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ΑΙΡΕΣΙΣ AND ΑΙΡΕΤΙΚΟΣ
IN THE ALEXANDRINE SCHOOL
OF THE II AND III CENTURIES
(CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND ORIGEN)

In order to think about the development of Christian doctrine in the Patristic era in relation with the heterodox views, it is worth to consider how the two main representatives of the Alexandrine School looked at them. The aim of this work is to analyze the different meanings of the terms αὐρεσις and αἱρετικὸς in Clement’s *Stromata* and Origen’s *Contra Celsum* with the intention of outlining how in the beginning of the history of Christian Church the main thinkers were establishing the ground so as to dialogue with their contemporary culture.

1. Clement of Alexandria. As we may see from Otto Stählin’s *Register*¹, the central term αὐρεσις has many meanings in the whole of Clement’s work. First of all, it is related to “the act of choice”², from which the word προαιρεσις; then, it is also a synonym for a “school” or a “sect”³, for example, a particular philosophical Greek intellectual community⁴ or a barbarian one⁵. For this reason, the same term refers to a religious sect⁶ and, especially, it signifies Christian “heresy”⁷.

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³ Cf. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* I 13, 1; I 17, 2; I 84, 1.5; I 89, 1; II 12, 1; III 67, 2; IV 91, 2; VI 72, 1; VI 156, 2; VII 12, 4; VII 48, 7; VIII 22, 3.

⁴ Cf. ibidem I 37, 6; I 57, 1; I 57, 4; II 117, 5; VI 5, 1; VI 35, 1; VI 55, 3; VI 67, 2; VI 83, 1; VI 89, 3; VIII 16, 1.

⁵ Cf. for Stoic school: ibidem I 64, 1; VII 92, 4; VII 95, 1; for Peripatetic: ibidem I 63, 5; II 127, 3.

⁶ Cf. ibidem I 57, 1; VII 90, 3-4.

⁷ Cf. ibidem I 69, 6; III 25, 7; VII 41, 1.
It is worth to notice that the first meaning of αἱρέσις concerns the choice. In the *Stromata* the freedom of choice is a very central question which Clement uses to distinguish the Christian thought from the fatalism implied by the Stoic philosophy and the deterministic naturalism of some Gnostics: in fact, man can attain salvation with his free will, and also faith and the real γνώσις are freely acquired. At the same time, man may be mistaken with his freedom and take a wrong way of thinking. When this happens, the term αἱρέσις takes a highly negative connotation, as Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski notes in his work. Indeed, it represents a wrong, even malicious choice, often of an intellectual nature; it suggests conscious deformation of a message. In addition, that sort of misinterpretation expresses itself in immoral acts and a misleading ethical code. It produces erroneous teaching of a religious nature and ultimately creates false concepts of God. Consequently those Christians who disfigured a religious message and then made immoral choices voluntarily, placed themselves at the opposite pole to orthodoxy, that of heterodoxy (ἐλεημονείας), as Clement states in the *Stromata*.

With respect to the other meaning of αἵρεσις, i.e. “school” or “sect”, it is possible to note that it is related to the other two meanings. In fact, man can freely choose to follow truth or its contrary, so that he falls in erroneous heresies, but this decision is due to the different schools of thought which differently interpret reality. In the VII book of the *Stromata*, the Alexandrine Father, in order to defend faith from opposed arguments, claims that as “among the Greek philosophers and the schools in medicine very sects (αἱρεσίας) have...”

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II 79, 3; III 11, 2; III 25, 1; III 40, 1, 2; III 71, 1; III 98, 5; IV 2, 2; IV 170, 2; V 26, 4; VI 123, 3; VII 89, 4; VII 90, 5; VII 91, 2, 3; VII 92, 3, 7; VII 93, 4; VII 94, 4; VII 97, 1, 3; VII 98, 4; VII 101, 1, 3; VII 103, 6; VII 105, 5; VII 107, 3, 5; VII 108, 1; VII 109, 1.


