

## Evagrius & the Three Ways

The three-fold division of the Christian life into purgative, illuminative and unitive ways is well established in Christian ascetical history. There is, to be sure, some disagreement about whether the three are properly understood as successive stages, more or less mutually exclusive, or whether they represent phases which overlap and recur as the Christian matures.<sup>1</sup> Briefly, the purgative way is the cultivation of the virtues and overcoming the clinging sins with which one begins Christian life. Its aim, Dean Harton tells us, “is the production of real penitence, for this will do more than anything else to detach the soul from sin and turn it to God.”<sup>2</sup> The “illuminative way marks a real advance in Charity and the commencement of a truly interior life,” with qualitative development in charity, faith, hope, and the imitation of Christ.<sup>3</sup> The focus shifts from a resistance to temptation to a greater focus on prayer and willing imitation of Christ in interior life as well as exterior. Bishop Grafton is even more explicit: “In this illuminative way Christ becomes the model of our new life.”<sup>4</sup> The unitive way [Grafton continues] is “the way of Christ's lovers, and represents, in its highest manifestations, the climax of Christian perfection in this life. It is seen in its fulness in the selfless charity and complete union of the saints.”<sup>5</sup> The knowledge of God which the soul receives unites it to God, and gives the foretaste of the Beatific Vision. This is a union of charity as well as knowledge. Even those who regard the three ways as successive stages recognize that not every Christian soul will attain to the unitive way before death, nor regard such as necessary to salvation.

Knowledge of the three ways is of practical importance for all those with the cure of souls. It helps pastors to guide Christians in efficient and effective growth into the full stature of Christ.

The three ways have their roots in Evagrius Ponticus, a Greek, archdeacon of Constantinople under Gregory Nazianzus, who spent his last years as a monk in Egypt (d. 399). My aim in this paper is this: by examining Evagrius' conception of (what will become) the three ways, we will be better able to use the three ways in pastoral ministry.

For Evagrius, the three ways are πρακτικη, θεωρια φυσικη, and θεωρια θεολογικη: what we might call the ascetic way, the contemplation of things or of nature, and the contemplation of God or simply, theology. Evagrius begins the *Praktikos*, his treatise on the ascetic life and the first work of his trilogy on the spiritual life: “Christianity is the dogma of Christ our Savior, which is composed of πρακτικης, φυσικης, and θεολογικης [or: ascetics, knowledge (or contemplation) of things, and knowledge (or contemplation) of God].”<sup>6</sup> The three-fold division of the Christian life is similar to the later formulation, and reflects the teaching of Clement of Alexandria and Origen before him.<sup>7</sup>

A little background is necessary here. Evagrius was an Origenist (and condemned as such in the sixth century – but that's another story). He has something of an intellectualist understanding of human nature. While perhaps not going quite so far as his contemporary Didymus the Blind (who explicitly taught a “double” creation: that the physical creation did not occur until after the Fall), Evagrius does regard the essential nature of man as his mind (νοϋς) – what we would be more likely to call soul or spirit. Man is fundamentally a rational (or reasoning) nature – something he shares with the angels and demons. [While the angelic nature is pure νοϋς, the demonic is dominated instead by θυμος, rage, and the unredeemed human by επιθυμια, desire or passion. The soul of fallen man has three corresponding parts: the intellectual, the passible, and

irascible, dominated by νους, επιθυμια and θυμος, respectively.] It follows that Christian life is aimed at the union of the mind with God, which is accomplished by the purification of the mind from all that inhibits its proper functioning, and its growth in proper knowing. For fallen man, this means freeing him from the depredations of επιθυμια and θυμος. The three ways describe how this is accomplished.

The first stage for Evagrius is the ascetic life (πρακτικη). The ascetic life establishes the basis for the contemplations which form the later stages. Evagrius conceives of the ascetic life principally in terms of overcoming the eight λογισμοι, “evil thoughts” or temptations: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, dejection, ακηδια (accidie), vainglory and pride. You will recognize this list from its similarity to the Seven Deadly Sins. Evagrius is the original source of the list, which was taken from Egypt to the West by John Cassian, and put in the form we know by Gregory the Great. As with Gregory, this is an ordered list: though Evagrius' order is from the first to be overcome to the last (from gluttony to pride), while Gregory begins with pride as the most serious and fountainhead of sins.

