

## Mystics of the Church 2

### Shapers of Christian Mysticism

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- Origen is usually credited with laying the foundation of Christian mysticism of both *Wesenmystik* (apophatic) and *Brautmystik* (kataphatic) types. The brilliant and prolific Alexandrian deserves a lot of credit certainly, but he aspired, above all, to be a biblical scholar, and owed a considerable debt to other forerunners in early Christianity. Although he became a controversial figure, having both stout defenders and harsh critics, most of the leading churchmen in the East had to take Origen into account when they did theology. Some, for instance, Gregory of Nyssa, were unabashed admirers and borrowers from Origen.

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- I. Origen (185-254/5)
  - A. Origen's Precursors
    - 1. Origen himself made reference to his Hebrew teacher in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and it is likely that he borrowed much of his perspective from Jewish interpretations and applications. Rabbis would have construed the tryst between the Lover and the beloved as referring to God's love for Israel. That application was secondary for Origen, behind his preference for applying them to the individual, but he did not lose sight of it. He could have drawn some encouragement for a more mystical slant from Philo of Alexandria, the contemporary of Jesus and Paul. Philo sought to find the best of Platonism in the Jewish scriptures, and developed a mysticism focused on Light. His works included a *Life of Moses*, in which he pointed up correspondences between Jewish and Platonist ethical teachings.

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- 2. Origen's predecessor in the School of Alexandria, Clement, depended heavily on Philo and emphasized the ethical teachings of scriptures very much as he did. Gregory of Nyssa made a different application, notably to perfection in the spiritual life, but he admired and imitated Philo. Writers in Origen's day didn't credit their sources very often, but both Clement of Alexandria and Origen thought of themselves as Gnostics. They differed, of course, in holding a positive view of the physical, material world, but the Alexandrian Gnostic Valentinian did not diverge far from orthodoxy. In fact, his teachings were not condemned in Rome until around 160 C.E. Origen made substantial use of the Valentinian Heracleon's *Commentary on John*, and he certainly shared their desire for *gnosis*, a higher "spiritual knowledge."

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- 3. Origen did not credit Clement of Alexandria, evidently because the latter fled Alexandria during the persecution under Septimius Severus that claimed the life of Origen's father Leonidas, but it is clear that he owed a considerable debt to him. Clement stoutly defended the quest for *gnosis* beyond the level of faith and, like the Gnostics, used allegorical interpretation on the New Testament as well as the Old. Origen, however, did diverge from Clement's concern for the moral teachings of scripture in his preference for their spiritual teachings. Clement aspired to have a mystical experience but evidently never had one.

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- 4. Martyrs deserve some notice in looking at Origen's precursors. Christian spirituality, as Louis Bouyer argued, began with the martyrs, and several martyrs, beginning with Stephen, recorded visions or other experiences of Christ or God. Ignatius of Antioch sought union with Christ in martyrdom. "It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth," he wrote to the Romans. "I seek Him who died for our sake. I desire Him who rose for us. The pains of birth are upon me." (Romans 6.1)

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- 5. Especially noteworthy was the Carthaginian noblewoman Perpetua and her serving woman Felicity. Perpetua wrote the first Christian “diary” or “journal” recording their experience. She reported numerous visions. In a vision of her brother, who had died a short time before, Christ appeared as the Shepherd to console and reassure her about him. When captors taunted Felicity as she cried out in pain during childbirth, asking what she would do when they tortured her, she responded, “Now it is I that suffer what I suffer; but then there will be another in me, who will suffer for me, because I also am about to suffer for Him.” (*The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* 5.2.) A martyr consciousness stood at the center of Origen’s spirituality for reasons evident in his life story.

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- B. Origen’s Life Story
  - 1. Origen was born in Alexandria around 185, the first theologian born to Christian parents. In 202 Origen’s father, Leonidas, suffered martyrdom during the persecution under Emperor Septimius Severus (193-211). Origen himself attempted to follow him, but his mother saved him by hiding his clothes. To his chagrin, his teacher, Clement, fled, and Origen took his place in the school of Alexandria. A year later he became the head of the school and began his strict ascetic regimen. His zeal led him to emasculate himself. Between 202 and 215 he traveled to Rome and to Arabia. During troubles in Alexandria, in 315 he traveled to Palestine, preaching in Caesarea and in Aelia (the Roman name for Jerusalem).

