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# DISCERNMENT IN ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

## ABSTRACT

Origen was the first Christian writer to reflect more systematically on the theme of discernment; his views have greatly influenced later spiritual writers. This article aims at situating Origen's understanding of discernment within his view of creation, of anthropology and of spiritual growth. Discernment is viewed as an operation of the higher part of the soul (*νοῦς*), whereby the soul opens itself to its spirit. As such it is able to accept divine guidance from the Holy Spirit and the Logos in order to assess the movements of the soul and to manage these correctly so that the soul may preserve what is good and continue to strive for better things. As the "intelligence" is created after the image of God, the Logos, its fulfilment lies in a cooperative movement with the Logos towards ever greater likeness with God. Progress in virtue, knowledge and happiness are an ever more intense participation in the Logos who himself is every virtue, all wisdom and love. As a result of this participation, the "intelligence" becomes ever more "like" the Logos and, therefore, becomes ever more capable of understanding and discerning.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Origen was the first to develop a systematic reflection on discernment; his inspiration influenced the further development of this theme, first among the monks of Egypt and later in the whole of Eastern and Western Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Bertrand (2003) pointed out that 1 Corinthians 12:10, the only verse in the NT which speaks about the "discernment of spirits", is hardly commented on in the Christian literature prior to Origen. Bertrand speaks of "un vide théorique" concerning the discernment of spirits between

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1 A number of studies have appeared recently on the influence of Origen on Antony, Evagrius and the emerging monastic movement. The Letters of Antony have been recognised as authentic works of Antony by Rubenson (1995); for a comparison of Origen and Antony, see Bright (1999); for a comparison of Antony and Evagrius, see O'Laughlin (1999); for a comparison between discernment in Origen and in Ignatius of Loyola, see Lies (1999).

the time of Paul and the time of Origen (Bertrand 2003:969). This lack of theoretical reflection is filled by Origen in his *On first principles*, but it is significant that in this work he does not comment on 1 Corinthians 12:10, but on Hebrews 5:14. It is only in later texts that Origen refers to 1 Corinthians 12:10<sup>2</sup> and specifically to the discernment of *spirits*. Bertrand (2003:972) attributes this development to his greater pastoral involvement as preacher in Caesarea.<sup>3</sup>

It will be noticed that Origen's earliest discussion on discernment, in *On first principles*, is part of his more apologetic and academic discussion on human freedom in Book 3.<sup>4</sup> For Origen, discernment is broader than discernment between spirits and more complex in function and meaning, as will be indicated later. In order to observe how he builds up towards that discussion, it is important to begin with the content of Book 2. After discussing the issues of God, the incarnation and the Holy Spirit, he focuses on the soul and ends with the questions of resurrection, punishments and promises. The issue of freedom and discernment is the logical presupposition for divine punishments and rewards. The following text puts it clearly:

But since those rational natures, which we have said above were made in the beginning, were created when they did not previously exist, in consequence of this very fact of their nonexistence and beginning of being, are they necessarily changeable and mutable;

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- 2 Bertrand (2003:972-974) identifies seven texts where Origen refers to 1 Cor. 12:10: *Hom. Luc.* 1:1; *Comm. Matt.* 12:2; *Hom. Exod.* 3:2 (where Origen also refers to 1 John 4:1, about testing not discerning); *Hom. Num.* 27:11, 2 and 12, 1; *Hom. Ezech.* 2:2; *Comm. Cant.* 4:3, 2-3.
  - 3 Lienhard (1980:529) points out that later on, especially with Evagrius Ponticus, the practice developed to drop the reference to 'the spirits', probably because of the fact that 'the spirits' were now understood as referring to movements of the psyche of the monks rather than to personal spirits. Whatever the view of Evagrius was, Origen thinks in terms of personal spirits whose attacks take on a particular form in the more advanced stages of the spiritual life.
  - 4 The affirmation of human freedom and responsibility is mentioned as the fourth among the eight "first principles" clearly delivered in the teaching of the apostles (*Princ* 1, Preface, 5). Origen was reacting against various forms of determinism which were popular in his day: Gnostics saw people as determined by their 'nature' as hylics, psychics or gnostics; popular belief in the determining influence of the stars or of evil spirits was also widespread. Bardy (1957:1249) refers to this in his article in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*: "Ajoutons, ce qui est important, qu'Origène parle beaucoup moins que ses devanciers de l'action des esprits bons ou mauvais, et beaucoup plus des activités propres de l'âme. Il s'exprime en philosophe: il ouvre une voie féconde, dans laquelle les théoriciens s'engageront."

since whatever power was in their substance was not in it by nature, but was the result of the goodness of their Maker. What they are, therefore, is neither their own nor endures for ever, but is bestowed by God. For it did not always exist; and everything which is a gift may also be taken away, and disappear. And a reason for removal will consist in the movements of souls not being conducted according to right and propriety. For the Creator gave, as an indulgence to the understandings created by him, the power of free and voluntary action, by which the good that was in them might become their own, being preserved by the exertion of their own will; but slothfulness, and a dislike of labour in preserving what is good, and an aversion to and a neglect of better things, furnished the beginning of a departure from goodness. But to depart from good is nothing else than to be made bad. For it is certain that to want goodness is to be wicked. Whence it happens that, in proportion as one falls away from goodness, in the same proportion does he become involved in wickedness. In which condition, according to its actions, each understanding, neglecting goodness either to a greater or more limited extent, was dragged into the opposite of good, which undoubtedly is evil (*Princ* 2, 9:6).<sup>5</sup>

