investigation is underway. I copiously cited and discussed Michael Williams’s *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, not only in the above-mentioned essay in *Journal of Coptic Studies*, but also, for example, in a review of Karen King’s *What Is Gnosticism?*, and in substantial articles on gnosticism for the *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* and the *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*.³ The pattern of “fall and restoration of souls” is common not only to Origen and the “gnostics,” as McC suggests, but to all patristic Platonists, including the anti-Manichaean Augustine (who speaks of creatures’ *deficere* and their restoration by God). More broadly, it is common even to all Christians, who share the biblical story of the Fall and believe in the restoration brought about by Christ.

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1. “Origen and the Stoic Allegorical Tradition: Continuity and Innovation,” *Invigilata Lucernis* 28 (2006) 195–226.
 2. *Origen of Alexandria as Philosopher and Theologian: A Chapter in the History of Platonism*.
 3. Review of Karen King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2003), *Invigilata Lucernis* 25 (2003) 331–34; “Gnosis-Gnosticism,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, 3 vols., ed. Angelo DiBerardino (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014) 2:139–47; “Gnosis/Knowledge,” in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

If one objects that the difference between Origen's and the gnostics' "fall and restoration of souls" on the one side, and the "orthodox" Christians on the other, lies the resurrection of the body, included in the "orthodox" account but excluded by the "gnostics" and Origen, it must be observed that Origen sided more with "orthodox" Christians than with the "gnostics" regarding the resurrection. That Origen denied the resurrection of the body is a misconception—probably originating in his twofold conception of the resurrection, of body and soul, later developed by Evagrius—that cannot stand careful investigation, just as the supposition that he admitted of disembodied souls. Much can be argued against this, and it can be shown that when Gregory Nyssen criticized the preexistence of disembodied souls, he was not targeting Origen, who did not support it.

Gregory's statement that his argument against preexistent souls had to do with "those before us who have written about principles" (*Hom. op.* 28.1) is, for many reasons,⁴ not a reference to Origen, as is often assumed and as McC believes (fn. 23); I mention here only three of those reasons: (1) Gregory, in the aforementioned passage and in *De anima*, is attacking the preexistence of disembodied souls together with metempsychosis, which Origen explicitly rejected; thus, Gregory's target could not have been Origen. (2) Among those who supported *metempsychosis* and the preexistence of disembodied souls were several Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists who wrote works *Peri Archōn*, including Porphyry, whom Gregory knew very well. (3) Moreover, Gregory does not say "one of us" Christians, but "one of those before us" (τις τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν), a formula that he regularly uses to designate *non-Christians*, such as Philo.

Thus, it is true that Nyssen "rejected the idea of souls existing outside of mortal bodies," or better, he rejected the idea of souls existing outside of bodies *tout court*; but it is not the case that he therefore "offered a teaching on *apokatastasis* no longer consonant with Origen's." In fact, Origen never affirmed the preexistence of disembodied souls, nor did Gregory ever state that the soul comes into existence together with the *mortal* body (Gregory was all too aware of the "perishability axiom"). Both Gregory's protology and eschatology are in continuity with those of Origen.

Indeed, as for the distinctions between Origen and Nyssen that I allegedly blurred, my extensive research (supported by a research fellowship from Oxford and expected to be published in a monograph) shows Nyssen's creative dependence on Origen's true thought in all fields. Misrepresentations of Origen's ideas clearly falsify the whole picture. The distinctions are between Origen's *alleged* thought—a misconception ultimately stemming from the Origenistic controversies—and Nyssen's, not between Origen's *actual* thought (as it emerges from his authentic texts) and Nyssen's. In fact, a painstaking critical assessment of Origen's genuine ideas allows for a reassessment

4. Some of these I expounded in "Preexistence of Souls? The ἀρχή and τέλος of Rational Creatures in Origen and Some Origenians," in *Studia Patristica* 56, ed. Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013) 167–226; I give further reasons in "Gregory of Nyssa's Purported Criticism of Origen's Purported Doctrine of the Preexistence of Souls," forthcoming from Harvard University Press; and in "Gregory of Nyssa," in *A History of Mind and Body in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, forthcoming).

of Origen's influence on many other patristic thinkers (from Nyssen to Augustine, Evagrius to Maximus, and Ps.-Dionysius to Eriugena). Indeed, this brings about—borrowing McC's words—“a new paradigm for understanding the church's first millennium” (p. 817).

