

AN INTERPRETATION OF ADOLF VON HARNACK'S "SYSTEM OF ORIGEN": THE GENIUS, THE THEOLOGIAN, AND THE VALUE OF HUMAN BEINGS

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Abstract:

The objective of this article is to analyze Harnack's interpretation of Origen of Alexandria, by focusing specifically on three elements of his thought. First, I focus on Harnack's account of Origen in relation to his concept of "personality," drawn primarily from the historicist tradition. I then show that Harnack's definition of the theologian's task can provide additional insight into his assessment of Origen as a theologian. Finally, I argue that Harnack's positive anthropology plays a central role in substantiating his appreciation for the work of earlier theologians like Origen. Contrary to the prevailing interpretation that Harnack held a negative evaluation of Origen as a philosopher and a corrupter of Christianity, I argue that Harnack valued the contributions of the Alexandrian, portraying him as a personality pivotal to the development of Christian doctrine.

Key Words:

Adolf von Harnack, Origen of Alexandria, Individuality, German historicism, Historiography

Introduction

The juxtaposition of the names of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) and Origen of Alexandria (ca. 180–253) elicits an immediate association with

Harnack's scholarly investigations into the works of Origen and its reception throughout the twentieth century. The section in *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (1886) that Harnack dedicated to the Alexandrian, titled "Das System des Origenes,"¹ initiated a discourse that has influenced the ongoing debate on the person of Origen to the present day. Scholars of Origen debated especially on the possibility of defining Origen's thought in terms of a system.² Henri Crouzel, among scholars engaging with Harnack's legacy, criticized him for portraying Origen as a Greek philosopher and simplifying his thought into a collection of grand metaphysical ideas.³ Moreover, Harnack's thesis regarding the

¹ Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 4th. edn., vol. I, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1964, 650. As for the first volume, the editions were issued in 1886, 1888, 1894, and 1909. The fourth edition was published in 1909 and was reprinted in 1964. English translation: Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, vol. I, London: Williams & Norgate, 1894.

² "But what constantly provokes wonder, and sometimes a good deal of scholarly annoyance, is the wide divergence that exists between the two camps of Origen studies today: that of Völker, Daniélou, Crouzel, Harl, and Gruber on the one side, and that of Hal Koch, E. de Faye, von Campenhausen, and others on the other ... But his [Origen's] theological system, which so often runs the danger of falling into the very Neoplatonism which he decries, can, in von Campenhausen's view, only with difficulty be called truly Christian." Herbert Musurillo, "The Recent Revival of Origen Studies", *Theological Studies* 24:2 (1963), 250–63 (252).

³ "Ainsi A. von Harnack dans son *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* expose sous le titre *Das System des Origenes* un condensé de ses idées sur l'Alexandrin. Il ne voit que le Peri Archon et les quelques allusions des autres oeuvres où il pense retrouver les théories de ce traité. On connaît le thème essentiel: Origène est un pur philosophe grec. Il est réduit à quelques grandes idées métaphysiques." Henri Crouzel, "Origène est-il un systématique?", in *Origène et la philosophie*, Aubier: Éditions Montaigne 1962, 180. The debate has evolved over the past decades; however, the topic still elicits interest today, as evidenced by Fernández's recently published article on the subject: "Was Origen a systematic theologian? Many outstanding scholars ... have given opposing answers to this question. Yet, their disagreement arises not only from different interpretations of Origen's theology, but also from the lack of a common definition of 'system' and 'systematic.' In fact, none of these scholars have explained in their works the meaning of the term 'system.' Henri Crouzel ... stressed that Origen was not a Greek philosopher but a Christian believer, and that his thought was not a concluded set of categorical definitions but an open and ongo-

Hellenization of Christianity left a long-lasting impact on the field, shaping the common perception of Harnack's attitude towards Origen.⁴

The *Origenes Werke* series, an important part of the *Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* (1891–),⁵ represents the first collection of modern critical editions of Origen's texts. Scholars agree that the *Origenes Werke* marked the commencement of the successful recovery of Origen's literary heritage, and that its enduring influence laid the foundation for subsequent editorial initiatives, such as the *Sources chrétiennes* series.⁶

Despite Harnack's profound influence on patristic scholarship, the connection between his philosophical and theological perspectives and his interpretation of Origen has not been explored to a satisfactory extent in research.⁷ This article aims to explore this under-researched area

ing theological synthesis. It is difficult to disagree with this description of Origen's theology; however, it is possible to call into question the idea of 'system' presupposed by Cruzel ... I propose to examine whether Origen's theology aspires to offer a comprehensive and coherent presentation of Christian teaching." Samuel Fernández, "Origen's Theological System in *On First Principles*", *Modern Theology* 38:2 (2022), 220–45 (225).

⁴ On the negative impact of Harnack's interpretation, see Manlio Simonetti, "La teologia dei padri" in: Piero Coda & Giacomo Canobbio (ed.), *La teologia del XX secolo: un bilancio*, vol. 1, Roma: Città Nuova 2003, 359–89 (368–72).