In this passage, Origen states that created intelligences (“understandings” in this translation), being created and not eternal, are changeable. In other words, the power given to them in being created in the image of God is not their own and, therefore, not automatically permanent. However, in this condition, God has given them freedom as the capacity to accept what they have been created to be and so to make it their own and even to bring it to perfection. The acceptance is realised by managing the “movements” of the soul according to right and propriety.<sup>6</sup> Discernment is

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5 All English translations of *On first principles* are taken from <http://biblical.ie/Patristic/Origen>. It must be remembered that this text is part of Origen’s argument against those who deny divine justice and providence on the grounds of the terrible difference in conditions between different persons. Origen argues that the cause of diversity must be found in the different ways in which people responded to God’s gift in the “pre-existent” world. “And these are the causes, in my opinion, why that world presents the aspect of diversity, while Divine Providence continues to regulate each individual according to the variety of his movements, or of his feelings and purpose. On which account the Creator will neither appear to be unjust in distributing (for the causes already mentioned) to everyone according to his merits; nor will the happiness or unhappiness of each one’s birth, or whatever be the condition that falls to his lot, be deemed accidental; nor will different Creators, or souls of different natures, be believed to exist” (*Princ* 2, 9:6).

6 *Princ* 3, 1:2 begins by reminding us that animated beings are moved by themselves, provoked by means of imagination (*fantasia*). In *Princ* 3, 1:3, Origen

concerned with the movements of the soul and their correct management, so that the soul may preserve what is good and continue to strive for better things. These “better things” are understood as an ever greater conformity to the Logos after whose image the soul has been created. However, freedom also involves the possibility that the soul may depart from the good gift through “slothfulness, and a dislike of labour in preserving what is good, and an aversion to and a neglect of better things”.<sup>7</sup>

The section on the promises (*Princ* 2, 11:1) begins by pointing out that souls are naturally striving towards a goal. The understanding of this goal depends on the horizon of their thinking: some only perceive the immediate reality of their bodies and strive for the pleasures of the body; some focus on the human community and strive to serve the common good; some see beyond the visible realities the intellectual realities and search for truth and knowledge. The first horizon is obviously inadequate and Origen explains it as the result of a lack of memory of who one is and a lack of knowledge of what is appropriate for a soul.<sup>8</sup> A first indication of what is required for discernment is self-knowledge. The Socratic γινῶθι σεαυτὸν means for Origen a twofold knowledge: “what she is in herself” (created after the image of God) and “what she is like according to her dispositions”.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, what is needed is an eye for the truth about all created things. In *Princ* 2, 11:4, Origen points to a natural desire of reason to know the causes of things. When we see a particularly well-made object, we experience an “ardent desire” to know more about it; all the more so, and incomparably more so, the soul must burn with unspeakable desire (“ineffabili desiderio ardet”) to know the “rationes = logoi”<sup>10</sup> of God’s works. It is a question of becoming able to see the created reality with the eyes of

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focuses on rational beings, who have beyond imagination also the power of reason (λόγος ; “vis rationis”), whereby they judge and discern between these imaginations in order to be led according to these or to resist them.

7 On the theme of “better things”, see Marty 1958:158-162.

8 “If, indeed, he is forgetful of himself, and ignorant of what becomes him, all his efforts are directed to serve the uses of the body, and in all his movements he is occupied with his own pleasures and bodily lusts.”

9 In his commentary on the Song of Songs 1:8LXX, Origen develops his views on the various aspects of self-knowledge in considerable detail; it covers 12 pages in the translation by Lawson (1957:128-139).

10 “La *ratio* des œuvres de Dieu, c’est l’essence originelle de chaque créature, non une nature statique, mais une force de développement, idée divine, volonté de Dieu incarnée en chaque être. Plusieurs textes, appartenant à toute la vie d’Origène, voient dans le fils, en tant que Sagesse, le réceptacle des *logoi* de la création” (Crouzel 1961:55).

God who “saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:10).<sup>11</sup> While during one’s earthly existence this understanding remains very limited, the development of the taste and love for the truth prepares for fuller instruction in the future.

Although Origen recognises the influence of external powers (good and evil spirits, God, and so on), the issue in *On first principles* is that these do not take away human responsibility. Therefore, the movements from within the individual and the influences from without the individual need to be assessed by reason, as the investigator and judge of all these. This discernment is viewed as an operation of the higher part of the soul (νοῦς), whereby the soul is open to its spirit and able to accept divine guidance from the Holy Spirit and the Logos in order to distinguish between what is good and what is evil and so direct itself taking responsibility for its judgement and action.