That Origen envisaged a “static afterlife,” for instance, is questionable; and therefore it is debatable that “Gregory [Nyssen], Maximus Confessor, and Eriugena all rejected Origen's static afterlife” (p. 820). I have extensively argued elsewhere that it is exactly in Origen that Gregory found inspiration for his doctrine of *epektasis*, which is the opposite of a static eschatology and is closely linked with *apokatastasis*.⁵ Both Origen's and Gregory's eschatological ideas will make their way into Maximus's ἀεικίνητος στάσις. Mateo-Seco (referenced by McC, n. 32) clearly acknowledges in Gregory the doctrine of universal restoration; Giulio Maspero's objections on this specific point are thoroughly refuted already in the monograph under review (pp. 433–36—but, apart from this, Maspero's work on Gregory is insightful and valuable), and a full response to Baghos's argument is included in the aforementioned research on Origen and Nyssen.

McC notes, “The vision of the eschaton in Evagrius's *Great Letter* . . . involved a pantheistic or pantheizing dissolution of the Creator–creature distinction.” However, in his *Great Letter/Letter to Melania* Evagrius makes clear that there will be no confusion of substance between creatures and creator, but a concord of will (see pp. 474–75): “The one and the same nature and three Persons of God, and the one and the same nature and many persons of God's image, *will remain eternally*, as it was before the Inhumanation, and will be after the Inhumanation, thanks to the *concord of wills*.”⁶ Therefore, no pantheistic interpretation of Evagrius is tenable. While Guillaumont offered an invaluable edition of Evagrius's *Kephalaia Gnostika* (which, apart from some new readings from the manuscript and some emendations, I kept as a basis for my own commentary),⁷ his view that Evagrius was a radical, “isochristic” Origenist whose ideas were the real target of the Second Council of Constantinople needs reconsideration.⁸

Regarding Augustine, I have argued in my monograph that he embraced *apokatastasis* during his long anti-Manichaean phase, and not until his death, notably not in his anti-Pelagian phase. Contrary to what McC argues (“a point Ramelli fails to mention,” fn. 9), I do discuss *Retractationes* 1.6 (on p. 674, also mentioned in my ancient authors index on p. 830), showing that Augustine was later embarrassed by his earlier adhesion to the *apokatastasis* doctrine, especially in *De moribus* 2.7.9. McC observes that in the

5. “*Apokatastasis* and *Epektasis* in *Hom. in Cant.*: The Relation between Two Core Doctrines in Gregory and Roots in Origen,” in *Proceedings of the XIII International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

6. Evagrius, *Letter to Melania* 23–25.

7. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Evagrius's Kephalaia Gnostika* (Atlanta: SBL, 2015).

8. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, “Evagrius Ponticus, the Origenian Ascetic (and not the Origenistic ‘Heretic’),” in *Orthodox Monasticism, Past and Present*, ed. John McGuckin (New York: Theotokos, 2014) 147–205.

latter passage I translated *ordinat* as “orders and leads,” which he deems incorrect: “The verb is *ordinat*, which translates as ‘orders’ and not as ‘orders and leads.’ There is no second verb alongside of *ordinat*. Moreover, Augustine’s statement that creatures are ordered toward restoration did not imply that all will attain it” (p. 818). Now, that *all* fallen creatures are ordered and guided by God’s goodness *until* they are restored (“*Dei bonitas . . . omnia deficientia sic ordinat . . . donec ad id recurrant unde defecerunt*”) manifestly means that all are restored. *Ordinare* means both “to order, arrange” and “to marshal,” “to manage, regulate, direct”;⁹ hence the double translation of *ordinat* as “orders and leads,” the subject being God, the object being rational creatures.