⁵ The first two volumes of *Origenes Werke* appeared in 1899 and included the *Exhortation to Martyrdom* and the treatises *Against Celsus* and the *On Prayer*. In 1913, Koetschau published *De Principiis*: Paul Koetschau, *De Principiis* (GCS 22, *Origenes Werke* 5), Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs 1913. For an overview on the different editions of *On First Principles*: Peter W. Martens, "The Modern Editions of *Peri Archon*", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28: 2 (2020), 303–31. Christoph Marksches, "The Reception and Transformation of Origen's Works in Modern Editions. Some Comparative Views on Editions in Britain, France, Italy and Germany", in: Anders-Christian Jacobsen (ed.), *Origeniana Undecima*, Leuven-Paris-Bristol: Peeters 2016, 165–89 (179).

⁶ Cf. Lorenzo Perrone, "Origen's Renaissance in the Twentieth Century and the Recovery of his Literary Heritage: New Finds and Philological Advancement," in: Patricia Ciner and Alyson Nunez (eds.), *The Discoveries of Manuscripts from Late Antiquity: Their Impact on Patristic Studies and the Contemporary World (Conference Proceedings 2nd International Conference on Patristic Studies)*, Turnhout: Brepols 2021, 91–109.

⁷ Ulrich Berner, in his comprehensive book, has presented various interpretations of Origen, including that of Harnack. Ulrich Berner, *Origenes*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1981. I have treated the topic of Harnack's interpretation of Origen more thoroughly in my PhD dissertation, which will be reworked for publication in the near future.

by investigating how Harnack's historical, philosophical, and theological views, along with his ecclesiastical concerns, shaped his understanding of Origen. I begin with the analysis of the concept of individuality, which Harnack drew from the German historicist tradition and defined as "personality."⁸ I then focus on how Harnack used the concept of "personality" in his portrayal of Origen. Finally, I present Harnack's views on the theologian's role in history and society, supporting it with a specific example from his own life.

The inquiry highlights Harnack's belief in the active role that theologians can play in shaping history, rooted in his historicist lineage that stresses the impact of individuals on historical narratives. This belief aligns with his optimistic anthropology, viewing human beings as equal in dignity and worth, unified as "Children of God." Consequently, in the present article, I argue that Harnack's positive evaluation of the theologian's mission and optimism about societal progress find their basis in his foundational understanding of human equality. Finally, attention is directed to a crucial passage in *Das Wesen des Christentums*, where Harnack's affirmative view of human nature is articulated. Despite Harnack's reservations about theological constructs like Origen's, he is shown to value their agency and societal contributions.

Harnack and the Historicist Tradition: The Influence of Individuals

Some scholars have observed that Harnack's ideas on history share many features with those of nineteenth-century historicist thinkers.⁹

⁸ The term "*Persönlichkeit*," translated here as "personality," has a long theological and philosophical tradition and was widely used in the nineteenth-century German philosophical milieu. In this article, I limit the explanation of the concept to Harnack's own work.

⁹ Studies that address the topic of Harnack and historicism: Wayne G. Glick, *The Reality of Christianity: A Study of Adolf von Harnack as Historian and Theologian*, New York: Evanston and London: Harper & Row 1967; Johanna Jantsch, *Die Entstehung des Christentums bei Adolf von Harnack und Eduard Meyer*, Bonn: R. Habelt 1990; Kurt Nowak, "Bürgerliche Bildungsreligion? Zur Stellung Adolf von Harnacks in der protestantischen Frömmigkeitsgeschichte der Moderne", *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 99 (1988), 326–53; 1996), Stefan

Nevertheless, as of the early 2000s, the state of research regarding Harnack's contribution to historical and methodological debates was perceived to be in its nascent stages.¹⁰ To the best of my knowledge, there have been no subsequent contributions to the discussion on the intersection of Harnack and historicism in recent decades.

The term "historicism" has often been characterized as a *Kampfbe-griff*, reflecting the challenges scholars face in precisely defining its attributes.¹¹ Nevertheless, within the scholarly discourse on historicism, there is a prevailing consensus recognizing Wilhelm von Humboldt, Leopold von Ranke, and Johann Gustav Bernhard Droysen as prominent historicist thinkers. The common thread unifying these thinkers is their extensive utilization of the intellectual categories of development (*Entwicklung*) and individuality (*Individualität*) for the analysis and interpretation of history.¹² Notably, Meinecke has underscored the paramount importance of the category of individuality for these thinkers.

Rebenich, *Theodor Mommsen und Adolf Harnack: Wissenschaft und Politik im Berlin des ausgehenden 19. Jahrhunderts. Mit einem Anhang: Edition und Kommentierung des Briefwechsels*, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter 1997; Michael Basse, *Die dogmengeschichtlichen Konzeptionen Adolf von Harnacks und Reinhold Seebergs*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2001; Kurt Nowak, "Theologie, Philologie und Geschichte: Adolf von Harnack Als Kirchenhistoriker", in Otto Gerhard Oexle and Kurt Nowak (eds.), *Adolf von Harnack: Theologe, Historiker, Wissenschaftspolitiker*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2001; Stefan Rebenich "Orbis Romanus. Deutungen der römischen Geschichte im Zeitalter des Historismus", in O. G. Oexle, K. Nowak, T. Rendtorff, and K.-V. Selge (ed.), *Adolf von Harnack. Christentum, Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2003, 29–49.