Reason, therefore, demonstrates that external events do not depend on us, but that it is our own business to use them in this way or the opposite, having received *reason*<sup>12</sup> as a judge and an investigator of

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- 11 “This would be true because the purpose (=logos) of being is clear to those who, being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, have assumed a likeness of those eyes that have seen how each of the things that have been made was good. For the declaration concerning each of the created things, ‘God saw that it was good’ means this: God perceived good in the purposes of each thing, and saw how each of the created things is good in relation to the purposes for which it had come to be” (*Comm. Jo.* 13:280; translated by Heine 1993:126).
- 12 The Greek text uses λόγος, while the translation by Rufinus has *ratio*. See *Princ.* 1, 3:6, where Origen indicates the logos as the source of the ability to distinguish between good and evil; referring to John 15:22, Origen writes (in the translation of Rufinus): “manifestum est et patet quomodo ex participatione *uerbi uel rationis* homines peccatum habere dicuntur: ... ex quo eis *diuinus sermo uel ratio* ostendere coeperit in corde discretionem boni ac mali, ut per hanc debeant refugere et cauere quod malum est, et quia scienti bonum et non facienti, inquit, peccatum est illi.” The wider context of this passage in English translation is: “The word is near you, even in your mouth, and in your heart.” By which he means that Christ is in the heart of all, in respect of his being the word or reason, by participating in which they are rational beings. That declaration also in the Gospel, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin” renders it manifest and obvious to all who have a rational knowledge of how long a time man is without sin, and from what period he is liable to it, how, by participating in the word or reason, men are said to have sinned, namely from the time they are made capable of understanding and knowledge, when the reason implanted within has suggested to them the difference between good and evil; and after they have already begun to know what evil is, they are made liable to sin, if they

the manner in which we ought to meet those events that come from without (*Princ* 3, 1:5).

The theme of discernment is in line with the traditional device of the two ways which similarly invites persons to discern various possible responses to life and their consequences.<sup>13</sup>

It is important, in this instance, to recognise the decisive weight Origen attributes to the need for the mind to be formed, educated or converted; the νοῦς is not a calculator functioning accurately and independently from the other dimensions of the person, but it is dependent on the person's self-knowledge, moral character, and finally on the degree of participation in the mind of Christ. Each individual is responsible for the education and training of his/her mind.<sup>14</sup>

The following steps will be taken in order to explore Origen's view of discernment:

- Discernment within the framework of Origen's anthropology.
- Steps in the development of the ability to discern.

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commit it. And this is the meaning of the expression, that "men have no excuse for their sin", namely that, from the time the divine word or reason has begun to show them internally the difference between good and evil, they ought to avoid and guard against that which is wicked: "For to him who knows to do good, and does it not, to him it is sin."

- 13 It is significant that Origen refers to Hermas and Barnabas, who spoke of the two kinds of ways or of the two kinds of angels influencing people: see *Princ* 3, 2:4; in 3, 1:6, there is a reference to Moses and the two ways in the text of Dt. 30:11-20. The aim of the two ways tradition is precisely to place people before a choice, to make them aware of choices and to show the right choice to make. On the broad use of the two ways, see Crouzel & Simonetti 1980b:64-65, note 34.
- 14 "Another man, again (when the same things have happened to him who has received more instruction, and has disciplined himself), encounters, indeed, allurements and enticements; but his reason, as being strengthened to a higher point, and carefully trained, and confirmed in its views towards a virtuous course, or being near to confirmation, repels the incitement, and extinguishes the desire" (*Princ* 3, 1:4). "But to blame, on the other hand, the mere constitution of the body, is absurd; for the disciplinary (παιδευτικῆς) reason, taking hold of those who are most intemperate and savage (if they will follow her exhortation), effects a transformation, so that the alteration and change for the better is most extensive, - ..." (*Princ* 3, 1:5). For a discussion on this section, see Böhm (1999:461-464), who shows how Origen follows the Stoic view, according to which a person naturally follows his insight, while in dealing with the biblical texts about cases of lack of self-control he accepts the contrary, Aristotelian, view, which accepts that a person can act against better insight.

- Struggle against “flesh and blood” and struggle against “the spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12)<sup>15</sup>

## 2. DISCERNMENT WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF ORIGEN’S ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>16</sup>

Origen saw the person as made up of spirit, soul and body (see 1 Thess. 5:23). The spirit is the teacher of the soul who leads the soul to the virtuous life and to the understanding of God.<sup>17</sup> The spirit is the locus of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life; it is a created participation in the Holy Spirit. The human spirit is, therefore, not properly part of the human personality; it does not take part in the person’s sins, but it weakens or falls asleep through human sinfulness and will finally be cut off from the damned so that they will be without spirit.<sup>18</sup>

The soul or, more precisely, the higher part of the soul is the centre of the person’s identity, the seat of freedom, the faculty of decision-making. This higher part of the soul is called νοῦς (*mens* in Latin, ‘intelligence’ in the translation followed in this article) or, according to stoic terminology, ἡγεμονικόν or, in biblical fashion, καρδιά. This is the part of the soul that participates in the image of God (the Logos) and it is, therefore, able to learn from the spirit. The νοῦς is the decisive factor in a person’s life; to the extent that it has become disabled, incapable to discern (Rom. 1:28), it needs to be reshaped by the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). The task of the

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15 Some other important dimensions to be explored would be discernment in the interpretation of the Scriptures and discernment as the ability to bring order in our loves. With regard to discernment in the interpretation of the Scriptures, it is significant that Origen interprets Hebrews 5:14 also as referring to the spiritual understanding of the Scriptures (see references in Marty 1958:161-162). With regard to discernment and the ability to bring order in our loves, see note 21 below.