For Evagrius, the evil thoughts afflict the mind with passion, which precludes the mind's proper functioning. The result of overcoming the evil thoughts (and thus the goal of the ascetic life) is απαθεια, literally “passionlessness,” and perhaps best rendered “purity of heart” (going back to John Cassian, who translated it *puritas cordis*). The term notwithstanding, Evagrius is not a stoic, any more than Clement of Alexandria or Origen before him. “Perfect purity of heart [απαθεια] develops in the soul after the victory over all the demons whose function it is to offer opposition to the ascetic life [πρακτικη].”<sup>8</sup> Intuitively, this makes sense: you have no doubt experienced how difficult it is to sustain any sort of recollected prayer when beset by base passion

of one sort or another. Since the later stages are stages of contemplation, the mind requires this preparatory stage of ascetic discipline to overcome the passions which preclude contemplation.

An example or two of how this works.

The thought (λογισμος) of gluttony suggests to the monk that he give up his ascetic efforts in short order. It brings to his mind concern for his stomach, for his liver and spleen, the thought of a long illness, scarcity of the commodities of life and finally his edematous body and the lack of care by the physicians. These things are depicted vividly before his eyes. It frequently brings him to recall certain ones among the brethren who have fallen upon such sufferings. There even comes a time when it persuades those who suffer from such maladies to visit those who are practicing a life of abstinence and to expose their misfortune and relate how these came about as the result of the ascetic life.<sup>9</sup>

Note here the role of the imagination. Even when there is no material temptation – the presence of food which according to the rule should not be eaten – there is still the possibility of being tempted by gluttony, whether by memory or imagination. The imagination can go further in conjuring up all sorts of bad effects from due abstinence. Given the severely ascetic (and boring) character of monastic life in Egypt at the time, one can easily imagine how the imagination would take over in time of temptation. Temptation can also come from a well-meant visit from another monk, unwittingly stimulating the passion of gluttony.

Another example: “Avarice suggests to the mind a lengthy old age, inability to perform manual labor (at some future date), famines that are sure to come, sickness that will visit us, the pinch of poverty, the great shame that comes from accepting the necessities of life from others.”<sup>10</sup> We can be tempted to greed even without the direct involvement of money or its lack, and without a direct desire for money itself – only an entirely understandable desire to avoid adverse consequences of poverty. Evagrius' characteristic insight into the ways and means of temptation is evident here: when in the midst of such temptations, we might well fail to see that what is at root

is avarice, or that we are even being tempted.

A third example, from later in the ascetic life.

The spirit of vainglory is most subtle and it readily grows up in the soul of those who practice virtue. It leads them to desire to make their struggles known publicly, to hunt after the praise of men. This in turn leads to their illusory healing of women, or to their hearing fancied sounds as the cries of demons – crowds of people who touch their clothes. This demon predicts besides that they will attain to the priesthood. It has men knocking at the door, seeking audiences with them.<sup>11</sup>

Vainglory is the subtle motivation for the monk's desire to share his struggles: so that another can see how far along he is in the spiritual life. For the desert fathers, the only real promotion was to become the priest for their community, so that too becomes the object of vainglory. Likewise any public acknowledgment of this monk's virtue or insight or holiness (real or imagined) – healings, others coming to seek his counsel – is a provocation to vainglory. “I have observed the demon of vainglory being chased by nearly all the other demons, and when his pursuers fell, shamelessly he drew near and unfolded a long list of his virtues.”<sup>12</sup> Vainglory is, not surprisingly, the sin of the virtuous (though not only so – there are imagined virtues as well as real). Even if there is no real grounds for being puffed up, the imagination can supply them. (The pride which is Evagrius' eighth and most serious evil thought is distinguished from vainglory as self-dependence: we begin to think that we can manage things on our own, without a proper dependence upon God. Gregory conflated the two in his later version of the list.)