¹⁰ See the works of: Christian Nottmeier, *Adolf von Harnack und die deutsche Politik 1890 bis 1930: eine biographische Studie zum Verhältnis von Protestantismus, Wissenschaft und Politik*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2004; Claus-Dieter Osthövener, "Adolf von Harnack als Systematiker", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 99:3 (2002), 296–331.

¹¹ The expression is from the book: Walther Hofer, *Geschichtschreibung und Weltanschauung: Betrachtungen zum Werk Friedrich Meineckes, Geschichtschreibung und Weltanschauung*, Munich: De Gruyter 1950, 322. Several issues are associated with the term 'historicism': on the one hand, there is no manifesto for historicism; on the other hand, thinkers who would later be classified as historicists did not refer to themselves as such. Cf. Jacques, Bos, "Individuality and Interpretation in Nineteenth-Century German Historicism", in Uljana Feest (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on Erklären and Verstehen*, Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands 2010, 207–220 (2008).

¹² Cf. Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus: eine Einführung*, München: C. H. Beck 1992, 1–3.

Meinecke's seminal work in 1936 on the historicist tradition highlights a distinctive emphasis on individuality, positioning it in stark contrast to more generalized approaches to the past.¹³ This perspective is particularly relevant when juxtaposed with the philosophy of history articulated by G. W. F. Hegel, a subject of frequent criticism. Hegel places the *Geist* as the determining factor in the historical process, proposing it as the overarching principle governing history. Implicit in this conception is the idea that, despite their central significance, individuals play a more passive role in influencing the course of historical events, functioning essentially as instruments of the *Weltgeist*.¹⁴

Contrary to this kind of philosophy of history, historicists developed a nuanced concept of individuality encompassing people, nations, and ideas, which assumed a central role in the analysis of historical events. For instance, Humboldt posited that history unfolds as the development of a diverse array of individual forms,¹⁵ assigning a distinct role to human beings, whom he deemed free to cultivate their peculiarity or distinctive characteristic (*Eigenthümlichkeit*).¹⁶ The notion of individuality concerning states, law, and society found elaboration in Ranke's writings.¹⁷ While Ranke did not preclude the possibility of discovering a general meaning in historical narratives, he diverged from Hegel's approach, rejecting the reduction of such meaning to a higher principle.¹⁸ By prioritizing the individual dimension of history, Ranke asserted the agency of individuality against what he perceived as an abstract concept imposed onto history.

¹³ Friedrich Meinecke, *Werke. Die Entstehung des Historismus*, 4th edn., vol. 3, München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag 1965.

¹⁴ Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in: Moldenhauer E, Michel KM (eds.) *Werke*, vol 12. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main [1837] 1986, 29–54; Bos, "Individuality and Interpretation in Nineteenth-Century German Historicism", 209–210.

¹⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte*, in: Flitner A, Giel K (eds.) *Schriften zur anthropologie und geschichte. Werke in fünf Bänden*, vol 1., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft [1814] 1960, 567–577.

¹⁶ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*, Breslau: Trewendt 1851, 9.

¹⁷ An example of this approach is Ranke's masterpiece: Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot 1885.

¹⁸ Leopold von Ranke, "Einleitung zu einer Vorlesung über Universalhistorie", in Eberhard Kessel (ed.), *Historische Zeitschrift* 178:2, (1954), 304–7.

Droysen, in his second supplement to *Grundriss der Historik*, titled "Natur und Geschichte",¹⁹ critically reviewed Henry Thomas Buckle's (1821–1862) *History of Civilization in England* (1843).²⁰ Buckle sought to uncover general laws of civilization, a proposition contested by Droysen, who argued for the freedom of unpredictability of human actions, precluding a more generalized explanation of history. Nevertheless, akin to other historicists, Droysen identified a guiding principle for the realization of human beings in the moral community (*in den sittlichen Gemeinsamkeiten*) of family, people, state, and religion.²¹ This shows that while historicists did not necessarily oppose Hegel's thought, they frequently reinterpreted and reconstructed it. Hence, Hegel's perspective on history continued to influence and inspire nineteenth-century thinkers that came after him.