As to the (posthumous) condemnation of Eriugena’s *Periphyseon* and its causes, I analyze them on the first page of my treatment of Eriugena. I deem him the last patristic thinker in the West, obviously not in the confessional sense as canonized Father, but because he relies so heavily on patristic authorities—from Origen to the Cappadocians, from Augustine to Pseudo-Dionysius—in all aspects of his philosophical theology. McC admits that Eriugena’s notion of the *eschaton* involves a universal return of souls to God—and indeed Eriugena is unequivocal when he claims that, thanks to Christ’s inhumanation, “every creature, in heaven and on earth, has been saved” (*Periphyseon* 5.24)—but he avers that “for Eriugena not all souls were happy in their final state with God.” In fact, however, Eriugena is adamant that all rational creatures in their substances will be happy; no substantial nature can “be in unhappiness” (*Praed.* 16.1). All natures will enjoy “a wonderful joy” (*Praed.* 19.3). The evilness derived from sinners’ perverted will perishes in the other world; only their substance will remain (*substantia permansura, malitia peritura*, and this—their substance—will be happy (*Periphyseon* 5.931A).

McC is correct that according to Eriugena “all . . . shall return into Paradise, but not all shall enjoy the Tree of Life—or rather . . . not all equally” (*Periph* 1015A), but this refers to the distinction between salvation and deification, and does not imply that not all will be saved. Sometimes Eriugena even suggests that deification itself will extend to all. For he postulates the return of all to God, and transformation of all into God, through their primordial causes; at that point all will enjoy peace and eternal splendor: “Quando omnis sensibilis creatura in intelligibilem et omnis intelligibilis in causas, et causae in causarum causa (quae Deus est) mutabuntur aeternaque requie gaudebunt ineffabilique claritate fulgebunt et sabbatizabunt” (*Periph.* 5.991C). At that point, it no longer even makes sense to speak of a beatific vision not shared by all.

Let us come to Basil’s problematic question-and-answer passage against *apokatastasis*, where he (if the passage is authentic) stated that his own brother, whom he appointed bishop, and saintly sister are inspired by the devil. Here I hypothesize not only—as McC has it—an interpolation (common in Basil’s question-and-answer works; moreover, anti-Origenian interpolations and glosses are abundantly attested in the case of Nyssen in the manuscripts themselves), but also pastoral concerns. If that text were Basil’s, in contradiction to his own linguistic usage and his knowledge of

9. S.v. “ordino, -are” *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 1266.

Origen's argument against what is claimed in that passage, this could be explained in light of the intended monastic, not scholarly, audience of that oeuvre. For Basil shared Origen's own pastoral worries about the disclosure of the *apokatastasis* doctrine to simple or immature people. My hypothesis is furthermore supported by Orosius, who cannot be suspected of embracing *apokatastasis*, and who explicitly attributes this doctrine to Basil, as I argue in a separate article.¹⁰ In Basil's commentary on Isaiah, then—whose authenticity finds more and more scholarly support—*apokatastasis* is simply obvious.

As for Rufinus, scholars are progressively exposing his deep understanding of the aims of Origen's thought—entirely grounded in the concern for theodicy—as well as his overall reliability as a translator, who never altered but only abridged, simplified, and glossed Origen's texts. This is also confirmed by the newly discovered Greek homilies in the Munich codex,¹¹ which allow for further, fairly extensive comparison between Origen's Greek and Rufinus's translation.

McC writes:

One indication of Origen's reputation as a heretic during late antiquity and the early medieval period is found in the wholesale destruction of most of his writings. If, as Ramelli suggests, the anathematizing of Origen—in the last place in Anathema 11—was not original, then the interpolation must have been added so quickly to the original text that no one recognized it as an interpolation. But then how is Ramelli—almost 1,500 years later—able to identify an interpolation when no one before her seems to have done so? (p. 818)

Even setting aside that the interpolation was certainly not discovered by me, Photius in the ninth century could still read all of Origen's *Peri Archōn* in Greek: thus, even Origen's most "dangerous" work was not yet destroyed by that time, over three centuries after Justinian and the supposed anathemas against Origen. On McC's hypothesis, this should have been the first oeuvre of Origen to be burned, shortly after the Second Council of Constantinople. Moreover, the Latin translation of Rufinus—especially treacherous because it meant to present Origen as "orthodox"—should have been destroyed; yet it survived up to Eriugena and the mediaeval monasteries, and has reached us in numerous manuscripts. Paradoxically, what has perished is not Rufinus's version, but Jerome's (after his volte-face), aimed at uncovering the allegedly heretical nature of Origen's work.

