

# Celsus' view of Christians and Christianity

*Celsus was a Greek writer in the second century who criticized Christianity as a threat to the stable communities and worldview that the "pagan" religious and social system sought to uphold. His work as a whole has been lost, but when the third century theologian Origen sought to answer Celsus' charges in a work appropriately called **Against Celsus**, he preserved most of Celsus' criticisms. Origen's replies are certainly worth reading in their own right, but the following excerpts are chosen in order to show how a thoughtful "pagan" viewed Christianity. In the excerpts that follow, Celsus' words are highlighted for easy of reading.*

## Excerpts from *Contra Celsus* by Origen

Translation is from volume 4 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*  
published 1867-1872 and in the public domain

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### BOOK 1

#### Chap. 28

...[Celsus] accuses [Jesus] of having "**invented his birth from a virgin,**" and upbraids Him with being "**born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.**"...

### BOOK 3

#### Chap. 44

After these points Celsus quotes some objections against the doctrine of Jesus, made by a very few individuals who are considered Christians, not of the more intelligent, as he supposes, but of the more ignorant class, and asserts that "**the following are the rules laid down by them. Let no one come to us who has been instructed, or who is wise or prudent (for such qualifications are deemed evil by us); but if there be any ignorant, or unintelligent, or uninstructed, or foolish persons, let them come with confidence. By which words, acknowledging that such individuals are worthy of their God, they manifestly show that they desire and are able to gain over only the silly, and the mean, and the stupid, with women and children.**"...

## Chap. 55

But as Celsus delights to heap up calumnies against us, and, in addition to those which he has already uttered, has added others, let us examine these also, and see whether it be the Christians or Celsus who have reason to be ashamed of what is said. He asserts, **"We see, indeed, in private houses workers in wool and leather, and fullers, and persons of the most uninstructed and rustic character, not venturing to utter a word in the presence of their elders and wiser masters; but when they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements, to the effect that they ought not to give heed to their father and to their teachers, but should obey them; that the former are foolish and stupid, and neither know nor can perform anything that is really good, being preoccupied with empty trifles; that they alone know how men ought to live, and that, if the children obey them, they will both be happy themselves, and will make their home happy also. And while thus speaking, if they see one of the instructors of youth approaching, or one of the more intelligent class, or even the father himself, the more timid among them become afraid, while the more forward incite the children to throw off the yoke, whispering that in the presence of father and teachers they neither will nor can explain to them any good thing, seeing they turn away with aversion from the silliness and stupidity of such persons as being altogether corrupt, and far advanced in wickedness, and such as would inflict punishment upon them; but that if they wish (to avail themselves of their aid,) they must leave their father and their instructors, and go with the women and their playfellows to the women's apartments, or to the leather shop, or to the fuller's shop, that they may attain to perfection;—and by words like these they gain them over."**

## Chap. 59

This statement also is untrue, that it is **"only foolish and low individuals, and persons devoid of perception, and slaves, and women, and children, of whom the teachers of the divine word wish to make converts."**... After this it is superfluous for us to wish to offer a reply to such statements of Celsus as the following: **"For why is it an evil to have been educated, and to have studied the best opinions, and to have both the reality and appearance of wisdom? What hindrance does this offer to the knowledge of God? Why should it not rather be an assistance, and a means by which one might be better able to arrive at the truth?"**...

## Chap. 64

But since he says, in addition to this, **"What is this preference of sinners over others?"** and makes other remarks of a similar nature, we have to reply....

## BOOK 4

## Chap. 14

But let us look at what Celsus next with great ostentation announces in the following fashion: **"And again,"** he says, **"let us resume the subject from the beginning, with a larger array of proofs. And I make no new statement, but say what has been long settled. God is good, and**

beautiful, and blessed, and that in the best and most beautiful degree. But if he come down among men, he must undergo a change, and a change from good to evil, from virtue to vice, from happiness to misery, and from best to worst. Who, then, would make choice of such a change? It is the nature of a mortal, indeed, to undergo change and remoulding, but of an immortal to remain the same and unaltered. God, then, could not admit of such a change."...