Turning our attention to Harnack's work, it becomes evident that he did not aim to directly confront philosophical theories through formal treatises. Nevertheless, he demonstrated a keen awareness of the ongoing philosophical debates surrounding the meaning of history and took a decisive stance on these issues. This is notably evident in his work *Das Christentum und die Geschichte* (1896), where he lauds Herder, Ranke, and Hegel for their contributions in reestablishing the significance of history. According to Harnack, they elevated history to a privileged dimension of religion, portraying it as a dynamic reality unfolding within the broader framework of human history. This was a response to the relativistic interpretations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²² Harnack stresses that the concepts of development and individuality lend vigor and coherence to any historical narrative.²³ He expounds on the notion of individuality, specifically framed as personality (*Persönlichkeit*), expressing a distinct preference for recognizing the active role of human beings in shaping historical events. Harnack regards the role

¹⁹ Johann Gustav Droysen, *Grundriss der Historik*, Leipzig: Verlag von Veit 1882.

²⁰ Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, London: Frowde 1913.

²¹ Cf. Droysen, *Grundriss der Historik*, 11.

²² Cf. Adolf von Harnack, "Das Christentum und die Geschichte (1895)" in: Adolf von Harnack & Kurt Nowak (ed.), *Adolf von Harnack als Zeitgenosse: Reden und Schriften aus den Jahren des Kaiserreichs und der Weimarer Republik. Teil 1: Der Theologe und Historiker*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter 1996, 880–899 (883).

²³ "Zwei Begriffe vornehmlich traten dabei mit steigender Klarheit in den Vordergrund; die Entwicklung und die Persönlichkeit". *Ibid.*

of individuals as pivotal, asserting that nothing truly great can be achieved in history without the agency of an individual or a personality: "Allein ohne die Kraft und die Tat eines Einzelnen, einer Persönlichkeit, vermag sich nichts Großes und Förderndes durchzusetzen."²⁴

A few lines later, Harnack emphasizes that the "living Word," embodied by the person, constitutes the actual driving force in history, surpassing the influence of circumstances.²⁵ Drawing from historical events, he deduces that progress is inseparable from the will of individuals, encompassing a diverse range from artists and poets to prophets. In this analysis, Jesus holds a distinctive role due to the unprecedented impact of his actions.²⁶ While Jesus's personality takes precedence, Harnack extends the concept to include individuals who, in their own right, achieve remarkable feats, foster success, and inspire others through their actions.²⁷ This observation sets the stage for a more nuanced exploration of Harnack's reception of Origen.

Harnack's Origen: Genius of Summation and Theologian

The section of *Dogmengeschichte* dedicated to Origen of Alexandria commences with a series of definitions, wherein Harnack encapsulates his views on the Alexandrian scholar. Each definition within this section proves Harnack's recognition of Origen's personality, both as a prominent scholar and on account of his moral rectitude and psychological resilience. Harnack deliberately structures his depiction of Origen in this manner, aiming to underscore the Alexandrian's profound impact on the historical trajectory of Christianity. I contend that three overarching themes permeate these definitions: Origen's role as a foundational "father" of church dogmatics, his moral and psychological fortitude, and his unwavering commitment to scholarly inquiry. In the following discussion, I will endeavor to clarify this array of definitions by drawing upon both the historicist background and other relevant works of Harnack.

²⁴ Ibid., 886.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 888–890.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 883.

Harnack is renowned for designating Origen as the progenitor of ecclesiastical science, as he himself expressed: “Vater der kirchlichen Wissenschaft.”²⁸ He further acclaims Origen as the thinker who created the ecclesiastic dogmatics: “... hat die kirchliche Dogmatik geschaffen.”²⁹ Harnack ascribed this preeminent role to Origen on account of the latter’s exceptional ability to expound upon the material laid out by Jewish and earlier Christian sources during the initial two centuries of Christianity. Origen, in Harnack’s view, emerged as the most significant and influential theologian preceding Augustine. As articulated by Harnack, “Unter den Theologen des kirchlichen Alterthums ist Origenes vor Augustin der bedeutendste und einflussreichste gewesen...”³⁰

In the fourth edition of *Dogmengeschichte*, Harnack introduces an additional characterization of Origen. He portrays him as an exceptional scholar, capable of encompassing the entirety of Christian knowledge. Harnack referred to this concept with the expression “Genius der Summation.”³¹ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the concept of genius enjoyed popularity among German intellectuals, providing an alternative framework for explicating historical transformations that diverged from previous dogmatic interpretations of the past. Rather than explicating historical transformations through the lens of God’s will or providence, the concept of genius emphasized the pivotal role played by individuals in shaping events.³² Kant’s 1790 definition in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* serves as a paradigmatic illustration of this perspective. Kant characterized genius as the talent of imparting rule to art, attributing this quality to extraordinary individuals who, since birth, have been endowed with a distinctive spirit enabling them to articulate an original representation corresponding to an idea of reason.³³ While Harnack employed the term genius in a different context than Kant – specifically, within the sphere of Christian dogmatics – Kant’s elucidation

²⁸ Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 650.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 652.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 650.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 652.

³² Cf. Peter Hans Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1975, 65; Simon Schaffer, “Genius in Romantic Natural Philosophy”, in Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine (eds.) *Romanticism and the Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, 82–98.