Evagrius' conception of the ascetic life consists, as we would expect, of the cultivation of the virtues and the usual ascetic practices. “Through acts of mercy [the Physician of souls] treats our irascibility (θυμος); through prayer [He] purges the mind (νοος); and through fasting causes desire (επιθυμια) to atrophy.”<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, Evagrius says, “Reading, vigils and prayer – these are the things that lend stability to the wandering mind (νοος). Hunger, toil, and solitude are the

means of extinguishing the flames of desire (επιθυμια). Turbid anger (θυμος) is calmed by the singing of Psalms, by patience and mercy [or: almsgiving]. But all these practices are to be engaged in according to due measure and at the appropriate times. What is untimely done, or done without measure, endures but a short time. And what is short-lived is more harmful than profitable.”<sup>14</sup> Note here (first of all) the psychological insight: demonic rage is to be combated particularly by Psalms, patience and mercy. Think of the temptations which come our way when driving (at least they do in Philadelphia): our anger and impatience with other drivers would indeed be calmed by being merciful towards them, by the cultivation of patience, and by reciting a Psalm or two. Note also that Evagrius associates these ascetic disciplines, which together constitute the monastic life (and, in a different form, the Christian life more generally), with the three-fold character of the fallen Christian soul. The mind (νους), the passionate part of the soul (επιθυμητικον) and the irascible part (θυμικον) each has its particular ascetic discipline, in preparing the mind for contemplation: (e.g.) mercy for the irascible, fasting for the passionate, prayer (attention) for the mind. Note also the emphasis on prudence and balance in the interest of long-term and sustained progress in the Christian life. Even in the desert context, which most of us would regard as extreme in its ascetic rigors, Evagrius maintains the necessity of a measured and prudent approach to the ascetic practices.

The ascetic disciplines, along with the on-going battle with the evil thoughts, will, in due course, yield the fruit of *απαθεια*. This state of mind allows for the beginning of contemplation, by putting the mind in proper relation to the passionate and irascible parts of man's nature, and freeing the mind from the tyranny of man's baser desires. “The goal of the *praktike* is to purify the intellect and to render it free of passions; that of the *gnostike* is to reveal the truth hidden in all beings; but to distance the intellect from matter and to turn it towards the First Cause – this is a

gift of theology.”<sup>15</sup> Here he uses the term *gnostike* for the first stage of contemplation, and theology for the final stage.

The second stage is the contemplation of things, θεωρια φυσικη sometimes (as above) called γνωσιτικη. At this stage, the development of the mind begins in earnest, as it is now freed from the passions which cloud the mind and keep it from functioning properly. It begins with applying the mind to the knowledge of created things. This is the preparation for the knowledge of God, which is the final stage of Christian life. The contemplation of things is further divided into two sub-stages. The first is the contemplation of material things; the second the contemplation of immaterial creatures – the rational natures (i.e., men, angels, demons). The contemplation of material things is aimed at rising from sensory knowledge of the thing, to the knowledge of its essence or λογος. Of the immaterial beings, there is of course no sensory knowledge. The aim here is to know the essence (λογος) of the beings. In the logical development of the mind, there is an obvious progression from sensory knowledge of material things to the essential knowledge of material things, and from thence to the essential knowledge of the “intelligibles” or immaterial things.

Evagrius acknowledges that the Christian in the midst of this second stage of Christian life is still tempted by evil thoughts. At this stage, however, these have more the character of temptations than of sins. Since θεωρια is depends upon the foundation of απαθεια then the thoughts no longer have the power to excite the passions, and thus disrupt contemplation. But this does not mean that the tempter does not try.

As the evil to be overcome in πρακτικη is passion as it is provoked by the evil thoughts, so

the evil to be overcome in θεωρία φυσικη is ignorance. “The sin of the *gnostikos* is false knowledge concerning matters themselves or their contemplations.”<sup>16</sup> The νοϋς is fulfilled by knowing: it attains its maturity; it fulfills its proper nature by knowing. True knowing is impossible so long as the mind is clouded by passions. But even when it attains απαθεια it remains in ignorance. That is, while it may have some sensory knowledge of material things, it does not penetrate to the essence of anything, to its λογος. Contemplation overcomes this ignorance by reaching essential knowledge of things.

