The National Honor Society for Religious Studies and Theology
Vol. 42, No. 2, Fall 2018

Essays:

Identity Construction by Western Missionaries in China 1
Zachary Ludwig

Hesed: An Old Testament Basis for Solidarity in Catholic Social Thought 20
Carolyn Wilson

Capital, Communitas, and Ritualization: Examining Hijra Lives 37
Justin Brown

Resurrection and Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews 47
Mitchell Mallary

The Debate over the Theory of Names in Origen's Contra Celsum 59
Jesse Siragan Arlen

Chapter News & Notes 71

 Theta Alpha Kappa

©TAK 2018
ISSN: 8756-4785
THE DEBATE OVER THE THEORY OF NAMES IN ORIGEN’S CONTRA CELSUM

Jesse Siragan Arlen

In the latter half of the second century, a Platonist philosopher named Celsus, probably writing in Rome or Alexandria, penned the earliest large-scale literary engagement with Christianity. He called his work the ἀληθὴς λόγος (alēthes logos, “true word/doctrine”), and it was likely written in response to Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr, who began to present the new religion to the Roman world not so much as the Jewish sect that it originally was, but in terms compatible with Graeco-Roman philosophy. Celsus’ response was a counter-apology as it were, refuting Christianity point-by-point on the
very same philosophical grounds on which Christianity was attempting to establish itself. Around 70 years later, long after Celsus’ death, the most famous Christian writer of his generation was asked by his wealthy patron Ambrose to compose a response to Celsus’ work. Near the end of his literary life, from Caesarea Maritima in Palestine, Origen wrote this response, known to us as the *Contra Celsum*, which quotes and paraphrases nearly all of Celsus’ text in brief sections that Origen responds to in turn, offering one the chance to get a good idea of Celsus’ text, the original of which no longer survives.1 Origen mobilized both standard critiques that the competing Graeco-Roman philosophical schools leveled against one another, as well as the Scriptures and everyday experience in his defense of Christianity.2

Both Origen and Celsus subscribed to a form of monotheism and a cosmology that included one supreme God (ὁ ἐπὶ πᾶσι θεός, o epi pasi theos) and a vast world of intermediary beings who filled the existential space between that one God and human beings. These beings were called δαιμονες (daimones) by Celsus and Platonist philosophers, while Origen used the two terms ἄγγελοι (angeloī) and δαιμονες (daimones), in accordance with the Christian Scriptures, to distinguish the good beings from the bad. One important point of contention concerned a theory of names, specifically the names of these divine beings. Celsus argued that their names are arbitrary, varying according to local custom and language, while Origen believed that the names for divine beings are not arbitrary. Previous scholarship has focused on the philosophical positions that frame Celsus’ and Origen’s debate, or has explored Origen’s views on magical practices—which we will see is an important part of his argument.3

This essay centers on the dispute concerning names of divine beings, arguing that it was not merely a philosophical or theological debate about contending theories of language, but that there were profound implications for ritual worship in the Roman Empire at stake. Reading the debate in the light of the modern linguistic theory of Charles Peirce brings out the implications of the different theories of names to ritual worship, and for that reason, his general theory and terminology is introduced before examining the debate over names in Celsus and Origen, using Peirce’s terminology as an analytical tool.4 It emerges that Celsus’ theory allows a practitioner to hold

60
monotheistic beliefs in the context of polytheistic ritual, while Origen’s does not. Consequently, Origen defends the essentialist—what we will come to call the iconic—relation between names and the divine beings they refer to, because, according to Origen, the names for the supreme God whom Christians worship are the only means by which Christians can manifest God in ritual. This has profound implications for early Christian ritual practice, some of which are briefly explored in the conclusion.

Charles Peirce’s Theory of Signs

The posthumous publication of Frederick de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916 launched a movement towards greater realization of the importance of language to human understanding, consciousness and experience in the world. He is most well known for the idea that there is an arbitrary relationship between the signer and the signified, and his focus upon the relation between the two, which had profound implications for the development of modern linguistics. Saussure’s less famous contemporary Charles Peirce may also be considered a founding figure of modern semiotics, and it is his conceptual insights that help to shed light on the debate over the theory of names between Celsus and Origen.

Charles Peirce’s theory may be briefly summarized in the following manner. To meaningfully convey content, a sign is part of a triadic relationship, which consists of object, sign and interpretant.

