

On Prayer

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Like Clement, the early Church Father Origen was highly educated both in Greek, Jewish and Christian thought and saw clearly the correspondences between these different strands of wisdom. As Laurence Freeman states: *“Christianity is a historical phenomenon with its own roots in Jewish and Greek religions and these roots can be followed even deeper into the very earliest religious consciousness of humanity. All religions may not be one, as William Blake claimed, but they are certainly deeply connected and interrelated.”*(Laurence Freeman)

At the young age of 17 Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria appointed Origen as Head of the Catechetical School as successor to Clement. The teaching of Catechumens – those wanting to be baptised into the Christian faith – was not narrowly restricted to the Christian faith but was carried out against a background of a general Greek education in philosophy and science prevalent at that time, with students from all the main cultures mixing and exchanging ideas. Origen was an extremely talented scholar, a gifted teacher. He was the first one to present in his *‘On First Principles’* a systematic and profound Christian cosmology and theology, based wholly on an allegorical and mystical interpretation of Scriptures. It was probably written in response to questions by thoughtful and educated students at the Catechetical School, who were trying to understand the Christian teaching against the background of Platonic, Stoic, Jewish and Gnostic philosophy. In his treatise *‘On Prayer’* there are important lessons for us, when

we sit down to meditate. Origen attached much importance to our attitude at the start of prayer and to cleansing the soul of strong emotions in preparation for prayer. He quotes Paul, as saying: *“we should pray without anger and without dissent”* and stresses that we must let go of *“all remembrance of wrongs against anyone who is supposed to have done [us] injustice”*. Unless we let go of these emotions, our wounded ‘ego’ will get in the way and prevent us from paying one-pointed attention to our prayer: *“anyone who intends to embark on prayer....should prepare himself a while, so that he will be the more attentive and alert throughout his prayer.”* Only by being alert and putting aside *“all alien thoughts”* can we keep our *“mind intent on God”* and transcend our ordinary consciousness, raise our *“intellect from the earth... setting it before the Lord of all.”*

It is easy to see the influence of Origen on the teaching of Evagrius and his disciple Cassian and through them on John Main. We see in their teaching the same importance attached to preparation: *“For whatever our soul was thinking about before the time of prayer inevitably occurs to us when we pray...hence we must prepare ourselves before the time of prayer to be the prayerful persons that we wish to be.”*(Cassian) and to clearing the mind of all emotions: *“No one who loves true prayer and yet gives way to anger or resentment can be absolved from the imputation of madness. For he resembles a man who wishes to see clearly and for this purpose he scratches his eyes.”*(Evagrius)

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