Spiritual Struggle and Gregory of Nyssa’s Theory of Perpetual Ascent: An Orthodox Christian Virtue Ethic

Stephen M. Meawad

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SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE AND GREGORY OF NYSSA’S THEORY OF PERPETUAL ASCENT: AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN VIRTUE ETHIC

A Dissertation Submitted to the
McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Stephen M. Meawad

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PERPETUAL ASCENT: AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN VIRTUE ETHIC

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ABSTRACT

SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE AND GREGORY OF NYSSA’S THEORY OF PERPETUAL ASCENT: AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN VIRTUE ETHIC

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May 2019

Dissertation supervised by Darlene F. Weaver, Ph.D.

This project utilizes virtue ethics as an especially suitable lens by which to develop an Orthodox Christian ethical model generally. At the same time, virtue ethics carries with it some complexities that are in turn mitigated by the particulars of this Orthodox model—spiritual struggle and perpetual progress, or *epektasis*. Spiritual struggle in this project, which ultimately shifts the emphasis from virtue’s *acquisition* to its *pursuit*, is defined as the exertion of effort in all conceivable dimensions—physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual—with intent to attain a semblance of, knowledge of, and intimacy with Jesus Christ in community, for God and for others. Gregory of Nyssa’s theory of *epektasis* assumes a basic three-tiered conception of perpetual ascent, beginning with purification and detachment from fleshly passions, strengthening the soul by increasing in similitude to God, and ending with unity with God, that is, with inexpressible and transformative experience of God. God—the infinite, the
Good, and the Paragon of virtue—functions as the orienting principle of this perpetual ascent, mitigating the issues of the unity of the virtues and the self-centeredness and self-effacement of virtue. This project goes on to provide two of many potential concrete examples of this Orthodox ethical model as applied to the body in the practice of asceticism and as applied to Scripture in the practice of sacred reading. In the end, a model of love of God and neighbor emerges that is characteristic of Orthodox Christianity’s inherent integrative nature, that locates God as telos, and that construes virtue as an enabler, marker, and result of the struggle-laden, epektatic journey to God.
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Ch. 1 – A Framework for Struggle and Perpetual Ascent

I – Introduction

There has been a shift in the last few decades towards a focus on virtue and character among Christian ethicists, especially among Catholic and some Protestant ethicists. Elizabeth Anscombe’s article on “Modern Moral Philosophy” in 1958 and Alasdair MacIntyre’s work *After Virtue* are often credited with the resurgence of this Aristotelian-based virtue ethic, which in turn sparked the interest of many philosophers and theologians. This shift toward virtue is both a reaction against an exclusive focus on rules, principles, and duties (such as with deontological ethics), on results and effects (such as with consequentialist ethics), and on problems and dilemmas (as in quandary ethics).\(^1\) Deontological and consequentialist theories often lead to ethical impasses in which multiple sides of ethical conundrums are thoroughly dissected only to be pinned up polemically against their respective opposing views. Stanley Hauerwas was right to observe that “[n]o ethic is formulated in isolation from the social conditions of its time.”\(^2\) In the politically and theologically polarized environment of contemporary American culture academic work in ethics also reflects and contributes to our social divisions.

Take, for example, the method by which deontological ethics, with its prioritization of universal rules and obligations, approaches certain end-of-life care issues.\(^3\) Prior to the completion of certain actions, it is necessary to assess the appropriateness of those actions in

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\(^3\) Darwall, 1-3. For a brief list of some deontological duties, see pp. 4-6.
specific situations. Some Christian deontologists argue that in consideration of these issues, the principle of the dignity and inviolability of every human life takes precedence. Their hard-set motto is “harm not.” This in turn could lead one to conclude that ventilators and feeding tubes should be used indefinitely, so long as a patient’s vital signs remain satisfactory. These ethicists could further argue that the advancement of modern medicine is a gift from God to be used to its furthest extent. Other Christian deontologists, instead, could prioritize the basic principles of love and compassion. These deontologists could argue that the pain of suffering at the end of life would necessitate the removal of a suffering patient from a ventilator or feeding tube if love and compassion are to be exhibited.

A consequentialist presented with the same issues would claim that “what is morally right or wrong to do depends on what would bring about the best consequences,” or “best overall outcome.” In this view and in contrast to deontological ethics, moral values and moral conduct are merely instrumental and are instead superseded by considering the effects of given actions. Thus, if pulling a ventilator or removing a feeding tube results in the death of a patient, and if life was deemed an absolute good despite the circumstances, suffering, or lack of dignity entailed, then these actions would be deemed wrong. Yet, an impasse could still be reached if a consequentialist reversed the prioritization of consequences, placing the economic stress from medical expenses or physical and emotional suffering of the patient and family over and against the consequences of death.

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As a corrective to these ethical systems, virtue ethics offers a fresh approach that focuses more on inner motives and less on analyzing isolated, external actions. In contrast to the other systems mentioned, virtue ethics gives proper weight to the intentions and moral dispositions of an agent. It is a broader approach that aims to move toward an ethic of character and away from principles. Yet, this does not imply that actions are altogether ignored in an ethic of virtue. Instead, an action is evaluated on the basis of intention and disposition, not instrumentality, intrinsic good, physical structure, or consequences. Dispositions involve our affects and our inclination to act or feel one way or another. The virtuous person does the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason. Thus, virtue ethics, in the example of the end-of-life care issues noted, would instead premise its investigation on the moral disposition behind the decisions, the character formation that would result, and the virtue or lack thereof of the people making the decisions. Yet, virtue ethics’ primary aim is not necessarily to speak to these issues directly by solving complex ethical dilemmas but to create systems or institutions by which people develop character, virtue, and a “moral compass” by which to navigate through life, not excluding the ethical dilemmas that will inevitably arise. The priority is vastly different. The dilemmas that have tended to occupy the majority of ethical quandaries are in a sense the final step of a broader series of events that led to the issue. Virtue ethics chooses to focus more on the steps prior to that final step, so that when the time comes to make a difficult decision, that person can make a good and morally motivated decision from a place of free-flowing virtue even amidst

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8 Ibid., 3-4.
9 Hauerwas, Vision and Virtue, 48-52.
external influences. At the same time, actions do not only flow from one’s character and moral disposition, but they also express and form that very character.

While the surge in interest towards virtue ethics was born out of a real need to recover neglected dimensions of spiritual and moral life, contemporary virtue ethics did not stay entirely clear of its own problems. Of these discussions, I will briefly highlight those that will be directly addressed by the concepts developed in this project, namely the development and application of the concept of spiritual struggle through Gregory of Nyssa’s theory on epektasis, or perpetual ascent. By spiritual struggle, I mean the exertion of effort in all conceivable dimensions—physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual—with intent to attain a semblance of, knowledge of, and intimacy with Jesus Christ in community, for God and for others. Though virtue ethicists are not unaware of these problems, the approach of this project in placing spiritual struggle within Gregory’s epektatic framework will cast new light on potential solutions.

The language of spiritual struggle stays true to the distance virtue ethics should keep from reducing moral life to principles and rules, while pointing to a way of life that is undeniably effective, evidenced by its ability to lead to transformation toward virtue and ultimately God-

11 I find the concern to bring Scripture into fruitful discussion with ethics, not by listing commands and imperatives but by Scriptural formation, in harmony with the goals of virtue ethics. Deontological and consequentialist ethics have focused too much on obligations, exhortations, and rules, but virtue ethics shifts this focus to character formation. This same shift is the very thing needed to mend Scripture and ethics, and it is for the very same reason. Scripture should be used as a former of character, not as a book in which only rules are sought. Lisa Sowle Cahill agrees in "Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values," in Character and Scripture (Grand Rapids, 2002), 3-17. Servais Pinckaers addresses this issue, pointing to the Patristic era for its resolution in "Scripture and the Renewal of Moral Theology," in The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology, ed. John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2005), 46-63. Similarly, Allen Verhey points to early Christian communities as places of moral discourse through the story of Jesus: Allen Verhey, Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). James Gustafson, almost two decades earlier pointed to the problem of searching only for mandates in Scripture and ignoring the spirit of Scripture. However, he did not remedy the problem with a solution such as virtue ethics. James Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study," in Readings in Moral Theology No. 4: The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 151-77.
likeness. Spiritual struggle requires a consistent, focused dedication to a certain holistic way of life. Virtue ethics does the same in that it takes actions seriously but locates them within a wider purview of the person. This purview or way of being is certainly manifested through actions, but the source of the actions is a determination to struggle for the sake of progress in life with and toward Jesus Christ. Similarly, virtue ethics gives priority to the formation of agents of character and virtue. The emphasis on character formation, again, is held against theories that place more emphasis on what to do and what not to do, given a set of circumstances.

At the heart of the concepts of spiritual struggle and perpetual ascent are two important insights that mitigate some of virtue ethic’s current complexities. The first is that emphasizing spiritual struggle makes virtue’s acquisition secondary to virtue’s pursuit. Asking whether or not an agent is en route to virtue instead of whether an agent has attained virtue will in turn ease anxieties regarding whether the ideal of the perfect moral agent is an attainable one and how moral luck should be understood in relation to the acquisition of virtue. The second insight is that Gregory’s theory of perpetual ascent enables a shift away from the self and away from virtue for the sake of virtue by reorienting an agent’s concern toward God and others. This will highlight Christianity’s chief commandments of love of God and neighbor and will at the same time clarify confusion regarding the unity to the virtues, lend insight into an agent’s ability to “possess” a virtue, and alleviate some of the tensions in virtue ethics regarding self-centeredness and self-effacement.

The trajectory of this epektatic journey toward semblance of God and simultaneously toward the pursuit of virtue is determined by grace-enabled spiritual struggle. Referencing the gospel of St. John, chapter 17, this journey in knowledge of God is the beginning of eternal life, and this is what is at stake in this discussion. To clarify these claims and to demonstrate two of
many possible examples of spiritual struggle, I will tap into two traditional Orthodox Christian devotional and spiritual practices—asceticism and sacred reading. If an ethic of virtue were constructed in the early Church, whose influence on Orthodoxy cannot be understated, these would be two of its most essential components. Scholarly attention to and ecclesial emphasis on asceticism has waned contemporarily. Yet, it remains true that ancient Christianity strongly attested to the ability of asceticism (contrary to some beliefs) to (re)orient one’s focus onto God and neighbor, away from one’s self.

Regarding sacred reading and its role in Christian ethics, there have been a variety of different opinions as to the proper place of sacred reading in ethical formation. These discussions have often taken place among Catholic ethicists, whose conceptions of ethics have experienced some degree of separation from Scripture. This has been clear at least since Vatican II “admonished moral theologians to draw more fully on the teaching of Scripture.”¹² I suggest that understanding sacred reading as a form of spiritual struggle or moral asceticism—a concept more deeply grounded in the early Church and subsequent Orthodox Christian sensibilities—allows for progress on this ἐπεκτάτικη journey towards semblance to God. As a result, virtue ethics can mine Scripture more deeply and holistically to tap its formative power for creating virtuous agents.

This project, then, will serve as an Orthodox Christian contribution to virtue ethics through the application of its Patristic heritage to this field, its understanding of grace and works through a model of divine-human co-agency, its traditions rooted in deep devotional, ascetical and spiritual practices, and its emphasis on spiritual struggle as a means to pursue semblance to God—in itself an underemphasized feature of contemporary virtue ethics—and consequently

virtue. There have been few Orthodox voices in virtue ethics, and Joseph Woodill’s suggestion that Patristics could offer something unique to virtue ethics is part of the challenge undertaken in this project. More than just offering Patristic voices, it is typical of Orthodox theology to present holistic models by which to understand and search for truths. As such, spiritual struggle seems to be of the most valuable contributions Orthodoxy can make to virtue ethics. Spiritual struggle emphasizes the pursuit of virtue as a lifelong progress toward God and contributes to the understanding of human agency in relation to divine grace.

Furthermore, this project will contribute to Orthodox Christian literature, especially on the side of ethics. While many traditions of thought in western Christian theology tend to display disciplinary boundaries, Orthodox Christian theology does not. In Orthodoxy the study of ethics as a distinct theological area is a recent development, since addressing ethical quandaries was seen as the responsibility of all theologians and faithful. Western and Eastern approaches to theology have had their pros and cons: systematization has led to deep analyses of complex topics, but it has often fragmented otherwise composite topics that require interdependence for the most accurate assessment. On the other hand, non-fragmentation has preserved the holistic reality that characterizes the complexity of truths, but it has not allowed for the same depth of analysis as that engaged in western systematic theology. Perhaps because Orthodox Christianity is less fragmented into theological sub-disciplines, it has never subscribed itself to any particular ethics. I am suggesting virtue ethics as the most compatible form of ethics for Orthodox Christianity, and this project will in more than one way demonstrate this compatibility. In this way, Orthodox Christianity can consider more seriously and locate itself within ethical and moral dialogues more prominent in the west.

2 – Complexities in Virtue Ethics Mitigated by Spiritual Struggle and Perpetual Ascent

2.1 – The Virtuous Agent and the Unity of the Virtues

Aristotle, whose influence on contemporary virtue ethics cannot be understated, in his *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian* ethics, presents an anthropology that emphasizes the perfection of human powers or potentialities within a comprehensive teleology. The focus on perfecting human nature leads to an emphasis on given conditions and confidence in fixed *teloi*. At the same time, for Aristotle, habituation in the good is a dynamic process toward a fixed end. Contrarily, an ethic of spiritual struggle and perpetual ascent relies less on a settled account of human nature or fixed ends. The ethic presented in this project is dynamic not just in the acquisition of virtue but also in relation to each person’s set of circumstances as well as the perpetual nature of the *telos* that drives the ethic. In other words, the shape of the journey of this ethic differs from that of an Aristotelian ethic of virtue as a result of the dynamism of human nature itself and the differences in *teloi*. This dynamism will also have consequences for the discussion below concerning moral luck. The *telos* of any contemporary ethic of virtue is the acquisition of virtue. The dynamic and perpetual *telos* in this project is unity with God, aided by the acquisition of virtue and a marker of which is the acquisition of virtue. Thus, for Aristotle, unless a settled anthropological account is agreed upon, the starting and ending points of the journey toward the acquisition of virtue cannot be discussed. This project, however, is more amenable to concerns about who gets to stipulate what characterizes human nature. These differences will be teased out below, throughout the project, and in the concluding chapter.

Additionally, the emphasis in Aristotelian-based virtue ethics on an agent who requires little deliberation prior to ethical action has had implications for those who have yet to attain
such unimpeded deliberation. For example, in Julia Annas’ account of an Aristotelian-based virtue ethic, she presents the concept of “flow,” which is unmediated by deliberation, is active not passive, and the experience of which is enjoyable in and of itself, although it also may fulfill a greater end.14 A virtuous agent practicing such flow finds no interruption in the exercise of thought prior to acting virtuously.15 In this way, an agent still in the process of acquiring such a natural emanation of virtue will often be viewed as lesser than the agent who already has acquired flow. One potential problem with such an understanding is that all human beings presumably fall into the category of agents who are still in process. Aristotle’s “good man”16 or virtuous agent is on one hand a telos to be realized here and now, and on the other hand, is an expectation that cannot be realized. One of two scenarios would be required to rid Aristotle’s ethics of this paradox. Either the expectation for a person adhering to his ethics of acquiring perfect virtue would need to be dismissed or at least lowered, or the ideal of a perfect virtuous agent would need to exist regularly in society to demonstrate the attainability of this ideal. In this vein, the spectrum of virtue that Annas admits exists in most if not all societies is a more helpful depiction that falls closer to a realistic picture in which most people find themselves en route, struggling toward, virtue.

It remains the case, however, that in a strictly Aristotelian ethic, this process, i.e. the struggle, is sometimes the hurdle standing in front of the real goal—unimpeded virtue in a perfectly virtuous agent.17 That is, when virtue becomes a natural emanation of one’s character, the struggle has diminished and the agent is considered morally superior to the one who must

15 Ibid., 77.
17 Annas, Intelligent Virtue, 28.
still toil against particular vices. Put another way, the struggler is always subordinate to the virtuous agent par excellence. Jean Porter’s comparison of those who struggle and those who have attained perfect virtue sheds some light on why this prioritization may be in place. While there is value to those who struggle, the idea of elevating the position of those who have perfected virtue, no longer needing to struggle, safeguards against valuing the struggle as a good in and of itself. Porter maintains that today we highly value struggle, and that the reason for this may be that most people are struggling and have not yet perfected virtues.¹⁸

This problem is compounded when Aristotle’s account of the virtuous agent is considered further. His account of the virtues tends to present a kind of unity among the virtues that is both difficult to observe and to defend and that contributes to a devaluation in the process of acquiring virtue. As noted, it is difficult to pinpoint where in society a complete and perfect moral agent can be found. In the same vein, most people can claim to exhibit partial virtue, but few will claim to possess complete, unified virtue. Even within that claim to partial virtue, there exists an observed reality that some of those partial virtues are more completely acquired than others. Could one conclude that partial virtue is no virtue at all? If so, then again, there exists no ideal agent, rendering the system impractical. In chapters 3 and 6, the unity of the virtues are located within, and only within, God Himself, a semblance of which is attained by humans.

The Aristotelian unity of the virtues is taken in part from Plato based on a reasoning that presents conflict as the result of a character flaw or a deficiency in virtue. Conflict presumably disrupts the unity that ought to exist in the “good life” and the “good” human being.¹⁹ This means that all one’s actions must be directed toward a particular end, and any actions that fall out

¹⁹MacIntyre, 157.
of sync with this focus are necessarily a result of vice. Moreover, the presence of vice points to a deficiency not just in the virtue to which that vice is associated but also to a number of other virtues. This is an all-or-none model in some ways, and in its need to denounce imperfection, it leaves struggle doubly-subordinated—first because of the superiority of an agent who is unimpededly virtuous in comparison to an agent en route to virtue, and second because of the hyper-exaltation of an all-virtuous moral agent.

A brief look at some of the flawed saints of Scripture, however, paints a different picture of possessing virtue. Numerous characters that were exalted for one virtue or another are seen exhibiting moments of weakness and flaws in character. Among these is Moses the prophet, chosen by God as the most humble of all His people to lead the Israelites out of slavery. This same Moses was also guilty of murder and of direct disobedience to God when he struck twice a rock instead of speaking to the rock. The same partial possession of virtue is seen with Jonah the prophet whom God chose to preach to the people of Nineveh but who was at the same time cowardly in his mission and petty in his complaints to God. Similarly, Paul calls out Peter, the great apostle of Christ, for his hypocrisy, along with the blessed Barnabas, in their dealings with Jews and Gentiles. The list goes on, and it is clear that throughout history and into contemporary times (from Cyril of Alexandria’s excessive austerity to Augustine’s lasciviousness to Teresa of Calcutta’s moments of doubt in God’s presence) even “God’s chosen” are imperfect, possessing partial virtue but not a singular Aristotelian unity of the virtues.

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20 This is more fully discussed with MacIntyre (219), but is accounted for in Jean Porter’s Thomistic account in *The Recovery of Virtue.*

21 Though it would be difficult to support this Aristotelian model contemporarily without modifications, my pushback here is specifically against Aristotle (and Plato and the Stoics). Contemporary virtue ethics by and large seems to me unconvinced by the suggestion of unity of the virtues as understood among the ancients. Nonetheless, virtue ethics always runs the risk of promoting conceptions of virtue in which ideal and complete forms exist and ought to be acquired. It is this thrust that my project aims to caution against.


23 Num. 20:7-13 (NRSV).
Alasdair MacIntyre appropriates this Aristotelian unity in a way that renders it accessible to all people. He writes, “It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is to be finally understood.” Virtue can be understood in light of a larger narrative, quest, or journey, and it is only through the difficulties confronted that the goal becomes especially clear. This is what determines success in the pursuit of virtue, and the singularity of this quest provides a unifying factor in what may otherwise appear as disparate virtues. For this reason, MacIntyre describes a virtuous agent as one who possesses “unity of a narrative quest.” The unity of this quest is made clear by answering what is good for humanity and what is good for me as a moral agent. This provides a more focused goal to which one will be able to align one’s actions, decisions, behavior, etc.

MacIntyre’s framework is then one of uncertainties and complications; it is a journey in its most spontaneous understanding. The quest is not clear-cut, nor is it entirely definable or reproducible universally given the infinite possibilities and circumstances of any person’s life. Instead, it is a progression, a development in an ever-unfolding story of virtue, each situation with its own particularities. Cultivating virtue in a series of progressions requires at least some level of exertion, and while some virtue may be present already to varying degrees in different people, there is always a possibility for development and further growth and cultivation. Thus, understanding the acquisition of virtue in terms of a broader narrative of struggle renders the

24 MacIntyre, 219.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 218
27 Annas presents a case in which virtues are already present in a person naturally yet require further development. Complete virtue is an unattainable ideal, but there exists a spectrum to virtue: it is not that one is either entirely virtuous or entirely not (10-11, 64, 85).
conversation more practical, relatable, and attainable. It lightens the emphasis on virtue’s acquisition and shifts it instead to virtue’s pursuit.28

What is more, understanding the pursuit of virtue as a progressive struggle more fully explains how a life of virtue can be both universal and particular at the same time. It is universal in that each person is somewhere along their own journey and somewhere along the spectrum of virtue. Each person is called to a life of virtue, and no one can claim exemption from being formed by one narrative quest or another.29 It is at the same time particular since each narrative quest is shaped differently and since a number of responses to varying circumstances are expected of different people. Each person is immersed in a unique combination of times, locations, and expectations. No single journey can be exactly like another’s, yet common ground can be found in the implementation of human agency and exertion in this continual quest. The issue of context is critical to the relationship between this project and Aristotle’s, and for this we turn to the discussion of moral luck and moral effort.

2.2 – Moral Luck and Moral Effort

Moral luck is an important topic of debate within the field and for good reason. The primary question at hand is whether or not a person can be blamed for a lack of virtue if certain circumstances prohibited the acquisition of virtue for that person. One account of moral luck is

28 Recent discussions are calling into question whether or not a person is able to claim possession of virtue or of particular character traits. See Nafsika Athanassoulis, "A Response to Harman: Virtue Ethics and Character Traits," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 100 (2000): 215-21. Nafsika Athanassoulis, Virtue Ethics (Bloomsbury Ethics. London ; New York: Bloomsbury), 2013. My project assumes that this acquisition is possible, but not without the full picture in place, which includes grace, struggle, reorientation toward God and others, and the realization that whatever virtues one may claim hold to are never complete or exhausted but exist on a spectrum.

29 For another elaborate discussion in addition MacIntyre’s, see Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame, 1981), for a full discussion of the function of narrative in a specifically Christian context.
that of Robert Merrihew Adams in which he conceives of virtue as dependent on context and circumstances. When an agent, who is able to resist temptations otherwise, lapses and acts contrary to a given virtue due to certain circumstances, this agent is said to be dependent on conditions that enable the acquisition of virtue. Adams admits that this is rare but that this does not negate one’s possessing that virtue for which there exist temporary lapses in its exhibition.  

To have real virtue does not mean that one remains virtuous in all circumstances. As a consequence of moral luck, each person’s optimal virtuosity is conditioned for certain contexts. The cultivation of virtue is facilitated by external conditions over which people have limited control, but perceptions of virtue (or vice) reflect social locations—class, culture, race, region, etc. This means that virtue is dependent and conditioned, but it does not mean that virtue is not real.

The dependency of virtue is also demonstrated in how one ought to see oneself in relation to the acquisition of virtue. Virtue should not be thought of as an individual achievement but as a gift—from nature, grace, and others. This grace is expressed as originating from what Adams refers to as the transcendent goodness, whose reality, he asserts, is far more important than “the reality of our virtue.” Adams reaches this conclusion as a result of his emphasis on moral luck in his ethic of virtue. For example, he calls the ability to live long enough to be able to change in

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31 Ibid., 161.

32 Ibid., 165.

33 Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28-81, 150-70. In this work, Adams uses the language of transcendent goodness, grace, and love to describe God, which he sometimes calls the “divine nature.” While this latter label may be problematic dogmatically, his points remain: grace is an attribute of God that characterizes all of His love; divine love is grace; and God does not love only that which is perfect or the best but that which is good or excellent. According to Adams, humans are good or excellent insofar as they resemble God, thus giving Him a reason to love.