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- 2. Between 218 and 230 Origen devoted himself to literary activities. In 230 he made a second trip to Palestine. His ordination by bishops there prompted Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria to exile him. In 231 he took up residence in Caesarea, where he founded an apologetic-missionary school that attracted students from throughout the Roman Empire. In 250 he was imprisoned and tortured during the severe persecution under Decius (249-251). He died ca. 254 or 255. Not even death gave Origen rest. He came under severe attack in the late fourth century from Epiphanius of Salamis, Jerome, and others, but he had stout defenders, including John Chrysostom. The Second Council of Constantinople in 553, however, formally condemned fifteen of his views.

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- C. Writings about Spirituality
  - 1. Origen wrote so prolifically I will not use space to list writings other than those which bear on his mystical theology. I should underline, however, that he expended most of his energy on the Bible. Sadly, because of his condemnation, many of his works have perished. Writings illuminative of his spirituality include about seven-tenths of his *Commentary on John*, several sections of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, and a treatise *On Prayer*. For his *Commentary on John* he drew heavily from the Gnostic Heracleon.

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- 2. In his interpretation of scriptures Origen posited three senses: literal, moral, and allegorical or spiritual. He had no equal in dealing with the literal, but he believed that not all scripture could be interpreted literally. All, however, had a spiritual meaning, which he pressed to discover. He believed that symbols and types pervade the whole universe and that everything had a double aspect—corporeal and sensible, which is accessible to all, and spiritual and mystical, which only the mature (“perfect”) can know. People thus fall into two classes, the simple and the mature. Whereas the simple were content with faith in Christ crucified, the mature sought to ascend beyond this to contemplation of the Word dwelling with the Father.

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- D. Laying the Foundations for Christian Mysticism
  - 1. Although we should not label Origen the originator of Christian mysticism, he does merit recognition as the shaper of its foundations. He combined the roles of exegete, theologian, and mystic. He prepared the way for the monastic turn that mysticism took in subsequent centuries by his ascetic lifestyle and fostering of the ideal of virginity. His thought supplied the major force shaping the theology that grew out of the desert experience. The desert Fathers and Mothers divided in following Origen, however. Some defended him stoutly; others attacked him.

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- 2. Thoroughly immersed in both Platonism and the Bible, Origen stood in exactly the right position to lay a foundation for both the *Wesenmystik* and the *Brautmystik* traditions. In Platonic thought God is Being beyond Itself. Origen framed this in a Trinitarian way. The Father alone is Unoriginated Being. The Logos-Son is Eternally Generated from the Father and thus subordinate. So, too, the Spirit. The First God remains always far beyond human conception and knowledge. Through the Second God (and Origen did use the phrase Second God), the Logos, however, God has made Godself known through the Incarnation.

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- 3. With reference to humankind nothing concerned Origen more than to preserve human freedom. In creation God gave intellects freedom. The "fall" resulted from the failure of humans properly to exercise their freedom. The restoration to an unimpeded relationship with God depended on the Logos coming as the model and the teacher for all other souls as they awaken to the spirit within them. In his insistence on the end being as the beginning, Origen was pushed toward his theory of the final restoration of all things, *apokatastasis*. The central metaphor for this process of return is the ascension, according to McGinn (*The Foundations of Mysticism* 115), the main motif of his mysticism. As in 1 Corinthians 15:28, in the end God will be "all in all."

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- 4. Origen presented the journey in biblical language. He found the pattern for the mystical ascent in the three books assigned to Solomon. *Proverbs* teaches the *purgative way* with its moral science. *Ecclesiastes* exemplifies the *illuminative way* with its natural science. *The Song of Songs* “instills love and desire of celestial and divine things under the image of the Bride and the Groom, teaching how we come to fellowship with God through paths of love and charity” (*Commentary* prol.). The journey, of course, is not simple and direct but complex and marked by constant warfare. It entails what later generations called “discernment of spirits” and other mystical aspects such as ecstasy.