The final stage of Christian life is θεωρία θεολογικη, the contemplation of God, also called the reception of essential knowledge, the reception of the Trinity, or simply theology. Evagrius' best known text is this: “If you are a theologian you pray in truth and if you pray in truth you are a theologian.”<sup>17</sup> I fear this is often misunderstood in our day as a statement that theology is no more than the experience of God in prayer: effectively equating theology with religious experience. This is obviously far from what Evagrius intends, with his emphasis on the mind. Within the Evagrian system, this text means that prayer in its fullest sense entails an essential knowledge of God, which effects a union of the mind with God. Thus prayer in its highest sense is equivalent with the last stage of Christian life, theology or the contemplation of God. Since this is knowledge of God and not of anything created, it is a qualitatively different sort of knowledge, and thus of knowing. It is knowledge which transcends that of the λογοι of things, even of the angels. God can never be to us the same sort of object of knowing that creatures are. This leads Evagrius to see θεωρία θεολογικη as a distinct stage from the “lower” contemplations.

This contemplation of God is knowledge which unites knower and Known – and thus the stage is directly comparable to the unitive stage of the later conceptions. Evagrius quotes Jesus'

word to His disciples at the Last Supper, “Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.” (John 15:15) The contemplation of God effects the adoption of the sons of God, by raising the Christian from servant – ignorant of his master – to friend, who is privileged with the knowledge of what his master – now Friend – is about. One might say that this is the stage of divine intimacy.

God can never be exhaustively known. While the mind gains true knowledge of God in his contemplation, it is a knowledge which can never of its very nature be complete. Evagrius is fond of the verse in Psalm 145 (frequently cited in the *Kephalia Gnostica*), “There is no end of His greatness.” The greatness of God is that He is beyond all that we can know of Him, even as our greatest life is to know Him so far as possible. This last stage of contemplation will never end.

The earlier stages overcame evil thoughts and ignorance. At this stage, it is also ignorance of a certain kind which is overcome, through the practice of a true knowledge of God. Yet, because the knowledge of God is inexhaustible, this contemplation is also accompanied by ignorance. Evagrius thus speaks of two kinds of ignorance: one overcome by contemplation, the other the necessary accompaniment of contemplation. As there is limitless knowledge of God in θεωρία θεολογική so there is limitless ignorance. “He who progresses in the ascetic life diminishes the passions; he who progresses in contemplation diminishes ignorance. There will come a time when the passions are completely destroyed, but with regard to ignorance, one kind [of ignorance] I say will have an end, another will not.”<sup>18</sup> In short, Evagrius fits well within the Eastern tradition of apophatic theology.

Evagrius is an ardent proponent of what we know as the principle of reserve. The practices of contemplation should not be taught to young monks and those still in the thrall of passions. “It is not necessary for the *gnostikoi* to tell the young anything, nor let them touch books of this sort, for they are not able to resist the falls that this contemplation entails [i.e., before they have attained *απαθεια* and are ready for it].”<sup>19</sup> He sees that contemplation not only does them no good, since they are not in a position to take advantage of the teaching, but it is genuinely harmful, in that it incites vainglory and envy, as the immature puffs himself up with a pretended attainment which is not real. “Those who are still afflicted with the passions and who [would] peer into the *λογοι* of bodies and incorporeal beings resemble invalids who carry on discussions concerning health. For it is when the soul is only with difficulty shaken by the passions that it is invited to taste these sweet rays of honey.”<sup>20</sup> An important consequence of this is that Evagrius' teaching on the later stages of the Christian life are not straightforward, but rather designed to conceal as much as to reveal. Most of his surviving texts are in the form of pithy “sentences,” generally formed into “centuries,” a form followed by later writers, notably Maximus the Confessor. The principal texts dealing with contemplation, the *Gnostikos* and *Kephalaia Gnostika*, are often obscure – one suspects, intentionally so, in order to conceal the higher knowledge from those who cannot yet take advantage of it. He says in the introduction to the *Praktikos*, “So as not to give that which is holy to the dogs or to cast our pearls before swine some of these matters will be kept in concealment and others alluded to only obscurely, but yet so as to keep them quite clear to those who walk along the same path.”<sup>21</sup> (Moreover, the second two books of his “trilogy” on the three stages of Christian life have not survived in the original Greek, which makes it that much harder to determine with any certainty exactly what Evagrius said, much less meant.<sup>22</sup>) You should assume that my analysis of Evagrius' teaching is not nearly so certain as I have made it appear.

The primary differences between the later traditions of the three ways and Evagrius' conception are rooted in his “intellectualist” approach. The later stages are specifically stages of knowledge, contemplation. The first stage, *πρακτικη*, is geared specifically toward getting the mind in a fit state to be able to contemplate, and thus to know that which will lead to salvation. Insofar as the later conceptions move away from Evagrius' intellectualist underpinnings, they are recast in more general terms.