34 Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 170. It should be noted that in *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 81, it is clear that Adams maintains the classical tenet of apophatic theology when he maintains that the reality of this virtue is imperfect and fragmentary. For Adams, this means that there should be no hesitation in questioning human views of God.
a relevant way toward virtue moral luck. He also sees moral luck as the source of fortunate circumstances that are out of one’s control. Adams accords moral luck more weight against those, such as Philippa Foot, who say that virtue is within reach of anyone who wants it.\textsuperscript{35} He rejects this and generally holds a low view of moral effort. What is more important to Adams is for one to have a particular virtue, not the effort one puts in.\textsuperscript{36}

It seems, however, that moral luck and moral effort do not need to be pinned in opposition to each other. Consider the effect that the shift of focus on virtue’s acquisition to virtue’s pursuit would have on this discussion. Virtue ethics, indebted to Aristotle, does focus on means or averages between two extremes to approximate what may or may not be considered a virtue. In this way, it is able to capture the vast and complex spectrum of differences that may exist among different people. Yet, it may be assumed that this spectrum is fixed while people vary. This is true of any ethic of virtue that attributes a stagnant beginning and end to the acquisition of any given virtue. The emphasis on spiritual struggle challenges this notion. Instead, scales that shift relative to circumstances seem to encompass a wider breadth of circumstances and seem to capture more of the complexity of the journey toward virtue. One is expected, in relation to one’s set of circumstances, to exhibit a certain exertion of effort, the sincerity of which becomes an important diagnostic tool and barometer for assessing virtue’s pursuit. Prioritizing effort over circumstance, however, does not imply that virtue becomes entirely a matter of relativity. What this shift does imply is that an action must not only be

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 163. Adams clarifies that while Foot does not make this claim explicitly, it can be deduced from her work, \textit{Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy} (Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{36} Adams, \textit{A Theory of Virtue}, 161-65.
deemed good, nor only must moral motivation be present,\textsuperscript{37} but also sustained effort must be present in an ethos of spiritual struggle in order to more accurately assess virtuousness.\textsuperscript{38}

Psychologist Angela Duckworth’s work on grit, passion, and perseverance attests to the importance of these traits over skill or luck. Success is not achieved, according to Duckworth, through talent or genius but through resilience of the will and focus on long-term goals—traits that can be learned and acquired.\textsuperscript{39} Duckworth’s concept of grit is similar to the exertion of effort in the concept of spiritual struggle, except that the former tends toward secular discussions of success while the latter is concerned more with “spiritual success” measured by intimacy with God and growth in relationship with and semblance of Him. Still, serious criticisms of Duckworth’s conception of grit might also apply to spiritual struggle. The first criticism is that encouraging perseverance can ignore or reinforce existing inequalities.\textsuperscript{40} While the response to this criticism will be detailed in chapter 2 on spiritual struggle, it is important to note here that this project does not justify or promote any sort of inequality, injustice, or oppression. To promote spiritual struggle is not to encourage a person or group of people who are oppressed to remain as they are. Spiritual struggle is to be distinguished from suffering. The former is

\textsuperscript{37} For a good exploration of moral motivation in virtue ethics and the criteria necessary to render actions virtuous, see Rosalind Hursthouse, \textit{On Virtue Ethics} (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 121-60. Hursthouse’s additional criterion and her main argument is that an action must be from a settled state of good character in order to be considered morally motivated. This is in addition to the obvious tenets that right thoughts, right reason, and good intent must accompany a virtuous action; but these are ultimately insufficient without a settled state of good character. Similar thought is found in Aquinas in Jean Porter, "The Subversion of Virtue: Acquired and Infused Virtues in the Summa Theologiae," \textit{The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics} 12 (1992), discussed below.

\textsuperscript{38} When discussing the need to safeguard against considering struggle as a good in itself in Porter, \textit{Recovery}, 115, she admits struggle is necessary for the majority of people who have not yet perfected the virtues. This majority, in my opinion, includes everyone, since none have perfected the virtues. This is discussed further in light of Nyssa’s theory on \textit{epektasis} in chapter 3.


\textsuperscript{40} This criticism is detailed in A. G. Stokas, “A Genealogy of Grit: Education in the New Gilded Age,” \textit{Educational Theory}, 65 (2015): 513-28, where she tracks the development of the concept of grit in response to the resurgence in its interest due to Duckworth’s research.
premised solely on freedom—freedom from vice, and freedom to choose the good. The latter is premised on force and coercion. All forms of spiritual struggle must be free and uncoerced in order to distinguish struggle from suffering. The emphasis of spiritual struggle on exertion and effort is encouragement to freely choose and focus on God in all circumstances, but it is not at the same time advocacy for inequality. More than this, it will become clear in the discussion on asceticism in chapter 4, that spiritual struggle is never a means by which one is to devalue the body. The denigration of the human body is opposed to the epektatic ascent in this project. That is, the denigration of the body through any injustice, oppression, or inequality results in a spiritual descent, not ascent.

The second and more problematic criticism relevant to spiritual struggle is that because of preexisting circumstances, a person may not be able to exhibit the sort of resilience or perseverance required by such an ethic. An example of this is the case of children who grew up in poor socioeconomic circumstances. Paul Tough writes, “[I]f you don’t have the mental tendencies that a stable, responsive early childhood tends to produce, the transition to kindergarten is likely to be significantly more fraught, and the challenge of learning the many things we ask kindergarten students to master can be overwhelming.” He links this to grit when he describes a conversation he had with Jack Shonkoff, the direction of Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child, who said:

If you haven’t in your early years been growing up in an environment of responsive relationships that has buffered you from excessive stress activation, then if, in tenth-grade math class, you’re not showing grit and motivation, it may not be a matter of you just not sucking it up enough…A lot of it has to do with problems of focusing attention, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. And

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41 The distinction between suffering and struggling is picked up in chapter 2 in conversation with Simone Weil, Waiting for God, Translated by Emma Graufurd (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

you may not have developed those capacities because of what happened to you early in life.\textsuperscript{43}

What this implies, then, is that demanding sustained effort from those who may not have those capacities would be unethical, unjust, and cruel. This is an important criticism that seems to effect grit more than it effects spiritual struggle.

What is asked of students in an academic setting differs greatly from what is required in an ethic of spiritual struggle. In the former, there is a singular measure of success—passing examinations set forth by certain curriculum committees and education boards. The measure of success in educational institutions does not change in relation to circumstances. What I am suggesting, however, is that circumstances do factor in to the discussion of spiritual struggle. The measure by which a person’s spiritual struggle is assessed is determined only by a person’s circumstances. That is, God—the ultimate Judge—to uphold His justice, determines a person’s success, virtuousness, and effort based on that person’s particular circumstances.\textsuperscript{44} This is similar to Aristotle’s assertion that the mean of virtue is relative to a person. The very model of spiritual struggle is premised on a shift away from an absolute scale of acquiring virtue to a relative, dynamic scale of pursuing virtue. In this way, a person’s inability to exert effort in an ethic of spiritual struggle is certainly taken into consideration.

By asking how much one is \textit{pursuing} virtue instead of how much virtue one has \textit{attained}, the issue of moral luck becomes less prominent. Shifting from a focus on luck to effort implies that circumstances are no longer the sole determining factors in one’s ability to become virtuous. However, moral luck is not replaced in its importance by moral effort. In fact, the question of...

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{44} The parable of the talents in Matt. 25:14-30 illustrates well God’s judgment relative to circumstances. Each person is expected to be faithful in the little he has been given and is expected to produce talents relative to the various talents given.
moral effort experiences a critical shift as well. Instead of asserting that virtue is within the reach of anyone who wants it, it is the pursuit of virtue that is within each person’s capabilities, despite circumstances or context. It will become clear in the next chapter on spiritual struggle just how this is so and also why I am suggesting that spiritual struggle is so helpful to Christian considerations of a life of virtue. The continuation of this discussion requires an analysis of contemporary accounts of grace, but this will be addressed after discussing the effects of the second part of this project’s thesis—that placing spiritual struggle within a framework of perpetual ascent, oriented toward God, assuages the complexities of self-centeredness and self-effacement in virtue ethics.

2.3 – Self-Centeredness and Self-Effacement

Gregory of Nyssa’s theory of perpetual progress or epektasis enables the formation and placement of grace-enabled human agency on a path simultaneously toward virtue and toward semblance of God. Briefly stated, epektasis places the acquisition of virtue as a marker toward the infinitude of God. This could be an important reason why the early church placed such weight on dogma and doctrine. To know God and His characteristics—in whatever capacity self-revelation allowed—is crucial to the proper formation of a virtuous agent. This infinitude by definition can never be entirely reached but can always be pursued to attain higher, albeit partial, summits. Epektasis enables a reorientation in the pursuit of virtue. This reorientation is empowered by Christ’s summation of the law and prophets into the two great commandments: 1) “[L]ove the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and 2) “[L]ove your neighbor as yourself.”\(^{45}\) In other words, this is a reframing of the pursuit of

\(^{45}\) Matt. 22:36-40 (NRSV).
virtue as the pursuit of love of God and neighbor. Placing virtue only as a marker that evidences one’s embarkation on this *epektatic* journey means that similitude to God, unity with Him, and love of neighbor are the distinct *teloi*—*teloi* that capture the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

This reorientation impacts discussions among virtue ethicists regarding the egoism or self-centeredness that an agent might risk in focusing on her own virtuousness and regarding the issue of the self-effacement of virtue ethics, since the goal of acquiring virtue could potentially detract from the proper motivations that render certain actions virtuous. These risks can never be entirely avoided but remain regular parts of the struggle throughout this journey. For example, Aristotle maintains that in order for virtue to be nobly good, it must be for its own sake, while virtue that is merely good is for the sake of other natural goods. Yet, placing God and others as the targets of virtuous actions safeguards against some of these risks and alleviates some of the preoccupation with the self and with virtue for the sake of virtue. Virtuousness itself, if it is no longer the chief concern, is no longer the goal of virtuous actions nor is it an invitation for hubris. Virtue for the sake of virtue—central to most accounts of virtue ethics—would no longer be the most salient of concerns for those who orient the pursuit of virtue onto God and others.

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Take, for example, the notion that virtuous action should not be for the sake of happiness but for its own sake. What this implies is that virtues are virtues because they have intrinsic values rendering them excellences in and of themselves. To demonstrate this point, Robert Merrihew Adams cites the virtue of altruism. He describes it as an intrinsic, not an instrumental, good. Altruism can include loving a person for her own sake and for the sake of wanting others to benefit from your service. Yet Augustine clarifies how these apparent self-preoccupations and preoccupations with virtue can be held in healthy tension with the reorientation at hand. He claims that one can love the virtues and others for their own sakes so long as this love is ordered toward God. Only in this way can anything be loved truly and properly. The difficulty of making selflessness a reality is addressed in part by the nature of the journey. The journey of spiritual struggle presupposes weaknesses, failings, and shortsightedness, but an orientation toward semblance of God keeps the agent’s focus away from these discouraging realities. While the implications of epektasis will be discussed further in chapter 3, it is important to note here that one’s orientation toward God not only prevents fixation on otherwise discouraging realities but also embodies the commandments of love of God and neighbor. This reorientation, then, is transformative, is a practical approach to impactful selflessness, and is ultimately grace-enabled.

2.4 – Grace and Works

The final contemporary discussion in virtue ethics that relates directly to the concept of spiritual struggle presented in this project is the issue of grace and works. Christian disagreement

49 Ibid., 35.
50 Adams, 24-25.
51 Ibid., 65.
52 Ibid., 68.
53 Herdt, Putting on Virtue, 54.
over the relationship between faith and works stretches back to early Christianity. Most positions exist within a spectrum at whose ends are Pelagianism and antinomianism. The former denies the need for divine participation as requisite for salvation while maintaining human agency’s ability to secure this salvation. The latter maintains that grace eliminates the need for any moral observance. In between these two extremes lies a broad consensus in which the indispensability of both divine and human agencies is acknowledged, each to one degree or another. This flexible model of divine-human co-agency is the realm within which spiritual struggle should be applied. For this reason, it is necessary to detail further what these extremes in the discussion of grace and works entail. I will then present chronologically a diverse string of thinkers who fall within this spectrum in order to delimit the parameters of the conversation into which spiritual struggle functions.

It would be difficult to find a virtue ethicist upholding the merits of Pelagianism successfully, especially as its merits have been repudiated time and again since at least Augustine’s time. This is not to say that there may not exist those whose Christianity maintains a strong Pelagian bent. In fact, Jennifer Moberly maintains that virtue ethics can often focus too much on human agency and not enough on divine grace. But this extreme of the spectrum is difficult, in fact virtually impossible, to assert without ignoring the power of God the Trinity gracing humanity with salvation and eternal life. In this case, the qualification of this ethic of virtue as “Christian” would be suspect. Yet it remains that with the attention that will be given to the implementation of human agency in light of the discussion of spiritual struggle, a contemporary account of grace is necessary especially since this account of struggle is one infused with grace from beginning to end.

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2.4.1 – *Grace and Virtue*

Grace is an indispensible component of any Christian account of virtue ethics.\(^{55}\) There is no part of the journey toward virtue and semblance of God that is not aided by unmerited grace. To begin, it is through the grace of salvation, that is, the economy of the Son of God incarnating, dying, and resurrecting, that the reconciliation between humanity and God is restored. Grace is responsible for the enablement of the journey toward virtue. Yet, when discussing grace and works, this conception is not usually the focus, a likely result of its wide acceptance among Christians. Instead, the discussion of grace often centers on the role of divine agency in aiding humanity here and now and how that agency affects any given person’s journey. Hans Boersma’s answer to this is found in Gregory of Nyssa’s conception of grace in this journey toward virtue. Grace enables virtuous actions, which further enlarge the capacity for grace, which further enable virtuous actions, and so the cycle continues.\(^{56}\) This is helpful in directly correlating human and divine agency, but it does not explain the mechanisms or parameters of grace.

Augustine claims that pagans cannot be virtuous since their apparently virtuous acts are directed toward themselves and not toward what should be their ultimate end—God; this is also true for the hypocritical Christian.\(^{57}\) Union with God and imitation of God can only be achieved through our active involvement with His grace.\(^{58}\) What pagans acquire is only a semblance of virtue, since it is subsumed in and contingent upon self-sufficiency, which is at the same time filled with hubris. All things must be loved, according to Augustine, in relation to God. That

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\(^{57}\) Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 46.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 47-48.
which we love, even people and virtues, must be ordered toward God. How then can a pagan possess true virtue? For Augustine, the answer is simple—they cannot. However, this does not by any means imply that Christians have been perfected in virtue. There exists a spectrum, and each person is on a different point. The spectrum is a gradual process of development in virtue by putting on Christ—the goal of virtue. Augustine does talk much of habituation, similar to Aristotle, but Augustine maintains that bringing the appetite into submission does further one along this spectrum. Yet, everything is graced. Despite his efforts, Augustine is aware of his own shortcomings and weaknesses, and this leads him to conclude that his putting on Christ, and even his will to do so, is a grace that is necessary for the acquisition of virtue.  

Aquinas is more gracious in granting the qualification of true virtue to pagans. Even if a pagan does not order all things to God, the virtue is still real, although it eventually must be directed toward God if virtue’s fullest potential is to be realized. Pagans are capable of good self-love as well as good love of the commonwealth. This virtue is real, incomplete, and not salvific, and on these points Herdt agrees with Aquinas. Herdt then turns to Aquinas’ theory on infused and acquired moral virtues, which shed some light on Aquinas’ understanding of grace. Aquinas’ account of the acquired virtues is very similar to Aristotle’s account of habituated virtues. Acquired virtues are concerned with the natural end of human beings, while infused with the supernatural. It is obvious that the theological virtues are infused, but Herdt asks what the function of infused moral virtues is, in comparison to acquired moral virtues.

The answer Aquinas gives it that actions that “may appear irrational from the perspective

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 74.
61 Ibid., 76.
62 Ibid., 82.
63 Ibid., 84.
of acquired virtue may be fully appropriate from the perspective of infused virtue,” since acquired virtues use human reason, while infused virtues relies on a divine lens.\textsuperscript{64} In this way, infused virtues, which are graced or gifted to humanity, provide perspectives that aid in the further progress of acquiring virtue. Additionally, infused virtue does not render the recipient automatically virtuous; it only makes one continent, able to struggle, perform good acts, and refrain from evil ones. That is, grace enables struggle. To fully possess virtue, both acquired and infused virtues are needed, in conjunction with human agency.\textsuperscript{65} This need for both acquired and infused virtues reflects one of Herdt’s (and this project’s) broader concerns—a holistic ethical model in which the bifurcation often characteristic of the moral life between acquired and infused, ordinary and mysterious, are broken down.\textsuperscript{66}

Jean Porter adds that Aquinas’ infused cardinal virtues can and do exist in those who do not possess the \textit{acquired} virtues and in those who are still immature with respect to virtue. In these cases, living virtuously may be painful, since the person will have infused virtue but has been habituated in a life of vice to some extent.\textsuperscript{67} More specifically, regarding the virtue of prudence, which is Aquinas’ correlate to Aristotle’s virtue of practical wisdom, just because one is infused with the cardinal virtue of prudence does not mean that person is able to act prudently regarding earthly judgments. Prudence, for Aquinas, is primarily concerned with matters of salvation.\textsuperscript{68} In this way, one who is infused with the cardinal virtues can err according to matters of seemingly obvious worldly logic. That person will still be on the road to virtue through virtue that has been graced or gifted. “[T]he gifts are nothing other than the dispositions by which the

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 96-97.
\textsuperscript{67} Porter, \textit{Recovery of Virtue}, 32.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 34.
justified individual is rendered amenable to God's inspiration.” They are “habitual dispositions of the soul.”⁶⁹ The person infused with virtue “consistently discerns and chooses the course of activity that is consonant with God's will.”⁷⁰ In Thomistic virtue ethics the one who is infused with virtues is seen as having fulfilled a native potentiality that has always been there. However, Aquinas does not offer a theory on the relation of the acquired virtue to the infused virtues other than denying the continuity between the two. Understanding this relation, though, would provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between grace and works.

Michael Sherwin poses a question that invites a deeper exploration of the concepts of grace and works, acquired and infused virtues.⁷¹ Paraphrased, he asks, “What do we make of the adult who converts to a life with Christ but still has inclinations from his old life?” In Thomistic terminology, what do we make of the person who has received the infused cardinal virtues (through the grace of the conversion) but lacks the acquired cardinal virtues (as a result of unfortunate old habits and the suddenness of the conversion)? This question digs deeper than initially appears. It raises the following questions: Does one need to acquire some of the cardinal virtues before being infused with the more desirable cardinal virtues? Further, how do the theological virtues fit into this scheme? To the first question, Sherwin explains that just as the acquisition of cardinal virtues before one’s conversion would come only through an agent’s effort, so too would this exercise of agency be required even after one’s conversion. While the convert may not completely desire the good because of the residual effects of former vices, the adult convert should struggle to do good actions that are contrary to his or her disordered inclinations. This will build good dispositions, i.e., acquired virtues.

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⁶⁹ Ibid., 36.
⁷⁰ Ibid.
“[W]hen the acquired virtues are integrated into the life of grace, they begin the process of integrating our wounded nature into the activities that the infused virtues make possible. The acquired virtues, therefore, are not as some recent commentators have affirmed a prerequisite to living the infused virtues. On the contrary, for many adult converts, the infused virtues are what make developing the acquired virtues possible at all.”

In this way, one can embark on the life of grace and thus receive infused cardinal virtues before struggling to attain the acquired cardinal virtues. But where do the theological virtues fit in all of this? At the initial conversion, the person is still a beginner, and the only way to fight against the negative dispositions and inclinations in order to attain the acquired virtues is by the theological virtue of faith. It is faith that Sherwin sees as the hinge point for the convert. Without faith, the convert will have no reason to go against his or her inclination toward vice. One must trust that gospel morality is good and that God can give the grace to live accordingly. The theological virtue of faith is able to overcome the opposition caused by a convert’s contrary psychological experience—a psyche that believes the old life of vice is good for it. This way of looking at Aquinas’ theology of infused virtue does well to answer chicken-and-egg questions regarding grace and works. Sometimes the acquired cardinal virtues come first, and sometimes the infused cardinal virtues come first.

Our analysis has, then, led to the following conclusions. The very impetus to embark on this journey, the ability to strive through its difficulties, and the progress to greater stages in the journey are all aided by divine grace. Grace of the economy of salvation infiltrates and pervades all aspects of one’s life and journey toward virtue and semblance of God. Much of this grace can be unseen and unnoticed and can come at times when a person seems otherwise unprepared. Thus, on one hand, grace is not summoned. On the other, it requires a response in order to be brought to its fullest potential. Grace enables the acquisition of virtue, but the response needed

72 Ibid., 47-51.
serves a critical function. This response ultimately orders virtue toward God. This consideration of orientation is one Augustine frequented, and its implications will be further unpacked in chapter 3 where the discussion of *epektasis* will demonstrate the responsibility of human agency in the form of spiritual struggle to orient the self toward God. It is sufficient at this point to agree that, for the reasons just noted, divine agency expressed through grace is requisite to a Christian account of virtue.

2.4.2 – Works and Antinomianism

In contrast to Pelagianism, few would argue a strict antinomianism, maintaining that grace eliminates the need for any human moral effort. However, antinomianism may attract more pale imitations than the Pelagian end of the spectrum. Evangelicals have historically erred more on the antinomian side due to Martin Luther’s theology, but have been cautious in doing so. In a number of Luther’s works, he emphasizes the important of grace over and against works. Among these texts are “On Two Kinds of Righteousness,” “The Freedom of a Christian,” “Lectures on Galatians (1935),” and “Answer to Latomus.” Luther asserts a clear distinction between faith through grace on one hand, and all other works and actions on the other. The former is concerned only with the “inner man,” the soul, that Luther forcefully separates from the external, outer man.\(^73\) This soul can be made clean, righteous, and justified only through Jesus Christ and Scripture, and not through any external acts.\(^74\) Luther writes, “It does not help the soul if the body is…occupied with sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain kinds of food, or does any work that can be done by the body and in the body.”\(^75\) For Luther, it is not through external

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\(^74\) Ibid., 393-394.

\(^75\) Ibid., 393.
works that a person attains righteousness, but it is through Christ that a person acquires Christian righteousness, which in turn leads to good actions.\footnote{Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” and “The Freedom of a Christian,” 135, 402-3.} Christian righteousness, is an inherently “passive,” not active; it is graced not merited.\footnote{Luther, “Lectures on Galatians (1535),” 19.}

However, Luther does not use this theology as an excuse for a life without discipline or good works. Instead, he warns that bad conduct reflects a person who has not been transformed through graced faith.\footnote{Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 136.} While these external works do not justify a person, they are important. He writes, “Here the works begin...he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fastings, watching, labors, and other reasonable discipline and to subject it to the Spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inner man and faith and not revolt against faith and hinder the inner man, as it is the nature of the body to do if it is not held in check.” He continues, “[T]hese works reduce the body to subjection and purify it of its lusts, and our whole purpose is to be directed only toward the driving out of lusts.”\footnote{Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” 401.} Thus, at least to some extent, Luther recognizes the importance of purity of body, self-motivation, and struggle against one’s debased tendencies—a concept that will factor prominently in to this project. He even exhorts his readers to study, read, meditate, and pray.\footnote{Luther, “Lectures on Galatians (1535),” 23.} Yet, it is Luther’s insistence that actions have no bearing on a person’s soul—that is, that the external cannot affect the internal and that the body does not possess the ability to affect the soul—that will ultimately set him apart from the authors that will aid in developing the concept of perpetual progress through spiritual struggle.\footnote{Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” 393-94.} His strong pushback against works righteousness left him at risk of a serious antinomian bent.

