

# Religious roots to the history of freedom

- ★ Ideas around human freedom and dignity are commonly thought of as fruits of the enlightenment,
- ★ but in fact these values have been shaped by philosophical and religious debate throughout
- ★ history. We spoke to **Dr Elena Rapetti** and **Professor Anders-Christian Jacobsen** about their
- ★ work in shedding new light on the non-secular origins of ideas about human freedom and dignity.

**The 2nd century** scholar and theologian Origen of Alexandria reflected deeply on questions around the nature of human freedom and our conception of ourselves as dignified beings, producing a large volume of writings over the course of his life. While of course the world has changed significantly since Origen's time, his work remains relevant today, believes Anders-Christian Jacobsen, Professor of Systematic Theology at Aarhus University in Denmark. "There are both differences and also similarities between today and Origen's time. One similarity is that the freedom and dignity of human beings still comes under pressure today," he points out. As the Principal Investigator of a research project bringing together partners across Europe, Professor Jacobsen is looking again at Origen's ideas, and assessing their influence on modern conceptions of freedom and dignity. "We are using Origen as an inspiration to continue this theological and philosophical debate about what it means to be a human being, and what it means to be free and dignified," he explains.

## Freedom and dignity

This research aims to uncover the religious roots of modern ideas around freedom and dignity, dating all the way back to Origen's time. While values such as freedom, dignity and equality are commonly thought of as fruits of the enlightenment, and the process of secularisation, the project aims to show that they also have a religious origin. "These values have been shaped by philosophical and religious debate throughout history," says Dr Elena Rapetti, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. There are many historical examples of human freedom and dignity being suppressed on religious grounds, yet researchers want to point to a more positive tradition in European history. "We aim to bring more clarity to the long history of human freedom, which will help us to better understand contemporary attacks on it," says Professor Jacobsen. "Human freedom is under pressure from several directions, one of which is different forms of religious extremism."

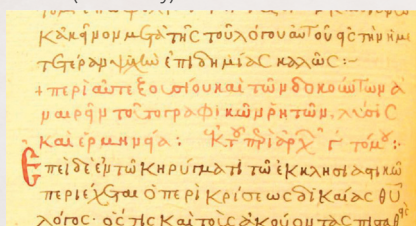
An easy conclusion to draw in this respect would be that religious belief and human



Origen of Alexandria, also known as Origen Adamantius.



Portrait of Origen in the Codex Monacensis Clm 17092 (12th century)



De Principiis III 1, on the topic of free will (as indicated by the introductory paragraph in red, *Περὶ αὐτέξουσίου*), in the Codex Marcianus 48 (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century)

freedom are fundamentally incompatible, yet this viewpoint overlooks a very large part of religious history, including the work of Origen. While researchers are looking at Origen's work in the project, Professor Jacobsen and his colleagues are looking more to investigate his influence on scholars, writers and theologians in later periods. "This project is more about seeing how he inspired people who came after him, mainly those in the Western European tradition," he outlines. The project itself is an international training network (ITN) in which early stage researchers (ESRs) are studying for their PhDs and looking at how Origen influenced many different historical figures, including Augustine of Hippo, who opposed many of his views. "Augustine and Origen had different ways of thinking about human freedom. Augustine was strongly influenced by religious thinking, which limited freedom of choice, while Origen had a more open vision of freedom," explains Dr Rapetti.

Researchers are investigating the extent to which Origen influenced Augustine's thinking, while a number of other important figures are



Origen as a preacher and as a teacher, illustrations by Jan Luyken, 1700 (courtesy of wikimedia commons).





## HHDFWC

### The History of Human Freedom and Dignity in Western Civilization

#### Project Objectives

The HHDFWC Project objectives are:

- to investigate the philosophical and theological traditions behind the modern Western conception of humans as free, valuable, and dignified beings, and how these traditions developed chronologically and geographically.
- to study the reception and assimilation of the theological and philosophical ideas about human freedom expounded by the church father Origen from the 3rd century Alexandria.
- to train Early Stage Researchers in theology, philosophy, history, and classics.