³³ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Leipzig: F. Meiner 1922, 160–1.

provides valuable insight into the uniqueness of this conceptual framework. Parallel to Kant's observations, Harnack views Origen as a genius endowed with a particular spirit. This inherent spirit bestows upon Origen the capacity to organize and structure the disparate ideas pertaining to the Christianity of his time. In other words, Harnack, in alignment with Kant's conceptualization, identifies in Origen's genius a creative force that not only comprehends but also imparts coherence and structure in the scattered ideas of Christianity of his time.

Harnack proceeds to delineate Origen's moral fortitude, asserting that Origen's character was defined by purity and his life by blamelessness, encapsulated in the phrase "Sein Charakter war lauter, sein Leben untadelig."³⁴ In his examination, Harnack comments on Origen's resilience in the face of perilous circumstances, both as a Christian and a philosopher. Notably, according to Harnack, Origen managed to maintain a robust spirit and adhered steadfastly to his own conception of truth, even in the midst of challenges: "Gefährlich war die Luft, die er als Christ und als Philosoph athmete; aber sein Geist blieb gesund, und selbst der Wahrheitssinn ist ihm fast immer treu geblieben."³⁵ Unfortunately, Harnack does not delve further into Origen's character. Nevertheless, this characterization carries considerable suggestiveness, hinting at Harnack's endeavor to repair Origen's reputation by reason of his moral and psychological resilience. This facet assumes significance within the historicist and idealistic tradition, as Harnack appears to have leaned on an idealized portrayal of Origen's personality to underscore the relevance and importance of the Alexandrian's contribution to the history of Christianity.

The third part of Harnack's section on Origen revolves around the assertion that Origen displayed a profound dedication to scholarly inquiry. Harnack depicts Origen as both restless and selfless in his endeavors, noting that only a selected few early Christian thinkers could leave such an impression as he did: "...in seiner Arbeit ist er nicht nur rastlos, sondern auch selbstlos gewesen. Es hat wenige Kirchenväter gegeben, deren Lebensbild einen so reinen Eindruck hinterlässt wie das des Origenes."³⁶ Furthermore, Harnack contends that Origen not only demonstrated diligence in his scholarly pursuits, but also emerged as a

³⁴ Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 651.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 651.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

figure capable of providing insightful solutions to the challenges Christianity faced during his time. Origen's intellectual acumen and capacity to interpret his contemporary historical and political milieu were instrumental in this regard.

This aspect is reiterated by Harnack in his treatise on the origins of the New Testament. Here, he emphasizes that the formation of the New Testament necessitated the cultivation of a critical and historical approach to canonical books. This approach served a defensive function by safeguarding Christianity against the myriad of interpretations proliferating within the church.³⁷ In this context, Harnack explicitly credits Origen with contributing to this undertaking and, consequently, to the consolidation of the church's authority.³⁸

Providing this characterization, Harnack underscores Origen's approach to research, as well as his analysis and comprehension of the historical milieu – a perspective that Harnack deems emblematic of the theologian's vocation. To illuminate this assertion, it is essential to delve into Harnack's broader conception of the theologian's role in society and history, a concept intricately linked to his renowned characterization of dogma as a cultural product.³⁹ In particular, Harnack emphasizes the interconnection between the formulation of dogma and the prevailing questions that dominated theological discourse in a specific historical age.⁴⁰ Consequently, he posited that theologians often respond to the inquiries arising from their historical context, crafting distinct theological theories and, consequently, dogma. According to Harnack, the theologian bears the responsibility of scrutinizing and comprehending the historical backdrop of a given historical era. This awareness is imperative for understanding the conditions that gave rise to a particular dogma:

Die Dogmen entstehen, entwickeln sich und werden neuen Absichten dienstbar gemacht; dies geschieht in allen Fällen durch die Theologie. Die Theologie aber ist abhängig von unzähligen

³⁷ Cf. Adolf von Harnack, *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments und die wichtigsten Folgen der neuen Schöpfung*, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs 1914, 90–95. Cf. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 359–60.

³⁸ Cf. Harnack, *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments*, 79–80.

³⁹ Cf. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 20.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

Faktoren, vor allem von dem Geiste der Zeit; denn es liegt im Wesen der Theologie, dass sie ihr Objekt verständlich machen will. Die Dogmen sind das Erzeugnis der Theologie – allerdings einer Theologie, die dem Glauben der Zeit in der Regel entsprochen hat.⁴¹

When we apply this conceptual framework to Harnack's interpretation of Origen, as outlined in the preceding paragraph, it becomes evident that Harnack views Origen as a theologian. Origen, in Harnack's rendition, assumed the responsibilities intrinsic to the theologian's role – focusing his energies on the diligent exploration and comprehension of his historical own context. Furthermore, Harnack explicitly characterizes Origen as a distinguished theologian, attributing to him a pivotal role in the historical trajectory of Christianity. Origen's contribution, according to Harnack, was instrumental in advancing Christianity within the specific socio-historical context in which he was situated and with which he was actively engaged.