\footnote{Luther, “Lectures on Galatians (1535),” 21.}
In Joel D. Biermann’s *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*, he analyzes four Lutheran authors and admits that while the gospel remains central to all four, their strict anti-Pelagianism sometimes leads to antinomianism.\(^{83}\) He poses the Lutheran challenge as one in which the absolute and unconditional forgiveness of the gospel can easily overshadow any place for ethics.\(^{84}\) Biermann continues by pointing to a number of solutions to this problem, a problem that likely affects not only Lutherans but many Christians. Antinomianism presents at least two important problems that render it unviable. First, its premise is inherently contradictory. It is difficult to envision a life in which no works are accomplished, in which human agency is inconsequential, and in which one’s choices have no bearing on one’s formation. Take for example Martin Luther’s forceful objection to any form of works righteousness that is thought to be acquired by the self. Luther is concerned with our entire beings, not isolated actions or even virtuous habits acquired piece by piece.\(^{85}\) For Luther, the examined life, that is the life of external works, is necessary, but it is not what makes us integral selves able to be in relationship with God. Hence, it is not worth living, and it deceives us into thinking we can rely on the virtues we have developed or acquired.\(^{86}\) Further, and more aggressively, our own progress toward virtue is still sinful if it is our own. It can only be God’s initiative that makes us virtuous, not our own efforts.\(^{87}\)

Gilbert Meilaender claims that Luther does in fact care for the examined life of moral struggle by holding the examined and unexamined lives—Luther’s language for lives of work and grace, respectively—in tension. These tensions include: the tension between self mastery of

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\(^{84}\) Ibid., 54.


\(^{86}\) Ibid., 120.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 114.
moral virtue and a self perfectly passive before God; the tension between virtue which we claim as our possession and on which we rely and a virtue which must be constantly reestablished by divine grace; and the tension between a partial self and a whole self before God. Meilaender admits that these tensions cannot be fully resolved, but his argument that Luther cared for moral struggle is not entirely persuasive. Luther does acknowledge this moral struggle, for example, when he says, “Day by day the substance is removed so it may be utterly destroyed.” However, ultimately he deems struggle unnecessary and even deceiving and sinful.

It is clear, at this point, that if there ever were an antinomian proponent, it would flow from the objections of Luther highlighted here. Yet, my contention is that even Luther was not strictly antinomian and that no Christian can fully lay hold to such a claim (without compromising human freedom and without accepting notions of absolute predestination) because of the inherent contradiction aforementioned. The contradiction becomes clear when some of Luther’s ideas are considered further: virtues can only be fostered by not trying to foster them; true virtue is in realizing that we cannot build our own virtue; character does not depend on self-mastery but becoming entirely passive to God; true virtue requires faith first, not self-mastery; the self is whole and entire when completely submitted to God; we are not righteous because of an intrinsic value but because of God’s grace and remission of sins which we receive when we acknowledge our sins; salvation is complete dependence on God; we must cling to God in faith; only when one realizes that there is nothing that can be done towards salvation, only then will that person have reason to turn to God; you will be delivered when you fully trust in Christ

88 Ibid., 122.
89 Ibid., 109.
90 Ibid., 113-14.
91 Ibid., 117.
93 Ibid., 30-31,
which allows you to live righteously extrinsically;\textsuperscript{94} and faith is a response of trusting extrinsically in another (God) in response to a promise.\textsuperscript{95} These are just a few examples, but the contradiction is clear in each one. In order of their presentation, each of these claims carries some kind of action that has falsely been considered passivity: submitting to and accepting the reality of our inability to foster virtue; realizing that virtue’s acquisition is not in our control; \textit{becoming} entirely passive to God; putting faith first; submitting the self entirely to God; acknowledging our sins; depending on God completely; clinging to God in faith; realizing we are powerless in securing salvation without God; and \textit{trusting} in God.

It is clear that these are all active, not passive, states of being. They are processes of \textit{becoming}. Even when considering an action such as trusting that appears to be a passive state of being that has been divinely graced, how is it that one achieves such a state? Is there no response to grace that is required in order for trust in God to be developed? Daphne Hampson pushes back against this question when she asserts that faith is not a work nor an infused virtue but a response of trusting extrinsically in another (i.e. God) in response to a promise.\textsuperscript{96} But to support this claim, a convincing qualification must be put forth distinguishing a work from a response. It would seem this qualification exists only nominally. The question then is not whether some action, response, or work is necessary for salvation and development in virtue. The point of contention is of an entirely other sort. Those who take Luther’s suggestions strictly are ultimately concerned not to attribute an inherent and “interior quality of righteousness” to oneself apart from God; this would ultimately lead to pride and self-preoccupation.\textsuperscript{97} The question is whether or not one thinks oneself able to stand before God with any sort of righteousness.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 47, 50-51.
There is no standing self apart from God’s grace, and there is no righteousness apart from God’s grace. This is precisely what spurred Luther’s writings—the potential of viewing intrinsic righteousness as distinct from God’s righteousness.\(^9\) Instead of thinking that one, through much struggle, has reached an accomplished state of virtuousness, one ought to realize that “[p]rogress is nothing other than constantly beginning,” and that life is for constantly praising and thanking God.\(^9\) This constantly beginning, this way of life summarized by Luther, is a life of active repentance—a life of effort and struggle achieved in complete submission and realization of one’s weakness. But this turn away from self-righteousness is much different than claiming that there are not works, actions, or responses to God’s grace that are necessary for salvation. As Herdt and others have argued, if virtue consists in a transformation and perfection of my agential capacities, if it is therefore something that is “mine,” then we need an account of grace that makes sense of the operation of human agency in relation to grace.

The second problem with antinomianism is a matter of divine justice. To insist that works are unimportant in the acquisition of virtue would be to beg the question of why one person would be saved and not another, if the only thing that mattered was God’s grace. If works have no import in the discussions of salvation and the acquisition of virtue, one would be left with two options. Either moral progress has no bearing on one’s relationship with God and thus salvation, or one’s moral development occurs apart from the exercise of one’s own agency. Regarding the former, each human being would be saved without differentiation, distinction, or without consideration. Regarding the latter, one would have to accept a sort of double-predestination in order to accept a model in which works do not determine one’s status in an afterlife.\(^1\) This

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\(^9\) Ibid., 45.
\(^9\) Ibid., 49-50.
\(^1\) Double predestination refers to the belief that God predestines some to salvation and others to condemnation. The “double” here refers to the latter—the condemnation of the reprobate—as opposed to predestination, which includes
would mean that regardless of one’s works, some would be preselected for eternal damnation while others preselected for eternal salvation based on grounds unknown to humanity.

These two options, then, disregard any need for moral cultivation. First, morality would be rendered unjust favoritism by a God whose justice would contradict His impartiality. Second, morality would collapse into an absolute relativism in which no moral bounds could be affirmed, since works would have no import regarding moral progress. If either of these were a reality, it would mean a disastrous blow for Christianity. If morality was rendered entirely relativistic as a result of a misplacement of works within a Christian framework, moral chaos would theoretically ensue, supposing the acceptance of such a conception. Moreover, could one defend a Christianity with a God whose conception of divine justice in regards to salvation necessarily and consistently contradicts any notion of justice one can envision?

Granted, in Romans 9:22-23 St. Paul writes, “What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory…. “ As chapter 5 will argue, individual Scriptural passages should be considered in relation to the entirety of Scripture to avoid misconceptions as much as possible. Paul mentions these same “vessels” elsewhere, in his second letter to


101 Rom. 9:22-23 (New King James Version). I used the NKJV translation here and in the following biblical citation because there is a consistency in the translation of σκεύη as “vessels,” accurately connecting the two passages in Romans and 2 Timothy. Other translations, such as the NRSV, do not maintain this consistency in translation between these two passages.
Timothy. Leaving this passage out when considering the reference from Romans would be a sure sign of proof texting. He writes, “But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.” Notice the apostle’s qualification in this letter. What one does—better yet, who one becomes—can aid in the transition between honor and dishonor, mercy and destruction. Active participation is required for sanctification.

Between Pelagianism and antinomianism lies a broad consensus in which fit the discussion of spiritual struggle and epektasis. So long as one does not uphold the tenets of Pelagianism or antinomianism, then one accepts that, to some degree, both works and grace are necessary. Within this consensus a variety of opinions exist, with different emphases on grace and works and with different accounts of grace and works. This spectrum will be explored below. It should become evident that the accounts of spiritual struggle and perpetual ascent that will be developed in chapters 2 and 3, respectively, strike an important and appropriate balance between divine and human agency within this loose but essential consensus.

2.4.3 – A Contemporary Consensus Between Grace and Works

Jennifer Herdt dedicates a chapter in her work, Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices, to discussing Augustine’s view toward pagans’ abilities, or lack thereof, to acquire virtue. The main problem with “pagan virtue,” according to Augustine, is their self-sufficiency—their belief that virtue can be acquired without external aid, and even more, that

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102 See footnote above.
103 2 Tim 2:20-21 (NKJV).
external aid would be considered a sign of weakness, not virtue.\textsuperscript{104} In response, Augustine asserts that virtue is the perfection of the love of God, which is union with God. Virtuous activity is an expression of one’s love of God and is constitutive of one’s happiness and final end.\textsuperscript{105} Of these activities, Herdt, in “Augustine and the Liturgical Pedagogy of Virtue,” points to the ascent toward God and virtue experienced through one’s holistic engagement in Christian liturgy.\textsuperscript{106} She continues: “By siting the growth of virtue in the context of worship we correct the insidious tendency to take pride in virtue as our own acquisition.”\textsuperscript{107} Herdt points to Augustine’s stance on true virtue as being directed toward God, in love for Him, others, and creation.\textsuperscript{108} A human’s ultimate goal is imitation of God and union with Him. This union can be realized only through grace, since humans are not equipped with the independent ability to secure perfect union with God. Grace is essential, and one’s active involvement with grace is what leads one to imitation of God and union with Him. This is in contrast to pagan virtue, which would view this union as reliance and therefore mere semblance of virtue.\textsuperscript{109}

Yet even in his anti-Pelagian arguments, Augustine does not deny the need for works in addition to grace: “…[H]e will come with his angels in his majesty, so that before him all the nations shall be gathered, and he will divide them and place some on his right, whom, after recounting their good works, he will take into eternal life, others on his left, and, charging them with barrenness of good works, he will condemn them to eternal fire.”\textsuperscript{110} In this same work

\begin{footnotes}
\item[105] Ibid., 55.
\item[107] Ibid., 23.
\item[108] Ibid., 22, 28.
\end{footnotes}
against Pelagius, Augustine explains that good works are from faith, and faith is from grace. He is aware that works are necessary, but he is also aware that virtuous works cannot be carried through without divine grace.\textsuperscript{111} Augustine strikes an effective balance, relating human struggle to divine grace. The former is realized by the latter, yet both are necessary for salvation. This struggle must be a daily and constant one against sinful inclinations.\textsuperscript{112}

Augustine summarizes the need for both grace and works in chapter 82 of “On Nature and Grace.” Had he placed too much an emphasis on grace, he may have posited that merely becoming a Christian through baptism would be sufficient and that living a virtuous life would require no further works or actions. Instead, he seamlessly interweaves the dynamic between grace and works when discussing Christians who have neglected lives of holiness.

“…we must not forget to urge them [those who are already Christians but neglect to lead holy lives] to godly prayers as well as to virtuous actions, and furthermore to instruct them in such wholesome doctrine that they be induced thereby to return thanks for being able to accomplish any step in that holy life which they have entered upon, without difficulty, and whenever they do experience such difficulty, that they then wrestle with God in most faithful and persistent prayer and ready works of mercy to obtain from Him facility. … I solemnly assert, that wheresoever and whenever they become perfect, it cannot be but by the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{113}

It seems at first that living this godly life requires a great deal of self-sufficiency and independent effort. It requires wrestling with God in prayer, virtuous actions, instruction in doctrine, gratitude

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 84, 147, 164. These are just a few instances, but it should not come as a surprise that the need for divine grace in relation to any good work is found all throughout \textit{On the Proceedings of Pelagius}.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 56.

\textsuperscript{113} While the translation in Augustine, \textit{On Nature and and Grace}, translated by John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge, The Fathers of the Church. Vol. 86 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), is not drastically different from the translation found in Augustine, "On Nature and Grace," in \textit{New Advent}, ed. Philip Schaff and Kevin Knight (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co.), 1887, cf. chapter 85, I chose the latter here because the language—particularly its layout of the terms “virtuous actions,” “wholesome doctrine,” “wrestle with God,” “persistent prayer,” and “the grace of God,”—better conveys Augustine’s interplay between works and grace. In fact, the New Advent translation is more helpful all throughout this section due to this same language, but I have been citing the translation by Mourant and Collinge for the benefits of pinpointing book citations compared to electronic citations.
and thanksgiving, and works of mercy. Yet after convincing his reader that rejoining the path of righteousness requires great personal effort, he reminds his reader that none of this can be accomplished without the grace of God.\textsuperscript{114}

Thomas Aquinas came to conclusions similar to Augustine’s regarding grace and works. Aquinas’ \textit{Summa Theologiae} carries unparalleled importance for Christian virtue ethics. Aquinas was clear that a life of virtue consisted not in following a prescription of actions or abstaining from other actions.\textsuperscript{115} Instead of a list of rules, acquiring virtue requires a certain way of life.\textsuperscript{116} Virtues cannot be emulated by mere mimicry, but certain motives and circumstances must accompany these actions until living virtuously no longer requires deliberation but instead flows naturally from a stable disposition of moral transformation.\textsuperscript{117} To reach this stable state, one must struggle against inclinations and passions that are contrary to virtue. At this juncture, since spiritual struggle is central to this project, it is important to mention a brief comment Porter makes regarding struggle. In expounding Aquinas theory, she maintains that struggle is praiseworthy for those who have yet to acquire perfect virtue. Yet, she also makes clear that this struggle ought not to be praised as a good \textit{in itself}.\textsuperscript{118} The line of reasoning in this project on spiritual struggle will proceed in the same vein, but with mild clarifications.

Spiritual struggle, as will be presented in the following chapter, must be considered good since perfect virtue is not “rare” as Porter holds; it is in fact impossible and necessarily unattainable. This becomes especially clear when Gregory’s framework of perpetual progress is

\textsuperscript{114} This is a minor point of contention with James Wetzel in \textit{Augustine and the Limits of Virtue} (Cambridge, England; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992). He does not deny that Augustine believes that the initial conversion of a believer is in the divine will, but he does not entirely agree that this is always the case. Moreover, Wetzel expresses similar sentiments toward Augustine’s consideration of perseverance as a graced gift.\textsuperscript{115} Jean Porter, “The Subversion of Virtue,”: Acquired and Infused Virtues in the Summa Theologiae,” \textit{The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics} 12 (1992), 100.\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 102.\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 103, 108-109.\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 115.
considered. Since God is the telos of spiritual struggle, and emulation of God as the Paragon of virtue is an unattainable feat, struggle on this side of the eschaton must necessarily be good. What this means is that Porter’s qualification that one should be cautious in attributing inherent goodness to struggle is more of a technicality than an experienced reality. This qualification should apply to the hereafter, where struggle will not be pertinent as it is here and now.\textsuperscript{119} The struggle for sanctification, to which we will turn below, can never be considered counterproductive, which means it will consistently produce good in this life. This is especially clear in light of the definition of spiritual struggle being developed in this project. Porter observes that it is only because there are more strugglers than there are non-strugglers that the former are praised above the latter—“those who act readily and easily.”\textsuperscript{120} While this may in fact be true, it is also the case that this struggle itself embodies the way of life or ethos supposed within an ethic of virtue. To struggle is to make progress in virtue, and to make progress in virtue is to live virtuously or to be virtuous, since virtue’s summit can never be reached.

While Porter is working through Aquinas’ Aristotelian premise that the state of complete virtue is attainable by humans here and now, Aquinas’ direct discussion of grace and works lends valuable insight. Aquinas argues that God is the initial Mover. Humans cannot merit the first movement of grace from God. God’s grace comes well before any good works, and it is only through grace that good works become feasible (I-II.114.5). Further, it is not just good works that require grace, but abstinence from sin is likewise dependent on grace. However, it is here—in the effort to abstain from sin—where Aquinas asserts that human agency is necessary.

\textsuperscript{119} This is of the more prevalent Christian understandings of the afterlife gathered from Revelation 21:4, in which tears, death, sorrow, crying, pain, and the old unpleasant ways of life will no longer exist. In this description of the heavenly Jerusalem, there no longer remains a place for struggle, since the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are present.

\textsuperscript{120} Porter, 115.
Human will is at the same time necessary and insufficient in order to successfully abstain from sin and do good. Human agents must make some sort of effort. In fact, through grace, humans cooperate with God for the purposes of their very salvation—eternal life. “God ordained human nature to attain the end of eternal life, not by its own strength, but by the help of grace; and in this way its act can be meritorious of eternal life” (I-II.114.2). In the same vein, he states that “[i]f...we speak of a meritorious work, inasmuch as it proceeds from the grace of the Holy Ghost moving us to life everlasting, it is meritorious of life everlasting condignly” (I-II.114.3). Thus, for Aquinas, grace initiates, sustains, and accomplishes good works, virtue, and ultimately salvation for the human agent, but amidst the journey, human agency plays a critical role in responding to, accepting, and cooperating with divine grace.

Joseph J. Kotva, in his 1996 work, The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics, played an important role in bringing contemporary virtue ethics into a discussion with Christianity. He mentions spiritual struggle in a section on sanctification, ultimately giving precedence to God’s grace and positing that this is an indispensable component of Christian virtue ethics and a distinct characteristic that Christianity can contribute to virtue ethics. For Kotva, likeness to God is the goal of sanctification.\footnote{Kotva, \textit{The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics}, 72-74.} Sanctification is a process that begins here, continues now, and is perfected in the \textit{eschaton}.\footnote{Ibid., 76-78.} This \textit{telos}, however, requires the cooperation between human and divine agencies. He draws on three theologians—Kendrikus Berkhof, Milliard J. Erickson, and John Macquarrie—in his discussion of sanctification and eschatology, to demonstrate that although grace is responsible for freeing us from sin toward a life of virtue, an active response
and real struggle are required on the side of human agency. Kotva, then, gives a glimpse of Gregory of Nyssa’s framework, which will be expounded in chapter 3.

There is a tendency in Christian virtue ethics to conceptualize development in virtue as a journey of struggle and advancement without necessarily naming it, but Gregory’s theory does just that. Daniel Harrington and James Keenan reflect a similar understanding of Christian virtue in *Jesus and Virtue Ethics* when they present virtue as a journey of growth, progress, and striving. This framework is consistent in its appropriation of grace and works, so it is not surprising that the definition these two authors give virtue ethics is in line with the relationship between grace and works presented in this section. Virtue ethics is “the appropriate response to God’s initiatives and gifts.” At this point, the loose consensus to which I am pointing in this section should be getting clearer, demonstrated especially in this terse definition.

Hans Boersma’s *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* is of the most helpful presentations of the relationship between divine and human agency. It is not entirely a coincidence that the most helpful of these presentations is found in a study on Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory’s understanding of virtue necessitates a balanced interplay between both types of agencies. Grace enables virtuous actions, which enlarges the capacity for grace, which enables further virtuous actions, and so on. In Boersma’s expounding of Gregory’s conception of virtue, he describes this progress as a growth away from a “measured body” and toward a virtuous body. Without going into too much detail here, since Boersma will be central to other sections below, Gregory holds that human freedom is given within a participatory framework. This participation is with God in Christ, who constitutes the journey

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123 Ibid., 71-76, 90-91.
125 Boersma, 220.
126 Ibid., 211-250.
and makes the very journey possible through grace. Gregory strongly maintains freedom of choice, which is maintained by God. Further, the grace of God sustains the continued efforts of the person in progress toward virtue.\textsuperscript{127}

In this section, it has been my goal to demonstrate that works are needed and that a number of virtue ethicists—exemplary of a larger population of virtue ethicists—appear to have reached a loose consensus that grace and works are both necessary to some degree in the acquisition of virtue. In all of this, it should be clear that my elaboration on works in the form of spiritual struggle should not be mistaken as a statement regarding the importance of works instead of or above grace. I will spend my time focusing on spiritual struggle with a magnifying lens, in a sense. This lens will certainly seem to inflate the import of works, but the emphasis that should be placed on works versus that on grace, while certainly the goal of other projects, is not the goal of this one. In other words, portioning the emphases one should place on divine and human agency—beyond the conclusion that works are necessary—is not an endeavor I am taking up here. It is my hope that this magnifying lens be understood as such and not as an instrument to aggrandize the place of works beyond its facility. At the same time, the reason for an increased emphasis on human agency in the pursuit of virtue is because—put very simply—human agency is the only type of agency over which humans exercise autonomy. It could very well be the case that works are far less significant relative to the working of grace in securing virtue. Yet it remains that this miniscule participant in virtue’s pursuit is all that a human agent has the freedom to exercise. In this sense, works deserve their due attention without forgetting that the discussion of the relative proportions and importance of grace to works is still open for debate.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 220.
3 - Chapter Overview

In order to accomplish the objectives outlined in this introductory chapter, the chapters that follow in this project will proceed with the following considerations. Chapter 2 will begin with a development of the concept of spiritual struggle, first by providing reasoning for the specific term chosen in relation to other possibilities, then by delimiting its parameters, and finally by discussing its communal dimension. Reiterating the brief definition of spiritual struggle, it is the exertion of effort in all conceivable dimensions—physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual—with intent to attain a semblance of, knowledge of, and intimacy with Jesus Christ in community, for God and for others. An ethos of spiritual struggle is central to the pursuit of virtue; the former is an indispensable enabler of the latter. The emphasis here is on human agency and responsibility in pursuing this change. Thus, the concept of spiritual struggle begins to push against accounts of virtue ethics that may diminish the import of human agency and that prefer instead to focus only on divine grace.

The development of this concept will serve further functions. It will allow accessibility to a wider breadth of people because of the attainability and practicality of spiritual struggle and its reliance on moral luck instead of moral effort. After defining and delimiting spiritual struggle, the chapter will turn to a chronological exploration of the few authors who, although not always using the term, alluded to the very notions I wish to emphasize in this concept. These include Aristotle, the Stoics, Plutarch, Patristic writers including Methodius and Antony the Great,

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128. This is not to say that spiritual struggle is the only way to acquire virtue, but it is to say that spiritual struggle, when carried out in the way that will be delineated in this work, will always result in the acquisition of virtue.
western mystics including, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross, Søren Kierkegaard, and Elder Paisios of Athos.

The argument for spiritual struggle will be qualitative, not quantitative. In other words, I will not be as concerned with quantifying—if that were even somehow possible—some sort of amount that human agency is responsible for virtue’s acquisition in relation to divine agency. Instead, in developing the concept of spiritual struggle I will focus on how this concept enables virtue’s acquisition. This is what I mean by qualitative. It is a focus on what kind of effort is most helpful in the pursuit of virtue and semblance to God and not a discussion on how important human agency is in comparison to divine agency (which has been partially addressed above). Even if one’s worldview maintains that a miniscule emphasis should be placed human agency, it remains that this small portion of human agency is the only one within a human’s control. The question becomes, “What is a person’s role in this grace-enabled labor?” instead of “How much does human effort really matter?”

In chapter 3, I will present a brief historical overview of Gregory of Nyssa, quickly turning to his theory of *epektasis* in the following works: *De Perfectione*, Commentary on the Beatitudes, Commentary on the Psalms, Commentary on the Song of Songs, and *De Vita Moysis*. This project will deploy Gregory’s theory on perpetual ascent, to chart the relationship between the following three topics: virtue and its acquisition; spiritual struggle in two instantiations—asceticism and sacred reading; and God, the unlimited Paragon of virtue. These three concepts are otherwise either fragmented or not presented in a comprehensive theory, and this is problematic. This project will serve as an interdisciplinary contribution that intersects systematic theology, Patristic studies, virtue ethics, and spirituality. Incorporating a variety of disciplines will increase not only the appeal of this project but also its accuracy in describing virtue’s pursuit
and partial acquisition. Bits and pieces of effective suggestions exist in each of these disciplines, and incorporating them together provides a larger picture of otherwise smaller, less complete ones. In this search, three stages of *epektasis* will be uncovered. First is the proper ordering of bodily passions to attain *apatheia* (passionlessness) and *parrhesia* (childlike innocence). In the second stage, the soul becomes like God and begins to acquire knowledge of God. Finally, in the third stage, one experiences the knowledge of God in the darkness or experiences a level of unity with God. Ultimately, placing spiritual struggle within an *epektatic* framework will address the tensions of self-centeredness and self-effacement prevalent in contemporary accounts of virtue ethics.