10 Cf. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* VII 92, 7, ed. A. Le Boulluec, SCh 428, Paris 1997, 282. As Mark Edwards illustrates in his work, Clement is one of the five great theologians who flourished between 180 and 250 and who considered the “Scripture as the sole foundation for argument against heresy; at the same time it is the Church […] that furnishes the norms of interpretation” (M. Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church*, Farnham Surrey 2009, 5).

11 This connection between “school” and “Church” or “sect” made by Clement is due to his idea that Christ himself is a “Pedagogue” and “Teacher”. For this reason as Oleh Kindiy underlines in his study, “the distance between the School and the Church is almost non-existent in Clement’s theological view. Education and personal growth are deepened and realized in sacramental initiation and eternal liturgy” (O. Kindiy, *Approximating Church and School in Clement of Alexandria’s “Stromateis” VII*, in: *The Seventh Book of the “Stromateis”*, p. 291-298).
sprung up”, but none “hesitates to philosophize or to have recourse to a physician on account of the different schools in medicine”\textsuperscript{12}, so that it is possible to find different interpretations within the Christian thought, but it doesn’t compromise its truth. And he continues saying that

“by the exercise of the apprehension of contemplation, and by reasoning of the most decisive character, we must distinguish the true from the seeming. And as, while there is one royal highway, there are many others, some leading to a precipice, some to a rushing river or to a deep sea, no one will shrink from traveling by reason of the diversity, but will make use of the safe, and royal, and frequented way; so, though some say this, some that, concerning the truth, we must not abandon it; but must seek out the most accurate knowledge respecting it”\textsuperscript{13}.

This is the responsibility of Christian: he has to use his reasoning and freely choose the right way. Hence, faith implies an intellectual and spiritual, i.e. moral, ascetic, adherence to the unique Church founded by Christ, while the heretics are divided into many mistaken doctrines and are dominated by passions, thus they can’t distinguish truth from error. Therefore, the true Gnostic is the man of faith who by studying the biblical texts and the Greek disciplines is enlightened by Christ and participatees at God’s life, while the others are “Gnostic falsely so called”\textsuperscript{14}.

Consequently, Clement states that the truth can be discerned with human reason and critically and rationally verified by the comparison with the Scriptures and the teachings of Church, while error, like delusion or false perception, comes from sense perception and self-deception.

However, it is worth to underline that Clement’s aim is showing that heresy as a phenomenon is not a new, or exclusively Christian, shameful characteristic as it can be found also in Greek philosophical tradition and schools in medicine\textsuperscript{15}. Every sect requires a free adherence that man can give by his choice (αἵρεσις). That is true also for Christian faith which Clement conceives as

“a voluntary preconception, the assent of piety. […] And since choice is the beginning of action, faith is discovered to be the beginning of action, being the foundation of rational choice in the case of any one who exhibits to himself the previous demonstration through faith”\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibidem VII 91, 4-5, SCh 428, 276-278, transl. Chadwick.
\textsuperscript{16} Clemens Alexandrinus, \textit{Stromata} II 9, 1-2, ed. C. Mondésert – P.Th. Camelot, SCh 38, Paris
Finally, there is another topic to consider: when the Alexandrine talks about the different schools (αἱρέσεις), he openly inserts also Christian Church among those, as he claims in a significant passage of the *Stromata*. In fact, he states that

“If there is a demonstration of proof, one should also agree to search and learn through the scriptures themselves by way of demonstration how the heresies (αἱρέσεις) went astray, and only in the truth and in the old Church does the most genuine «gnosis» and the truly best way of thinking (αἱρέσεις) exist”¹⁷.

The use of αἱρέσεις here twice in the same sentence is striking: Firstly to mean “heresy”, and then “way of thinking” or “school of thought”. It is the only occasion in which Clement equates αἱρέσεις with his Church, and he clearly does so only as a play on words, in order to make a point, since elsewhere αἱρέσεις is a word that Clement uses to characterize his opponents¹⁸. But, anyway, it is important because this passage resumes the different meanings of αἱρέσεις and the importance of free choice in order to join the true Church¹⁹.