#### Project Funding

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#### Project Partners

**Beneficiaries:** University of Reading • Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster Martin Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore • Aarhus University • Charles University / **Partner Organizations:** Etikos APS • Franckesche Stiftungen zu Halle Evangelische Kirche in Mitteldeutschland Dean and Chapter of Canterbury • Mohr Siebeck Verlag • Aschendorff Verlag • Dar al-Kalima University College • Diocese of Pécs • Walter de Gruyter Verlag / **Scientific Advisory Board:** Prof. Dr. Theo Kobusch, Bonn University • Dr. Peter W. Martens, Saint Louis University.

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being investigated through several different PhD projects. Some ESRs are looking at the writings of the Swiss theologian Jean LeClerc for example, others are looking at philosophical debates in 18th century Germany, while there are also projects with a more modern slant. "There is a project looking at how Origen's ideas have influenced modern Catholic theology, which involves looking at the works of scholars like Hans Urs von Balthasar," says Dr Rapetti. There are also a number of other projects on more contemporary topics. "One project looked at freedom and dignity in modern organisations, at how concepts of freedom were perceived in management settings," outlines Professor Jacobsen. "We also have a project studying the concept of freedom in contemporary Islam, so we are also considering these questions in other theological and philosophical settings."

#### Adapting ideas

The ideas that Origen put forward in the 3rd century were not simply re-used in these cases, rather they were adapted to the philosophical and theological circumstances of the time, which is a major point of interest in the project. Researchers are looking at how later theologians and philosophers understood Origen's work. "In the history of ideas, in theology, inspiration is often drawn from earlier ideas, which are then re-used in other settings," says Professor



Jacobsen. Origen was a very important figure in this respect. "He was one of the first theologians to connect Christianity with the Greek philosophical tradition at the highest theoretical level," explains Professor Jacobsen. "That was important not only in terms of freedom and dignity, but also in many other situations, where Christianity and the classical philosophical tradition came together. In that sense Origen was foundational, in creating the intellectual basis for some of Europe's historical, theological and philosophical traditions."

This connection between philosophy and Christianity is also important because of the emphasis that Origen placed on the notion of freedom of choice and freedom to develop according to the true nature of human beings, and many groups in later periods of history have invoked his ideas and his memory when arguing for greater freedoms. Freedom will always be defined to an extent by the social, economic and political circumstances of the time, but Professor Jacobsen says certain basic ideas remain constant. "Whatever the circumstances you are living in, as a dignified human being you have the right to claim your freedom. Whatever situation you are in, you have the right to try and fulfil your goals as a human being," he says. This is not about unadulterated individualism however, as there is always a recognition that an individual's right to exercise their freedoms should not limit

those of another. "The freedom that you claim for yourself, you should also allow others. Your freedom should never limit other people's freedoms," says Professor Jacobsen.

A number of theologians have argued that men lose their full liberty following the original sin, which limits their freedom. Their freedom is tainted by the original sin, and men in a way become slaves of flesh and desire; they then need the grace of God to act in a good and proper way. "There are some visions of Grace which are quite pessimistic, while other movements saw Grace differently," outlines Dr Rapetti. "The Jesuits for example had a more optimistic vision of Grace than the Jansenists."

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#### Modern threats to freedom

The wider backdrop to this research is ongoing threats to human freedom and dignity, such as political violence and religious intolerance. While many of us believe that humans are free and dignified, in reality there are a lot of threats to human dignity and freedom, including in Western societies. "Our point of departure is that there are many examples of threats against human freedom and dignity in

modern societies. And we need to be aware of them," says Professor Jacobsen. The wider aim in the project is to re-think the prevailing narratives around freedom, for example that we are free because of business and economic activities, and to make the case that we are all equal, free and dignified by nature. "Freedom is not something that we decide we want, because we are in a certain political or economic situation," continues Professor Jacobsen. "Freedom is an ontological concept. If a majority decides that people should not be free then you can suppress freedom, but you cannot change the basic understanding of human beings as ontologically free."

This represents a much more radical understanding of human freedom and dignity than one built on market economics for example, or another concept. A more fundamental understanding of what freedom is could also then help protect it and reaffirm it as central to human existence, believes Professor Jacobsen. "These ideas would then not be so open to attacks, or so vulnerable," he says.