Chapters 4 and 5 will turn to two of several manifestations of spiritual struggle—asceticism and sacred reading, respectively—in order to concretize practical ways that spiritual struggle aids in the pursuit of virtue and in assimilation to God in Jesus Christ. Asceticism has had a long history both inside and outside of Christian contexts. Yet, contemporarily it is hardly considered within virtue ethics as a crucial component in a life of virtue. This chapter will provide reasons why at least some form of contemporary asceticism ought to be recovered, since its effects have long been attested. In analyzing early Christian attestations to asceticism, including Clement of Alexandria, Methodius of Olympus, Aphrahat the Persian Sage, the Acts of Thomas, the Shepherd of Hermas, Antony the Great, and Gregory of Nyssa, three themes will emerge: asceticism in relation to sexual continence; asceticism as angelification and restoration; and the body as the dwelling place of God. These three themes will parallel the three stages of *epektasis*, respectively. The chapter will then conclude by offering a contemporary approach to asceticism in which the interiorization of all of the literature and imagery that is characteristic of monastic asceticism will be further interiorized for implementation for laity. In the end, this
chapter will provide one example of the overall theory of this project: the application of spiritual struggle to any form of Christian living, in this case to a Christian’s care for the body through asceticism, will act as a portal to detachment from pleasures, strengthening of the soul, and unity with God.

I will continue in chapter 5 with the second example of spiritual struggle—its application in the practice of sacred reading. Scripture is sometimes considered to be an informer of virtue—a prescriber for particular actions that when carried out, prove helpful in acquiring virtue—but not a securer of virtue. In other words, Scripture has often been viewed only as a source for rules, regulations, and suggestions for living a virtuous life. Yet, what requires greater attention are ways by which to read Scripture as a transformative practice. There has been much debate among Christian ethicists and virtue ethicists as to the proper place of Scripture in the moral life. This project will suggest that the very practice of sacred reading, most clearly implemented in the first few centuries of Christianity, enables the pursuit of virtue. That is, sacred reading, when practiced in certain ways embodied by the early church, offers one degree of separation between reading and acquiring virtue—not two. Two degrees of separation would imply one degree for its very reading and a second for the application of what seems appropriate for a particular context. Instead, there exists a spiritual struggle in the practice itself. This struggle alone encapsulates a way of life, a worldview, and a spirit that enables the acquisition of virtue.

This chapter will begin by offering an extensive analysis of the current state of Scripture and ethics and contemporary suggestions on how to mend their divorce. In this analysis, some consensus will begin to emerge, and this consensus will be correlated to ancient Patristic and Orthodox Christian methodologies. More specifically, the concepts of unity and holism, character formation and virtue, and community will form bases by which to move forward in the
discussion of Scripture and ethics. All of the suggestions among contemporary and ancient authors will then be placed into the three epektatic stages of sacred reading. The first stage will consist of struggle, vulnerability, trust, and humility. The second stage includes sustained struggle, purity, embodiment, and prayer. The final stage is one of full immersion and transformation into a new creation. Through the lens of spiritual struggle, the sacred reading of Scripture cannot be reduced only to an exercise of the intellect or a battle between a variety of historical reconstructions. While these things certainly have their place in the discussion, sacred reading goes beyond these. Thus, this chapter will provide the second instantiation of applying spiritual struggle to a Christian practice, in this case to the reading of Scripture. The result, similar to that of chapter 4, is access to the epektatic journey that ultimately leads to unity with God.

The final chapter will proceed with three main goals. The first is to evaluate the contribution of this project as an Orthodox Christian virtue ethic. Orthodox Christian methodology offers an interdisciplinary approach important for the contemporary hyper-fragmentation that characterizes much of theological scholarship today. Orthodoxy also offers a distinct praxis characterized by spiritual struggle and by the placement of God as the guiding principle and telos of ethics. The second goal of this chapter will be to reassess the affinities and differences between this project and an Aristotelian-Thomistic framework and the implications of this comparison. This project is deeply engrained in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition but also distinguishes itself as a non-Aristotelian ethic at times. For this reason, seven distinct points of comparison will be highlighted in this chapter. The third goal of this chapter will be to identify the tensions that arise when providing the concrete examples of asceticism and sacred reading detailed in chapters 4 and 5. Specifically, I will address the tensions of the dignity of the body
versus what may appear as a devaluation of the body; the exclusivity of this project as a Christian ethic; and the risk of these concrete examples devolving into empty gestures. Thus, chapter 6 will assess the contributions and shortcomings of the project as a contemporary Orthodox Christian ethic of virtue, grounded in a retrieval of Patristic and ancient Christian thought, and will at the same time address potential avenues for further research carved out by this project.

Ch. 2 – Spiritual Struggle

1 – What is Spiritual Struggle?

1.1 – Selecting a Precise Term

The term “spiritual struggle” hardly appears in theology, although this chapter will argue that the phenomenon of spiritual struggle appears frequently under different guises. The two main components of this term, “spiritual” and “struggle,” have direct implications. The first—“spiritual”—implies a religious component that is specifically not secular. As attractive as a more universal term might be, spiritual struggle in this project does necessitate a belief in Jesus Christ, since He is ultimately the Paragon of virtue who Christians seek to imitate. This does not

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129 One of the few books that uses the term moral struggle as its central topic is David A. Clairmont’s Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics: On the Person as Classic in Comparative Theological Contexts (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) is a comparative study between Christianity and Buddhism and not an attempt to elaborate on the term. Simon D. Podmore, Struggling with God: Kierkegaard and the Temptation of Spiritual Trial (United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co, 2013), 47-70, also suggests this term to translate Kierkegaard’s Anfægtelse, but he ultimately ends up sticking with “spiritual trial” so as not to add another word to the list of possibilities for Anfægtelse. In going through an in depth analysis of the difficulties of pinning this concept to one English translation, his discussion of the various possibilities provides a good picture for its fuller meaning. Anfægtelse does capture much of what spiritual struggle means in this project, with nuances that will be developed throughout, the most notable of which is Kierkegaard’s focus on struggling only with God.
mean that those who do not profess such a belief cannot pursue and acquire virtue, but it will become clear that this project reinterprets virtue as a subset and result of the love of God and neighbor. In other words, in this project, it is the pursuit of semblance to God (as revealed in Jesus Christ) that receives the emphasis; virtue is a result of this pursuit. Spiritual struggle is undertaken for the sake and through the grace of the God of Christianity toward whom that struggle is oriented. In this way, while virtue is accessible to Christians and non-Christians alike, the motives, methods, and results between the two will differ significantly.

For example, one component of spiritual struggle that will be unpacked in chapter 4 is asceticism. Christianity certainly cannot claim asceticism as unique to itself, but this project is differentiating between asceticism undertaken for the self and asceticism undertaken for Christ. The former is encumbered with notions of self-improvement and self-centeredness and so risks making asceticism counter-productive to virtue. If asceticism is undertaken without Christ as its aim and solely for one’s own benefit, it becomes devoid of love and life; it accomplishes self-emptying but not fulfillment. Asceticism for Christ, on the other hand, is an asceticism that gives. It is an asceticism that focuses on self-improvement only insofar as this improvement is for the sake of a larger community, for the kingdom of God, and for the furtherance of the gospel of Christ that subsequently promotes further love and self-sacrifice, all through emulation of Christ from whom grace originates. It becomes an asceticism focused on the self, only paradoxically. It is an improvement of oneself for all those except oneself. This is a rather different approach and so produces different results.

130 See Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 46-61, 72-82, on pagan virtue in Augustine and Aquinas, respectively. Augustine maintains that pagans cannot be virtuous because their emphasis on self-sufficiency, filled with hubris. Further, hypocritical Christians and pagans are in the same “semblance of virtue” for Augustine. Aquinas is more generous, according to Herdt’s assessment, asserting that pagan virtue is true but not salvific. In other words, the virtue must eventually be redirected toward God. This is precisely what is meant above—virtue must eventually be redirected to God for it to flourish with all the benefits of possessing that virtue.
Christ transforms all struggle; struggle for, in, and through Christ creates an entirely different lens by which to view a given physical practice. The same can be said of other forms of spiritual struggle. Two of these other forms include asceticism, the topic of chapter 4, and sacred reading, further discussed in chapter 5. If these practices are done with selfish ambition, pride, or conceit they are readily misinterpreted and thus misapplied. Another practice to which spiritual struggle prayer can be applied is Christian prayer, which at its core is always, in one way or another, communal in the Body of Christ. Similarly, spiritual struggle can be applied to meditation—struggling to center oneself in order to experience the presence of God—and to penance—a self-evaluative and self-emptying struggle that requires what is often a difficult look at one’s real state of virtue, or lack thereof. Finally, though this list is not exhaustive, spiritual struggle can be applied to works of charity, which are often premised on self-sacrifice, and to the observance of other sacraments and rituals, which require human effort at the mercy of divine grace.

These religious practices, when considered within the scope of spiritual struggle for, in, and through Christ, take on new meaning, and this project will examine two of these practices—asceticism and sacred reading—in detail in their respective chapters to see just how this is so. Secular terms such as moral effort, moral struggle, or simply speaking of an ethic of virtue or a virtuous struggle would not entirely capture what is meant by spiritual struggle. Moreover, words such as spirituality, pietism, and religiousness underemphasize the persistence, perseverance, and work that are needed in the spiritual struggle under consideration here. They also carry baggage. Thus, the “struggle” in the terminology of spiritual struggle is meant to convey this tenacity. “Effort” does not immediately invoke resolve but carries with it traces of intermittency. “Strife” is a close replacement, yet it can at times be mistaken to include feelings of bitterness or anger,
much the same as “grief.” The language of spiritual struggle, then, captures the definition mentioned in chapter one: the exertion of sustained effort in all dimensions—physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual—with intent to attain a semblance of, knowledge of, and intimacy with Jesus Christ in community, for God and for others.

1.2 – Origins and Scope of Spiritual Struggle

Struggle in this respect is necessarily voluntary and uncoerced and has three possible origins. The presentation of their order has no particular relevance, but when a stage is referred to as a lower stage, for Gregory, it does imply a lesser stage, the higher stage being the ultimate goal to be pursued. First, spiritual struggle may originate from God, as will be seen in Kierkegaard’s presentation of spiritual struggle. Reminiscent of this type of struggle is Jacob’s wrestling with God in Genesis 32. This struggle Gregory refers to as a higher stage of struggle, since it deals directly with God Himself. Second, it may arise from one’s own weaknesses or base desires. This is one of the stages that receives much attention in monastic and ascetic works. This falls into a lower stage of struggle. The third origin, which also falls into a lower stage, is other extra-personal forces, such as demonic powers or even people who make poor decisions that affect those around them. Structural violence that originates from the injustices of other people, groups, and institutions can technically fall into this third category, but this does not imply that injustices or oppression of any sort should be tolerated. Spiritual struggle in this project, since it is presented as an action to be chosen and even pursued, is not the same as the struggles faced in cases of oppression, as one would find in liberation theologies. As noted above, spiritual struggle here is voluntary and uncoerced, whereas struggles occasioned by oppression are not and should not be. The former is freely chosen with the belief that it will
benefit the agent making the free selection, but the latter should be avoided, protested, and should not be pursued. This distinction is clear in a number of works that discuss struggle, spirituality, and oppression.

For instance, Lisa Tessman in her interest to examine further the effects of oppression on moral progress or its lack thereof, coins the term “burdened virtues.”131 These virtues are “burdened” because of an unpleasant set of circumstances but that are separated from their bearer’s flourishing. In a sense, virtue is delinked from Aristotle’s conception of the good life or human flourishing. Instead, they “forfeit their bearer’s well-being because they are self-sacrificial or corrosive or crowd out other valuable traits.”132 Thus, Tessman believes that conditions of oppression do not just damage the victim’s morality through a sort of trauma that is experienced after the fact, but they also cause moral limitations and burdens by creating circumstances in which there is no good way to live, in the traditional sense.133 Trevor Smith echoes much the same when he identifies oppression as a limitation to virtue, cites the obligation to resist oppression, and details what this resistance might look like.134

In the discussion of moral luck in the previous chapter, I concluded that circumstances do not affect one’s ability to spiritually struggle, since spiritual struggle is measured by exertion relative to any set of circumstances. In other words, for some, merely carrying the will to survive might be just as exertive as the ascetic who fasts and prays days without interruption. For this reason, it is important to distinguish spiritual struggle from spiritual suffering. The former is accessible to, and in my argument necessary for, everyone, yet is not determined by

132 Ibid., 5.
133 Ibid., 6, 81-106.
circumstances. Circumstances determined by factors such as oppression and suffering might
determine the starting point of one who undergoes spiritual struggle, but as will be discussed,
there exists no absolute scale by which to measure one’s moral progress. Instead, each
individual’s scale is unique, and progress on that scale is determined relative to one’s
circumstances.

An earlier writer, Simone Weil, sheds some light on why it is the case that oppression
stunts moral progress and creates situations in which exist grave moral limitations. In her essay,
“The Love of God and Affliction,” she makes a distinction between suffering and affliction. The
former is certainly a component of the latter, she agrees, but the latter is beyond the former,
piercing the soul and affecting the very core of a person. Because affliction damages the soul,
she describes affliction that may be caused by oppression—in her example, slavery—as a sort of
death and hell. The effects of affliction are so devastating to Weil that she is astonished that
“God has given affliction the power to take hold of the very souls of innocents and to seize them
as their sovereign master.” She seems to have expected that such unjust circumstances would
not have been so far reaching, crippling a person’s soul, in the sight of a just God. Yet it remains
that the conditions caused by oppression are not the same favorable conditions by which struggle
is to cultivate virtue.

Spiritual struggle, while necessarily difficult as the name implies, is always an occasion
for growth, although not always imminently. Consider the three kinds of struggle mentioned
earlier. Perseverance in struggling with God himself, with one’s base desires, or against extra-
personal evils will almost always amount to good, to moral growth. Yet, the sort of extra-
personal evil by which oppression limits the possibility of virtue should certainly not be pursued,

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136 Ibid., 33.
but resisted. Even with the consideration of burdened virtues, Tessman does not maintain that oppression should ever be pursued, but lamented. Thus, the scope of spiritual struggle in this project does not include liberatory struggles. This is not to say there is no potential for growth in these struggles, but it is to be clear that advocacy of spiritual struggle is in no way advocacy of oppression of any sort.\(^{137}\)

1.3 – Communal Dimension of Spiritual Struggle

A final dimension important in defining spiritual struggle is its communal nature. Here, two questions will be addressed simultaneously: What does it mean to be in community? What does it mean for spiritual struggle to be communal? Stanley Hauerwas is particularly helpful in unpacking what it means to be in community, especially in relation to virtue. Hauerwas, throughout a number of works, has laid out and argued for the foundation on which a community is to be established. He does not necessarily provide an organized list of these ideals or criteria, but I have chosen four essential—not exhaustive—features of this community that I believe present a fair assessment of Hauerwas’ work: narrative, virtue, selflessness, and Christ-centeredness.\(^{138}\)

First, narrative provides context for spiritual struggle. That is, without understanding one’s own role within a community, which is further defined by a history, traditions, and

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\(^{137}\) One contemporary example of this can be found in the Coptic Orthodox Church. It has witnessed to one positive result of oppression—the proliferation of the gospel of Christ. Evidenced by their use of a calendar whose year was reset after the mass extinction of hundreds of thousands of Coptic Christians, this Church prides itself on the blood of the martyrs, whose line of blood has been shed almost consistently for nearly two millennia. Yet, this still does not and should not translate (although at times it did) into a pursuit or welcoming of oppression. See Mark Gruber, *Sacrifice in the Desert: A Study of an Egyptian Minority through the Prism of Coptic Monasticism*, Ed. M. Michele Ransil (Lanham, MD: U of America, 2003); Sana S. Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-long Struggle for Coptic Equality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003); and Samuel Tadros, *Motherland Lost the Egyptian and Coptic Quest for Modernity* (Chicago: Hoover Institution, 2013).

\(^{138}\) To be fair to Hauers’ work, an important component of this community is its being peaceable, but emphasizing this point may have taken the project a little too far off track. Consequently, this fifth component was left out.
relations within broader communities, the content or specifics of spiritual struggle risks ambiguity. It is through identification with a group of people with a particular narrative that communication with other narratives finds a reference point. For example, the two instantiations of spiritual struggle that will be discussed in further chapters—asceticism and sacred reading—have their histories, traditions, trials, experiences, corrections, etc. They have been tried, tested, and emended, and in a sense, they have been received within communities in a more perfect, yet ever-changing form. Yet, the dynamism of narrative does not counter the reality of either of their stable histories. It is this understanding of narrative that explains how spiritual struggle can be effective in any sense. Arbitrary spiritual struggle devoid of reference points found in communities with narratives runs the risk of a self-righteous legalism that works contrary to virtue. Narrative grounds and warrants the implementation of certain forms of spiritual struggle that would otherwise lose their spirit and focus.

When Hauerwas maintains that the development of virtue is impossible without taking into account a narrative, he subordinates rules to the communal formation of agents through shared practices and stories. Narrative is integral to Hauerwas’ community because moral development necessarily occurs within the appropriation and recognition of traditions and histories and the way a community relates to them. We are inherently contingent beings, and so narratives guide us, form us, situate us, and give us a reference point to which we can relate to all other realities. No person or community can be understood apart from a particular context. Specifically, Christians must locate themselves within the story of Jesus Christ found in Scripture. It is in this light that the particular virtues such a community ought to have are

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139 Hauerwas, Peaceable Kingdom, 19-22.
140 Hauerwas, Community of Character, 112.
141 Ibid., 34-35. Hauerwas, Peaceable Kingdom, 28.
142 Hauerwas, Community of Character, 35.
determined. It is only through narrative that meaning can be ascribed to actions, thoughts, and ways of life. “Narrative provides the conceptual means to suggest how the stories of Israel and Jesus are a ‘morality’ for the formation of Christian community and character.” Hauerwas is clear that this cyclical approach of beginning with Scripture to reaffirm what is upheld in Scripture may not be convincing to many, but one should be comfortable knowing that its truthfulness can be verified through and after the community’s faithfulness to embodying the narrative and its implications. Jesus Christ insisted that we can form our lives together by trusting in truth and love to banish the fears that create enmity and discord. Christians are then bound to the responsibility of embodying communities that live in accordance with this while challenging its veridicality.

A second emphasis in Hauerwas’ work is virtue. Hauerwas, as an important proponent of the contemporary revival of virtue ethics, holds that decisions are made as a result of the type of people we have become. It follows, in his reasoning, that we ought to become virtuous and that “[t]he most important political service the church does for any society is to be a community capable of developing people of virtue.” The point of this virtue is that it helps us see reality and truth more clearly. More specifically, once a community begins journeying on the road of virtue, that community’s shortcomings and sinfulness become more apparent to them, effectively enabling its correction and thus development of further virtue. Without this spiral, ongoing growth in virtue, a community would likely remain blind to its own shortcomings, out of touch

143 Ibid., 95.
145 Hauerwas, Community of Character, 35.
146 Ibid., 129-30.
with the truthfulness of reality.\textsuperscript{149} Instead, a community ought to experience communal transformation of character, without an overemphasis on rules.\textsuperscript{150} Spiritual struggle unfolds in communal contexts, which are indispensable for growth in virtue; communities act as mirrors that reveal flaws with the hopes of correction, of becoming virtuous.

Third, a community necessarily functions as a \textit{community} detached from individualistic tendencies or worldviews and focused on a common goal. Hauerwas makes clear that part and parcel of the successful formation of a community is a shift in perspective from one’s own to that of the entire community.\textsuperscript{151} The interest of the larger body of people must not contend with or be seen as distinct from an individual’s interests within that community. Moreover, we are often deceived into thinking that we are able to maintain individualistic worldviews while prioritizing the desires of others over our own. Yet, Hauerwas contends that this is nothing more than self-deception; we must see ourselves as community if we desire sincerely to put others above ourselves.\textsuperscript{152} If we truly desire to put others above ourselves, our individualistic worldviews must give room to a more communal one. Placing oneself above others may seem impossible to uphold indefinitely, but the concept of spiritual struggle helps make this prioritization possible.

Inherent to the concept of spiritual struggle is the idea that the agent’s exertion is always oriented outwardly—toward the promotion of God’s word and kingdom, for the benefit of others through one’s own transformation, and towards growth in semblance to God for the sake of the good of the world and the flourishing of humanity. Thus, at the heart of this project are the chief commandments of Christianity that are understood as embodying all the law and prophets—the

\textsuperscript{149} The description here of “spiral and upward” foreshadows the discussion of \textit{epektasis} in the following chapter, whose schema is depicted in much the same way.

\textsuperscript{150} Hauerwas, \textit{Christian Existence}, 10.


\textsuperscript{152} Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{The Peaceable Kingdom : A Primer in Christian Ethics} (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 9, 28-29.
commandments to love God with all your being and to love your neighbor as yourself. In a word, these commandments turn one’s focus from the self to the other. Without selflessness in community, there can be no sincere love of neighbor, since love presupposes an ability to place another’s desires and preferences above one’s own. This reprioritization cannot happen outside of a community, regardless of how loosely this community might be defined. If spiritual struggle is not understood within community and without selflessness, it risks the self-preoccupation, self-centeredness, and self-reliance that Luther was so worried about and argued so ardently against. He was right to be so cautious, but ultimately what this points to is the centrality of selflessness in a community for spiritual struggle. But there are more components of this community that are required in order to capture what community looks like, what it means for spiritual struggle to be communal, and why this is important to the efficacy of spiritual struggle with respect to the acquisition of virtue.

Finally, it goes without saying that if the Christian community is to find its narrative within Christian Scripture, that Jesus Christ is at the center of that community’s self-understanding and that He is essential to that community’s interaction within its context. In order to understand how to live as a community, any Christian community must understand as best as possible Jesus’ life and mission. Hauerwas asserts that Jesus Christ is a social ethic because discipleship to His way of life and worshipping Him as God implies a specific social ethic. Jesus’ story, according to Hauerwas, centers on His proclamation that the Kingdom of God is present in Him and that this Kingdom is to be instantiated through the church as it spreads its message and character to all those with which it interacts. In this way, the community formed by

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154 Ibid., 52.
155 Ibid., 40.
the story of Christ presents a Kingdom different than other kingdoms or political powers one may encounter. This Christian Kingdom is one that is based primarily on trust, forgiveness, and peace. Since, as mentioned above, two important criteria for this are virtue formation and faithfulness to the narrative of the gospel, the veracity of its claims will become apparent as it lives out its claims through time. Consequently, this truth need not be upheld through coercion, but only need remain faithful to the message by which it is formed; it need only embody the peaceable nature through which it lays hold to the claim of virtuosity, toward which the narrative is centered, and on which the Kingdom is predicated.

Jesus Christ’s centrality to spiritual struggle is manifold. First, Christ is the source of grace needed to embark on the journey of spiritual struggle, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Second, He is the Paragon of virtue. He is to be emulated, but further, He is the one toward which a struggler ought to be oriented if that struggler hopes to be on the proper path toward virtue. Virtues are certainly excellences in and of themselves, but the goal in a Christian context and within the framework of this project is Christ-likeness. Virtues are reassurance of this proper orientation. Third, Christ serves as the purpose and justifier of the content of spiritual struggle, as mentioned at the outset of this chapter. The example described how asceticism for Christ is different than asceticism for the self. Such is the case with all forms of spiritual struggle; they must be Christ-centered to be most effective. Christ transforms certain actions; he enlivens an ethos of outward reflection—to Him and others—instead of inward focus centered on the self. Christ’s centrality is evident in the very definition of spiritual struggle, since it is necessary that there exist “intent to attain a semblance of, knowledge of, and intimacy with [Him].” It is clear then that spiritual struggle is contingent on the person of Jesus Christ as is the

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156 Ibid., 37-40, 50.
Christian community, and that part of what is means for spiritual struggle to be communal is that it be predicated on this person.

These criteria, then, serve as a foundation by which a community of character that faithfully witnesses to the gospel of the Kingdom of God should be understood. Further, this assessment clarifies how spiritual struggle is communal in character. This is important because in order for spiritual struggle to be *virtuous*, it must be communal. Otherwise, spiritual struggle faces a number of risks that can render it ineffective in acquiring virtue. Spiritual struggle must be communal because this promotes its selflessness and its focus on virtue and Christ, and provides a fuller framework for its narrative and context. Without these not only will spiritual struggle miss the mark when it comes to virtue, but under false pretense it will appear to be an achiever of this end.