I am pleased that McC agrees that "*aionios* in ancient sources need not mean 'eternal' in the absolute, unqualified sense" (p. 824).¹² More precisely, it does not mean "eternal"

10. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli "Basil and *Apokatastasis*: New Findings," *Journal of Early Christian History* 4 (2014) 116–36.

11. Lorenzo Perrone, ed., *Origenes: Die neuen Psalmenhomilien: Eine kritische Edition des Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* (Berlin: deGruyter, 2015) GCS NF 19.

12. For full analysis see Ilaria L. E. Ramelli and David Konstan, *Terms for Eternity: Aiōnios and Aīdios in Classical and Christian Texts* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007; new editions 2011, 2013); and Ilaria Ramelli, *Tempo ed eternità in età antica e patristica: Grecità, ebraismo e cristianesimo* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2015).

beyond the strictly philosophical Platonic tradition (and certainly not in the Bible, where it has a number of other meanings, e.g., “remote,” “ancient,” “mundane,” “future,” “otherworldly”).¹³ Contrary to what McC claims, I comment on Jude 6 as the only biblical occurrence of *aidios* as describing punishment—but of fallen angels, not of fallen humans (*Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* 33). *Aidios* in Scripture never refers to punishment/death/fire in the other world for humans.

I cited Latin, Greek, Syriac, and Coptic, the original often being necessary for the language of restoration, but I always translated Syriac and Coptic, and Greek when the passages were long or difficult, for example in Pseudo-Dionysius. McC wonders why I reject the New Testament Greek text in favor of a Syriac translation of it. My use of the *Vetus Syra* (anterior to the Peshitta) in NT criticism is amply justified, because it reflects a Greek *Vorlage* that is more ancient than all extant Greek manuscripts, apart from perhaps a couple of fragmentary papyri.¹⁴ I referred to my previous works when necessary, to document what I was saying in my monograph. Otherwise my assertions would have seemed mere opinions unsupported by arguments; or else I would have needed to repeat the whole arguments, but this would have made the book (impossibly) longer.

Mine is a work of historical theology and patristic philosophy. As such, it does not aim at defending or refuting *apokatastasis*. I have rather argued—I hope forcefully and extremely carefully, for the first time in a comprehensive monograph, how the *apokatastasis* doctrine is biblically, philosophically, and especially christologically grounded in its patristic supporters. This refutes views such as De Faye’s, cited by McC, that “Origen made Christ all but irrelevant to the process of salvation” (p. 815). I have painstakingly traced and disentangled the various strands of this doctrine, and dismantled widespread assumptions about its opposition to the doctrine of free will and its dependence on “pagan” philosophy more than on Scripture in the patristic era. I have also demonstrated that this theory was present in more thinkers than is commonly assumed—even in Augustine for a while—and was in fact prominent in patristic thought, down to the last great Western Patristic philosopher, Eriugena. Augustine himself, after rejecting *apokatastasis*, and Basil attest that still late in the fourth and fifth centuries this doctrine was upheld by the vast majority of Christians (*immo quam plurimi*).