Nevertheless, Harnack's conception of the theologian appears to encompass an additional layer intricately linked to his understanding of the nature of Christianity. Harnack articulates the foundational premise of his religious and theological thought in his famous cycle of lectures *Das Wesen des Christentums*. According to Harnack, the original message of the gospel is encapsulated in three core principles, discernible through a careful reading of the Sermon on the Mount.⁴² Harnack posits that over the course of the church's existence, various exigencies – historical and political in nature – necessitated the incorporation of a dogmatic framework, giving rise to a complex and structured Christian doctrine. For Harnack, the contemporary mission of theology lies in the role of a discipline that "frees" Christianity from its own complex scientific structure. In doing so, theology seeks to unveil the authentic meaning of Jesus's message. As he aptly expressed, "Die Theologie muß heute die Wissenschaft sein, die die christliche Religion von der Wissenschaft befreit – aus der Paradoxie dieser Aufgabe entspringt der größte Teil

⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

⁴² Cf. Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums: sechzehn Vorlesungen vor Studierenden aller Fakultäten im Wintersemester 1899/1900 an der Universität Berlin*, in: Adolf von Harnack & Claus-Dieter Osthövenner (ed.), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2012, 49.

der Schwierigkeiten, die sie belasten."⁴³ Consequently, the theologian, according to Harnack, shoulders the added responsibility of elucidating the profound truths almost concealed within the intricate system of Christian doctrine: "Der Theologe hat die Aufgabe, die tiefen Wahrheiten klar zu legen."⁴⁴ This dual role entails not only an analysis of historical and doctrinal layers but also an emancipation of Christianity from its own complicated theological ideas.

This theoretical foundation also elucidates Harnack's assessment of Origen as a figure of historical significance, whose actions were shaped by specific historical conditions. The emphasis on individual personality and its pivotal role in shaping historical events reveals the influence of Harnack's historicist background: "Wie allen Persönlichkeiten, die Epoche gemacht haben, sind auch ihm die Bedingungen, unter denen er gestanden hat, zu Statten gekommen, obgleich er schwere Anfeindungen zu ertragen hatte."⁴⁵ This assertion reflects the belief that, like all individuals who have made history, Origen benefited from the conditions in which he found himself, despite facing formidable opposition.

Since Harnack conceives the role of the theologian as involving an understanding of the ideas of other influential theologians, through an exploration of their cultural milieu and historical context, he argues that Origen's intellectual contribution to the history of Christianity was influenced by his historical and political environment. Harnack posits that once these contextual presuppositions are understood and considered, Origen emerges as a figure possessing critical prudence, foresight, versatile knowledge, and a discerning and constructive intellect of the highest calibre:

Dieser wahrhaft große Theologe braucht ja überhaupt nur von den wissenschaftlichen Voraussetzungen seines Zeitalters an die er selbstverständlich gebunden war, befreit zu werden, um in seiner eigenen kritischen Umsicht und universalen Weitsicht sowie

⁴³ Adolf von Harnack, "Über Wissenschaft und Religion", in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 2nd vol., 2nd edition, Giessen: J. Ricker'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung-Alfred Töpelmann 1906, 369–79 (374).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁴⁵ Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 650.

in der Vielseitigkeit seiner Erkenntnisse als ein kritischer und konstruktiver Geist ersten Ranges zu erscheinen.⁴⁶

This analysis of Harnack's interpretation of Origen, drawing on Harnack's more general observations regarding the role of the theologian, facilitates a new preliminary assessment of Harnack's portrayal of the Alexandrian. Harnack's grounding in the historicist tradition, coupled with his emphasis on the pivotal concept of personality, leads him to recognize Origen as a central figure in the history of Christianity. Additionally, Harnack's precise definition of the theologian as a scholar engaged in understanding contemporary issues, coupled with his frequent characterization of Origen's acumen in addressing the challenges of his time, allows for a nuanced qualification of Harnack's characterization of Origen as a theologian. Moreover, Harnack emphasizes the importance of understanding theological systems 'regardless of' their cultural context. This underscores Harnack's specific interest in the personality of Origen and his profound esteem for the Alexandrian thinker.

The Apostolikumsstreit

Harnack's conceptualization of the nature of theology and the role of the theologian exerted a significant influence not only on his assessment of historical Christian scholars, including Origen, but also on his own intellectual endeavors within the context of Wilhelmine Germany. In this regard, Harnack's biographical details assume particular relevance, especially in connection with the famous episode known as the *Apostolikumsstreit*. This event in Harnack's life provides valuable insight into his stance regarding the responsibilities of the theologian and the nature of theology as a discipline.

The case involved a pastor, Christoph Schrempf, who, in 1892, declined to recite the Apostles' Creed in the capacity of his official duties, citing his individual conscience. The Apostles' Creed had a central significance in the ecclesiastical life of the Evangelical Church of Prussia. Officially mandated in 1829, the profession of the Apostles' Creed became obligatory during baptism and ordination ceremonies, in addition

⁴⁶ Harnack, *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments*, 126, footnote.

to being an integral part of the liturgy in every church service.⁴⁷ The Creed served as a paramount expression of clergy members' affiliation with the church, and any omission or open refusal to recite it was deemed unacceptable.