Spiritual struggle is communal by nature. Technically, one cannot envision a scenario, barring extreme circumstances or exceptions, in which a person does not belong to a community in one sense or another. It is more a matter of identifying a number of communities to which one belongs than of assessing whether or not one lives in community. Personhood exists as a result of communal interactions, whether this community is, for example, a group of strangers at a local farmer’s market or a group of people gathered at a church. The picture painted here of spiritual struggle within a community is indeed idealistic, but the concept of spiritual struggle never foregoes the reality of shortcomings and temporary failures. Implied in a life of spiritual struggle is to always fall short but to always rise up. It is to always aspire and to be satisfied in the process of transformation than in actually attaining a supposed summit in that aspiration. Spiritual struggle is to move forward, to strive. It is to never be satisfied and yet to delight always in the life that is lived vibrantly in, for, and through God and others.
2 – A Way of Life Far and Wide

Until now, I have attempted only to define and delimit the scope of spiritual struggle, but this section will advance a step further. Here, I will demonstrate different dimensions of spiritual struggle by analyzing a variety of thinkers throughout the ages who have grasped and detailed a number of aspects of this important concept. These authors are selected to represent a broad range of thought. This breadth—geographical and temporal—is intentional in that the case for spiritual struggle will be strengthened through commonalities found among otherwise disparate writers. Each author will refer to at least one of the three forms of struggle aforementioned: struggle with God, oneself, or others. This survey will begin with the ancients, including Aristotle and the Stoics, after which it will move to a brief examination of spiritual struggle in the Patristic era using Ss. Methodius and Antony as examples. Next, it will examine some Western mystics from the middle ages, including Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross. The exploration will then delve into Søren Kierkegaard’s conception of struggling with God. Finally, it will end with a more contemporary understanding of spiritual struggle with Elder Paisios, whose Orthodox Christian tradition tends to conceptualize the Christian journey as one of perseverant and perpetual spiritual struggle. Through these writers, the essence of spiritual struggle will be more clearly demonstrated to be presented as concluding remarks. Additionally, the intimacy between the concept of spiritual struggle and Gregory’s theory of epektasis will begin to emerge in this exploration—evidence of the contingency each concept has on the other and justification for placing the concept of spiritual struggle within a broader epektatic framework.
2.1 – The Ancients

2.1.1 - Aristotle

Contemporary virtue ethics is based primarily on Aristotle’s account of the virtues, in some form or another. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle details virtue and the virtues by explicating the rational and irrational parts of the soul;\(^{157}\) intellectual and moral virtues;\(^{158}\) means, deficiencies, and excesses in assessing virtues;\(^{159}\) choice in virtue as a mean between excesses in pleasure and pain; the role of intention and deliberation in becoming virtuous;\(^{160}\) the habituation of character and virtue;\(^{161}\) voluntary and involuntary actions;\(^{162}\) and the conditions necessary for actions to be considered virtuous.\(^{163}\) All of these issues are foundational to the field and to the discussion of development in virtue, but the goal here is not necessarily to discuss Aristotle’s view on virtue and its acquisition but to examine whether or not this influential expounder of virtue had anything to say concerning struggle and the acquisition of virtue.

Aristotle clearly argues that struggle is necessary for acquiring virtue. “[C]raftsmanship and virtue are always concerned with what is harder; for even the good is better when it is harder.”\(^{164}\) He continues by explaining that the target of virtue is easy to miss and hard to hit.\(^{165}\) The road to virtue is difficult and it is in fact often the road of *most* resistance, not least. Aristotle

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\(^{158}\) Ibid., 237-41.


\(^{163}\) Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” 242-244.

\(^{164}\) Ibid., 242.

\(^{165}\) Ibid., 246.
foreshadowed similar assertions that would be made centuries later in Christian Scripture’s description of the narrow gate. Yet, even in locating this project as an interjection in virtue ethics and even with Aristotle’s awareness of the struggle required in virtue’s acquisition, this project remains a significant departure from an Aristotelian ethic.

Noted in chapter 1 are four departures of this project from Aristotle’s Nichomachean and Eudemian ethics: 1) Aristotle’s good, perfectly virtuous agent is an inaccessible ideal, whereas this project by definition proposes spiritual struggle as a process that is accessible to all. 2) Aristotle maintains a unity to the virtues, while the concept of spiritual struggle maintains that partial, though real, virtue is possible. The road to virtue is a perpetual journey, and many saints and righteous figures in Christianity have at the same time been flawed and sinful. 3) The self’s own goodness, for Aristotle, is the object of the moral life, whereas the Christian moral life is de-centered. This project is based on Christianity’s chief commandments of love of God and neighbor, effectively displacing the emphasis on one’s own goodness. 4) For Aristotle, in order for virtue to be considered nobly good, it must be acquired for its own sake. Yet, virtue as a result of spiritual struggle on a perpetual ascent toward God is not for the sake of acquiring virtue but is for the sake of becoming like God.

Aristotle is clear that one can have the right end (telos) but the wrong actions, the right actions but the wrong end; or both can be wrong; or both can be right.\textsuperscript{166} Virtue chooses the purpose or action by which to reach the end, and the correctness of the choice’s end is the job of virtue.\textsuperscript{167} Said more succinctly, virtue is what allows you to choose the right actions towards the right end. Thus, character is assessed by the purpose for which a person acts, not entirely from the act itself. On the other hand, the ethic presented in this project, envisions the telos in a much

\textsuperscript{166} Aristotle, “Eudemian Ethics,” 71.  
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 72.
different way. Spiritual struggle, in concert with the theory of *epektasis* discussed in the next chapter, requires actions to be directed at growth in God-likeness. That is, God is the *telos* that can never be entirely reached. The actions that one must take in order to pursue virtue require a persistent orientation and reorientation toward this infinite, though partially knowable, end. The absence in Aristotle’s theory of the defined Christian God that would develop in future centuries meant that inherent contradictions and impossibilities would riddle his theory as evidenced by the discrepancies noted above. Still, what is critical here is that despite all of these differences, Aristotle recognizes the transformative nature of struggle. Reassessing this concept of the transformative nature of struggle toward virtue within a Christian framework will shed light on the true, though incomplete, reality the philosopher observed.

2.1.2 – The Stoics

The stoics also offer a perspective on struggle in their discussion of moral progress, albeit one riddled with paradoxes. The most obvious contradiction in the Stoics’ discussion of moral struggle is the assessment of the effects of struggle in a person who has yet to reach perfection, or the status of the sage. The struggle of such a person is rendered worthless. For example, Cicero writes:

> For just as a drowning man is no more able to breathe if he be not far from the surface of the water, so that he might at any moment emerge, than if he were actually at the bottom already, and just as a puppy on the point of opening its eyes is no less blind than one just born, similarly a man that has made some progress towards the state of virtue is none the less in misery than he that has made no progress at all.\(^\text{168}\)

\(^{168}\) Cicero, "De Finibus, Book III": Loeb Classical Library, 1931, 267.
The assertion made by Cicero is in direct opposition to the type of ethic suggested in this project. While Cicero and the Stoics maintained that the struggle is only as valuable as the final state achieved, I am suggesting that progress itself is valuable and that a final state of perfection is necessarily unattainable. Yet, even while denouncing the benefits of a sort of partial moral progress, Cicero is aware that the Stoic doctrine appears contradictory but that it must be asserted so as to maintain an inherent and holistic system of Stoic logic. He writes:

I am aware that all this seems paradoxical; but as our previous conclusions are undoubtedly true and well established, and as these are the logical inferences from them, the truth of these inferences also cannot be called in question.169

Thus, Cicero is aware that denying value to moral struggle is paradoxical. It is difficult to imagine that a person who struggles against vice—though has not entirely attained perfect virtue—is not better off than a person who does not struggle at all. This notion will remain a strong point of disagreement with most of the writers below, though there exist other aspects of Stoic ethics that are compatible with Christian ethics.170

Geert Roskam does well to demonstrate the logic of the Stoics in this regard and the contradictions therein. Despite the contradictions, it is helpful to analyze Stoic philosophy on moral progress, as it captures the inability to forego the need to struggle despite the obvious problems that arose to the contrary for the Stoics. In introducing his work, Roskam, with broad strokes, paints a picture of the ancients’ discussion of virtue in relation to struggle. Socrates was the first to challenge the self-evidence of the concept of virtue, proving that there exist more discrepancies than presumed.171 Further, Sophists were of the persuasion that virtue can be

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169 Ibid., 268.
170 See Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, *Protestant Virtue and Stoic Ethics* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), for an insightful work on how Stoic ethics can lend themselves well to virtue and Christian ethics broadly, and Protestant ethics specifically. Cochran, in recovering the use of the Stoics for contemporary virtue ethics, lays out different thinkers who influenced the formation of Protestantism on both sides of the debate—that Stoics lend themselves well to Christian ethics and that they do not.
171 Roskam, 3.
taught, and Plato’s dialogues cast a shadow on the forthcoming theories of virtue and moral progress, which, important for the purposes of Roskam’s study, include two main schools of thought—those of Aristotle and the Stoics.\textsuperscript{172} Regarding the question of whether or not moral progress is possible and how it is achieved, the former hinges on the theory of habituation in the virtues through \textit{phronesis} while the latter presents a paradoxical all-or-nothing model. In this model there exists a preeminent concern for doctrines (the “why” of the action) over and against the precepts (the mechanical manifestation of individual actions of particular instances). While one is either good or bad, without an in between, moral progress is still encouraged since it is possible to reach the level of the sage who uninhibitedly does good in perfect freedom and wisdom and without need for deliberation.\textsuperscript{173} The caveat remains that unless this level is reached, any and all moral progress made that falls short of this pinnacle is rendered useless. Gradual change (\textit{prokopē}) leads to radical change (\textit{metabolē}), but the gradual without the radical is as good as no gradual at all.\textsuperscript{174}

Roskam then examines a number of Stoic philosophers chronologically, including Panaetius, Hecato, Posidonius, Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.\textsuperscript{175} While a number of these Stoics wrestle with the paradox of their school—that one ought to struggle for moral progress, but that anything short of perfection is useless—they all seem either to provide insufficient resolution to this tension or attempt to resolve the tension without ridding their theories of serious gaps in logic. Epictetus gets the closest to providing a solution. He admits, “As virtue leads to happiness, freedom from passions and a good flow of life, progress towards virtue is progress towards any of these effects of virtue.” (115) It would seem, then, that

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 9-15.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 24-29.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 37-135.
Epictetus would admit that there is value to a person who struggles. However, his divide between internal (disposition and attitude) and external (precepts and actions) left him unable to make this admission. The problem, as Roskam point out, is that if moral progress is an internal endeavor that is evidenced by a person’s moral consistency, then if a person falters, that person was never a sage and his or her struggle is not valuable, and if a person does not falter, there is no way to tell if that person is a sage since one cannot assess internal disposition. The Stoics remained pragmatically aware of the need for moral progress but theoretically unable to attribute any value to the one who progresses.

Epictetus, though, in a short passage from his Discourses does describe his particular understanding of struggle. One is to struggle against certain impulses, and the purpose of struggle is to prevent bad habits from forming and to aid in the formation of good ones. Reminiscent of Aristotle’s model but with significantly less elaboration, habituation requires struggle since only by constant repetition of good actions can one purify oneself of what is undesirable. This includes anger, distress, and lust, among others. Moreover, habituation in the good through struggling against negative impulses ought to be gradual, with increasing increments of good actions and decreasing increments of bad ones. In this way, bad habits will become completely destroyed. Among these “actions” on which Epictetus elaborates are impure thoughts. He advises to set one’s mind on pure things and to sacrifice to God when an impure impression (thought) attacks. Struggle against the lingering of any thoughts. If a thought is identified as bad, get rid of it right away without entertaining it. The more one does this, the

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176 Ibid., 116-24.
178 Ibid., 156.
more one will be equipped and ready to resist any impure thought.\textsuperscript{179} This model, then, can be applied to other bad habits. Finally, Epictetus advises the struggler to call on God to aid in the struggle, so that by catching any bad action early on, it does not risk becoming a full-blown habit.\textsuperscript{180} In this way, Epictetus’ struggler will not fear death, but will live a life of peace and tranquility free from bad actions and habits. With all this, it still remains that Epictetus’ explicit theory on moral progress does not make room for full-fledged recognition of moral progress through spiritual struggle. Similarly, the divide aforementioned between internal disposition and external actions would stunt a fully developed appreciation for struggle in relation to moral progress. These inconsistencies, however, did not continue unnoticed.

Plutarch, a Platonic anti-Stoic of the early first century AD, did not deny that moral progress was absent to the Stoics, but that there would be no way to witness this moral progress if ignorance remained the same and skill did not increase, that is, if there existed no external evidence for internal transformation.\textsuperscript{181} He pointed out that none of the process of Stoic moral progress can be seen until everything has been fixed in one shot. But if one cannot see moral progress, it is not really moral progress. Thus, he concluded that the Stoics’ moral progress is not actually moral progress. Plutarch was unaware that Stoic moral progress was able to effect an abatement of a person’s inappropriate behavior without diminishing that person’s fundamental wickedness. Yet, he still takes his argument further by asking them to think about the transition from evil to good, which he believes to be the domain of moral progress.\textsuperscript{182} The crux of his argument against the Stoics regards the suddenness of the change from evil to good, the process of \textit{metabolē} aforementioned. He thinks that their moral progress is really found in this \textit{metabolē}.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 157.  \\
\textsuperscript{181} Roskam, 224-25.  \\
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 226-28.
\end{flushright}
A fundamental flaw arises in Stoic thought, according to Plutarch, when they admit that there sometimes exist those they call *Sophos dialelithos*—wise men who were not aware of their becoming wise.\(^{183}\)

Plutarch asks how this could be, since such a sudden change must be noticeable. He concludes that either their conception of *metabolē* is mistaken or that there can be no *Sophos dialelithos*. Moreover, if even the greatest moral change (*metabolē*) can sometimes be unnoticed, how would smaller change be noticed? Thus, there could be gradual moral progress but the Stoics are unaware of it. In this way, Plutarch pushes the Stoics into a corner where they must admit that their understanding of moral progress is mistaken, or that all those who have undergone *metabolē*, successfully rendering them sages, must be aware of their accomplishment. The final nail in the coffin, then, is that since many of those whom the Stoics followed as moral guides were not considered sages, and since they chose to follow some and rejected to follow others, this implies that the Stoics did indeed differentiate between those struggling for moral progress and those who were morally depraved. They follow some leaders who are not sages but do not listen to others at all because of a judgment they have placed on them. Degrees between vice and virtue did exist.\(^{184}\) Thus, one way or another, the Stoic philosophy on moral progress could not stand without modification.

The Stoics, such as in the example found in Cicero’s *De Finibus*, were aware that their doctrine had to deny the value of struggle, though they were aware that common experience contradicted their doctrinal theories. Despite the apparent paradoxes, struggle was a widely attested religious experience even among the Stoics, and for this reason it occupied much of their writings. Moral struggle, in this light and with consideration by Stoics such as Epictetus, was a

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 229-36.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 242-44.
practice on which moral progress was contingent.

2.2 - Patristics

Patristic thought will characterize much of the forthcoming discussions in chapters 3, 4, and 5 regarding *epektasis*, asceticism, and Scripture, respectively, but it is worth noting here two important aspects of spiritual struggle in this period that will help delineate this concept. First, spiritual struggle requires intensive exertion and full human agency, as discussed in another light in chapter 1. The 3rd and 4th centuries saw a vast spread of monasticism in the East. In this monastic setting, struggle was understood to be mainly in the form of ascetical physical exertion aimed at ridding evil inclinations and fighting off extra-personal temptations. Though it certainly did exhibit the third dimension of spiritual struggle—struggle with God—it was especially concerned with oneself—one’s base desires—and with demonic powers. This era saw an elevation of struggle that, in later years, would receive criticism for seeming to neglect the grace of God while placing too much emphasis on human agency. For example, in the epilogue of Methodius’ *Symposium on Virginity*, a character named Gregorian is arguing that those who experience no concupiscence are better than those who struggle against it, since the former are far from any lust and have the Holy Spirit always dwelling in them. Yet another character named Eubolion—the character who Methodius is ultimately in agreement with—makes a number of analogies, e.g. the pilot who has steered many ships, the wrestler who has beat many opponents, the doctor who has healed many patients, and the wise man who built his house on the rocks. These people are compared to the one who has struggled, and for this reason Eubolion

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concludes that the soul that struggles against concupiscence is stronger than the soul that has no such passions to begin with. The force that makes virtue stronger is perseverance.

Another example can be found in the classic work, *The Life of Antony*, by St. Athanasius. The acquisition of virtue, according to the account of St. Antony’s life, does indeed require effort and struggle—positive input from the side of the human. This effort is described as intensive and intimidating, but it is on this road that virtue is to be acquired. Virtue is within humans—a potential that is easily within the grasp of any who desire. But the effort need be one that is sustained, focused, and unrelenting. This effort includes the importance Athanasius places on discipleship. For this reason, Antony was the bee that went from flower to flower taking any and all good pollen he could find. In all these efforts, Antony discovered firsthand a truth of Scripture—the inverse proportionality between the body and the soul. The weaker one is, within limits he adds, the stronger the other is, again within limits.

But the emphasis on one’s own struggle in asceticism was never meant to overshadow divine grace—the second aspect of spiritual struggle worth highlighting in this period. This road to virtue, which Athanasius describes as the reason for Antony’s and all other monastics’ asceticism, was not contingent entirely on those who embarked on this journey. Instead, Athanasius ultimately attributes Antony’s successes to God.

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186 Ibid., 161.
187 Ibid., 162.
189 Ibid., 105, 107. (GL 20.5-20.6).
190 Ibid., 77. (GL 7.8-7.13).
191 Ibid., 61, 63 (GL 3.4).
192 Ibid., 75, 77 (GL 7.8-7.9), 93 (GL 14.3-14.4).
193 Ibid., 153 (GL 45.4).
194 Ibid., 257, 259 (GL 93.3-93.4).
work function as appositives in Athanasius’ writing. Healing, exorcism, and all other feats come through Anthony’s prayers and ascetic discipline but from God. This grace-enabled struggle, then, required the human being’s efforts but was rendered naught without God’s grace. Moreover, it was God’s very grace that infused the desires, strength, and ability to embark on the journey in the first place. The two aspects presented here carry over prominently into medieval western mystics, which will be represented by Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross. As previously noted, the geographic and temporal variations among these diverse thinkers serve to strengthen the commonalities demonstrated despite these degrees of separation. That is, if commonalities exist—and they do—these commonalities, in overcoming significant barriers, must point to the importance of spiritual struggle as a frequented and thus important religious experience in discussions of virtue. Similarly, the overlap unpacked in this chapter will help delineate the essence of spiritual struggle for its appropriation in Christian virtue ethics. It will also become clear that fundamental components of Gregory’s theory of perpetual progress will begin to emerge more clearly in the discussion of spiritual struggle among these western mystics.

2.3 – Medieval Western Mystics

2.3.1 – Julian of Norwich

Julian of Norwich presents an autobiographical account of the struggles she went through on her journey to God through illness and anguish. In movements of solidarity with the suffering Christ, she recalls His pain as encouragement to endure her own pains, which are often spoken

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195 Ibid., 73 (Greek Life 7.1; SC 400, 150), 143 (GL 39.3; SC 400, 240), 237 (GL 84.1; SC 400, 352)
196 Ibid., 93 (GL 14.5; SC 400, ), 141 (GL 38.3), 243 (GL 87.1).
197 Ibid., 69 (GL 5.7).
about as originating outside of herself, that is, externally.\textsuperscript{198} The interplay between internal and external origins of suffering with and for Christ is explicit in this work.\textsuperscript{199} Aristotle, the Stoics, and the ascetics discussed above all seem to emphasize a “lower stage” of struggle—struggle against one’s base desires. While this struggle is certainly present with Julian, she focuses more on a higher stage of struggle, one that fully embraces the reality that God allows turmoil in life as a means of purification.\textsuperscript{200} God expects our patience in the difficulties that befall us, and many of these difficulties befall us outside of our control. While Julian indeed was responsible for some of her requested sufferings, she admits that struggles come and go as God pleases, and we are often not in control of what comes at us, only at how we react to them.\textsuperscript{201} Yet in all this the solace of the struggler is in the realization that God suffers with us and understands our suffering.\textsuperscript{202}

Also unique to this text are the active versus inactive remedies or reactions to this struggle, or those of works and grace, respectively. The struggler is expected to seek, endure, pray, strive, and repent.\textsuperscript{203} In fact, struggling through this life’s pain is directly proportional to the solace of the next life.\textsuperscript{204} Julian asserts that “the harder our pains have been with Him in His Cross, the more shall our worship be with Him in His Kingdom.”\textsuperscript{205} One must feel the purgative process of sorrow in order to experience God’s mercy and grace.\textsuperscript{206} All of this struggle is deemed

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 57. On one hand, the origin of struggle here can be considered external since God allows it. On the other hand, the real reason God allows it is because humans are infested with sin that must be purged if they are to be with Him and like Him. “For that contrariness [which is in us] is cause of our tribulations and all our woe, and our Lord Jesus taketh them and sendeth them up to Heaven, and there are they made more sweet and delectable than heart may think or tongue may tell” (97). Similarly, “But for failing love on our part, therefore is all our travail” (72).
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 62-63.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 21-23.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 94-95, 161-62.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 95.
necessary by Julian, but in the end it is only God’s grace that mends us. When we sin we become unlike God, and He allows us to go through difficulties, after which His grace and mercy restores us. In this way, the interplay between works and grace is beautifully painted, with one never nullifying or overstepping the bounds of the other. His unmerited grace alone is able to restore the downcast struggler, but this person must be just that—a struggler.

A final notable theme that distinguishes Julian’s writing in the discussion of spiritual struggle is that of sin. One cannot see God while still in sin because His will and sin are antithetical; sin makes one unlike God. There is no evil worse than sin, and this is the primary reason for spiritual struggle—to cast out sin through sincere prayer and travail—in a word, purgation. The more one realize one’s sinfulness, the more one is able to repent. And the more one repents, the more one is given grace. While this may seem contrary to her conception of grace just noted, Julian seems to have no problem presenting this subtle paradox concerning grace—it is unmerited and at the same time increases with increasing contrition. The purpose of life for Julian is penance—a realization of one’s weakness that leads one to experience and rely on God, not on the self. In all of this, she is hardly concerned with the acquisition of virtue, except in her discussion of the higher parts of the human that are geared towards virtue, in opposition to the lower parts geared towards bodily passion. Struggle is what allows a human to switch from the lower to the higher. We are already seeing the reorientation towards God that will be discussed in the following chapter. This focus on God is ultimately what allows Julian to

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207 Ibid., 130.
208 Ibid., 151-52.
209 Ibid., 157.
210 Ibid., 161-62.
212 Ibid., 109-11, 116-17, 119-20.
rest assured that “all shall be well,” because the passions of Christ protect against her own inevitable struggles.213

2.3.2 – Teresa of Avila

Next, Teresa of Avila’s autobiography asserts that struggle in religious observance leads to virtue. (VII.9) Moreover, Teresa believed that God took pleasure in her infirmities and, similar to Julian, that any pain she experienced she saw as sharing in the pains of the Lord. (VII. 18, 24) She saw the narrow road of righteousness as a gradual one that leads to heaven. (VIII. 7) In letting go of worldliness, that is, attachment to worldly pleasures, she struggled in prayer, which she believed to be the door to grace. (VIII. 13) Yet, unless this struggle ultimately led to the a state of complete submission to God, it was all in vain. She says:

I used to pray to our Lord for help; but, as it now seems to me, I must have committed the fault of not putting my whole trust in His Majesty, and of not thoroughly distrusting myself. I sought for help, took great pains; but it must be that I did not understand how all is of little profit if we do not root out all confidence in ourselves, and place it wholly in God. (VIII. 18)

While positing that nothing can be done outside of complete reliance on God, she never let go of the belief that this complete dependence ought to be accompanied by sincere struggle. God at the same time gives grace to those who struggle and persevere but also gives grace to sinners while they are sinning. (XI. 1-5) She attests to experiencing both of these. Thus, Teresa’s perfect formula, so to speak, is found when one struggles with determination while exhibiting complete faith, trust, and reliance on God and His grace. For this reason, she holds that the most important of all struggles is that of prayer, which she outlines in four stages.