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- 5. Origen used a variety of symbols and images drawn from the Bible to describe the return of the soul to God. He stood at the head of Christian mystics who argued that erotic language is the most appropriate way to speak of it. The mystics insisted that they were transforming *eros* to lead it back to its original form. McGinn remarks that in Origen’s view “God himself must be Eros if eros implanted in us is what returns us to him.” (119) “Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs* contains the first Christian theoretical exposition of this transformation.” (120) Origen marked the first defense of the strict division between sexual practice

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- and mystical endeavor. The person who thinks only of *amor carnalis* should not even read the Song of Songs; it is for one who thinks on the level of *amor caelestis*. From Clement Origen took over the teaching about the spiritual senses of the soul and insisted that the best way to read the inner text of the soul is the language of the Song of Songs. The surviving books of his commentary give numerous examples of how the spiritual senses guide the soul's mystical transformation. McGinn says, "Although Origen uses the full range of the erotic images of the Song of Songs to describe how the spiritual senses contact the Divine Lover, spiritual 'touch' and spiritual 'vision' have a certain priority and seem to communicate a more intimate connection." (124)

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- 6. Scholars have debated whether Origen thought of knowledge of God in "intellectual" or in "affective" terms. McGinn insists that Origen's mystical *gnosis* is both, "a possession of the truth that satisfies both the noetic and the erotic dynamism of the soul." (125) Platonic mysticism was not a purely intellectual one, and Origen's mysticism focused on the transformation of eros ii implanted in the soul by God, who is EROS I. Origen was the first Christian mystic to make charity an important element of theological speculation; Augustine and the 12<sup>th</sup> century mystics carried this further.

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- 7. Origen also played a leading role in consideration of the relation between action and contemplation. He based his conviction about the superiority of contemplative life on the Mary/Martha story of Luke 10:38-42, but he insisted also that both modes must work together in the soul's instruction.
- 8. Origen did not see mystical journey as a solitary one; it is rooted in the life of the church. The love tryst between the Lover and the individual soul presupposes the same with the church or is another dimension of it. Yet grace must be personally appropriated. In his treatise *On Prayer* Origen sought to show that prayer must pervade the entire life of a Christian. In his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* he appropriated the earliest Christian ideal for attaining God in the present, that is, by witnessing for him by dying.

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- 9. The vision of God begins in this life, but it is completed only in the restoration of all things when the mind "will think God and see God and hold God and God will be the mode and measure of its every movement" (*On First Things* 3.6.3). Origen did not hesitate to say that contemplation of God may lead to divinization or deification of the soul. This does not happen because the soul is of divine origin, as in Platonism or Gnosticism, but by participation in God. He frequently used the language of union with God, too, but he modeled it on the union of Lover and beloved in the Song of Songs and not on the Platonist concept.

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- II. The Desert Fathers and Mothers
  - Origen was not a monk, but he lived an ascetic and contemplative lifestyle that served as an incentive to the development of the monastic movement from the late third century on. Thanks in great part to him, mysticism took a turn toward monasticism. Not all monks would have qualified as mystics, but the contemplative life encouraged the quest of mystics for union with God and emphasis upon solitude and silence provided an environment in which attentiveness to the Presence of God could thrive. It is not surprising, therefore, to find most mystics among the monks in the late antique and medieval periods.

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- *The Life of Anthony, The Sayings of the Fathers, The Life of Pachomius, Cassian's Conferences, and Palladius's Lives* contain numerous accounts of experiences which might be termed mystical. Abba Isaac, for instance, reported: "Perhaps by some joyous rapture I feel that the Holy Spirit has visited me, and I have gained a redirected purpose, a concentration of mind, a liveliness of spirit. And through these overflowing sensations I discern a sudden disclosure by the lord of sacred truths hidden from me till now." (Cassian, *Conferences*, 10.10.)

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- The aim of monks was to fulfill the beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8). Abba Isaac identified the solitary’s purpose as “to seek to possess in some measure, even while mortal man, the first bridal gifts from the heavenly country and its glory.” The goal of all true goodness, he added, is “that the mind may every day be lifted beyond the material sphere to the realm of the Spirit, until the whole life and every stirring of the heart becomes one continuous prayer.” (Cassian 10.7.)

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- III. Gregory of Nyssa
  - Origen had strong advocates among the “great Cappadocians”—Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-379), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330- c. 395), and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389)—the anti-Origenism of the late fourth century notwithstanding. Where Basil of Caesarea fostered the Pachomian-style of monasticism over against rigorous eremitism with his rules, Gregory of Nyssa advanced apophatic mysticism. Gregory was a thinker of great originality and knowledge, especially of Platonism and Neoplatonism.