Schrempf reported his actions to the Consistory in Württemberg, and the church leadership promptly dismissed him. The case then gained attention in Prussia, where young theology students engaged in a debate over the matter, drawing Harnack into the discussion. In the summer of 1892, Harnack's students asked him if he would advocate for the removal of the Apostles' Creed from ordination requirements, clergy obligations, and liturgical use. They also intended to present this request in a petition to the church council.

Harnack responded to their inquiry through nine points, which he presented in his lecture titled "Entstehung und Bedeutung der theologischen Richtungen der Gegenwart." This lecture was also published by Martin Rade in "Christlichen Welt" on August 18, 1892.⁴⁸ In this context, Harnack comments that the question of the value and use of the Apostles' Creed was a pressing issue of his time, and Schrempf's case provided an opportunity to initiate the discussion. Harnack believed that the General synod of the Evangelical church of Prussia had the crucial task of thoroughly examining this topic.

The noteworthy aspect of this situation lies in the tangible manifestation of Harnack's theoretical framework regarding the role of the theologian in society, particularly exemplified in the episode of the *Apostolikumsstreit*. As previously indicated, Harnack appears to offer two distinct definitions of the theologian. On the one hand, the theologian is an intellectual who comprehends the contemporary issues of their time and endeavors to formulate solutions, akin to the approach taken by scholars like Origen. On the other hand, the theologian is tasked with liberating Christianity from theological complexities, aiming to attain its purest form.

⁴⁷ Cf. Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *Der Apostolikumsstreit des Jahres 1892 und seine Bedeutung für die Gegenwart*, Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlagsbuchhandlung 1950, 2.

⁴⁸ See Adolf von Harnack, "Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis. Ein geschichtlicher Bericht nebst einer Einleitung und einem Nachwort," in Adolf von Harnack & Kurt Nowak (ed.), *Adolf von Harnack als Zeitgenosse: Reden und Schriften aus den Jahren des Kaiserreichs und der Weimarer Republik. Teil 1: Der Theologe und Historiker*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter 1996, 501–544.

Harnack articulated his response to Schrempf's case in a lecture. In this context, he employed two analytical tools: the assessment of the truthfulness of dogma and the evaluation of its reasonableness. Regarding the first one, Harnack advocated for an examination of the origins of the Apostles' Creed and its use throughout history.⁴⁹ Concerning the second one, Harnack contended that certain statements within the Creed were incorrect or contradicted human reason, potentially causing offense to a Christian educated in the understanding of the Gospel and church history.⁵⁰ Consequently, Harnack recommended a comprehensive study and understanding of the History of Dogma and the Symbol, aiming to grasp the original meaning of the confession and discern the changes that occurred over the centuries.⁵¹

In response to Schrempf's rejection of the Apostles' Creed, Harnack publicly engaged with a pressing issue of his time, urging the General Synod of the Evangelical church of Prussia to adopt a critical and constructive position. Unfortunately, the outcome of this situation did not unfold favorably for Harnack. Many of his readers speciously interpreted his points, erroneously assuming he sought to dismiss the Creed as an antiquated document of early Christianity, neglecting its authority. The debate escalated, with the evangelical-ecclesial conference of Prussia reaffirming that the foundation of Christianity lies in the belief that the Son of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary – a stance that Harnack perceived as regressive into Catholicism.⁵²

The aftermath of the *Apostolikumsstreit* led Harnack, Martin Rade, and contributors to *Christliche Welt* to consolidate their group and issue a joint clarification. They emphasized that they did not advocate for the abolition of the Apostles' Creed but asserted the right to pursue scientific investigation within the church.⁵³ In response, the General Synod increased the prominence of the Apostles' Creed, including in priestly ordination. In 1894, Harnack participated in a petition to the Evangelical Supreme Church Council, advocating for the comprehensive revision of

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 507–510.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 502–3.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 506.

⁵² Cf. Zahn-Harnack, *Der Apostolikumsstreit*, 6.

⁵³ As reported in Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack*. Berlin: W. de Gruyter 1951, 153.

the church service regulations. Subsequent to this episode, Harnack reduced his involvement as a critical theologian in society, refocusing his efforts on other pursuits, such as directing the Royal Library and contributing to the committee of the GCS.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, this episode serves as a compelling illustration of how Harnack's ideas regarding the role of the theologian in society, articulated across various segments of his works and over different years, mirror his own endeavors as an intellectual and a theologian critical of his contemporary society and religious milieu. The examination of historical circumstances influencing the development of dogma becomes a focal point in Harnack's analysis of the past, holding equal significance in his reflection on the contemporary relevance of the Apostles' Creed.