![Diagram of the triadic relationship between sign, object, and interpretant](image)

There are three types of signs—called icon, index and symbol—differentiated from one another because they represent their objects in different ways. An icon is a sign that refers to its object by virtue of its form, such as a pen streak representing a geographical line. One might also think of a map representing a geographic space. Icons are not arbitrarily related to their object, but rather their form
conveys that which they signify. As Peirce says, “the only way of directly communicating an idea is by means of an icon,” for the icon “possesses the character” of that which it signifies. For the form, and you lose the icon.

The second type of sign is an index. An index is a sign that points to its object by virtue of the object’s physical impact on nature. For example, smoke signals a fire, or a bullet hole through a door signals a gun.

The third type of sign is called a symbol, and lacks any formal or spatial relationship to the object it denotes. It is arbitrary, and established by convention. This is the most common understanding of language today, as a system of arbitrary signifiers. For example, the orange fruit that comes from Armenia is referred to as ձիրան (dziran) by speakers of the Armenian language, ‘apricot’ by English speakers, and Prunus armeniaca by botanists, yet each of these names refers to the same object.

The terms icon and symbol will help us differentiate Celsus’ and Origen’s views on names and their implications for ritual worship, while index will not factor into the scope of this essay.

**Celsus’ Theory of Names**

Debate over theories of names long preceded Celsus and Origen. In fact, it already featured prominently as the central topic of discussion in Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*. Aristotle and the peripatetic school held that names were assigned to things by convention (ὁἐστι, thesei), while the Stoics taught that names have an inherent connection with the nature of that to which they refer. Celsus follows the former line of reasoning, which means he assumes a symbolic relation between names and their objects, like the different ways of referring to the orange Armenian fruit. Celsus applies this to divine names in particular, and his theory has implications for the polytheistic ritual that prevailed in the early Roman Empire.

Platonist philosophy as early as Xenocrates in the fourth century BCE had found a way to harmonize the old polytheistic religion with a form of monotheism in which the gods of classical mythology—and later on, the local deities of other nations—were
understood to be different manifestations of the one supreme god. This harmonization became widespread among philosophers in the Roman Empire and had a practical political function. Since the Empire was so large, one encountered innumerable local varieties of cult ritual among different ethnolinguistic communities, with gods who seemed quite similar being referred to by different names in different languages. Many philosophers held that the local gods of particular peoples were different subordinate beings (daimones) to the same one supreme god, and the different names for the supreme god among the different religious traditions were just different ways of referring to the same being. Hence Celsus writes that “it makes no difference whether one calls the supreme God by the name used among the Greeks, or by that, for example, used among the Indians, or by that among the Egyptians.” Celsus derides the Christians who attempt to say that the god of the Jews is in fact the one supreme God, rather than just a local name for the deity, and that Jesus himself is the unique Son of God, rather than just another divinized man, worshipped like the divinized men of other peoples. The philosopher who truly understands how names function realizes that the different names for the supreme being are symbolic representations of the deity, and have no inherent connection to the deity itself.

Origen reports that Celsus and many philosophers like him would pretend to worship the local gods in their temples, all the while redirecting their actual worship to the one supreme God. According to Celsus, the philosopher is not to be fooled by the local variety of ritual language and form; rather, he maintains his correct belief about the supreme being in his mind, even while he engages in polytheistic ritual. In this way, he will be able to outwardly conform to the established Roman polytheistic state religion, while inwardly maintaining his monotheistic beliefs. This is only made possible because of the symbolic relationship between the names for divine beings and those divine beings themselves. Any name for God is in fact arbitrary, with no iconic connection to the divinity itself. Therefore, the supreme being may be worshipped through any number of different local rituals and names.

**Origen’s Theory of Names**

Origen promotes a different theory of names. He defines names in the following manner: “a name is a term that summarizes and manifests the personal character of him who is named (ὄνομα
The ability of a name to manifest the presence of the one named is due—in Origen’s understanding—to the fact that languages do not have a human origin, but a divine one. He provides interesting evidence for this assertion. He refers to the immensely popular practice in the early Empire wherein a practitioner named certain gods in the context of ritual, in order to access those gods’ power to achieve a desired outcome. Origen says that those knowledgeable in the science of names know that the names used in incantations and spells lose their effectiveness when they are translated into another language, such that a daimon will not be summoned when it is called with a translated name. This implies that the names for these beings are somehow God-given, and are inherently proper to the daimones due to “some natural factor that we cannot discern.” Origen says that the connection between name and being is so close that a daimon will instantly be brought present when its name is uttered, no matter the intention of the speaker. Therefore, he concludes that it is not “the significance of the things which the words describe that has a certain power,” in which case translation would be possible; rather it is “the qualities and characteristics of the sounds.” In Pierce’s terminology, what this means is that the names for divine beings are not symbolic but iconic. A name iconically manifests the one that is named through its sound when pronounced. Alter the form through translation, and you lose the icon.