16 For this section I draw especially on Crouzel 1982:937-941.

17 Origen identifies the spirit with conscience, see *Comm. Rom.* 2, 9:3: “In my opinion the conscience is identical with the spirit, which the Apostle says is with the soul as we have taught above, a guide and companion, as it were, so that it might admonish it concerning better things or correct and convict it of faults” (translated by Scheck 2001:133).

18 See Origen’s commentary on Mt. 24:50 and Lk. 12:46 in *Comm. ser. Matt.* 56:62; translated by von Balthasar 1984:nr 53: “He will divide them in two when ‘the spirit returns to God who gave it,’ but the soul goes with its body to hell. The just, however, are not divided; instead their soul goes with their body to the heavenly kingdom.”

νοῦς is, therefore, twofold: *to be itself* as created after the image of God and *to find itself again*, by turning away from evil (Bertrand 2003:971).<sup>19</sup>

The lower part of the soul, principle of the imagination and the passions (and which is the part which was added after the fall during pre-existence), is often understood negatively in terms of Romans 8:6-7: τὸ ... γὰρ φρόνημα τῆς σαρκὸς. However, the lower part of the soul is not sinful by nature; in spite of its weakness, it can be “spiritualised”, as is the case in Christ. To the extent that the higher part of the soul rules the person, to that extent will the faculties of the lower part of the soul work in harmony with it.

The third dimension of the person, the body, is an essential dimension of the soul as created being (only the Trinity is absolutely incorporeal). In their pre-existence, the souls existed in ethereal bodies and this will also be the final state for the saved at the end (see Decock 2011).

The faculty of discernment is situated in the interaction between the spirit and the higher part of the soul. On the one hand, the spirit is the source of transformation and discerning power of the “intelligence”; on the other, the “intelligence” is both the receptive power with regard to the spirit and the active power in ordering the person’s love.<sup>20</sup> However, this liberating interaction between the spirit and human intelligence is threatened by sin, which is basically idolatry in the sense that the human intelligences can get so absorbed in the sensible world that they fail to see the mystery *in* the sensible.<sup>21</sup> The lower part of the soul can easily distract the higher part from the mystery in all things by getting its attention “fixated” on the sensible.

This reflects Origen’s understanding of the present human condition as a “fallen” condition in the sense that the ardour of the “original” love for God has cooled down (hence the play on words ψυχῆ and ψύχος [=cold]).

19 Origen’s articulation of the place of the “intelligence” and call to move forward through union with the “nous” of the Logos is a crucial base for the later developments in St. Antony (see Lienhard 1980).

20 “...; nettement distincts et cependant inséparables l’un de l’autre ici-bas, le *pneuma* et le *nous* expriment dans une délicate dialectique les deux aspects de la grâce, le don et l’accueil” (Crouzel 1982:938). One important way of describing the task of discernment is that of “ordering love”: see Bernard of Clairvaux (Waaijman 2002:484), who is probably continuing a tradition having its origin in Origen’s commentary on the Song of Songs 2:4 (*Comm. Cant.* 1:7 and *Hom. Cant.* 2:8). On this text in Origen and Augustine, see Decock 2010:284-285.

21 “Le péché fondamental consiste à s’arrêter au sensible qui n’est qu’image sans poursuivre sa marche vers le mystère: l’image prend alors la place du mystère qu’elle doit montrer; ...” (Crouzel 1982:954).

The present condition of the soul, with a lower part and a lower body, is God's response to this fallen state in order to challenge and lead human beings to return to, or realise again, that ardent love for God. The crucial factor is the  $\nu\omicron\delta\varsigma$  which needs to grow in the capacity to discern what is right and to manage the whole person accordingly.

The way forward – or backward – is determined by the relationship of the  $\nu\omicron\delta\varsigma$  to the Logos. As pointed out earlier, the higher part of the soul, the intelligence, is created after the image of God and it is by becoming more like that image that the soul reaches its fullest destiny. The human intelligence is not an utterly autonomous entity, but a possibility of ever greater participation in the divine Logos. However, this participation, this gift, is still to be realised through the exercise of human choice and action by means of education, correction, discipline, conversion, and so on:

... that man received the honor of God's image in the first creation, whereas the perfection of God's likeness was reserved for him at the consummation. The purpose for this was that Man should acquire it for himself, by his own earnest efforts to imitate God. In this way, while the possibility of attaining perfection was given to Man in the beginning through the honor of the 'image,' even so he should, in the end, obtain for himself the 'perfect likeness' by the accomplishment of these works (*Princ* 3, 6:1).

Various images are used to describe this “human work” between the “beginning” and the “end”. One key image is that of a *vigilant* or a *negligent* mind. People are called to be attentive and open to God's gift of existence (Father), of rationality (Son) and of sanctity (Spirit) in order to “appropriate” these in the full sense of the word by willingly and freely participating in these gifts. Existence, intelligence and holiness always remain gifts from God in which human beings only “participate”, but they become their own by receiving these gifts willingly and actively.<sup>22</sup> As one progresses in holiness by participating in the Spirit, one can receive more worthily