At this point, it is possible to say that in those first centuries of Christianity the great thinkers were building the bases of doctrine in dialogue with the main philosophical schools of that period and using their same vocabulary, so that αἱρέσεις and γνώσεις refer both to Church and to the Heathens or the heresies.

### 2. Origen.

As several scholars have already pointed out²⁰, Origen mainly uses the term αἱρέσεις in order to define those who either refuse or disagree

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¹⁹ About the connection between human responsibility and heresy, see also: Le Boulluec, *La notion d’hérésie*, p. 381-391.

about the Church’s rule of faith\textsuperscript{21}, in other words the \textquotesingle\textquotesingle\textit{ετερόδοξοι}\textsuperscript{22}. Nevertheless, there are some cases in which the Alexandrine’s strategy of argumentation leads him to use the term also with reference to the Christians, as it occurs in his treatise \textit{Contra Celsum}. Given that in this writing the word \textit{αἱρετικὸς} means someone who belongs to a school, as Origen very often implies\textsuperscript{23}, our aim is to list the most significant arguments upon which within his polemics against Celsus he bases the definition of Christians as \textit{αἱρετικοὶ}. In fact, in \textit{Contra Celsum} 3, 12 Celsus’ criticism of Christians as divided into \textit{‘heresies’}, namely as deprived of a unique doctrine\textsuperscript{24}, suggests to Origen a comparison with both medical and philosophical schools: as in the science of medicine many are the points of dispute with respect to the manner of curing bodies, and in philosophy great are the differences of opinion, so among Christians there are different ways of interpreting the Scripture\textsuperscript{25}. Thus, Celsus and Origen agree that Christians are divided into \textit{‘heresies’}, like the schools of medicine and philosophy: however, the latter responds that the different points of view occurring among Christians, as well as in medical and philosophical schools, do not contradict the unique doctrine, but they rather deepen it\textsuperscript{26}. On basis of this feature of Christianity, which is in accordance with medical and philosophical schools, Origen formulates at least three arguments against Celsus.

\textbf{a) \textit{Contra Celsum} 3, 66.} The first argument is the Alexandrine’s reply to Celsus’ statement that no one could effect a complete change (\textit{παντελῆς}


\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Origenes, \textit{Commentarii in Iohannem I} 13, 82, ed. C. Blanc, SCh 120, Paris 1966, 100; idem, \textit{Contra Celsum} 5, 63, ed. M. Borret, SCh 147, Paris 1969, 170; idem \textit{De principiis} III 1, 16, SCh 268, 96. They are also termed: “οἱ τε ἀπὸ τῶν αἱρέσεων”, as in: ibidem IV 2, 1, SCh 268, 298; idem, \textit{In Jeremia hom.} V 14, 1, SCh 232, 316; “οἱ ἐξ ἔναντιας”, as in: idem, \textit{De principiis} III 1, 16, SCh 268, 94; “οἱ γὰρ ἐπιλαμβανόμενοι”, as in: ibidem III 1, 16, SCh 268, 111.


\textsuperscript{24} Cf, ibidem 3, 12, SCh 136, 34: “Φησί δὲ ὅτι καὶ ὑπὸ πλῆθως πάλιν διαστάμενοι σφᾶς αὐτῶς ἐλέγχουσιν· ἐνός ἡς εἰπέν ἐτί κοινωνοῦντες, εἰ γε κοινωνοῦσι, τοῦ ὀνόματος. Καὶ τούτο μόνον ἐγκαταλεῖπεν ὤμως αἰσχύνονται· τὰ λοιπὰ δὲ ἄλλοι ἄλλαχα τετάχασιν”.

\textsuperscript{25} Cf, ibidem, SCh 136, 34-36.

