

Is It Better to Be Behind on the Path?: Experiencing the Path of Christian Spirituality in Different Millennia

Part V: The Ancient Eastern Way

By [Rev. Joel Kletzing](#)

For assistance in grasping the spirituality of Evagrius, it may be helpful to understand a bit about the wider theological currents which dominated his day. Easterners tended not to focus on sin and the fall as much as on ignorance. *Apatheia* referred to giving up destructive passions, letting go of anything less than God. *Askesis* is the name given to training essential for spiritual development (e.g., employing prayer). Simplicity was a key goal so that whatever encumbers a person in the quest of knowing the presence of God can be removed. And self-control or the practice of denying self was recognized as a key ingredient in spirituality of the time.¹

The Bible was emphasized as the main source for developing spirituality, and there was freedom taken to search out allegorical or deeper meanings than the strictly literal. Christ resides in a believer and does good works. He is in, with and among His people. He is the Logos, wisdom from God, and also light, grace, truth and life. He is present in the Eucharist, the church and the Scriptures. His death and resurrection was the death of death. Walter Wagner summarized this point with these words:

[Christ alone] has revealed the true philosophy in both His life and His teaching. For by His life He was the first to establish the way of true philosophy. He always held His soul above the passions of the body, and in the end, when His death was required by His design for man's salvation, He laid down even His soul.²

A true philosopher surrenders body and soul as holiness demands it. Salvation is God restoring the likeness of Himself in a person. Sin is a rejection of the contemplation of God, an opportunity that was available to Adam and Eve. Neilos the Ascetic (died 430) expanded on contemplation in this way,

¹ Information for this section derived from class notes, "Patristic Pioneers," Walter Wagner (Spring 2011), The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

² Ibid.

All spiritual contemplation should be governed by faith, hope and love, but most of all by love. The first two teach us to be detached from visible delights, but love unites the soul with the excellence of God, searching out the invisible by means of intellectual perception.³

The mind or intellect is the highest faculty humans possess. If it is purified, it is able to grasp truth directly. It is the eye of the heart and capable of contemplating God.

Stillness was valued as inner tranquility prepares one to listen to God. Yet for all the spiritual exercises required of those who would know and enjoy God, Mark the Ascetic (died early fifth century) stated that the kingdom of heaven is not a reward for works but a gift of grace granted to faithful servants. The passions were seen as a departure from the path of contemplation. Exercises such as prayer and all night vigils were considered useful to uproot the causes of evil resident in the intellect. It is only divine grace which can grant an understanding of the Gospels and produce a result of self-denial. What results from the Eastern way of thinking is a well-developed regimen for preparing oneself to know God. It is a path of developing holiness, but without the Puritan reliance on covenant theology it is lacking a well-developed emphasis on what Christ has done as the grounds for engaging in this path. It opens the door wider to see the human agent as initiator in spiritual growth rather than the sovereign God.

As Philip Schaff explained concerning differing factions within Christianity, frequently the completion of both could be the union of both, for if the zeal of saints such as Evagrius could be combined with the later well-developed doctrine of justification by faith, there would be no room for the easy-believism that some Protestants have practiced. There are present-day Eastern theologians who downplay justification by faith as they react against those who would simply pray a prayer of salvation and give very little attention to applying a spiritual regimen of self-denial, *apatheia* or *askesis*.⁴ It would be difficult for such a critic to pin similar allegations on Thomas Brooks who emphasized the importance of holiness.

Evagrius was a man who realized his affinity with sin and answered the call of Jesus to take drastic steps to evade the devil's traps. When in Constantinople early in his life, he was known as a successful refuter of heretics. Why, then would he move to the desert? He very nearly had an affair with a married noble woman. In his repentance he fled temptation and eventually exiled himself, having been mentored by other ascetics, desiring to know God and be freed from

³ Ibid.

⁴ See "How Are We Saved?" by Fr. Theodore Syllianopoulos, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, November 2, 2012, accessed April 7, 2016. www.goarch.org/ourfaith/how-are-we-saved

passions. There is also a story about him standing in a well on a freezing night to discipline his flesh when he was tempted by the demon of fornication.

He held that whatever a person loves he will want completely and will struggle to acquire it. Evagrius wanted a knowledge of God. Salvation for him was faith which demonstrated itself in a lifestyle of grasping for God.

Evagrius emphasized being pure so that one might know truth. Brooks emphasized knowing truth (Christ) so that one might be pure. Both figures promoted faith and disciplined lifestyles. Evagrius sought more to distance the mind from matter so it can contemplate the First Cause. Brooks sought more to consider the First Cause so that matter or the physical world could be employed properly in His service.

Evagrius urged great caution when speaking about God because he believed that what is simple cannot be defined; only composite things can be. God is simple. The dogmas of the church are important but are not his central focus because he saw them as material-world explanations of divine things.⁵ Yet Puritan theology has much to say about the nature of God, believing that Deuteronomy 29:29 says that what is revealed is what should be embraced and celebrated and taught. Evagrius' ultimate goal was to engage in wordless, imageless prayer.⁶ But while God is beyond human comprehension, He has chosen to communicate in words, and so it is difficult to justify a goal of wanting to move beyond words in relating to God since He has not taught us to do so or the way to do so.

Perhaps the Eastern spirituality could be thought of in terms of child-rearing where keeping rules and memorizing routines are a prerequisite to later internalizing truth. One is inducted into the faith in baptism, and others (parents and pastors) are responsible for training in the way of salvation. Salvation is not by works, but the person is disciplined so as to be a fit receptacle for truth and her soul cultivated and readied to produce fruit – all of which is possible only because of supernatural work the Holy Spirit is doing to apply the work of Christ. For the Orthodox family, infant baptism is the expression of the parents' desire to join the baby to the Body of Christ. The Christian life is not one which begins with a cognitive decision but is a bestowed relationship. The grace of baptism would later be activated or hidden away, and spiritual formation is critical in fanning into flame the gift received in baptism.⁷

⁵ Bunge, 118.

⁶ However, as Evan B. Howard points out, this idea is not clear in Evagrius' practice because his prayers were reciting memorized Scripture or responding to Scripture. All he did was saturated with Scripture. See Evan B. Howard, "Is Thoughtless Prayer Really Christian? A Biblical/Evangelical Response to Evagrius of Pontus" in *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7.1 (Spr 2014): 121. In striving for imageless prayer, it seems that Evagrius was reacting to anthropomorphic images used by pagans (p. 126).

⁷ Liviu Barbu, "Spiritual Formation as an Art: Adult Faith Formation in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 9.1 (Jun 2010): 30.

Evagrius would start with discipline and aim toward a renewed intellect, ready to grasp God as much as is humanly capable. Brooks would start with the intellect's grasp of the Gospel and from that develop a discipline with the goal of being proven a true partaker of Christ. Both rest on Christ and revere the Bible as their authority.

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