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22 “Deus pater omnibus praestat ut sint, participatio vero Christi secundum id, quod verbum (vel ratio) est, facit eas esse rationabilia. Ex quo consequens est ea vel laude digna esse vel culpa, quia et virtutis et malitiae sunt capacia. Propter hoc consequenter adest etiam gratia spiritus sancti, ut ea quae substantialiter sancta non sunt, participatione ipsius sancta efficiantur.” Translated: “God the Father bestows on all existence; and participation in Christ, in respect of his being the word of reason, renders them rational beings. From which it follows that they are deserving either of praise or blame, because capable of virtue and vice. On this account, therefore, is the grace of the Holy Spirit present, that those beings which are not holy in their essence may be rendered holy by participating in it” (*Princ* 1, 3:8).

the gifts of justice, wisdom and knowledge.<sup>23</sup> This is a gradual process of progress, just as the process of regression is also regarded as gradual but resulting from negligence.<sup>24</sup> Vigilance enkindles desire and desire sustains vigilance so that the constant commitment to what is good will diminish the capacity to be attracted by evil. The more the human intelligence grows in harmony with the Logos, the clearer will be its discernment and the stronger will be its adherence to the good.<sup>25</sup> Origen's concern about freedom confronted the limit cases of the "incapacity" of the human soul of the Logos to commit sin and the "incapacity" of the Devil to repent. As Holliday (2009:20) puts it:

Consistently choosing goodness is both a product and reflection of learning. The more one chooses goodness, it may be argued, the more one is able to recognize goodness. As man progresses in this

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- 23 "Unde et inoperatio patris, ... clarior ac magnificentior invenitur, cum unusquisque per participationem Christi secundum id, quod scientia est et sanctificatio est, proficit et in altiores profectuum gradus venit; ... ut tam dignum sit id quod est, quam est ille qui id esse fecit." Translated: "Whence also the working of the Father, ... is found to be more glorious and magnificent, while each one, by participation in Christ, as being wisdom, and knowledge, and sanctification, makes progress, and advances to higher degrees of perfection; ... so that the being which exists may be as worthy as he who called it into existence" (*Princ* 1, 3:8).
- 24 The following text articulates the gradual nature of regression due to "satietas" and "neglegentia": "Si autem aliquando satietas cepit aliquem ex his, qui in summo perfectoque constiterunt gradu, non arbitrator quod ad subitum quis evacuetur ac decidat, sed per partes defluere eum necesse est (ita ut fieri possit interdum, brevis aliquis lapsus acciderit, ut cito resipiscat atque in se revertatur), non penitus ruere, sed revocare pedem et redire ad statum suum ac rursum statuere posse id, quod per neglegentiam fuerit elapsus." Translation: "But if satiety should ever take hold of anyone of those who stand on the highest and perfect summit of attainment, I do not think that such a person would suddenly be deposed from his position and fall away, but that he must decline gradually and little by little, so that it may sometimes happen that if a brief lapsus take place, and the individual quickly repent and return to himself, he may not utterly fall away, but may retrace his steps, and return to his former place, and again make good that which had been lost by his negligence" (*Princ* 1, 3:8). The "two ways" are often presented as a choice between "imitation of God" and "negligence" (*Princ* 2, 9:6), or between diligence and negligence of God's gifts of power (*Princ* 3, 2:3); also 3, 3:6. More references to texts on vigilance in Crouzel & Simonetti 1980b:81-82, note 40.
- 25 "Le libre arbitre origénien, qui fait bien entendu jouer la volonté, est en premier lieu intellectuel. C'est pourquoi il est à ce point imbriqué avec le discernement. Choisir librement le bien ou le mal, est, radicalement, un problème noétique" (Bertrand 2003:971).

knowledge, his capacity to choose evil diminishes. ... The contrary would be true: if man consistently chooses evil, he will be habituated to choosing evil.<sup>26</sup>

Whether we are struggling to manage our natural movements or whether we are struggling to resist the influence of evil spirits, it is a matter of making use of the divine help through diligence in order to win or lose as a result of our laziness.<sup>27</sup>

A theme that became very popular in the later tradition is that of the *battle against Satan and the demons*. The higher part of the soul, the νοῦς, is not only 'torn' between the spirit and the lower part of the soul, but also on a wider scale between Christ and Satan, between the good spirits and the evil spirits. The issue of the influence of opposing spirits and the devil is introduced in chapter 2 of Book 3 in *On first principles*: "We have now to notice, agreeably to the statements of Scripture, how the opposing powers, or the devil himself, contends with the human; race, inciting and instigating men to sin." A fundamental point which Origen wants to make is that of human freedom. Chapter 3:4-6 turns to the question of the discernment of spirits. Origen finds a clear criterion for such discernment in the kind of inspiration: inspiration from the good spirits, in contrast to the inspiration by evil spirits, heightens awareness and does not take away freedom of judgment ("nullam ... obturbationem uel alienationem mentis incurrat nec perdat arbitrii sui iudicium liberum", *Princ* 3, 3:4).<sup>28</sup> In this instance, we

26 "Another man, again (when the same things [temptations against chastity] have happened to him who has received more instruction, and has disciplined himself), encounters, indeed, allurements and enticements; but his reason, as being strengthened to a higher point, and carefully trained, and confirmed in its views towards a virtuous course, or being near to confirmation, repels the incitement, and extinguishes the desire" (*Princ* 3, 1:4). Holliday (2009:17-22) considers the souls of Satan and of Christ as two extreme cases, who remain fixed in their position; they retain the power of choice, but are fixed through their desire, which has become a second nature or a habitual way of acting.