Of course there were antiuniversalists also in the ancient church, but scholars must be careful not to list among them—as is the case with the list of “the 68” antiuniversalists repeatedly cited by McC on the basis of Brian Daley’s *The Hope of the Early Church*—an author just because he uses $\pi\upsilon\rho$ αἰώνιον, κόλασις αἰώνιος, θάνατος αἰώνιος, or the like, since these biblical expressions do not necessarily refer to eternal damnation. Indeed all universalists, from Origen to Gregory Nyssen to Evagrius, used

13. Full analysis in Ramelli and Konstan, *Terms for Eternity* 37–70.

14. See, e.g., Sebastian P. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006) 17, 19, 33–34, 111–14.

15. For Origen, full analysis in my “Origene ed il lessico dell’eternità,” *Adamantius* 14 (2008) 100–29.

these phrases without problems,¹⁵ for universalists understood these expressions as “otherworldly,” or “long-lasting,” fire, educative punishment, and death. Thus, the mere presence of such phrases is not enough to conclude that a patristic thinker “affirmed the idea of everlasting punishment” (p. 822). *Didache* mentions the ways of life and death, but not *eternal* death or torment; Ignatius, as others among “the 68,” never mentions eternal punishment. Ephrem does not speak of eternal damnation, but has many hints of healing and restoration. For Theodore of Mopsuestia, another of “the 68,” if one takes into account also the Syriac and Latin evidence, given that the Greek is mostly lost, it becomes impossible to list him among the antiuniversalists. He explicitly ruled out unending retributive punishment, *sine fine et sine correctione*.¹⁶

I have shown, indeed, that a few of “the 68” were not antiuniversalist, and that the uncertain were in fact universalists, for example, Clement of Alexandria, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Sibylline Oracles* (in one passage), Eusebius, Nazianzen, perhaps even Basil and Athanasius, Ambrose, Jerome before his change of mind, and Augustine in his anti-Manichaean years. Maximus too, another of “the 68,” speaks only of punishment *aiōnios*, not *aīdios* and talks about restoration with circumspection after Justinian, also using a *persona* to express it. Torstein Tollefsen, Panayiotis Tzamalikos, and Maria Luisa Gatti, for instance, agree that he affirmed *apokatastasis*.

It is not the case that “the support for universalism is paltry compared with opposition to it” (p. 823). Not only were “the 68” in fact fewer than 68, and not only did many “uncertain” in fact support *apokatastasis*, but the theologians who remain in the list of antiuniversalists tend to be much less important. Look at the theological weight of Origen, the Cappadocians, Athanasius, or Maximus, for instance, on all of whom much of Christian doctrine and dogmas depends. Or think of the cultural significance of Eusebius, the spiritual impact of Evagrius or Isaac of Nineveh, or the philosophico-theological importance of Eriugena, the only author of a comprehensive treatise of systematic theology and theoretical philosophy between Origen’s *Peri Archōn* and Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*. Then compare, for instance, Barsanuphius, Victorinus of Pettau, Gaudentius of Brescia, Maximus of Turin, Tyconius, Evodius of Uzala, or Orientius, listed among “the 68” (and mostly ignorant of Greek). McC’s statement, “there are no unambiguous cases of universalist teaching prior to Origen” (p. 823), should also be at least nuanced, in light of Bardaisan, Clement, the *Apocalypse of Peter*’s Rainer Fragment, parts of the *Sibylline Oracles*, and arguably of the NT, especially Paul’s letters.

Certainly, “there was a diversity of views in the early church on the scope of final salvation.” Tertullian, for instance, did not embrace *apokatastasis*. But my monograph is not on patristic eschatology or soteriology in general, but specifically on the doctrine of *apokatastasis*. Thus, I treated the theologians who supported it, and not others. It is illogical to criticize a monograph on patristic *apokatastasis* for not being a book on the diversity of early Christian eschatological teachings; the latter already existed—for example, works by Brian Daley and Henryk Pietras, as I explain in my

16. From Marius Mercator, PL 48.232.

introduction. My monograph has a clearly different scope, methodology, focus, new research, and, inevitably, different conclusions. A review of a patristic book should be informed by fresh, direct reading (in the original languages) of the patristic theologians involved and of recent research into, and reassessment of, their thought. It should reflect a thorough study of the interactions of patristic philosophy and theology with ancient philosophy. It should not, in other words, limit itself to restating in 2015 the conclusions of another scholar's 1991 book.

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