The first stage of prayer is very labor intensive and is not always accompanied by

213 Ibid., 145.
sweetness or solace. It is an acceptance of suffering because Christ has suffered, but God often consoles and gives grace through these intense struggles. If any virtue is to be acquired in this stage, it is through God. (XI. 11-25) The second stage is less labor intensive and leaves the struggler reaping more benefits. This stage includes the prayer of quiet, that is, the quieting of the mind and the will, but these are not entirely ridden. This is part of the struggle of this stage. It is also filled with more grace and thus more virtue and is attained by many. (XIV. 1 – XV. 14) However, they are few who progress past this stage to the third stage, in which the pleasures of the flesh and of the world become the most dreaded sufferings that the soul can imagine after having experienced such joys and detachment. There is no more labor in this stage but there is a great deal of virtue acquisition in which the soul becomes united with God. (XVI. 1 – XVII. 14) Finally, the fourth stage is complete death to the world. A struggler in this stage only experiences bliss and divine union. It is a mystical state in which the senses are suspended, and so little can be said of this state. Attaining this stage, according to Teresa, is worth all of the trials and struggles in the word for just a taste of this, which she labels tasting the glory of the Lord. (XVIII. 1 – XXXVII. 3)

In this way, Teresa of Avila realizes a progress similar to that of Gregory detailed in the next chapter, except that Gregory’s conception is more eschatologically-oriented than Teresa’s. In all this, without complete submission to and reliance on God and His grace, there can be no progress. Teresa’s demonstration of the stages of struggle in prayer provides one brief example of the transformative nature of spiritual struggle. It is clear that the telos of this struggle in prayer is unity with God, and still, virtue is acquired along the way. In chapters 4 and 5, we will turn to the ways in which struggle oriented toward God transforms ascetical practices and devotional reading of Scripture. For now, we turn to our final western medieval mystic—John of the Cross.
2.3.3 – John of the Cross

At first glance, John of the Cross’ “dark night” would appear to be an elaboration on what Teresa of Avila left unturned—the mystical fourth stage of prayer that could not be captured by human language or explanations. However, Teresa’s fourth stage includes no suffering, at least not any suffering that one can be aware of while in this state. John’s dark night of John is just that—dark. It is imbued with pain, warfare, strife, and labor. While only Teresa’s first stage of prayer is riddled with struggle, both John and Teresa are aware that this pain is produced by much the same cause. For Teresa, labor is required and pain is experienced when ridding oneself of worldly attachments. Similarly, John’s “darkness” is experienced when God flows into the soul and purges is from its imperfection and ignorances. The more impurities and weaknesses in one’s soul, the more painful the purgation of that soul. The Divine light is not full of pain or darkness, but its incompatibility with the darkness that already exists in the soul causes a fire within. The old human must die, and the new human emerges in a new divine radiance. (V-X) The road of struggle is the only sure profitable road upon which one ought to tread.

John captures the concomitant difficulties and benefits of pursuing this path of suffering:

There is another reason why the soul has walked securely in this darkness, and this is because it has been suffering; for the road of suffering is more secure and even more profitable than that of fruition and action: first, because in suffering the strength of God is added to that of man, while in action and fruition the soul is practicing its own weaknesses and imperfections; and second, because in suffering the soul continues to practise and acquire the virtues and become purer, wiser and more cautious. (XVI. 9)

Suffering leads to virtue, and in this way, the soul becomes prepared for the indwelling of the Divine, of God. Again, virtue is a marker that a person is en route towards God, and while it is in some ways an excellence in itself, it is ultimately at the service of unity with God. It would seem then that John’s dark night encompasses pieces of all four of Teresa’s stages of prayer—the
purgation, the acquisition of virtue, preparation for God’s indwelling, and finally unity with the Divine. It should be clear at this point that the overlap between western and eastern writers, even of different eras, have come to very similar conclusions regarding the process of spiritual struggle. Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian, is no different, and his discussion of Anfægtelse and temptation comes closest to capturing the essence of the concept of spiritual struggle in this project.

2.4 - Søren Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard laments that spiritual trial has become a rarity among Christians and that it is not sought after any longer. The reason for this is partly clarified by Kierkegaard’s understanding of spiritual trial. Anfægtelse, which Simon Podmore translates as “spiritual trial,” is a multidimensional word difficult to translate. Luther’s melancholic Anfechtung can be a synonym, but it only really captures Anfægtelse’s dimension of despair. Moreover, spiritual trial is not the same as temptation. Kierkegaard writes, “[W]hile temptation points to a darkness within, spiritual trial orients the self, anxiously, towards an Other. Spiritual trial can thus be understood as encountering the numinous boundary, the limit, between the self and a Holy Other.” He continues: “Temptation attacks the individual in his weak moments; spiritual trial is a nemesis upon the intense moments in the absolute relation. Therefore, temptation has a connection with the individual’s ethical constitution, whereas spiritual trial is without continuity and is the absolute’s own resistance.” Kierkegaard makes the distinction between spiritual trial

215 Ibid., 54-70.
216 Ibid., 178.
217 Ibid., 179.
and temptation clear. The latter originates outside of oneself, i.e. from demonic powers, and is involuntary. Spiritual trial, on the other hand, is experienced when humans voluntarily pursue and push the bounds of the limitless. “When the voluntary disappears, ‘spiritual trial’ [Anfægtelse] disappears…”218 But why is spiritual trial and its freedom from coercion so central to Kierkegaard’s understanding of, what he would see as an authentic, Christianity?

Kierkegaard’s law, as Podmore puts it, is that as spiritual trial increases, religious inwardness increases proportionately.219 The response of the spiritual boundary that one reaches is to inflict spiritual trial so that it can be surpassed. For this reason, spiritual trial is always to be sought after and to be fought against. When Christians look upon all aspects of life and relate it to God, when they are focused on the religious every day, spiritual trial will arise. But this intense focus is rare, and so results Kierkegaard’s lament that Christians experiencing spiritual trials is a rarity. What is more, “when spiritual trials disappear, Christianity disappears — as it has disappeared in Christendom.”220 Only when one lives as an authentic Christian, according to Kierkegaard, will one experience spiritual trials, thus successfully making progress. Even feeling God-forsaken is a spiritual trial to be fought against, since we have the consolation of the God-forsaken Christ. (184) One will overcome this trial with perseverance, but the most dangerous thing for Kierkegaard is the one who forsakes God; from this, there is no hope in overcoming, since the battle has been all together left.221

Finally, Kierkegaard makes further categorical clarifications when he describes the dialectical relationship between temptation and spiritual trial. It is similar to the perpetual

218 Ibid., 202.
219 Ibid., 175.
220 Ibid., 202.
221 Ibid., 209.
struggle between flesh and spirit. When one is still warring against the flesh and its base desires, this is temptation and is not the supreme form of religiousness to be sought after. It is necessary but must be surpassed. This helps make sense of the first order of struggle found in many of the previous authors mentioned. Aristotle’s habituation requires that certain base desires be fought against initially until their rejection becomes a regular, free-flowing reaction. Those of the Patristic era undertake asceticism, whose preliminary steps require the rejection of fleshly passions. The same applies to Teresa of Avila’s first stage of prayer and the first steps of John’s mystic ladder of divine love. Kierkegaard’s model is more of a three-step ladder, where the second step is always transitory. The bottom step is the temptation just mentioned. However, when confronted by anything to be struggled against (the middle step), one has the option to go up toward the higher things of the Spirit (the higher step). It is at this higher step where the bounds of the limitless are expanded to the human being who has engaged the pinnacle of Christian existence for Kierkegaard—Anfægtelse.

Thus, this project’s concept of spiritual struggle encompasses all of Kierkegaard’s steps, with minor qualifications. Struggle against external temptations and against one’s own evil desires or inclinations is certainly part of the spiritual struggle highlighted here. In fact, the majority of this project will focus on these so-called lower struggles, since it seems that more people fall within the bounds of this type of struggle than higher struggles with God Himself. This is not to say that Kierkegaard’s elevation of struggle with God is unwarranted. On the contrary, it effectively captures elements of Gregory’s third stage of perpetual progress. However, the linear conception of struggle as progressing from lower temptations to higher trials might not be entirely congruent with common experience. It could be that with regard to some

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222 Ibid., 239-42.
base desires, for example gluttony, a person can be weak, still fighting against temptations. That same person could also be well beyond base desires in the struggle to pray earnestly and wholeheartedly. Categorizations between temptations and trials, lower and higher desires, external and internal, are often less organized than some of these authors may admit. This non-linear nature of the journey in virtue will be detailed in the next chapter. However, the distinction that remains in the concept of spiritual struggle presented in this project is its voluntary dimension. Spiritual struggle must be intentional. Intentionality is implied in the concept’s very definition as exertion toward the semblance of God in Christ. It is contingent on focus, dedication, and sustained effort on a journey chosen, not forced. It is a commitment to a way of life, an ethos. This confirms the distinction made in chapter 1 between spiritual struggle and oppression. The former is never a justifier of the latter, and spiritual struggle’s voluntary criterion ensures the preservation of this distinction.

2.5 –Paisios of Athos

By means of concluding this section on spiritual struggle from authors far and wide, the 20th century writer Elder Paisios of Athos offers a contemporary Orthodox Christian work that explains why intentionality is central to spiritual struggle and why complacency and spiritual struggle are antithetical. At the same time, his account—similar to the western mystics above—begins to demonstrate the natural tendency to describe Gregory’s perpetual progress when discussing spiritual struggle. To begin, spiritual struggle, for Paisios, begins with a part of an individual’s autonomy that often dictates the actions and virtues that result therefrom—one’s thoughts. “Progress in [one’s] spiritual life depends on thoughts.”223 One must endeavor to get

223 Paisios, *Spiritual Counsels III: Spiritual Struggle*, Translated by Peter Chamberas (Patmos, Greece: Monastery of
rid of any thoughts that pollute the soul and must struggle to cultivate good thoughts that purify the heart. Only when this purity of thought (mind) and heart has been obtained does Paisios speak of a person’s entitlement to divine succor.\textsuperscript{224} According to the elder, God rewards those who have good thoughts. Ultimately, the reason for the need to purify the thoughts is to make room for Christ himself to dwell within.\textsuperscript{225} Similar to John of the Cross’ dark night that is painful because of the contrariness of impurities that exist to the divine light that yearns to unite therein, elder Paisios recognizes the discrepancy between evil thoughts and the indwelling of Christ. It begins with thoughts but extends to all aspects of life. The more one is drenched in sin, the more one must engage sincerely in struggle against the passions to attain purity. “[A] good habit equals virtue; a bad habit equals passions.”\textsuperscript{226} Within the parameters of this outlook, one must struggle to make all habits “good,” and only then will a person be ready to accept Christ.

Purgation is impossible without intentionality. An attitude of complacency will allow evil thoughts and therefore actions to pervade one’s life. Another problem lies in self-deception. If one does not know one’s own faults, how can one rid oneself of the evil therein? Thus, Paisios emphasized self-awareness. The more you know yourself and the more you make good use of past experiences, the more you are able to struggle in rectifying any impurities within. Recalling the discussion in chapter 1 of Luther’s antinomian bent, this struggle in crucifying the flesh was only to align the body with an already purified soul. He writes, “Since by faith the soul is cleansed and made to love God, it desires that all things, and especially its own body, shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God.”\textsuperscript{227} It is because the soul

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item St John the Theologian, 2010), 63.
\item Ibid., 66.
\item Ibid., 127.
\item Ibid., 128.
\item Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 401.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
has been purified by Christ that bodily passions ought to be crucified as well. Yet, Paisios suggests just the opposite. It is purification of the body that in turn in aids in the soul’s purification, making room for Christ. Neglecting this cleansing means piling rubbish onto rubbish, under which reality becomes obfuscated and with which Christ will not be given room to dwell. Paisios takes this notion of self-awareness a step further.

Awareness of one’s sinfulness is what moves God. Divine grace is unmerited under different terms for Paisios. For Paisios, grace is unmerited in the sense of magnitude. That is, the amount of divine aid given a person is much greater than what that person has merited. Yet, for Paisios, there are still things humans can do to receive grace, though they will always receive an amount beyond their deservedness. The grace one receives is undeserved in comparison to what one does, but one can still act in a way that wins the favor and the grace of God. In a way, this is similar to Teresa’s notion of repentance and how it is a necessary work despite God’s free Grace. For elder Paisios, this way of life that moves God’s grace is awareness of one’s sinfulness and need for God. Importantly, Paisios, while starting with an understanding of grace that seems to flirt with Pelagianism, ends at the same point as did many of the previous authors

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228 For a fuller discussion on the superabundance and unmeritedness of grace, see Jean Cassien, “Conference XIII,” in Conférences II Sources Chrétiennes. Vol. 54, 2009. Cassian makes it clear from the outset that nothing good can be done in this life without the grace of God. Furthermore, even the impetus toward or desire for good, the ability to do the good, and the opportunities that arise for the good, are from God. God is the one who provides the spark, enlarges the spark, and gives the opportunity for the spark to grow. Another dimension of the dynamic between grace and struggle is a comparison that Cassian makes between what is input and what is output. Humans put in efforts that are rather small and dainty, yet the grace that results is insurmountable. This is another dimension of the unmeritedness of grace. Not only does God give grace to those who do not deserve it, but He does so in an amount not proportional to those who may deserve at least some grace. Cassian continues to another factor in the immensity of grace—it’s superabundance; it comes even when humans are unaware of it or not seeking it, and it comes in an amount that almost cannot be resisted. Yet, the doctrine of irresistibility that would develop in future post-Enlightenment Christianity is countered by Cassian’s explanation that turning to evil can in fact become a resistor to grace. God will still do all He can without overstepping the boundaries of free will, but constant opposition to grace is indeed able to create a resistance to grace as a result of free will. A number of these observations are typical of ascetics in early Christianity, play important roles in Orthodox Christian theology, and are at play in the backdrop of the asceticism presented in this chapter.

229 Ibid., 166.
mentioned and even at the same point at which Luther would end. Complete submission, faith, and trust in God are the point of the Christian life. The difference between Paisios and Luther, though, is that the latter held that achieving this reliance was not through any works nor through turning to oneself for the answer, while Paisios finds that it is only through a grace-enabled ascetical struggle for purity and self-awareness that one is able to achieve this state.

For Paisios, while God’s grace can always be resisted, a lack of spiritual struggle almost guarantees resistance to this grace.230 Salvation through the blood of Christ is accepted and attained if one dies amidst sincere struggle. It is helpful here to think of Gregory’s perpetual progress; if one is progressing, one is on the path of salvation, and for Paisios progress is in struggling for self-realization and in repentance and reliance on God. “The more one progresses in the spiritual life, the clearer the eyes of his soul become, enabling him to see the magnitude of his sins with greater perception, which in turn humbles him and makes him more receptive to the Grace of God.”231 In this way, Paisios begins to capture the dynamics of spiritual struggle in its constant upward progression that cycles between realization of human frailty, submission to God, the bestowal of His grace, an increase in struggle toward purity and self-awareness, and so the cycle begins again. It is a journey of intrinsic transformation that will be discussed at length in chapter 4 on asceticism, i.e. spiritual struggle applied to the body.

3 – Conclusions Regarding Spiritual Struggle

It is important at this juncture to recap the conclusions made during this exploration of spiritual struggle throughout the ages, in various locations, and among different traditions. The

230 Ibid., 94-110.
231 Ibid., 176-77.
literature review offered here demonstrates that an ethic of virtue centered around spiritual struggle is an accessible moral pathway, pragmatic in nature, and reflective of commonly attested experiences of virtue in Christian tradition. What has emerged in this chapter is a fuller picture of what constitutes spiritual struggle.

*Spiritual struggle is a commonly attested religious experience.* This is seen all throughout the writings of the ancients, including Aristotle and the Stoics. The latter attested to the reality of moral progress through struggle even when it meant maintaining an inherent and internal paradox contrary to the logic of their broader philosophies. This means that the experience was one that could not be denied even if it was not entirely coherent within a Stoic philosophy. While these ancients are indeed missing a component of the definition of spiritual struggle presented in this chapter—that of its orientation toward God in Jesus Christ—they experienced the virtuous fruits of struggle. The accessibility of the practices and effects of spiritual struggle are widely affirmed. This includes contemporary affirmations of the benefits of asceticism, mindfulness, meditation, and other contemplative practices among other considerations. These people belong to a vast array of religious groups, and this component of spiritual struggle’s multiple attestations contains within it answers to how it is that humans are to pursue virtue in addition to the confirmation of spiritual struggle’s centrality to this pursuit.

*Struggle is transformative.* Transformation resulting from struggle has taken three distinct yet closely related forms in this chapter. The first is the strengthening of the soul. There is a disposition that results from the endurance of struggle in which an agent finds herself stronger than she had been before enduring spiritual struggle. This conception of struggle may be wider than the one delimited in this chapter, but the point remains that different camps—such as Aristotle’s and those of the early church fathers—noted this strengthening of the soul. The
second type of transformation highlighted in this chapter is in the link between struggle and virtue. One of the aims of this project is to shift the focus from the acquisition of virtue to the pursuit of virtue. Yet it remains that there is a long history of discussing the acquisition of virtue, and this is one of the ways the authors here have described the journey through spiritual struggle. This is especially notable in Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, in which the connection between struggle and virtue is made explicit. Lastly, spiritual struggle is transformative in that it makes unity with God possible. Unity with and likeness to God is the central feature of many of these authors. It is the singular or at least the final goal of the struggle. This is why there is so much of an emphasis on purgation and detachment in the journey of spiritual struggle. Unity can only be achieved the more one becomes emptied of all that is contrary to God. It is possible that the strengthening of the soul, the acquisition of virtue, and growth in likeness to God are different sides of the same coin and are at times even synonymous. The primary concern here, however, is not determining how these are to be distinguished but confirming the transformative power of spiritual struggle.

Spiritual struggle’s transformative nature has important consequences in relation to virtue ethics. It makes this ethic a true ethic in the real sense; it is an ethos—a way of life. The claim to spiritual struggle’s transformative power allows it to respond to the accusation that virtue ethics is not practical enough, that it does not offer a pragmatic approach as an applied ethic.232 At this

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point, this concern may not be entirely mitigated, since spiritual struggle has not been presented in any concrete way. Up until now, the discussion has been largely theoretical, but future chapters will further mitigate this concern. The fact that virtue’s pursuit is transformative eases tensions in virtue ethics regarding whether or not virtue can actually be fully acquired and also regarding whether or not there is a unity to the virtues.

To the first concern, virtues can be possessed, but it is always on a spectrum. This may be one reason why many who have spoken of the attainment of virtue may have communicated what this attainment looks like differently. One person’s understanding of generosity may be more invested than another’s, yet both “possess” the virtue to one degree or another. And still, neither can claim to possess the virtue of generosity to an absolute degree. To the second concern, virtues are fragmentary in reality, while in theory they can observe a certain unity. That is, humans tend not only to possess each virtue only partially but also to possess different virtues to different degrees. So it is not the case, for example, that if one is far along the spectrum in relation to the virtue of generosity that she must also be far along in relation to patience. Both of these points discussed here can be understood better in light of a simple principle that will be unpacked in the following chapter—God is the Paragon of Virtue. He is the possessor and origin of all virtues and He is the only one who possesses all Virtue as a unity and absolutely. It is sufficient to note at this point, however, that understanding the transformative nature of spiritual struggle allows for these important alleviations within virtue ethics.

*Struggle is participation in God’s grace.* The word “intimacy” selected in defining spiritual struggle was carefully chosen to describe the literal co-operation between divine and

that the issue of practicality is more than asking what does moral philosophy tell us to do. Finally, Jennifer Baker, “VIRTUE ETHICS AND PRACTICAL GUIDANCE,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 30, no. 1-2 (2013): 297–313. doi:10.1017/S0265052513000149, offers a fuller picture of how virtue ethics can be rendered most practical.
human agency therein. It is characteristic of God in Scripture to encourage the participation of human agency within His divine plans. There are many instances in which it is clear that God could have accomplished certain tasks on His own but instead chose to involve humans. God tells Job that in order for his friends to be forgiven, Job must pray for them (Job 42:7-8). The blind man had to go (while still blind) to the lake to wash his eyes although Christ was there and able to heal him immediately (Jn 9:6-7). The disciples had to give out the food after Christ miraculously multiplied the loaves and fish, which could have also miraculously been distributed through Christ (Mt 14:13-21; Mt 15:32-39; Mk 6:30-44; Mk 8:1-10; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-14). Paul had to go to Ananias to recover from his blindness although it was God who appeared to Paul—at that time Saul—initially (Acts 9:3-19). God raised Lazarus from the grave but commanded humans to unwrap his grave clothes, though the former is immeasurably more difficult than the latter (Jn 11:38-44). The examples that illustrate God’s desire to include humanity in His divine economy are many, and Moses is a good example of this divine-human co-operation. But at this point, it should be clear that part of God’s plan is for humanity to participate with Him in His works, which from humanity’s perspective is in effect His grace. The essence of this cooperation might be difficult to assess in its particularities, but at least at the surface, God is a God who loves, gives, and shares. He is a God of community, a God of cooperation, and a God who enjoys the participation of human agency in the economy of salvation.

Spiritual struggle and divine grace work in tandem, and the intimacy developed therefrom is the reason similitude to God is a result. One cannot work so closely with another and not be transformed. This is easily observed in human-to-human interaction; how much more God-and-human interaction! Further, struggle creates an awareness of God’s participation in one’s life that might otherwise go unnoticed. When one focuses on exertion, one becomes
hypersensitive to any responses to that exertion. This responds to the accusation that focusing on one’s human agency is inherently selfish or self-centered. Its result, instead, is an increase in one’s faith, resulting from the divine response to human struggle. This also appeases some of the concern that virtue ethics may focus too much on human agency and not enough on divine agency. The question should not be whether or not one form of agency is receiving more attention than another but whether or not that attention is constantly oriented toward God, even when focusing on human mechanisms. This reorientation will be further explored in chapter 3.

*Spiritual struggle implies full participation of human agency.* The complexity of human beings cannot be understated, and this is apparent in numerous contemporary fields, including sociology, theology, anthropology, psychology, and the hard sciences. Spiritual struggle, by definition, requires the engagement of all of these complexities—a holistic engagement—in which passivity finds no place. Spiritual struggle encourages an ethic that is primarily a call to action. It is a call to passion and at the same time a call away from apathy. It requires intentionality, free choice, focus, exertion, and persistence, in order to reach an ultimate state of submission, repentance, and dependence on divine grace. That this state is of central importance implies that the progression in this nonlinear struggle is inundated with uncertainties and convolution. Outside help is needed throughout its navigation, and so the holistic engagement of one’s being is also needed. This is important because the impetus placed on human agency directly addresses the haphazard nature at the heart of moral luck in an ethic of virtue. Circumstances, context, nature, and nurture are no longer the primary determining factor for one’s ability to pursue virtue. Instead, spiritual struggle is an ethic accessible to all—those considered to be in advantageous circumstances and those who are not.

In the following chapter, we will turn to the topic that has come up often in this chapter—
epektasis or perpetual progress—since its marriage with spiritual struggle is critical to properly understanding the full form of this ethic. Gregory of Nyssa’s theory of epektasis ultimately orients spiritual struggle toward God. It is these two components—the struggle and the orientation—that serve as the backbone to the thesis of this project, and without the concept of epektasis, the latter component finds little grounding. We will examine how conceiving the journey as one that is never-ending casts a new light on what it might mean to be virtuous and to claim moral progress. The framework will then be laid out for the specific implementation of this ethic through concrete practices rooted in Orthodox Christian spiritual and devotional practices.
Ch. 3 – Gregory of Nyssa’s Theory Of Perpetual Ascent and Its Implications for Virtue Ethics

1 - Introduction

Born around 335 AD, Gregory of Nyssa is one of the three heralded Cappadocian fathers that include his brother Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus. The Cappadocian fathers impacted much of the developing theology of the early Christian Church and the centuries that followed. Their contributions include writings on the doctrine of the Trinity, the Person of the Holy Spirit, responses to Christological controversies, ascetical treatises, and what would be characterized in modern times as spiritual teachings. Scholarly attention to Gregory is growing in recent decades, largely thanks to French theologian Jean Daniélou and numerous scholars thereafter.