27 "Ea autem uirtute, quae nobis data est ut uincere possimus, secundum liberi arbitrii facultatem aut industrie ("in a diligent manner") utimur et uincimus, aut segniter ("in a slothful manner") et superamur" (*Princ* 3, 2:3).

28 By contrast to the Greek understanding of inspiration as a "take over" of the mind by the divine powers, Origen views the effect of the biblical inspiration as a free and transformative response which leads to *participation* in the divinity. The contrast between the two is developed in *Princ* 3, 3:3: "Now these effects we are to suppose are brought about in the following manner: As holy and immaculate souls, after devoting themselves to God with all affection and purity, and after preserving themselves free from all contagion of evil spirits, and after being purified by lengthened abstinence, and imbued with holy and religious training, assume by this means a portion of divinity, and earn the

touch upon the well spring of the reflection on the criteria for discernment which later tradition developed in a variety of ways.<sup>29</sup>

The power of discernment develops in the process of the healing of the νοῦς, in which it rediscovers itself as created after the image of God and responds to the healing presence of the Logos and the Spirit.<sup>30</sup> Origen reflected on the process of this growth of the capacity to discern.

### 3. THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE CAPACITY TO DISCERN<sup>31</sup>

The capacity to discern depends on the person's progress in the spiritual life. Therefore, discernment is not a mere moral exercise, but a deeply mystical one. Individuals must first of all know the fundamental truth about themselves, that they are created according to the image of God and called to realise the likeness of God in them. In order to actualise this gift, the potential three dimensions of the person need to be developed, which Origen mentioned in terms of the stages of Greek philosophical education: ethics, physics and enoptics (*Princ* 4:2,4; *Comm. Cant.* Prologue 3). The first dimension,<sup>32</sup> *ethics*, is about the transformation of the external behaviour of a person; all human movements are to be directed by, and integrated into the person's love of God and love of neighbour. The growth

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grace of prophecy, and other divine gifts; so also are we to suppose that those who place themselves in the way of the opposing powers, i.e., who purposely admire and adopt their way of life and habits, receive their inspiration, and become partakers of their wisdom and doctrine. And the result of this is that they are filled with the working of those spirits to whose service they have subjected themselves." While the influence of the evil spirits brings about slavery, openness to the good spirits leads to freedom. However, as Gebauer (2000:114) puts it: "The will, however, is never coerced by spiritual discernment. It is given knowledge which the person may or may not choose to act upon."

29 For a comparison between Origen and Ignatius of Loyola, see Lies 1999:718-732.

30 It may be useful to refer here to Rom. 1:28, παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ἀδόκιμον νοῦν, and to Rom 12:2, where God's healing response to this condition is referred to as ἀλλὰ μεταμορφώσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον. The intelligence is incapacitated by sin, but can be transformed and renewed through participation in the mind of Christ (see Munzinger 2007:40, note 103).

31 Blommestijn (1986:2385-2389) has been most useful for this section.

32 Blommestijn (1986:2389) does not speak about "stages" in the spiritual progress but rather about "dimensions". "Il s'agit plutôt de trois processus spirituels et mystiques de transformation de l'homme en la totalité de son être humain, trois dimensions différenciées qui ne sont que partiellement successives."

in love, and in all the other virtues, is a participation in the Logos-Christ, who himself contains, and is, all virtues. All the virtues are part of the divine perfection, of which the Logos is the image and after whose image we are created:

Or he who holds this opinion would certainly impugn the authority of Scripture, which says that man was made in the image of God; and in him are manifestly to be discovered traces of the divine image, not by any appearance of the bodily frame, which is corruptible, but by mental wisdom, by justice, moderation, virtue, wisdom, discipline; in fine, by the whole band of virtues, which are innate in the essence of God, and which may enter into man by diligence and imitation of God; as the Lord also intimates in the Gospel, when he says, 'Be therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful'; and, 'Be perfect, even as your Father also is perfect' (*Princ.* 4, 4:10 [3, 36]) (on virtue, see Larsen 2004).

This diligence and imitation on the part of human beings is the fruit of discernment and, ultimately, the creative work of God. As Blommestijn (1986:2387) states:

In the experience of the soul with God, the Father engenders the good works and virtues in man, which are identified with Christ. Christ has to be born and grow in man in a concrete and existential manner.<sup>33</sup>

This divine involvement is indicated in the following passage:

It is therefore from what God has given that human beings nevertheless make offering to God. What did God give them? Knowledge of himself. What does the human being offer God? His faith and love (*Hom. Num.* 12:3 translated by Von Balthasar 1984:nr 503).

The second dimension, *physics*, refers to the development of a correct appreciation of everything surrounding us; in facing the created world, we are prompted to appreciate God as the absolute value and everything created as relative, relative in the sense that all things are meant to be seen in relation to God and as manifestations of God.<sup>34</sup> Discernment in this case is not simply a moralistic discernment between vice and virtue, but

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33 "Dans l'expérience de l'âme avec Dieu, le Père engendre dans l'homme les bonnes œuvres et les vertus, qui s'identifient au Christ. Le Christ doit naître et grandir dans l'homme d'une manière concrète et existentielle."