## BOOK 5

### Chap. 25

Let us next notice the statements of Celsus, which follow the preceding, and which are as follow: "As the Jews, then, became a peculiar people, and enacted laws in keeping with the customs of their country, and maintain them up to the present time, and observe a mode of worship which, whatever be its nature, is yet derived from their fathers, they act in these respects like other men, because each nation retains its ancestral customs, whatever they are, if they happen to be established among them. And such an arrangement appears to be advantageous, not only because it has occurred to the mind of other nations to decide some things differently, but also because it is a duty to protect what has been established for the public advantage; and also because, in all probability, the various quarters of the earth were from the beginning allotted to different superintending spirits, and were thus distributed among certain governing powers, and in this manner the administration of the world is carried on. And whatever is done among each nation in this way would be rightly done, wherever it was agreeable to the wishes (of the superintending powers), while it would be an act of impiety to get rid of the institutions established from the beginning in the various places."...

### Chap. 33

The remarks which we have made not only answer the statements of Celsus regarding the superintending spirits, but anticipate in some measure what he afterwards brings forward, when he says: "Let the second party come forward; and I shall ask them whence they come, and whom they regard as the originator of their ancestral customs. They will reply, No one, because they spring from the same source as the Jews themselves, and derive their instruction and superintendence from no other quarter, and notwithstanding they have revolted from the Jews."...

## BOOK 6

### Chap. 78

Celsus next makes certain observations of the following nature: "Again, if God, like Jupiter in the comedy, should, on awaking from a lengthened slumber, desire to rescue the human race from evil, why did He send this Spirit of which you speak into one corner (of the earth)? He ought to have breathed it alike into many bodies, and have sent them out into all the world. Now the comic poet, to cause laughter in the theatre, wrote that Jupiter, after

awakening, despatched Mercury to the Athenians and Lacedaemonians; but do not you think that you have made the Son of God more ridiculous in sending Him to the Jews?"...

## BOOK 8

### Chap. 21

Let us see what Celsus further says of God, and how he urges us to the use of those things which are properly called idol offerings, or, still better, offerings to demons, although, in his ignorance of what true sanctity is, and what sacrifices are well-pleasing to God, he call them **"holy sacrifices."** His words are, **"God is the God of all alike; He is good, He stands in need of nothing, and He is without jealousy. What, then, is there to hinder those who are most devoted to His service from taking part in public feasts."...**

### Chap. 24

Let us now see on what grounds Celsus urges us to make use of the idol offerings and the public sacrifices in the public feasts. His words are, **"If these idols are nothing, what harm will there be in taking part in the feast? On the other hand, if they are demons, it is certain that they too are God's creatures, and that we must believe in them, sacrifice to them according to the laws, and pray to them that they may be propitious."...**

### Chap. 28

We shall now proceed to the next statement of Celsus, and examine it with care: **"If in obedience to the traditions of their fathers they abstain from such victims, they must also abstain from all animal food, in accordance with the opinions of Pythagoras, who thus showed his respect for the soul and its bodily organs. But if, as they say, they abstain that they may not eat along with demons, I admire their wisdom, in having at length discovered, that whenever they eat they eat with demons, although they only refuse to do so when they are looking upon a slain victim; for when they eat bread, or drink wine, or taste fruits, do they not receive these things, as well as the water they drink and the air they breathe, from certain demons, to whom have been assigned these different provinces of nature?"...**

### Chap. 33

From this it is evident that we have already met the next statement of Celsus, which is as follows: **"We must either not live, and indeed not come into this life at all, or we must do so on condition that we give thanks and first-fruits and prayers to demons, who have been set over the things of this world: and that we must do as long as we live, that they may prove good and kind."...**

### Chap. 55

Celsus goes on to say: **"They must make their choice between two alternatives. If they refuse to render due service to the gods, and to respect those who are set over this service, let them**