\textsuperscript{26} Cf. ibidem, SCh 136, 36: “Ἀλλ' οὔτ' ἱατρικὴν εὐλόγος ἄν τις φεύγων διὰ τὰς ἐν αὐτῇ αἱρέσεις, οὔτε φιλοσοφίαν τοῦ πρέποντος στοχαζόμενος τις ἄν μισοῦ, πρόφασιν τοῦ μισεῖν αὐτὴν ποριζόμενος τὰς πολλὰς αἱρέσεις".
metabol”) in those who are sinners both by nature and custom. On the contrary, Origen responds that all men are inclined to sin by nature, but this does not prevent them from a complete change. This point – Origen argues – is well expressed not only by the Scripture, but also by the philosophical schools which regard Hercules, Ulysses, Socrates, and Musonius as models of complete change for the entire mankind. Furthermore, if Celsus rejects the notion of complete change, he ends up being in contrast not only with the Christians, but also with the philosophical background which he seems to belong to.

Origen’s reply to Celsus thus implies the assumption that the Christians agree with the philosophers about the notion of change of life, namely conversion.

b) *Contra Celsum 3, 80*. The second argument consists in Origen’s reply to Celsus’ claim of Christian doctrines of the blessed life (μακαρία ζωή) and communion with God (πρός τὸν θείον κοινωνία) as vain hopes. The Alexandrine argues that these doctrines are supported not only by the Christians, but also by ancient philosophers, particularly Pythagoras and Plato, whom Celsus seems to follow. Moreover, he expressly quotes three ideas of ancient philosophy, that is, the immortality of the soul (ἀθανασία τῆς ψυχῆς), which derives from Plato; her duration after death (ἐπιδαιμονή), which recalls the Stoics; finally, the immortality of the thinking principle (τοῦ νου ἀθανασία), which reminds of Aristotle’s *De generatione animalium* 736B, 5. Therefore, Celsus contradicts himself, since he refuses those doctrines which the Christians have

27 Cf. ibidem 3, 65, SCh 136, 150: “Καὶ μὴν παντὶ που δὴλον ὁτι τοὺς μὲν ἀμαρτάνειν περικότας τε καὶ εἰθισμένους οὐδεὶς ἀν οὐδὲ κολάζουν πάντη μεταβάλοι, μὴτι γε ἐλεύνοι φῶς ἡν ἀμείναι τελέος παραχλήσον ὡς τῶ ἀναμάρτητοι βελτίως κοινωνι βιοῦ”.


31 As it results from: Origenes, *Contra Celsum 2, 17, 132, 330-332; 6, 52, SCh 147, 308-310; 7, 62, SCh 150, 158-160.


33 Cf. Origenes, *Contra Celsum 3, 80, SCh 136, 180.*
in common (κοινά τινα)\textsuperscript{34} with the philosophers. Once again, Origen implies a similarity among the Christians and the philosophical schools.

c) \textit{Contra Celsum} 1, 10. A further argument occurs in Origen’s comment on Celsus’ criticism, that Christians assent to the doctrine of their religion without reason and a rational guide, whereas one should accept a doctrine only after hearing the arguments of all the other philosophers, condemning one system and supporting another\textsuperscript{35}. To him the Alexandrine responds that, as the choice to assent to a philosophical school rather another depends on a kind of irrational impulse (ἄλογος φορά), namely one becomes a Stoic, a Platonist, a Peripatetic, or an Epicurean on basis not of a careful examination of these philosophical schools’ arguments, but of a sort of faith, so the same for the Christians\textsuperscript{36}. Furthermore, both the Christians and the members of a philosophical school assent to their doctrines on basis of an irrational impulse, which is followed by critical examination of the opposite doctrines.