34 "Dans la connaissance des choses créées, l'homme pénètre le mystère de l'acte créateur et s'y insère par une adhésion et une participation mystiques à

more fundamentally between appearance and truth. One learns to look at everything and appreciate everything from the perspective of God, who saw the goodness of everything:

This would be true because the purpose (=logos) of being is clear to those who, being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, have assumed a likeness of those eyes that have seen how each of the things that have been made was good. For the declaration concerning each of the created things, 'God saw that it was good', means this: God perceived good in the purposes of each thing, and saw how each of the created things is good in relation to the purposes for which it had come to be (*Comm. Jo.* 13:280; translated by Heine 1993:126).<sup>35</sup>

The third dimension, *enoptics*, is the ever greater knowledge and love of God by *participation* in the Logos: this is experiential knowledge and not mere knowledge *about* God transmitted in doctrines, reasoning or imagining. To know the reality of God, we have to become like God and so become ever more able to recognise that reality within ourselves. This knowledge becomes real only to the extent that the similitude of God develops in us, because only like understands like.<sup>36</sup> What is needed for this progress to take place is to protect our hearts against the devil who is for ever seeking opportunities to attack us while preparing our hearts with virtue and holiness as a space for the good spirits, where they will enjoy to dwell with us and will direct us with better counsels ("melioribus nos consiliis regant", *Princ* 3, 3:6).

Origen refers frequently to Hebrews 5:14, "But solid food is for the mature, τῶν διὰ τὴν ἕξιν τὰ αἰσθητήρια γεγυμνασμένα ἔχόντων πρὸς διάκρισιν καλοῦ τε καὶ κακοῦ "for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (RSV). Origen understands these faculties of perception as referring to the spiritual senses, the "senses of the heart"(Jer. 4:19) or our "divine senses" (Prov. 2:3, 5) which are regarded

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la volonté de Dieu qui, comme force et développement, se trouve incarnée en l'essence originelle de chaque être" (Blommestijn 1986:2388).

35 "En dernière analyse la science du monde se ramène à la connaissance du Verbe qui en contient les principes: elle est affaire de grâce. ... Les objets sensibles ouvrent le chemin qui conduit aux mystères dont ils sont les images: le contemplatif les voit transfigurées par cette signification. Ils en sont des ombres dégradées: il ne faut pas s'attacher à eux, mais les dépasser pour atteindre la Vérité" (Crouzel 1961:60-61).

36 On this fundamental principle of Origen and other ancient witnesses to it, see Harl 1958:92 with note 90. See also Munzinger 2007:177-178.

as the faculties of discernment. Just as we are endowed with physical senses, we are also capable of developing spiritual senses.<sup>37</sup>

So too the inner sense: if it is not 'trained' by practice and diligence, ... but the darkness of ignorance and inexperience covers its eyes, or the eyes themselves are infected by some disease, it becomes wholly incapable of distinguishing good from evil (cf. Heb. 5:14). As a consequence, it does evil instead of good and misjudges the good as something evil (*Comm. Cant.* 1; translated by von Balthasar 1984:nr 547).

On the other hand, when people discover their spiritual senses and let them develop within them, they become like the holy prophets. In fact, we can say that Origen understood the prophetic inspiration from his understanding of the spiritual senses:

But he who examines such matters more profoundly will say, that there being, as the Scripture calls it, a kind of general divine perception which the blessed man alone knows how to discover, according to the saying of Solomon, 'You shall find the knowledge of God;' and as there are various forms of this perceptive power, such as a faculty of vision which can naturally see things that are better than bodies, among which are ranked the cherubim and seraphim; and a faculty of hearing which can perceive voices which have not their being in the air; and a sense of taste which can make use of living bread that has come down from heaven, and that gives life to the world; and so also a sense of smelling, which scents such things as leads Paul to say that he is a sweet savour of Christ to God; and a sense of touch, by which John says that he 'handled with his hands of the Word of life;' – the blessed prophets having discovered this divine perception, and seeing and hearing in this divine manner, and tasting likewise, and smelling, so to speak, with no sensible organs of perception, and laying hold on the Logos by faith, so that a healing effluence from it comes on them, saw in this manner what they record as having seen, and heard what they say they heard, and were affected in a similar manner to what they describe when eating the roll of a book that was given them (*Cels.* 1:48).<sup>38</sup>

37 For a selection of texts by Origen on the "inner senses", see von Balthasar 1984:218-223; see also the well known article by Rahner 1979.

38 This communion with the Logos through the spiritual senses is expressed more clearly in another text from the Commentary on the Song of Songs: "And perhaps, as the Apostle says, *for those who have their senses exercised to the discerning of good and evil*, Christ becomes each of these things in turn, to suit the several senses of the soul. He is called true Light, therefore, so that the soul's eyes may have something to lighten them. He is the Word, so that her ears may have something to hear. Again, He is Bread of life, so that the

Origen regards the entire process of discernment or lack thereof as leading either to Jerusalem or to Babylon. One of the texts in which Origen explains the signs of the good spirits and the signs of the evil ones links the first one with the peaceful home of Jerusalem and the second one with the exile in Babylon:

When we see that a soul is confused by sins, vices, sadness, anger, desires, greed, then we know that she is the one whom the devil is leading off into Babylon (cf. Ezek. 17:12). But if in the depth of heart calmness, serenity and peace bring forth their fruit, then we know that Jerusalem dwells within: that is, the vision of peace is within her (*Hom. Ezech.* 15, 2; translated by von Balthasar 1984:nr 563).