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### – A. Life

- 1. Gregory belonged to the third generation of a deeply devout Christian family of Cappadocia shaped in a Christian mold by his older sister Macrina (c. 327-379). He was the third son of ten children. Macrina won her brother Basil from a promising secular career to the priesthood. Gregory wrote a *Life of Macrina the Younger*, following her death in 379.
- 2. Gregory was born ca. 335. At age twenty his church ordained him as a lector (reader). He chose a career as a rhetorician (lawyer). In 338 he declined to join his friend Gregory of Nazianzus in a monastery at Anesis in Pontus. In 371 he was appointed Bishop of Nyssa to resist the Emperor Valens.

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- 3. Valens banished Gregory in 374. During his exile, he experienced a “conversion” to a more devout life. Following Valens’ death in 377, he returned to Nyssa. After the death of his brother Basil in 379 he continued Basil’s theological, monastic, and ecclesiastical work. Basil favored the Pachomian monastic model. He stood out as the major theologian at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Not content with the life of a bishop, in 389 he began to focus his energies on the spiritual life as contrasted with Basil of Caesarea’s focus on monastic and ecclesiastical leadership. Gregory died in 395.

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- B. Writings and Thought
  - Gregory wrote polemical treatises against Eunomius, Apollinarius, and Abladius (a tri-theist) and expounded his theology in his *Catechetical Orations*. Deeply influenced by Origen, he focused on the mystical sense of scriptures in his *Life of Moses*, *On the Pythonissa*, and homilies on Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the Lord's Prayer, and the Beatitudes. Ascetical writings include a treatise on virginity, another on perfection, and his *Life of Macrina the Younger*. He ardently defended the Nicene Creed and distinguished carefully between the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit. He shared Origen's conviction that ultimately even souls in hell and the devils will return to God. He held the fish-hook theory of the Atonement.

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- C. Spirituality
  - 1. Gregory tilted toward the Platonist side of Origen. Whereas Origen balanced apophatic and kataphatic positions, Gregory favored the apophatic. God is absolute good and absolute virtue. Insofar as human beings can understand the divine nature, "whatever It may be in Itself, [It] is absolute goodness, holiness and joy, power, glory and purity, eternity that is always absolutely the same." (*Lord's Prayer*, Ancient Christian Writers, 38.) Since God transcends all cognitive thought, God is ultimately unknowable, beyond human understanding. We can at best have only partial understanding by constantly following God. To see God is to know that God is unknowable. (*Life of Moses* 2.162-165, 234f., 236-238, 252.)

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- 2. Knowledge of God, insofar as possible, depends on purity. Only the pure in heart see God. As human beings, we have free will and are capable of cooperating with the divine will. We are placed between God and the Evil One and have to make a choice. “We men [and women] have in ourselves, in our own nature and by our own choice, the causes of light and darkness, since we place ourselves in whichever sphere we wish to be.” (Ibid. 2.80; *Classics of Western Spirituality*, 17.) The Holy Spirit guides those who are worthy toward the good. “For truly the assistance which God gives to our nature is provided to those who correctly live the life of virtue.” (Ibid. 2.44.)

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- 3. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* Gregory used Moses' experience to explain mystical experience:
  - Now the doctrine we are taught here is as follows. Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which overshadows all appearances and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves below all that human nature can attain, she enters within the

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- secret chamber of the divine darkness. Now she leaves outside all that can be grasped by sense or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible. And here God is, as the Scriptures tell us in connection with Moses: *But Moses went to the dark cloud wherein God was.* (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 11; *From Glory to Glory*, ed. Jean Daniélou, SJ, 246-7.)

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- 3. Gregory adopted the term *epektasis* used by Paul in Philippians 3:13 to characterize his understanding of the mystical experience. The word means “stretching forward” or “straining.” In Gregory’s view there is a heightened sense of self-possession in the possession of God within one’s soul and the sense of oneself into God transcendent. He seems himself to have experienced what he described. (Elmer O’Brien, *Varieties of Mystic Experience*, 46.) This concept negated the pessimism of Greek philosophers who projected the gradual decay or decline of the universe into nothingness.

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- IV. Evagrius Ponticus
  - Evagrius Ponticus (345-399) synthesized the Hellenistic intellectualism of the Greek Fathers and the mysticism of the heart of the desert Fathers and mothers. Although he is one of the most important names in Christian spirituality, he remains virtually unknown except to specialists. Through his *Praktikos* and *Chapters on Prayer* he left his stamp on the entire monastic tradition after him. He deeply influenced Palladius, Cassian, Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius), and Maximus the Confessor.