3. The case of \textit{Panegyric Oration on Origen}. The aforesaid data point out that, in accordance with Celsus’ claim of Christians as “heresies” in \textit{Contra Celsum} 3, 12, Origen also compares them with medical and philosophical schools, and he highlights at least three features that are common to both Christians and philosophers: the notion of conversion; the view of the soul; finally, the irrational impulse which is the base of attendance to a school. In addition to this, a comparison between these texts, in particular \textit{Contra Celsum} 1, 10, and a passage at the end of the \textit{Panegyric Oration on Origen}, delivered by a pupil of him in around 238\textsuperscript{37}, suggests a very interesting novelty about the Alexandrine’s teaching in Caesarea\textsuperscript{38}. In fact, in \textit{Panegyric Oration} 14, whilst describing the life-style of philosophical schools, he declares that one assents to a philosophical doctrine on basis of a kind of irrational impulse (ἄλογος

\textsuperscript{34} Cf. ibidem 3, 81, Sch 136, 182.

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. ibidem 1, 9, Sch 132, 96-98.

\textsuperscript{36} Cf. ibidem 1, 10, Sch 132, 102-104: “Ὅδε γὰρ περιμείνας ἄκουσαι τοὺς πάντων ϕιλοσόφων λόγους καὶ τῶν διαφόρων αἱρέσεων καὶ τὴν ἀνατροπὴν μὲν τὸν δέκα κατασκευὴν δὲ ἐτέρων, οὕτω σαιρεῖται ἤτοι Στοιχίκος ἢ Πλατωνικός ἢ Περιπατητικός ἢ Ἐπικούρειος εἶναι ἢ ὅπως ἀριστερὸτεροι φιλοσόφων αἱρέσεως ἀλλ’ ἄλογο τινί, κἂν μὴ βούλονται τοῦτο ὁμολογεῖν, φορά ἐρχονται ἐπὶ τὸ ἀσκήσαι, φέρ’ εἰπέν, τῶν στοιχικῶν λόγον, καταλαμπόντες τοὺς λοιποὺς, ἢ τῶν πλατωνικών, ύπερφρονησάντες ὡς ταπείνωτέρον τῶν ἄλλων, ἢ τὸν περιπατητικόν ὡς ἀνθρωπικότατον καὶ μᾶλλον τῶν λοιπῶν αἱρέσεων εὐγνωμόνος ὁμολογοῦντα τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἀγαθά”.


rather than the critical examination of the arguments of the other schools, and he also compares the philosophical schools with the Christians: as the former assent to a doctrine by an irrational impulse and thus examine other doctrines, so the latter assent to Christian religion by an irrational impulse and thus examine the philosophical arguments. Furthermore, if the idea that both the philosophers and the Christians are moved by an irrational impulse, that is ἀλοχος φορά or ὀρμή, is well expressed by the Panegyric Oration, which attests Origen’s teaching in Caesarea by 232, and by the treatise Contra Celsum, which is dated at the end of his life in Caesarea, then this idea must have been an argument which Origen taught his school-audience, mainly composed of higher-educated Heathens.

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The period which these two Fathers of Alexandria belong to was central for the cultural background and history. Both of them were in dialogue with the brilliant exponents of the contemporary philosophy so that they were called to explain the importance of faith on the intellectual side but with a distinction from the other schools. This difference of the Church is given in Clement by the true γνώσις brought by Christ and taught by the Apostles which men have to join with their free choice (αἰρεσις).

With respect to Origen, the texts from Contra Celsum and the Panegyric Oration suggest that, though “heresy” mainly denotes those who are outside of the Church’s rule of faith, as said before, the Alexandrine also regards it as philosophical school. In particular, in order to defend the Christian school against the philosopher Celsus’s criticisms, as it results from Contra Celsum, and to persuade the Heathens to accept Christianity, as it results from the Panegyric Oration, Origen acknowledges some features of Christian school which typically belong to the philosophical schools. Moreover, the fact that this strategy of argumentation occurs both in a late writing, that is Contra Celsum, and in the witness of a pupil about his teaching in the first years at Caesarea, that is, the Panegyric Oration, implies that his audience in Caesarea may have been composed especially of well-educated in philosophy and lay hearers.


41 In accordance with: Eusebius, HE VI 36, 2, Sch 41, 138.

The aim of this study is to outline the use of the terms **αἵρεσις** and **αἱρετικός** according the two main representatives of the Alexandrine School, Clement and Origen.