#### 4. STRUGGLE AGAINST “FLESH AND BLOOD” AND STRUGGLE AGAINST “THE SPIRITUAL FORCES OF EVIL” (EPHESIANS 6:12)

For Origen, the source of the “movements” to be discerned in human beings is first of all what Galatians 5:17 calls the flesh and the spirit (see *Princ.* 3, 4-1-5). The soul is torn between these two. Or, to be more exact, because of the duality of the soul, a higher part and a lower part,<sup>39</sup> if the lower part dominates, the soul will become increasingly enslaved to the flesh, but if the higher soul dominates, the soul will become increasingly open to the spirit. It is only at a more advanced stage of spiritual growth that the opposing movements are regarded as coming from evil spirits:

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soul’s palate may have something to taste. And in the same way, He is called the spikenard or ointment, that the soul’s sense of smell may apprehend the fragrance of the Word. For the same reason He is said to be able to be felt and handled, and is called the Word made flesh, so that the hand of the interior soul may touch concerning the Word of life. But all these things are the One, Same Word of God, who adapts himself to the sundry tempers of prayer according to these several guises, and so leaves none of the soul’s faculties empty of His grace (*Comm. Cant.* 2:9; translated by Lawson 1957:162).

- 39 “Now, if this is not to be understood of the Spirit of God, but of the nature of the soul itself, that will be called its better part which was made in the image and likeness of God; whereas the other part, that which afterwards, through its fall by the exercise of free-will, was assumed contrary to the nature of its original condition of purity, – this part, as being the friend and beloved of matter, is punished with the fate of unbelievers” (*Princ* 2, 10:7 (or 6). “En fait, plutôt que des parties ou de principes, il faudrait s’exprimer d’une manière plus dynamique: le premier principe, c’est l’âme en tant qu’elle est tournée vers l’esprit; le second, l’âme en tant qu’elle est tournée vers le corps” (Crouzel & Simonetti 1980b:98).

The declaration, indeed, in the Letter to the Ephesians, ‘We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places’, must be so understood as if ‘we’ meant, ‘I Paul, and you Ephesians, and all who have not to wrestle against flesh and blood’: for such have to struggle against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, not like the Corinthians, whose struggle was as yet against flesh and blood, and who had been overtaken by no temptation but such as is common to man (*Princ* 3, 2:4).<sup>40</sup>

For Origen, as long as the lower part of the soul is still dominant, the evil powers can simply use this disordered condition in order to keep the soul under their control, but once the higher part of the soul has become dominant, the evil powers have to turn to different strategies. These strategies are described as follows:

The following is to be understood as the nature of the struggles; when, e.g., losses and dangers befall us, or calumnies and false accusations are brought against us, it not being the object of the hostile powers that we should suffer these (trials) only, but that by means of them we should be driven either to excess of anger or sorrow, or to the last pitch of despair; or at least, which is a greater sin, should be forced, when fatigued and overcome by any annoyances, to make complaints against God, as one who does not administer human life justly and equitably; the consequence of which is, that our faith may be weakened, or our hopes disappointed, or we may be compelled to give up the truth of our opinions, or be led to entertain irreligious sentiments regarding God (*Princ*. 3, 2:6).

From this we can understand how discernment “of spirits” became particularly related to the struggles of the more advanced Christians, among them the monks of the desert, while discernment, in general, remained a crucial task for everyone.

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40 See also *Comm. Rom.* 7:12, which also distinguishes “two classes of things that customarily arouse temptations for men. Among these a class of human temptations ...” The second class discussed here in the interpretation of Romans 8:38-39 indicates, among others: angels, powers, and so on. These are not as easily overcome as the first class, but Christ is our help and when victory is won, it is the “work of Christ alone.”

## 5. CONCLUSION

- Discernment is the crucial exercise of human freedom whereby Christians are guided to make progress in life by letting the gift of the image of God become their own. That which is not our own by nature needs to be “appropriated” by our freedom.
- Growth in discernment requires an ever greater identification of the human “intelligence” with the νοῦς of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16 in *Comm. Jo.* 1:24). As the “intelligence” is created after the image of God, the Logos, its fulfilment lies in a receptive and cooperative movement with the Logos towards ever greater likeness with God. Progress in virtue, knowledge and happiness is an ever more intense participation in the Logos who himself is every virtue, all wisdom and love. As a result of this participation, the ‘intelligence’ becomes ever more “like” the Logos and, therefore, becomes ever more capable of understanding and discerning.
- The progress in discernment corresponds to the progress in the “likeness” so that progress can be regarded as a spiral movement. Greater likeness enables deeper discernment, and deeper discernment enables a movement towards greater likeness.<sup>41</sup>

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41 Compare with the remarks of Munzinger (2007:186-189) on Paul: “Furthermore, a spiral clarifies that attaining true discernment is not a linear mono-causal process but that Spirit and mind are both active in varying degrees around the axis of Christ. Nevertheless, and finally, some tension remains (similar to that which we saw in my work on the Stoics) between a ‘total directedness towards God’, a once and for all affair, and a process of continual learning and appropriating this grasp of the Christ event” (Munzinger 2007:187).

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