**not come to manhood, or marry wives, or have children, or indeed take any share in the affairs of life; but let them depart hence with all speed, and leave no posterity behind them, that such a race may become extinct from the face of the earth. Or, on the other hand, if they will take wives, and bring up children, and taste of the fruits of the earth, and partake of all the blessings of life, and bear its appointed sorrows (for nature herself hath allotted sorrows to all men; for sorrows must exist, and earth is the only place for them), then must they discharge the duties of life until they are released from its bonds, and render due honour to those beings who control the affairs of this life, if they would not show themselves ungrateful to them. For it would be unjust in them, after receiving the good things which they dispense, to pay them no tribute in return."...**

### **Chap. 38**

Celsus goes on to say: **"We must not disobey the ancient writer [Homer], who said long ago, 'Let one be king, whom the son of crafty Saturn appointed ;'"** and adds: **"If you set aside this maxim, you will deservedly suffer for it at the hands of the king. For if all were to do the same as you, there would be nothing to prevent his being left in utter solitude and desertion, and the affairs of the earth would fall into the hands of the wildest and most lawless barbarians; and then there would no longer remain among men any of the glory of your religion or of the true wisdom."...**

### **Chap. 73**

In the next place, Celsus urges us **"to help the king with all our might, and to labour with him in the maintenance of justice, to fight for him; and if he requires it, to fight under him, or lead an army along with him."** To this our answer is, that we do, when occasion requires, give help to kings, and that, so to say, a divine help, "putting on the whole armour of God." And this we do in obedience to the injunction of the apostle, "I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority;" and the more any one excels in piety, the more effective help does he render to kings, even more than is given by soldiers, who go forth to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can. And to those enemies of our faith who require us to bear arms for the commonwealth, and to slay men, we can reply: "Do not those who are priests at certain shrines, and those who attend on certain gods, as you account them, keep their hands free from blood, that they may with hands unstained and free from human blood offer the appointed sacrifices to your gods; and even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army. If that, then, is a laudable custom, how much more so, that while others are engaged in battle, these too should engage as the priests and ministers of God, keeping their hands pure, and wrestling in prayers to God on behalf of those who are fighting in a righteous cause, and for the king who reigns righteously, that whatever is opposed to those who act righteously may be destroyed!" And as we by our prayers vanquish all demons who stir up war, and lead to the violation of oaths, and disturb the peace, we in this way are much more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them. And we do take our part in public affairs, when along with righteous prayers we join self-denying exercises and meditations, which teach us to despise pleasures, and not to be led away by them. And none fight better for the king than we do. We do not indeed

fight under him, although he require it; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army--an army of piety--by offering our prayers to God.

## Chap. 75

Celsus also urges us to "**take office in the government of the country, if that is required for the maintenance of the laws and the support of religion.**" But we recognise in each state the existence of another national organization founded by the Word of God, and we exhort those who are mighty in word and of blameless life to rule over Churches. Those who are ambitious of ruling we reject; but we constrain those who, through excess of modesty, are not easily induced to take a public charge in the Church of God. And those who rule over us well are under the constraining influence of the great King, whom we believe to be the Son of God, God the Word. And if those who govern in the Church, and are called rulers of the divine nation--that is, the Church--rule well, they rule in accordance with the divine commands, and never suffer themselves to be led astray by worldly policy. And it is not for the purpose of escaping public duties that Christians decline public offices, but that they may reserve themselves for a diviner and more necessary service in the Church of God--for the salvation of men. And this service is at once necessary and right. They take charge of all--of those that are within, that they may day by day lead better lives, and of those that are without, that they may come to abound in holy words and in deeds of piety; and that, while thus worshipping God truly, and training up as many as they can in the same way, they may be filled with the word of God and the law of God, and thus be united with the Supreme God through His Son the Word, Wisdom, Truth, and Righteousness, who unites to God all who are resolved to conform their lives in all things to the law of God.

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