In the *Stromateis* the word **αἵρεσις** has many meanings and, first of all, it is related to “the act of choice”, then, it is also a synonym for a “school” or a “sect”, hence it signifies Christian “heresy”. The connection between human freedom and schools, mainly philosophical ones, but also the schools of medicine, points out that Clement conceives “heresy” as an error, an incorrect way of thinking due to a wrong, even malicious choice, often of an intellectual nature; it suggests conscious deformation of a message. Hence, Clement contrasts the Gnostic **αἱρετικός** and the “true Gnostic”, the man of faith who by studying the biblical texts and the Greek disciplines is enlightened by Christ (*Stromata* VII 92, 7).

About the Origen’s usage of the term **αἵρεσις** in his *Contra Celsum* it is worth to note that, firstly, the word **αἵρεσις** always indicates the philosophical schools of Late Antiquity (cf. *Contra Celsum* 4, 45; 8, 53); secondly, that Origen aims at persuading his enemy, Celsus, that Christian religion is neither a refusal of philosophical schools nor something very different from them, but it may be regarded as an **αἵρεσις** too and, in order to argue this, he shows that not only Christian religion and philosophical schools share some moral and cosmological topics (*Contra Celsum* 3, 66; 3, 80), but also that both Christians and philosophers are moved by the same **ἄλογος φορά** (*Contra Celsum* 1, 10). Therefore, in Origen’s *Contra Celsum* the **αἵρεσις** means not only the philosophical schools of the II and III centuries, but also the Christian religion as long as it is accepted by the Heathens.

In conclusion, this study shows, once again, that, as the two representatives of Alexandria were in dialogue with the brilliant exponents of the contemporary philosophy, they were called to explain the importance of faith on the intellectual side, using some terms and conceptions of the main schools, on the one side, and by distinguishing Christian faith from them, on the other.
wyboru, często o charakterze intelektualnym; sugeruje świadomą deformację posłannictwa. Stąd Klemens przeciwstawia gnostykiemu αἵρεσις „prawdziwego gnostyka”, człowieka wiary, który przez poznawanie tekstów biblijnych i wiedzy klasycznej jest oświetlony przez Chrystusa (Stromata VII 92, 7).

Mówiąc zaś o stosowaniu przez Orygenesa terminu αἵρεσις w jego Contra Celsum, trzeba po pierwsze zauważyć, że słowo αἵρεσις oznacza zawsze filozoficzne szkoły późnej starożytności (por. Contra Celsum 4, 45; 8, 53); po drugie zaś to, że Aleksandryjczyk ma na celu przekonanie swojego wroga Celsusa, że religia chrześcijańska nie odrzuca szkół filozoficznych, ani nie jest też czymś bardzo różniącym się od nich, nawet można uznać, że jest to również αἵρεσις. Jako dowód ukazuje, że religia chrześcijańska i szkoły filozoficzne nie tylko mają pewne wspólne zagadnienia moralne i kosmologiczne (Contra Celsum 3, 66; 3, 80), ale także to, że chrześcijanie i filozofowie kierują się tymi samymi impulsami wiary (ἀλογος φορός; Contra Celsum 1, 10). Dlatego też w Contra Celsum Orygenesa αἵρεσις oznacza nie tylko szkoły filozoficzne II i III w., lecz także religię chrześcijańską.

Podsumowując, studyjum to jeszcze raz ukazuje, że dwaj Aleksandryjczycy prowadząc dialog z błyskotliwymi przedstawicielami ówczesnej filozofii, wezwali do wyjaśnienia znaczenia wiary od strony intelektualnej, z jednej strony używali pewnych pojęć i koncepcji charakterystycznych dla głównych szkół, z drugiej zaś odróżniali wiarę chrześcijańską od nich.

**Key words:** heresy, heretic, Alexandrine school, Clement of Alexandria, Origen.

**Słowa kluczowe:** hierja, heretyk, szkoła aleksandryjska, Klemens Aleksandryjski, Orygenes.

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