The goal of this chapter is to unpack one of his theological concepts called *epektasis*—a term coined by Daniélou—and to explore the implications this theory might have on a contemporary Christian ethic of virtue. Particularly important are Gregory’s understanding of God as infinite, God as Good, God as the Paragon of virtue, and the importance of orientation toward God. These resources address ongoing discussions within virtue ethics of virtue and self-centeredness, virtue’s self-effacement, and the unity of the virtues. It will also become clear that *epektasis*—or perpetual progress—and the concept of spiritual struggle detailed in the previous chapter are contingent on each other for the successful progress of an agent simultaneously toward virtue and God.

Part of the challenge of reading Gregory’s writings is his occasionally imprecise theological language, which sits uncomfortably alongside other instances of hyper-

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systematization in certain theological treatises.\textsuperscript{235} The theory of \textit{epektasis} tends to fall into the former category, in which Gregory’s precision is not as great as his desire to encourage a practical ethic of spiritual journeying.\textsuperscript{236} Before turning to the texts in which Gregory most clearly unpacks the journey of perpetual progress, I will first turn to the way in which Gregory compares to certain philosophical and theological currents in his time, hoping to bring some clarity and consistency to his more nebulous language, followed by a brief examination of Gregory’s theological methodology. In a way, Gregory demonstrates obedience to the advice given by his brother Basil to take the good from Christian and pagan thinkers alike, as bees take sweet nectar from a variety of flowers.\textsuperscript{237}

1.2 – Philosophies Contrary to Epektasis

It is clear that Gregory’s thoughts have been heavily influenced by nectar from Platonism’s flower, as an early work of Harold F. Cherniss argues.\textsuperscript{238} Elements of influence from these two schools of thought as well as Aristotle and Origen can be seen in Gregory’s writings, but to detail the similarities between them all would take us far off target from the topic of this chapter—the theory of \textit{epektasis} or perpetual ascent. Briefly and preliminarily, this theory maintains that a person has the capacity to participate in an infinite God toward whom one’s desire, love, and fulfillment increase as that person concomitantly and paradoxically strives

\textsuperscript{235} Andrew Louth, \textit{The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys}. 2nd ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83; and Meredith, 7.


forward and upward, insatiably and eternally. Thus, it is more appropriate to discuss these other schools of thought in direct relation to elements of this proposed theory. Ultimately, it will become clear that much of Gregory’s innovation and contribution to Christian theology is born out of this theory, which starkly opposes at least some elements of each of the thinkers and schools of thought mentioned.\footnote{Anthony Meredith explains that whether or not \textit{epektasis} is an innovation of Gregory is disputed since parallel lines of thought can be found in Origen and Augustine. This may be true, but the way this theory was taken up, explained, and made accessible by Gregory seems, at the least, to be an important contribution of Gregory of Nyssa. Additionally, Zdenko S. Sirka finds Nyssa’s is distinctiveness and effectiveness in his application of the lives of Christians to the texts he explicates. See Zdenko S. Sirka, “The Role of Theoria in Gregory of Nyssa's Vita Moysis and in Canticum Canticorum,” \textit{Communio Viatorum: A Theological Journal} 11 (2012): 142-63.}

To begin, as discussed in some detail in the previous chapter, in a perfectionist ethics like that of the Stoics the value or merit of intermediate stages is relativized and qualified. All that matters is whether or not a person attains a final state of perfection—in this case, the status of the sage. Drowning ten feet underwater is the same as drowning one hundred feet underwater; one must break through the depths of the water for any of the effort to matter. The previous discussion of this Stoic position demonstrates its nuances and flaws. By contrast, in a developmental account of moral and spiritual progress, intermediate stages of moral and spiritual growth would likely meet with approbation. Gregory is at odds with the Stoic perfectionist model; he goes so far as to relate progress with perfection.\footnote{Ronald E. Heine, \textit{Perfection in the Virtuous Life : A Study in the Relationship between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis}, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975), 70.} In a sense, suggesting a sort of synonymy between progress and perfection appeases the Scriptural commandment to be perfect as God in heaven is perfect.\footnote{Matt. 5:48 (New Revised Standard Version).} This of course begs the question as to what constitutes progress, but this task will be left to the discussion of the forms in which spiritual struggle can come to be
embodied. For now, what is most pressing is to note the gravity of Gregory’s claims; they cannot be overstated in relation to the philosophical currents of his time.

More than his departure from Stoic moral progress, Gregory’s theory directly challenges an Aristotelian focus on one’s own goodness as the object of the moral life. For Gregory, in providing an account of virtue that does not depend on a universal schema of human potentialities, grace-enabled struggle allows a person to embark on the journey toward God—the telos of the ethic. Gregory does not believe that a final state will ever be reached on the journey of virtue but that humanity by its nature is in constant flux and that perfection is found in this dynamism. Aristotle similarly takes into account an inherent dynamism in the life of goodness, but the contribution of Gregory’s thought is to redefine the goal of the life of virtue, and progress therein, as a perpetual process in which progress implies success and as a process necessarily de-centered from the self.

Most notably, Gregory’s opposition is a significant departure from Platonic thought with which, as noted, he agrees on a number of other presuppositions to a great degree. Anthony Meredith points out at least three basic theological and philosophical principles in Gregory that find their origin in Plato: 1) God as goodness, reality, and being; 2) God as beauty; 3) The way upward is a demanding task and is also a “return to origins.” He adds to these three claiming that Gregory shares with Platonism a belief in the “spirituality of the soul and the existence of a supreme, changeless spirit.” All of these principles aid Gregory in piecing together a fuller

244 Meredith, 7-8.
245 Ibid., 11.
theory of *epektasis*. However, there is an important distinction that Gregory makes without which perpetual progress would have been philosophically inconsistent. Platonists hold that change is inherently bad, while stability is good.\(^{246}\) It is not hard to see how starkly opposed an essentially dynamic theory as *epektasis* would be to such a tenet. While Gregory ultimately does deny this premise, he does not entirely forego this claim.

Instead, there is an element of stability in his theory of perpetual ascent: as the epicenter toward which perpetual progress is oriented, God is the stable Good in which humans ought themselves to remain stable.\(^{247}\) In other words, progress in the Good is the only constant, a paradoxical aphorism (“change is the only constant”) still used in the 21\(^{st}\) century. In the same vein as the Platonic disdain for mutability, Origen saw the mutability of humans as problematic.\(^{248}\) For Gregory mutability is not necessarily bad.\(^{249}\) Jean Daniélou summarizes Gregory’s view of humanity as being presented with two forms of mutability, which can essentially be called “mutable immutability.”\(^{250}\) This is a state in which a person does not alternate between bad and good. Instead, she is paradoxically at rest in the good and at movement along a spectral ascent.\(^{251}\)

A number of scholars distinguished Gregory from Origen on many accounts while still acknowledging similarities between them.\(^{252}\) In relation to our current discussion of *epektasis,*


\(^{248}\) Heine, *Perfection*, 52.

\(^{249}\) Heine, *Perfection*, 57.

\(^{250}\) Heine, *Perfection*, 57.

\(^{251}\) Heine, *Perfection*, 57, 59.

\(^{252}\) Gregory and Ronald E. Heine, *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 72-73, 79. Heine sees Gregory as having adjusted some of Origen’s thoughts so that by the time he wrote his later, more mature writings, *epektasis* was the theory that provided this redressing. This is also made clear in Heine, *Perfection*, 8-9.; Meredith, 18; and Smith, *Passion*, 125.
Origen, similar to Plato, viewed “absence of limit and form as a defect.” What this meant for Plato and would come to mean for Origen is that God Himself is finite, since infinitude for Origen would have implied defectiveness. Origen states:

For we must maintain that even the power of God is finite, and we must not, under pretext of praising him, lose sight of his limitations. For if the divine power were infinite, of necessity it could not even understand itself, since the infinite is by its nature incomprehensible.

Thus, for Origen, ascribing infinitude to God’s power would have meant that God would not even be able to comprehend Himself. Infinitude implied defect for Origen, and Gregory would come to disagree strongly with this view. In this view, Gregory’s theory of perpetual ascent could not function, since if there were an end to God, there would also necessarily be an end to the journey of virtue toward Him. There would at the same time be a limit to virtue and an end to perfection. Aristotle’s telos and vision of the perfectly virtuous agent would in ways be preserved. Yet, in response to what Gregory viewed as a misunderstanding of God in His self-revelation, he maintained God’s infinitude, which would render humanity’s participation with this infinite God an infinite journey.

Yet Origen’s conception of God as finite created another problem, this time anthropologically. If God is finite, then humans can reach a point of perfect satiety in God. That is, if God has a limit, this limit can be reached in which the desire for God and assimilation to Him are exhausted. Humans would in this way have a limited capacity by which to participate

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253 Meredith, 13.
254 Heine claims that Gregory did not just develop the theory of epektasis in response to Origen’s belief that God is finite but also because of Eunomius’ belief that the nature of God can be fully understood by humans and that the Son is not the Same as the Father. See Heine, Perfection, 8-9.
255 Heine, Perfection, 73-74.
256 Ibid, 8-9.
257 Meredith asserts that Plato and Gregory agreed that imitation of God was the aim of life. However, the latter believed He was infinite, while the former finite (Meredith, 22). Further, Andrew Louth points out another departure of Gregory from Platonism and neo-Platonism. For Gregory, there is no ecstasy, that is, no way to pass from the created nature of humans to the uncreated nature of God since humans were created ex nihilo (Louth, 79). Smith
in God. Gregory, dissatisfied with this notion, makes a distinction between human participation in God here on earth and thereafter in the eschaton. Origen does not distinguish between the two in terms of capacity. However, Gregory asserts that humans possess an increased capacity for participation with God in the eschaton where the original state of humanity is restored. This distinction in turn seems to appease Origen’s anxieties regarding satiation. For Gregory, what appears to be a state of satiation as one progresses through virtue turns out to be the beginning of a newly discovered stage of virtue. The human soul constantly grows in its desire for God only to realize that there is nothing binding this desire’s satiation. This is possible because human beings are made in God’s image and likeness. Being created in this way means that humans are equipped with the capacity to experience God in a way unparalleled by the rest of creation. The potential to continue growing in God’s image and likeness is necessarily unlimited since God Himself is unlimited; this growth can never reach an end. In effect, the chasm that exists between finite humans and the infinite God is always being bridged partially but never fully.

This conversation is critical because what is at stake here is an understanding of eternal life. This notion will be discussed in further detail at the end of the chapter, but each of the points Gregory defends against Origen is followed by a subsequent and more important consequence. Gregory must defend God’s infinitude, in order to uphold the impossibility of human satiation by God, in order to maintain the potential of perpetual progress of humans toward and in God, in

agrees on this point, to which Gregory’s discussion of diastema is important, to which this project will turn below (Smith, Passion, 132).
258 See Smith passion, 106-15, for a fuller discussion of Origen’s theory of satiation.
259 Smith, Passion, 115-16, 123-25.
261 Meredith, 19.
order to associate this earthly, struggle-laden journey of virtue with an eternal life that begins now and continues after death. Thus, Gregory defends against Origen’s ideas in order to preserve the possibility of everlasting life and so that he can lay out the ways by which one ought to live in order to live this life with Christ. The concept of eternal life and salvation is what is at stake for Gregory, and it is also at stake in the virtue ethic of this project. Epektasis, as it unfolds in this chapter, will function primarily as a reorienting principle towards love of God and others.

What Gregory seems to have done, then, is a baptism of some of the philosophical currents of his day. While he is certainly influenced by Platonic philosophies, he ultimately Christianizes these concepts in his theory of epektasis.262 Morwenna Ludlow claims that it is in Gregory’s later works that epektasis really becomes his own through a fusion of Platonic associations and biblical conceptions.263 Sarah Coakley agrees, characterizing Gregory’s earlier writing as Platonic, after which his work De anima et resurrection serves as a shift in his thinking, after which his thoughts later in life began expounding this theory.264 Most Gregory scholars agree that his theory of epektasis developed most prominently toward the end of his life.265 However, before turning to these later writings and laying out a detailed analysis of epektasis, in understanding this theory it is first helpful to note very briefly an important characteristic of Gregory’s theological methodology.

265 Meredith, 22.
2 – Gregory of Nyssa’s Theological Integrity

One is never entirely free of the temptation to anachronistically impose modern conceptions onto ancient texts, and the exploration of Gregory’s theory runs this same risk. Sarah Coakley offers some of the more insightful reading on the Cappadocian. She challenges Jean Daniélou’s modernization of Gregory in which epistemology/philosophy and spirituality are separated. Gregory did not conceive of a separation between the sensual and the spiritual but understood the human journey as a continuum between fallen sensuality and redeemed sensuality—“a human continuum of epistemic transformation.” That is, one’s actions, thoughts, and tendencies do affect the state of one’s inner person or soul. The “spiritual senses” in Gregory are no less tied to sensual perception. Yet, detachment and freedom from these sensualities are ultimately what drives one’s perpetual ascent. It is for this reason that my thesis marries the notions of epektasis and spiritual struggle. While each notion maintains its distinctiveness, the two are so intimately tied that one does not make sense in Gregory’s thought without the other. It is also for this reason that the following chapter will focus on asceticism as a chief component of the ethic I am proposing.

It is also not a coincidence that the seamless garment Gregory weaves between epistemology and spirituality is a central component to an Orthodox Christian ethic. As mentioned previously, the double-edged sword of systematic theology’s fragmentation has not entirely cut through Orthodox theological tendencies. Comments on Gregory’s theological

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266 Coakley, 38.
267 Ibid., 44, 47.
268 Though, in an effort to speak the language often characteristic of the West, Orthodox theology has realized a need to offer more fragmented theological discussions. This is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, this has proven helpful in articulating Orthodox viewpoints and communicating them effectively in the West. The Coptic scholar Emmanuel Gergis is currently undertaking a project demonstrating an “Alexandrian epistemology,” distinct from an entirely Hellenistic epistemology. While Gregory was not necessarily functioning through this framework, it is likely that he was influenced by such an epistemology under which many of the prominent early church fathers belonged.
methodology are often easily transferred right onto Orthodox methods as well. For example, in Mary Emily Keenan’s description of Gregory’s theology, she describes the spiritual life as a sort of organic whole, taking into consideration the intellectual, the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual.269 There exists no realm of the human experience that does not affect all other realms. This is no less the case among Orthodox Christians. For this reason, Balthasar explains that for Gregory, dogmatic theology and mystical theology are one and the same—a notion not easily accepted in modern times.270

It can be argued that Orthodox Christians have been labeled in the West as possessing more of a mystical theology for this reason, but a closer look reveals that this mysticism is not, or at least should not, be understood as separate from the mundane, the sensual, the perceivable.271 This is evident in overemphases on the question of Gregory’s mysticism. It seems that this emphasis might also arise from historical discrepancies in the understanding of mysticism between East and West.272 The question of whether or not he presents a mystical theology proper

271Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: J. Clarke, 1957), 7-11, 20-21. Lossky defines mystical theology as “no more than a spirituality which expresses a doctrinal attitude.” Spirituality, discussed as being in harmony with and inseparable from action, is at the same time united with doctrine. The East has not typically fragmented these three, and with such an understanding, has never divorced mysticism from theology, despite opposing opinions. Dogma and doctrine express revealed truths, which despite often being presented as mysteries, do not escape the realms of contemplation and experience. Interestingly, Lossky places St. Paul’s out of body experience from 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 within what would contemporarily be more accurately presented as a case for a sort of mystical psychology. This allows him to point to the discrepancy between East and West. In the Eastern tradition, this is not a text that comes to mind when discussing mystical theology, but it would certainly fall into this category in the West. This is not to say that the East discredits or minimizes this Scriptural account, but there is a banality to mystical theology in the East, as will be discussed later, that is very much in connection with the material, the spiritual, and the dogmatic. The development of this disparity between definitions of mystical theology can also be attributed to a concomitant hyper-individualization within Western mystical writing, which is almost entirely absent in the East.
272Ibid., 38-39, 42, 221, 238. The mystical theology of the East holds that spiritual realities are never to be overshadowed by philosophical endeavors. While this Eastern mystical theology does function under the title of the metaphysical and does not seek to deny that, it remains true that what is denounced by Western phenomenologists, such as Jean-Luc Marion, in metaphysical mystical theology is not existent in the Eastern equivalent. See Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). Instead, both Eastern mystical
seems to have occupied a good deal of scholarship surrounding the theory of *epektasis*. However, while I acknowledge that this line of inquiry has its merits, it seems to miss his more important point, summed up well by Coakley: “[O]ur very acts of visual perceiving and sensual response might be affected by our moral fibre, our spiritual maturity or our depths of scriptural engagement.” Understanding how this is so will occupy most of our time in chapters 4 and 5.

What is most important in insisting that Gregory writes with a certain theological holism or integrity is understanding that his theory of *epektasis* was never intended as a mere theory but as an applicable ethic. It seems that Gregory is at the very least just as interested in encouraging his readers to *act* on his theological excurses as he is in getting them to *understand* his theological premises. That is, he is interested not just in imparting knowledge but in getting his reader to experience immediately the *epektatic* journey he is presenting. It is a journey accessible to all, and it is this accessibility that makes the ethic proposed in this project especially suitable for the 21st century Christian. The sentient, the spiritual, and the intellectual are all enmeshed in this singular journey, and this will be demonstrated clearly in Gregory’s primary texts below. The integrity of his theology translated directly into the accessibility of the ethic he proposed—an ethic that saw no need to distinguish between theological knowledge and spiritual formation.

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273 To cite a few contributors to this debate, in Martin S. Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 174, he understands Gregory’s mysticism of darkness as no less a mysticism of light. Ronald Heine (*Perfection*, 104-105) sees in Gregory’s thought no basis for mysticism but instead a response to Origen’s theme of satiety. Anthony Meredith (87-88, 100) believes that Daniélou’s assessment of Gregory’s mysticism is overstated, preferring instead to think of it as “sublime moralism.” Others, such as Andrew Louth (79) interpret Gregory’s theology as mystical despite opinions to the contrary.

274 Coakley, 55.
Growing in knowledge of God was the transformative journey itself, and this growth could never be separated from the composite integrity that is human nature.

3 – *Gregory’s Primary Sources on Epektasis*

*Epektasis* in this project is referred to as a theory instead of a doctrine\(^\text{275}\) because it is a word that is contemporarily used to summarize Gregory of Nyssa’s sense of the spiritual journey. Though it is premised largely on theological arguments, it is does not necessitate the creedal affirmations typical of doctrines proper. *Epektasis* describes a journey in which the human soul grows perpetually through an orientation toward God, in desire of God, and toward likeness of God. It is a journey in which the soul is always filled as it progresses but simultaneously always desires more because of God’s infinitude—the basis of the eternality of the journey. A good deal of energy will be dedicated to unpacking this theory, as it dictates the specifics of and generates the reasons for an ethic of spiritual struggle. The first order of business then, before synthesizing the reception of *epektasis* among the various scholars engaged in the discussion, is to take a look at what Gregory himself says on the topic from which this developing theory in modern scholarship originates.

Sarah Coakley points out that Gregory may have changed his mind over time in his discussion of what spiritual sense might mean.\(^\text{276}\) She points to different stages in his development beginning with a Platonic sense, to realizing that the body can be transformed through the Holy Spirit and union with Christ,\(^\text{277}\) that “cognition, ethics and ascetics” work as

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\(^{275}\) See Coakley, 38.
\(^{276}\) Ibid., 55.
\(^{277}\) Ibid., 51.
one in Gregory’s thinking, that the “eye of the soul” is the constant that can be dragged down by the body or undisturbed through purification from passions, and that “progression of sensuality from baseness to Christlikeness.” Thus, the writings of Gregory that include his theory of *epektasis*—his most sophisticated expansion of the spiritual life—are often dated as the latest of his writings, coming after his *De anima et resurrectione*. These writings include his treatise entitled *De Perfectione*, his commentaries on the Beatitudes, the Psalms, the Songs of Songs, and his *De Vita Moysis*. To these, we now turn briefly.

### 3.1 – *De Perfectione*

In Gregory’s of Nyssa’s treatise on perfection, he focuses on the name of Jesus Christ and how Christians ought to imitate Him, orient themselves toward Him, and unite with Him. The Christian is to imitate the perfection found in Christ, and if this is impossible regarding certain qualities, characteristics, or virtues, then what is unattainable should be worshipped. Put into practice, the Christian is to get rid of all evil and all attachment to bodily passions. Gregory calls Christ the “author of detachment” and asserts that those who are detached from the “mud” of passion that smears the “brightness” of the soul are able to properly orient themselves toward

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278 Ibid., 52.
279 Ibid., 53.
280 Ibid., 54.
281 See Gregory, *On the Soul and the Resurrection [Translated from the Greek]*, translated by Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002). Gregory admits that humans are led to God by desire in a process that is inherently dynamic (77). However, the soul *can* be satiated; it *can* stop desiring, though this satiety does not cut off the attachment to love (77-81). There is no limit to the love and beauty experienced by the soul when it detaches from the flesh and attains the heavenly (81). Gregory’s ambivalence regarding the notion of satiety or lack thereof, which eventually becomes central to his theory of *epektasis*, could be the reason Sarah Coakley sees Gregory of Nyssa’s *De anima et resurrectione* as a break or shift in Gregory’s writings. See Coakley, 52.
283 Ibid., 362-64.
participation in and union with God. Thus, fighting against sin, living a life of struggle, and freely choosing the good life are continual tasks of those who wish to call themselves Christians. Christians, according to Gregory “will necessarily show the power of the other names by which Christ is understood since he participates in each of them by his life.” In other words, those who orient themselves toward Christ by first detaching from the passions will exhibit the virtues of Christ—His “other names.”

Further, it is not only the responsibility of a Christian to imitate Christ’s virtues but also to participate in His immutability. Gregory uses the image of Christ as a rock that is immutably in the good. When a Christian puts on the virtues of Christ through detachment and imitation, that Christian becomes constant in the good, as much as human nature will allow. Becoming Christ-like, having union with God, and residing in Him—dynamically through perpetual growth but statically through constancy—are the inexhaustible “ends” of spiritual struggle for Gregory. That is, the telos of the *epektatic* journey presented in this chapter is both dynamic and static. It is dynamic in that growth and progress never cease. It is static in that a person remains consistently and stably in God—the good—by making progress toward similitude of Him. Gregory presents this Christian telos as the only means to attain perfection. He concludes this treatise explaining how mutable humans can participate in an immutable God and describing the anticipated trajectory of the *epektatic* journey, worth quoting at length:

> Hence, let us struggle against the very changeableness of our nature as though with some adversary, wrestling by our reason, becoming victors not by casting it down but by not concurring in the fall. For man has a change not only for evil, for if he had a natural inclination only to evil, it would be impossible for him to turn to the good. Now the most beautiful effect of change is growth in the good since a

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284 Ibid., 378.
285 Ibid., 365, 378-79.
286 Ibid., 377-78.
287 Ibid., 369.
288 Ibid., 370-75.
change to things more divine is always remaking the man being changed for the better. Therefore, what seems fearful (I mean our mutable nature) can serve as a wing for flight to better things, since it is to our disgrace if we cannot change for the better. Therefore, let not a person be grieved by the fact that his nature is mutable; rather, by always being changed to what is better and by being transformed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3.18), let him so be changed: by daily growth he always becomes better and is always being perfected yet never attains perfection's goal. For perfection truly consists in never stopping our increase towards the better nor to limit perfection with any boundary.\(^{289}\)

As noted, Gregory is concerned with defending a notion of mutability that was in his time considered inherently problematic. At the same time, he is providing a basis for Christian perfection through spiritual struggle. The Cappadocian defines his conception of the virtuous life not by a telic Aristotelianism of final attainment but a perpetual progress toward that which is immutably but infinitely good. Virtue is the result of constant flight towards and pursuit of God-likeness, who is at the same time Goodness itself and is also God incarnate, able to be emulated. Gregory’s scheme is an important departure from traditional and even contemporary conceptions of virtue, and its implications and implementation will be discussed below.