Origen then turns from discussing daimones to the supreme God. Hebrew is given pride of place among languages, because it is the unique language through which God revealed his names. The Hebrew names for God “refer to the Creator of all things, being established not through ordinary and created means, but through a certain mysterious divine science (τινος θεολογίας ἀπορρήτου).” These names are not symbolic, established by human convention, but are iconically related to God. This is nowhere more true than with the name of God revealed in Exodus 3:14, as “He who is (τὸ ὄν).” Following Rabbinic practice, Origen refuses to write the name, even in transliteration, for the name is too powerful to be uttered or written. As far back as the second or third century BC, a Jew named Atrapanus related an apocryphal story that when Moses uttered the name of God before Pharaoh, Pharaoh immediately fell down dead, and had to be revived by Moses; as with the daimones, who are instantly manifested when they are named, in this story, the iconic status of the divine name

64
gives it an automatic power to kill. Origen shares the Rabbinic belief that the name is too dangerous to be used, and thus God provided other names to be used instead, such as Adonai and Sabaoth, although Origen modifies the Rabbinic teaching by adding that Jesus’ name is the primary name to be used by Christians.

Origen’s theory held very different implications for ritual worship than did Celsus’. To grasp these implications, we must realize that, as Naomi Janowitz, who has employed Peirce’s terminology to illumine various aspects of late antique ritual practice, states, “any ritual in which a deity is believed to be present will have some form of iconic representation of that deity—that is, the deity is not simply referred to in a ritual, but is physically present in some sign with formal links to the deity.” Origen maintains that the names for God are the only things that may iconically represent the divine being in ritual. He says that graven images, statues, or idols—which are also attempts at iconically manifesting a God’s presence in ritual—are strictly forbidden throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Unlike names, idols are unable to iconically manifest God, but they can iconically manifest daimones. For this reason, Origen sharply criticizes those who, like Celsus, go through the outward semblance of pagan worship, while inwardly redirecting their worship to the supreme God. They help to lead the multitudes astray, who do not realize that only daimones can be worshipped through graven images, not the true God. The multitudes who suppose they are worshipping the supreme God or benevolent lesser gods, are actually worshipping daimones, who are evil and deceptive. They steal worship from the one true God when they redirect it towards themselves, by having their names spoken in ritual worship. Thus, when Zeus or Osiris, for example, is named in ritual and their statue is worshipped and sacrificed to, the daimon associated with that name and image is made present and receives the worship. In fact, the daimon, being a physical being of sorts, relies on the sacrificial food for its sustenance, and greedily haunts the shrines dedicated to it, eager for its next meal. In Origen’s thinking then, the pagan rituals, and the daimones they call upon do have power, but since they are evil, and lead one astray from the true God, they are to be avoided. God requires exclusive worship, and will not favor someone who calls upon daimones for help. For this reason it was impossible for Christians to conform outwardly to the ritual of the Roman state, while inwardly maintaining their monotheistic beliefs. Thus they avoid pagan temples and shrines, refusing to the point of
death to perform pagan ritual.\textsuperscript{31}

Origen explains that in their own worship, Christians do not build temples, shrines or graven images, nor do they sacrifice to God.\textsuperscript{32} The worship due to God is spiritual and non-physical, in accordance with the divine nature. Unlike the \textit{daimones}, God, being utterly good and spiritual, does not desire sacrifices. Origen says that the Old Testament prophets communicated this through their words, but also through their ascetic practices. By scorning the flesh and material world by means of bodily deprivation, they intended to lead the ancient Israelites towards the realization that spiritual worship must be rendered to God.\textsuperscript{33}

Physicality then is at the root of the difference between \textit{daimones} and the supreme God, and the ritual that is associated with each. God neither requires sacrificial offering, nor can be circumscribed in an image, being utterly removed from physicality.\textsuperscript{34} For \textit{daimones} it is just the opposite—because they are physical, they may be iconically manifested through graven images.\textsuperscript{35} To seek to iconically manifest God through physical means (graven images) is to attempt to circumscribe the uncircumscribable, to render the invisible, visible. Those who seek to access God in such a way are misguided, and do not understand the nature of God. As Origen says, “it is impossible both to know God and to pray to images.”\textsuperscript{36}