The Anthropological Perspective: The Value of the Human Soul

Harnack's conception of epoch-making personalities in history, such as Origen, is intricately linked to his role as a theologian – an identity he shared with these historical personalities, albeit in different historical contexts. Taking a further and definitive step, one can assert that Harnack's emphasis on historical personalities capable of comprehending the fundamental issues of their time and proposing innovative solutions, thus advancing the course of human history, finds its foundation in Harnack's optimistic anthropological viewpoint. This perspective is notably articulated in his renowned lecture series, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, where Harnack delineates the "infinite value of the human soul."⁵⁵

Harnack posited a distinctive understanding of the nature of Christianity, delineating it into three key facets: God as the Father; the human soul; and the commandment of love. He associated the concept of the infinite value of the human soul with the proposition that all human beings are children of God. Significantly, Harnack drew a comparison between Jesus's teachings and those of Plato. According to Harnack, Jesus has raised the human being's soul above heaven and earth, since all human beings are children of God, and he has done it in a different way

⁵⁴ Cf. Nottmeier, *Adolf von Harnack und die deutsche Politik*, 133–35.

⁵⁵ Cf. Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 43 ff. Harnack was quite critical of any metaphysical concept of theological and philosophical kind. Nevertheless, he used such concepts extensively.

from Plato's. Harnack notes that Plato had also raised the human soul, but he was mainly addressing the wise, while Jesus extended his call to every "poor" soul – that is, to every human being – in virtue of their shared identity as children of the living God.⁵⁶

Harnack contends that the true greatness of a human being lies in enhancing the worth of all humanity. Consequently, the paramount significance of exceptional individuals is their progressive contribution to realizing human value. In Harnack's view, the revelation of this value was pioneered by Jesus, and the impact of his actions is irreversible; no one can negate the transformative influence he exerted on people's life.

In der That, das ist die höchste Bedeutung großer Männer, sie haben den Wert der Menschheit – jener Menschheit, die aus dem dumpfen Grunde der Natur aufgestiegen ist – gesteigert, d. h. fortschreitend in Kraft gesetzt. Aber erst durch Jesus Christus ist der Wert jeder einzelnen Menschenseele in die Erscheinung getreten, und das kann Niemand mehr ungeschehen machen. Man mag zu ihm selbst stehen, wie man will, die Anerkennung, daß er in der Geschichte die Menschheit auf diese Höhe gestellt hat, kann ihm Niemand versagen.⁵⁷

Given that every human being is regarded as a child of God, there exists an inherent equality before God, underscoring the equal value of each individual soul. This inherent equality suggests that every person has the potential to achieve greatness in the course of history. This conceptual framework elucidates Harnack's viewpoint, namely that he allowed for the possibility of theologians and Christians to reassess even fundamental assertions within the Apostles' Creed. In this regard, Harnack contends that these articles of faith, or dogmatic statements, were formulated by individuals within specific cultural and historical contexts.

Furthermore, this framework illuminates Harnack's profound appreciation for the intellectual contributions of theologians from the past, such as Origen. In Harnack's perspective, as every human being possess

⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

an inherent worth bestowed by God, even a theologian whose interpretation of Christianity deviates significantly from Harnack's deserved recognition and commendation.

Conclusion

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Harnack's assessment of Origen has commonly been understood in negative terms, often attributed to his depiction of the Hellenization of Christianity as a form of corruption. This article aims to contribute nuanced elements to the understanding of Harnack's reception of the Alexandrian.

In this context, I sought to establish connections between Harnack's acknowledged but not sufficiently explored historicist background and his specific thesis for his interpretation of history, which are then exemplified in the case of Origen. I contended that to Harnack, Origen falls within the category of significant personalities who not only interpreted their historical age but actively shaped it. Consequently, I propose interpreting Harnack's view of Origen not as the "corrupter" of Christianity, but within the framework of Harnack's broader perspective on the pivotal role of human beings in history. This perspective is deeply rooted in Harnack's general belief in the equality of all human beings as children of God, entrusted with the task of enhancing the value of humanity. Finally, the case of the *Apostolikumsstreit* demonstrates Harnack's perception of the authority of the church and theologians as dynamic and subject to challenge.

In conclusion, existing scholarship on Harnack and Origen frequently labels Harnack's characterization of Origen as a philosopher. With the present study I endeavored to provide a more precise analysis of Harnack's definition of Origen as a theologian, which becomes evident from specific passages in Harnack's writings. Building on this distinction, I argued that Harnack positioned Origen primarily as a theologian and viewed theologians as significant historical personalities, employing the term in the historicist sense. According to Harnack, these personalities played a pivotal role in advancing the progress and development of humanity as a whole.

The objective of this research thus far has not been to assert that Harnack embraced a positive understanding of the Hellenization of Christianity. Harnack regarded the Christian message as a distinct entity separate from the historical realm, viewing the interaction between the two

as highly problematic. Nevertheless, Harnack believed that a reinterpretation of Jesus's message in the context of specific historical circumstances was unavoidable. This required the theologian's intervention, involving a critical examination of the church's statements. Importantly, this perspective does not diminish the value of the theologian's meticulous and devoted research. On the contrary, Harnack held the task of the theologian in high esteem – a sentiment directed towards earlier theologians and extended to his own work.