Likewise the goal of the ascetic life is for Evagrius *απαθεια*, the state in which the passions will no longer cloud the mind and mire it in the ignorance which is death. This not only expresses the general truth of the later conceptions that until we are living an intentionally Christian moral life, we should not expect much deep contact with God in the spirit; it also makes clear the relation between the life of the flesh and the life of the spirit (to shift to Pauline terms). The effect of fleshly life is passions, and the means to deal with passions is *πρακτικη*. Similarly, the eight evil thoughts against which the ascetic life is directed, have an intellectualist character, when compared with the later seven deadly sins. They are not merely temptations, but perversions of the proper functioning of the mind. Only when they have been fought and overcome is the mind ready to receive the essential knowledge (*λογου*) of things and of God.

That said, there is a certain elegance to Evagrius' system. The pieces fit neatly together, while remaining well-grounded in the empirical practice of Christian life. The downside is, of course, that few of us share his intellectualist presuppositions (much less his doctrine of creation or of theological anthropology). The later tradition transforms Evagrius' conceptions as it removes them from his intellectualist (and desert) context. The original significance is not wholly lost in the transformation: the roots are there for those who look. It is perhaps fair to say that what is lost

in coherence in the later conceptions is more than made up in a gain of flexibility.

David Ousley  
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- 1 E.g., F. P. Harton, *The Elements of the Spiritual Life* (London: 1964) pp 299-332: views the three as stages, with some qualifications. Charles Grafton: “The illustration [of the three ways] has its defects. The spiritual work belonging to each condition may be simultaneously present. Nor do we regularly proceed from one degree to another, leaving the former behind. Our progress is rather like a spiral ... .” *Christian & Catholic*, (n.p.: 1914), p. 109
- 2 Harton, p. 307
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp 314-317
- 4 Grafton, p. 114
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 323
- 6 The text of the *Praktikos* is in: Evagre le Pontique, *Traite Pratique ou Le Moine*, ed. & tr., Antoine & Claire Guillaumont, in *Sources Chretiennes* (Paris: 1971), p. 498. Hereafter: TP
- 7 TP, p. 83f.
- 8 The text of the *Praktikos* (TP) is available in an English translation as *Praktikos*, tr. John Eudes Bamberger (Spencer: 1972), p. 33. The text is chapter 60 of the *Praktikos*.
- 9 *Praktikos*, 7; Bamberger, p. 17.
- 10 *Praktikos* 9; Bamberger, p. 17.
- 11 *Praktikos* 13, Bamberger, p. 19.
- 12 *Praktikos* 31, Bamberger, 24.
- 13 *Peri Logismon*, 3; tr Luke Dysinger OSB, available at <http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius>.
- 14 *Praktikos* 15, Bamberger p. 20
- 15 *Gnostikos*, 49; Dysinger, *op. cit.*
- 16 *Gnostikos*, 43; Dysinger, *op. cit.*
- 17 *De Oratione*, 60; text in Migne, PG 79:1180; English translation in Bamberger, *op. cit.*, p. 65
- 18 *Praktikos*, 87, TP 687.
- 19 *Gnostikos* 25, Dysinger *op.cit.*
- 20 *Gnostikos* 25, Dysinger *op. cit.* The distinction between those who have attained ἀπαθεια and are thus ready for contemplation and those who are not is a key theme of the *Gnostikos*.
- 21 *Ad Anatolius* – generally taken to be the introduction to the *Praktikos* – sic; Bamberger, 15.
- 22 In particular, of the major texts of the “trilogy”, only the first (the *Praktikos*) survives in Greek. The *Gnostikos* and *Kephalia Gnostika* survive only in Syriac translation and Greek fragments. To further complicate matters, the six centuries of the *Kephalaia Gnostika* have come down to us in two distinct Syriac translations, one of which seems to show major editing to attenuate Origenist tendencies which were later regarded as suspect. While the other (existing in a single manuscript) seems clearly preferable, it is still possible that it too has been significantly edited. Evagrius' other major surviving work, the *De Oratione*, survives in Greek, attributed in most of the manuscripts to St Nilus.