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- A. Life
  - Little is known of his life. Born in Ibora, Pontus, about 345, he was the son of a country bishop (*chorepiskopos*). He came to the attention of the Cappadocians. Basil of Caesarea ordained him a lector, Gregory of Nazianzus a deacon. Attracted to Constantinople, he attained considerable social prominence for his support of the Nicene Creed. His religious fervor dwindling, he fell in love with the wife of a prominent member of society and, warned by a dream, fled to Jerusalem. There he became a disciple of Melania the Elder, a Roman noble woman who had read extensively in Origen's works. After a period of illness, about 383 he went to live with a group of Origenist monks at Nitria in Egypt. There he took up the life of a severe ascetic. Through occasional forays to Alexandria, he came to the attention of Theophilus, the Patriarch of Egypt, who wanted to make him a bishop. Evagrius declined the honor and continued to live as a monk. He died on the Feast of Epiphany (January 6), 399.

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### – B. Writings

- Evagrius's most important work was the trilogy sometimes known as *Monachkos*, in which he laid out the basic structure of his view of the mystical life. The *Praktikos* devotes one hundred chapters to the ascetic life, the *Gnostikos* fifty chapters to spiritual knowledge, and *Kephalaia Gnostica* six hundred chapters of ninety axioms to Evagrius's speculative mysticism. His surviving corpus includes a treatise *On Prayer* and several works addressed chiefly to monks. Most of his works appear in chapter or century form, i.e., with aphorisms organized by hundreds.

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### – C. Thought

- 1. Some scholars have disputed whether Evagrius's thought is Christian or not. Von Balthasar believed he leaned more toward Buddhism, but notables such as Karl Rahner, John Eudes Bamberger, and Antoine Guillaumont have defended him, and all recent interpreters agree on his influence.
- 2. His theology is fundamentally Origenist, although with important differences from Origen. Like Origen, he viewed reality in three stages—creation, fall and second creation, and the eventual return. The return of the fallen rational creation likewise goes through three stages—*praktike*, *physike*, and *theologike*. "The goal of *praktike* is to purify

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- the intellect and to render it impassible; that of the *physike* is to reveal the truth hidden in all beings; but to remove the intellect from all material things and to turn it toward the First Cause is a gift of *theologike*.” (*Gnostikos* 49.)
- 3. As Evagrius conceived of the human situation, our basic struggle is with *logismoi* or evil and passionate thoughts or tendencies. He posited a solution in the development of discernment of spirits. Like Origen, he insisted that the process of return could only take place through the taking on of human flesh by the preexistent Christ. Our minds can ascend through the power of the Incarnate Christ, and the essential

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- factor in this is prayer. Prayer is in the truest sense essential *gnosis* of the Trinity. “If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian.” (*Prayer* 60.) “Prayer is the continual intercourse of the spirit with God. What state of soul then is required that the spirit might thus strain after its Master without wavering, living constantly with him without intermediary?” (*Prayer* 3.) McGinn has remarked: “Evagrius is one of the first who made contemplative prayer the essence of the monastic life and thus linked the forces of monasticism and mysticism in a powerful way.” (151)

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- 4. Evagrius also underscored the importance of developing *apatheia* (detachment), which we attain “when the spirit begins to see its own light, when it remains in a state of tranquility in the presence of images it has during sleep and when it maintains its calm as it beholds the affairs of life.” (*Praktikos* 64.) Such *apatheia* begets *agape* as its child. It is a necessary precondition for pure prayer. Acquisition of *apatheia* enables one to move forward and upward to *gnostike*.

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- 5. Whereas *gnosis* below the level of the Trinity is characterized by multiplicity, the *gnosis* of the Trinity is marked by simplicity. Several questions have arisen concerning the nature of Evagrius’s teaching concerning *gnosis* of the Trinity, but he was clearly Trinitarian, not a pagan Neoplatonist. Like all Christian mystics, he insisted that God surpasses all human thought, but he developed his own brand of apophaticism through his teaching about infinite ignorance. He distinguished between ignorance of created reality and ignorance of the Trinity, which would never end. Although he would rank among the most intellectualist of the Christian mystics, that does not seem to take him outside the Christian fold. Much of the intellectual emphasis originated out of his debate with Gnostics in the desert during the late fourth century.

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