Still, Christians must have a way to iconically manifest God in order for the divinity to be present in ritual. According to Origen, language, specifically the names for God, is the only means by which God may be iconically manifested in ritual, since language is neither physical nor visible. There was in fact scriptural reason for this belief: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”\textsuperscript{37} In Origen’s time, the names of God were used to iconically manifest God in ritual practice, particularly for curative purposes. Origen explains that Christian healing and exorcism involved the ritual use of Jesus’ name along with the recital of the stories about him—probably narratives of healing from the gospels—to effect healing and to cast out \textit{daimones}.\textsuperscript{38} For Origen then, the names of God, being non-physical and self-revealed through the Hebrew language, are the sole means by which God may be manifested in ritual. The use of anything else to manifest the divine presence is idolatrous.

66
Conclusion

This essay has focused on a late antique debate over names between Celsius and Origen. While both Origen and Celsius shared beliefs in one supreme God and intermediary beings who filled the existential space between that one God and human beings, Celsius argued that the names for divine beings are arbitrary, varying according to local custom and language, while Origen believed that their names are not arbitrary. By making use of the modern linguistic theory of Charles Peirce, it has been possible to show how the debate over the names for divine beings was not just an abstract, theoretical argument but had profound implications for ritual worship. Celsius’ theory allows a practitioner to hold monotheistic beliefs in the context of the polytheistic ritual of the Roman Empire, which was an important way of maintaining faithfulness to the state while also preserving philosophical beliefs. Origen’s theory, arguing for an iconic relation between the name of a divine being and the being itself, does not allow for this. Origen defends the inherent, or iconic, relation between names and the divine beings they refer to, because the names for the supreme God whom Christians worship are the only means by which Christians can manifest God in ritual.

It is now possible to mention briefly some of the implications that Origen’s theory of names has on understanding certain aspects of early Christianity. First, Origen’s theory of divine names helps shed further light on the use of *nomina sacra* in scrolls and manuscripts. Being conscious of the early Christian belief that speaking the name held the power to iconically manifest the divine being helps explain the unwillingness on the part of early Christian authors and scribes to write out the divine name at all. Secondly, Origen’s view that God can only be manifested through the divine names stands out in part precisely because it was not held to by later Christians. Developments in later theology allowed for the presence of the divine being to be manifest through physical elements, both the bread and wine of the Eucharist and, to a lesser extent, by means of icons in the Byzantine milieu. Further research may investigate both how normative and widespread Origen’s views were in his time, and also interrogate the causes for the changes in theological and ritualistic perceptions that allowed for physical elements to manifest the divine presence. The adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire and
the theological and Christological developments at Nicaea and the later church councils ought to be considered in such an investigation.

Notes


4 It is a book by Naomi Janowitz that alerted me to the importance of the theory of names to late antique ritual. I had understood the importance of this debate in Origen’s work, but I hadn’t fully grasped its importance to early Christian worship until I encountered her study, which focuses on theories of language in relation to late antique ritual, with a focus on Judaism. Her use of the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce to illuminate the implications these debates held for late antique ritual gave me the approach with which to treat this important debate in an essay, which I had wanted to do for some time. See Naomi Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).


7 Ibid., 104.


19 Ibid.


24 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, I.24; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 24. Origen explains how Jesus’ name was used to cast out demons and perform healings in the gospels and Acts, and is still used in that way to this day, being efficacious even when used by “bad men.” See Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, I.6, I.25; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 9-10, 24-26. The name for Jesus also shows up along with Adonai, Saboath and other Old Testament names for god on defixiones, or “curse tablets.” Origen says that people who use the name of Jesus in this way are those whom Jesus refers to in Matt. 7:22.

25 Janowitz, Icons of Power, xxiii.

26 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, VII.64; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 448.

27 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, VII.66; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 449-450.

28 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, VII.67; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 450.

29 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, V.46, VII.5; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 301, 398-399; Prayer (De oratione) 45.

30 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, VII.5; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 398-399.

31 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, VII.64; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 448.

32 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, V.38, VII.64; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 294-295, 448.

33 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, VII.7; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 400-401.

34 Borret, Origène. Contre Celse, VII.64-66; Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick, 448-450.

69


37 Origen devotes many pages of commentary to this verse at the beginning of his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (*Commentarii in evangelium Joannis*).