### 3.2 – Commentary on the Beatitudes

Homilies 4 and 5 of Gregory’s commentary on the Beatitudes contain a number of components that constitute the theory *epektasis* as presented in this chapter and that help situate this concept within an ethic of virtue. To begin, Gregory maintains that inherent in each human being is an inclination toward the good, which each person has a choice against.\(^{290}\) The more this desire for the good, righteousness, justice, or salvation—in a word, God’s Divine Will—is fed,

\(^{289}\) Ibid., 379.

the more it grows in its desire for them.\textsuperscript{291} “We need an unceasing desire for higher things, which is not content to acquiesce in past achievements; we ought to count it loss if we fail to progress further.”\textsuperscript{292} This forward or upward striving is perpetual; it is always satisfied in growing but at the same time enthralled with its infinite potential. This infinite potential is founded on Gregory’s understanding that virtue is modeled on the Godhead. That is, participation in the Beatitudes in the virtues is at the same time participation in God and union with Him.\textsuperscript{293} What is more, this growth potential is not limited by circumstance. Gregory claims that one who desires to be merciful but is not given the opportunity is just as good as the person who has the same desire and is presented with a situation in which to act on this mercy.\textsuperscript{294}

Another important discussion for this project in Gregory’s commentary is his explanation of virtue. Virtue is at the same time the work and the reward; it is to be pursued \textit{and} acquired. Yet, he also described Christ Himself as virtue in which there is no limitation through time or satiation.\textsuperscript{295} This is a good example of the inconsistency in Gregory’s writings. Without getting bogged down with Gregory’s technical use of the term virtue, it is not difficult to grant that in discussing virtue as a reward that can be acquired, he is not implying that virtue is an end in itself or is good for its own sake. This would directly contradict his belief expressed in the same homily that growth in virtue is at the same time growth in God, which growth cannot be limited. After quoting Psalm 43:1, “‘…I shall be satisfied when Thy glory shall appear,’” Gregory writes, “Now in my view this glory is the true virtue, the good that is unmixed with evil, which

\textsuperscript{291} Ibid., 118, 124.
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{293} Ibid., 130-31.
\textsuperscript{294} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{295} Ibid., 127-28.
comprises every concept concerned with goodness. This is God the Word Himself, the virtue that covered the heavens…”  

“True virtue,” according to Gregory, is God Himself, and yet he leaves room for the acquisition by humans of partial virtue. Growth in virtue, which he makes clear requires struggle and exertion, consists of perpetually increasing degrees of growth and transformation in God. The perfection of each virtue and all virtues resides in an unlimited and perfect God. However, people can claim possession of a virtue, albeit incomplete possession, to the degree that they participate in God through grace-enabled spiritual struggle applied to the various components of Christian life. This point will become especially important below in the discussion of humans’ abilities to possess virtue and whether there is a unity to the virtues, which Gregory holds there is.

3.3 – Commentary on the Psalms

In this commentary, Gregory perceives of a life of virtue in spectral terms, that is, on a spectrum through which progress can be made and assessed. Virtue is a journey that has a beginning, progress, and an end. Similar to his commentary on the Beatitudes, he does discuss an acquisition of virtue, albeit one that is relative to God and similitude to Him, and not absolute in the sense of perfect or complete acquisition. “A life perfect through virtue,” for Gregory, is nothing more than a perpetual progress in participation in God. To demonstrate this point, Gregory writes, “[T]he acquisition of virtue thus belongs to blessedness and desires that one may
live according to its nature, for virtue is the beginning and end of everything considered with respect to the good.” He continues this thought by adding that “the definition of human blessedness is likeness to God.” Gregory correlates virtue with goodness and blessedness. This participation in blessedness he explicitly defines as likeness to God. The process he provides is simple. Humans begin by detaching from evil and then continue on to goodness through imitation of Christ through virtue directed toward God. This orientation is contingent on participation in a perfection, a goodness, and a blessedness defined by and in God. That is, the pursuit of virtue, as defined in God as Paragon, is the ultimate end toward which one is oriented. Gregory likens this process to God the sculptor chiseling humans into his divine likeness.

This process is also described through the ascents of Moses who is midway in a transformation from mutable humanity to immutable God. Ultimately, Gregory sees the progression of the Psalms as an exposition of the soul’s ascent away from evil and toward God. Thus, instead of presenting rigid categories, Gregory presents a smoothly transitioning and overlapping spectrum of development in virtue through the pursuit of God-likeness described as having a stamp on one’s human nature. He makes clear that a descent of sorts is also possible. The spectrum can be put in reverse when evil, that is, a life in opposition to the attributes of God as revealed in Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ, is chosen. This ultimately moves one from an otherwise concomitant process of becoming human and like God.

302 Ibid., 23.
303 Ibid., 40, 100, 141.
304 Ibid., 24.
305 Ibid., 67.
306 Ibid., 100.
307 Ibid., 40.
308 Ibid., 106-42.
309 Ibid., 109.
to becoming bestial or “dog-like,” as Gregory prefers.\textsuperscript{310} The choice between progress and
digression is a result of the free choice of any given human and is within the grasp of all people
despite maleficent circumstances.

3.4 – Commentary on the Song of Songs

Gregory’s commentary \textit{In Canticum Canticorum}, or on the Song of Songs, is a main
source for his theory of \textit{epektasis}, arguably second only to \textit{De Vita Moysis}. In Homily 5 of his
commentary, he speaks of the bride’s ascent: first, she hears his voice, after which she
continually draws nearer to Him in a variety of obfuscated and changing images.\textsuperscript{311} The bride’s
journey is any person’s journey in this ascent. Similarly, he understands the command of Christ
to the paralytic to take up his bed and walk as a command to move toward greater perfection.\textsuperscript{312}
A person must, according to Gregory, \textit{voluntarily} begin the journey toward virtue and God by
first getting rid of the little foxes in one’s life, that is, of all vice in pursuit of the pure life.\textsuperscript{313}
After ridding oneself of vice, Gregory points to the positive component of this journey. “‘It is not
enough for you,’ the bridegroom says, ‘to arise from your fall, but you must advance through
progress in good to finish the course in virtue.’”\textsuperscript{314} As noted in his commentary on the Psalms,
Gregory does indeed speak of an end to virtue, but ultimately it seems that Gregory is talking
about some sort of relative end or feeling that one has acquired virtue at least partially, without
compromising his assertion that the road to perfection is perpetual. It is the soul that is constantly
transformed as it progressively drawn into a higher beauty of the Divine nature that remains

\textsuperscript{310} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{311} Gregory, \textit{Song of Songs}, 109-10.
\textsuperscript{312} Ibid., 114-15.
\textsuperscript{313} Ibid., 116, 122-24.
\textsuperscript{314} Ibid., 114.
immutably in infinite good. The person making progress toward similitude to the infinite God “always seems to be beginning her ascent” as each step “of virtue to the heights of perfection” is summited.\textsuperscript{315} In this way, virtue is the means and the marker toward an end never fully attained. No matter how magnificent one may deem a certain glory, there is always a greater glory beyond it, which ever-inflames one’s desire toward God.\textsuperscript{316}

Gregory delves deeper into this theory in Homily 8, and this is where it is especially clear that the limit of virtue is unbounded. The soul journeys continually to loftier levels of glory in a progression toward God who remains unchanged, infinite, and ineffable.\textsuperscript{317} He cites the example of Paul who kept ascending toward God, never standing still, but always striving onward toward the unbounded. The person who tastes a little of the Lord by partaking of the good will continue to grow in this participation for eternity, as previous experience incites a desire for more of this experience.\textsuperscript{318} The sojourner “will arrive while not ceasing to continually pass on by continuing to rise.”\textsuperscript{319} Each new arrival immediately becomes a new departure, a process in which “we are to use our mutability as an ally in our ascent towards higher things, [that] by the changeability of our nature we are to establish it immovably in the good.”\textsuperscript{320}

This desire is accompanied by a joy of one’s new “status,” in which a reminder of one’s previous state functions as a cause for delight. Gregory writes, “[T]he bridegroom imparts to the soul ascending to him an intensity in her enjoyment of goodness. Not only does he manifest his own beauty to the bride, but he reminds her of her horrible, beastly forms in order that she may delight in her present enjoyment, by comparing them with her former state.”\textsuperscript{321} Thus, one’s joy is

\textsuperscript{315} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 115-16.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., 161-62, 165.
\textsuperscript{318} Ibid., 161.
\textsuperscript{319} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{320} Ibid., 161-64.
\textsuperscript{321} Ibid., 164.
compounded in a number of ways: from one’s satisfaction in deeper participation with God, from one’s progress in virtue, from the potential for new growth, and from the recollection of previous, less-desirable levels of joy and goodness. In order to embark on this journey one must turn from evil and orient oneself with one’s entire being with a singularity of purpose. This latter condition is a meditation on Song of Song 4:9, to which Gregory highlights the need for one eye and one soul looking to the One God in the Trinity.\textsuperscript{322} This \textit{epektatic} orientation, most evident in the “ethic” he details in Homily 12, is central to Gregory’s thinking and will be critical to this project.

Homily 12 emphasizes a theme especially important to the connection between \textit{epektasis} and spiritual struggle. Gregory asserts that the perpetual ascent toward God is simultaneous with the process of purification through bodily senses.\textsuperscript{323} In homily 10, Gregory draws on this same point—it is through sensory experience, or more accurately through detachment from bodily passions that one’s soul is able to draw closer to God.\textsuperscript{324} The \textit{epektatic} journey is a movement of the soul—the dwelling place of God—and the disposition of the soul is dependent on a person’s interaction with material.\textsuperscript{325} In this way, the concept of spiritual struggle developed in this project is central to the way Gregory envisions the implementation of this ethic. In order for God to dwell within a person, she must first be purified through a \textit{voluntary} mortification of the body, in which the death of passion enables the ascent of the soul.\textsuperscript{326} Between material attachment, which for Gregory weighs the soul downward, and material detachment, which enables ascent,

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., 167.  
\textsuperscript{323} Ibid., 221.  
\textsuperscript{324} Ibid., 195.  
\textsuperscript{325} Ibid., 220.  
\textsuperscript{326} Ibid., 214.
lies free choice. No one can participate in the latter without experiencing the death of fleshly desires.327

Gregory admits that this mortification of the passions can even originate from God’s own strikes and blows. In chapter 2 of this project, one of the three origins of spiritual struggle was God, and though it seemed in Kierkegaard’s understanding that God is only the source of spiritual struggle when higher levels of spirituality are reached, the Cappadocian finds it possible for God to incite struggle even at the lower, more base levels of spirituality—detachment from bodily passions. “The divine rod or Spirit is a comforting staff whose blow effects healing and whose fruit consists of those other goods listed by Paul, especially temperance, the teacher of a virtuous life.”328 In the same breath, he points to Isaiah who was struck with coal and thereby purified, insisting that the goal of spiritual struggle in any light is purification.329 As noted, purification and ascent occur simultaneously, and both are contingent upon a person’s voluntary orientation toward God.330 Gregory does recap his theory on epektasis toward the end of this homily, though without much insight distinct from his previous excurses.331 What seems instead to take his attention is that in order for the soul to “always move forward and never stand still,” two things are necessary: purification through mortification of bodily passions, which at the same time purges the soul, and an orientation of the soul toward its unattainable end—God.332

327 Ibid., 215-19.
328 Ibid., 223.
329 Ibid., 224-25.
330 Ibid., 217.
331 Ibid., 223-25.
332 Ibid., 217-18. See section 2.1.1 of chapter 2 of this project for a full discussion of the ways in which the ethic presented here is a departure from traditional Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, its acquisition, and its telos.
3.5 – *De Vita Moysis*

The Cappadocian’s *Life of Moses* is written as an allegorical interpretation of Moses’ life for the purposes of spiritual edification, as Gregory put it.\(^{333}\) His exposition of Moses’ life, especially as it appears in the Book of Exodus, is in response to the question of how one ought to emulate those from which one is separated.\(^{334}\) Gregory finds that the answer to this question, embodied through Moses, is found in St. Paul’s concept in Philippians 3:13 of striving or straining (ἐπεκτεινόμενος) toward those things still to come.\(^{335}\) He begins by providing a brief history of the life of Moses, highlighting Moses’ approach of the mountain and the darkness and also the inability of the people to follow Moses due to their impurity, immoderation, and lack of virtue.\(^{336}\) Gregory quickly turns to his aim in this text: understanding the life of Moses in a way that allows his readers to pursue and benefit from a virtuous life.\(^{337}\)

Virtue for Gregory consists of two parts: virtue that pertains to right conduct, purity, and a good conscience, and virtue that pertains to the divine and to matters of faith.\(^{338}\) Both of these are necessary in order to begin ascending to God-likeness, but the former, for Gregory, are usually lowers tiers on the ‘ladder of divine ascent,’ while the latter are encountered higher up the ladder. Gregory uses the image of the mountain in Exodus to describe further the ascent to God. The further one is able to ascend, the “greater and higher teaching of the mysteries” one is able to comprehend.”\(^{339}\) In order to ascend, “the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to

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\(^{333}\) Gregory, *The Life of Moses*, 33.

\(^{334}\) Ibid., 32.

\(^{335}\) Ibid., 30, 113.

\(^{336}\) Ibid., 43-48, 122-25.

\(^{337}\) Ibid., 51.

\(^{338}\) Ibid., 106.

\(^{339}\) Ibid., 58.
the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul.” Deadness, according to Gregory, is found in the pleasures and passions of the body, and this state is reached by those who do not acknowledge God. Purity, that is, a clean soul attained through outward struggle and reliance on God—is necessary to ascend the mountain. There exist lower and higher parts of the soul. Faith increases when the latter prevail. Just as the body is weighed down by gravity, the soul’s natural trajectory is upwards when it is released from earthly pleasures and attachments.

What is interesting here is that Gregory leaves no room for neutrality—one is either ascending or descending. For example, he considers arrogance and pride as a downward descent away from God and virtue. Falling into arrogance is no different than falling in bodily passion. Gregory envisions the life of virtue as one that is dynamic and that requires constant struggle. He maintains that “stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil.” Moreover, “those slackening on the upward and toilsome course of virtue” will find themselves descending further down into fleshly attachments, away from the soul’s light, airy, and unhindered ascent. Evil must be stopped in its tracks from the very first trace of its temptations. Otherwise, one’s upward ascent risks an immediate turn to its opposite. This ascent is detailed allegorically through a few images found in the story of Moses.

Knowledge of God is seen as light, attracting a person’s soul through its brilliance. Interpreting “Egyptian wealth” in the Exodus account as worldly knowledge, Gregory even carves a space for the pursuit of “outside” philosophy, maintaining that it can be profitable but

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340 Ibid., 59.
341 Ibid., 71-72, 129-32.
342 Ibid., 83, 91-94, 135.
343 Ibid., 76-77.
344 Ibid., 113.
345 Ibid., 126.
346 Ibid., 30.
347 Ibid., 76.
that it ultimately risks tainting the truth.\textsuperscript{348} As one approaches closer to the Divine, one realizes that reason and the senses fall short to express these experiences. For this reason, Gregory uses the language of darkness.\textsuperscript{349} It is in this darkness that one is able to draw near to God through faith to learn about other images presented in Exodus. The first example Gregory gives is that of the heavenly tabernacle, which teaches those on the journey toward virtue that they ought to be comfortable with mystery, with not knowing.\textsuperscript{350} That which is above comprehension is felt beyond all doubt to exist. Its ineffability does not contradict its existent; it only implies its inability to be articulated.\textsuperscript{351} Next, he describes the earthly tabernacle as a teacher of the importance of self-control and mortification of the flesh through asceticism.\textsuperscript{352} This is signified through the skin that is dyed red, like blood, and the coverings made of hair, which resemble death in their callousness—their inability to feel.\textsuperscript{353} The earthly tabernacle points to the notion that grace “flourishes through the Spirit [and] is not found in men unless they first make themselves dead to sin.”\textsuperscript{354} God assists those who live a life of virtue.\textsuperscript{355} Lastly, Gregory describes the priestly garments whose names are “rational,” “doctrine,” and “truth,” pointing to the adornment of the soul by virtue.\textsuperscript{356} The long garment reveals the continuous nature of virtue, which should not be cut short but should extend perpetually.\textsuperscript{357}

Gregory claims that matter and senses have definite limits, while virtue’s only limit is that it has no limit because virtue is based in God, who by nature is unlimited and infinite.\textsuperscript{358} For

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{348} Ibid., 62-63, 81.
\item \textsuperscript{349} Ibid., 95.
\item \textsuperscript{350} Ibid., 98.
\item \textsuperscript{351} Ibid., 103.
\item \textsuperscript{352} Ibid., 79, 102.
\item \textsuperscript{353} Ibid., 101.
\item \textsuperscript{354} Ibid., 102.
\item \textsuperscript{355} Ibid., 64.
\item \textsuperscript{356} Ibid., 103.
\item \textsuperscript{357} Ibid., 104.
\item \textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 30.
\end{itemize}
this reason, it is impossible for those who pursue a life of virtue to ever reach perfection; perfection is a continual process of the soul.\textsuperscript{359} Gregory, similar to Aristotle, envisions the road of virtue as a narrow mean between two neighboring extremes or evils, but Gregory’s understanding of perfection—since it is defined in relation to a Christian God who is the Paragon of virtue—will ultimately be at odds with the broader Greek thought of his time. The Greek philosophy accepted by many in Gregory’s time saw change as an inherent imperfection. Only stability and immutability could be associated with true perfection. Yet, the Cappadocian writes, “[T]he perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness,” found in God who is Goodness.\textsuperscript{360} Thus, as noted above, Gregory again in his \textit{De Vita Moysis} envisions the path of virtue as a dynamic one in which ascent to perfection is always a movement, while its stability in God is the immutable, static dimension of the process.\textsuperscript{361} In fact, stability in the good increases the intensity of the ascent to God.\textsuperscript{362}

Gregory goes on to liken this road to perfection as friendship with God. It is a road that is predicated on freedom and desire for God, not slavery and fear of God. He writes:

\begin{quote}
This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like and contractual arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God’s friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life.\textsuperscript{363}
\end{quote}

In this way, he defines perfection as an intimate relationship with God that is voluntary and toward which one’s desire should be oriented. This desire, when fulfilled, is constantly enflamed.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[359] Ibid., 31, 133.
\item[360] Ibid., 31.
\item[361] Ibid., 117.
\item[362] Ibid., 118.
\item[363] Ibid., 137.
\end{footnotes}
with greater desire for participation in God. For this reason, Gregory provides another—perhaps the most important—exposition of *epektasis* in this work.

The human soul is described by Gregory to experience the beautiful, whose origin is God, and to be drawn towards a thirst and desire for more of that beauty and for what lies behind that beauty. This thirst—an image of the ascent toward the infinite God—is always filled and at the same time never satisfied when it realizes that there is more to be desired after reaching each subsequent level of the ascent.\textsuperscript{364} Similarly, Moses never stopped ascending, nor did he set a limit for his ascent. There always remained in front of him a step higher than the one previously taken.\textsuperscript{365}

Finally, Gregory makes explicit that Christ is absolute virtue itself.\textsuperscript{366} We are to participate in God, not for virtue’s own sake, nor for some satisfaction that attaining virtue might bring about, but because life is a continual process of increasing in the image of God. In other words, it is not enough to love the good if that good is perceived outside of God as its source; one must love God. God is the Archetype, and human understanding of virtue is predicated on Him. The purpose of life is to be called a servant of God as a result of a sublime and virtuous life.\textsuperscript{367} Gregory explains that when Moses sees God’s back, the reader is to understand that God is the one to be followed. Humans can only see His back because He is the guide of virtue, and in order to grow in this virtue, following His commandments, way of life, words, example, and constant instruction is essential in becoming virtuous.\textsuperscript{368} He describes the armor of the soldier of virtue as God Himself, without foregoing his critical emphasis on the importance of struggle.\textsuperscript{369}

\textsuperscript{364} Ibid., 114-16.  
\textsuperscript{365} Ibid., 113-14.  
\textsuperscript{366} Ibid., 117.  
\textsuperscript{367} Ibid., 135-36.  
\textsuperscript{368} Ibid., 119-20.  
\textsuperscript{369} Ibid., 122.
Spiritual struggle is the means by which perpetual progress continues. “Activity directed toward virtue causes its [the flight’s] capacity to grow through exertion; this kind of activity alone does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it.”

By way of conclusion, this section on Gregory’s understanding of the journey of ekptasis highlights simple yet meaningful conclusions for this ethic of virtue. More than anything, Gregory makes it clear that the road to virtue is more importantly a road to unity with God. God is the central component of this theory, effectively displacing one’s own self as the center. Though it is obvious that there exists some level of focus on oneself, the self is not the impetus behind one’s actions or desires, but assimilation and similitude to God is the goal. The God-centeredness of Gregory’s theory is at the same time other-centered. The Cappadocian’s God—the God of Christianity is a God of selfless, overflowing love, who gives over-abundantly and sacrifices Himself. Becoming like this God requires displacing an overemphasis on oneself with an outpouring of love to God and others.

Moreover, it is a journey—one with intermediate stages and one that never ends. Thus, despite the reality that all people are on different parts of the spectrum, they are on the same spectrum; there are none who have reached a final destination of virtuousness to be categorized apart from any others. In this light, no one is to boast oneself above another. Gregory’s ekptatic framework necessitates an ethic of humility. None have secured complete virtue, and so all must strive for the continuous pursuit of God-likeness by which virtue will at the same time be acquired. Gregory’s theory also implies that there is always more a person can do. Gregory’s framework is antithetical to any sort of complacent behavior. It is inherently an ethic of exertion. It is a call to action not in spite of the salvation granted by Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

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370 Ibid., 113.
but *because* of this salvation. In other words, Gregory’s ethic is a response to the salvation granted by God. It is the way to demonstrate the sincerity of one’s desire to be united with Him and to demonstrate dedication to life with Him—the earthly beginning to eternal life.

4 – *Analyzing the Theory of Epektasis and Its Implications for Virtue Ethics*

4.1 – *Stages of the Journey*

At the outset, it seems most needful to determine the exact scheme, if any, that Gregory is proposing in the sources above. Are there specific stages that he is suggesting, and do these stages have implications for the pursuit of virtue? While there is no overwhelming consensus regarding the most appropriate consolidation and explication of Gregory’s theory, a basic three-tiered model is often proposed in order to understand the journey that is *epektasis*. Some have suggested schematizations in which purification and illumination fall in the first stage, followed by a second stage of depreciation of worldly values, and concluding with union with God.371 Thomas Bohm suggests that in Gregory’s theory, human beings never arrive at any sort of union with God. Instead, spiritual advancement consists only in intellectual contemplation of God.372 Hui Xia notes that Jean Daniélou, Andrew Louth, and Warren Smith all propose stages of purification, illumination, and union, though Gregory himself did not suggest these categories explicitly.373

Xia goes on to offer her analysis of the stages of divine ascent specifically in the *De Vita Moysis*, arguably the work in which Gregory’s theory is most developed. She suggests two larger

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371 This is actually Heine’s assessment of Daniélou. Heine, *Perfection*, 2-3.
373 Ibid., 540.
stages—the preliminary stage and the mystical stage. The first stage consists of human sensory experience and is best characterized by light—that is, what humans can sense and describe. In this stage, one’s understanding is enlightened through the “light of virtue,” mentioned in the De Vita Moysis and in Gregory’s commentaries on the Psalms and the Beatitudes. This stage requires constant effort in order to achieve a certain level of virtuosity. A person must be focused with a constant drive to live in accordance with the word of God. This constant drive, however, is grace-enabled in all its stages, since it does not ignore the reality of human fickleness and weakness. It is in this stage that the purification of the soul begins in a process of continual self-formation until a personal relationship to God is formed. Next is the mystical stage best characterized by darkness. In this stage, sense perception is no longer needed. There is a sort of material likeness, says Xia, but it is not a stage that can be articulated through regular sensory description. It is here that union with God is achieved, best described as a “[c]onstant communication or exchange of love.” This communication has no end because of God’s infinitude.

Andrew Louth, in a similar way, understands Gregory’s scheme as a progression from light to deeper and deeper darkness, in contrast to Origen’s scheme that increases in light. Louth points to a lack of systematization in Gregory’s writings in which the three supposed stages blend into each other. Moreover, epektasis describes the soul’s encounter with the inexhaustibility of God. To this point, Louth asserts that there are other ways that Gregory

374 Ibid., 546.
375 Ibid., 543.
376 Ibid., 544.
377 Ibid., 547-48.
378 Ibid., 549.
379 Ibid., 551.
380 Louth, 81.
381 Ibid., 83.
speaks of encountering God. More specifically, one can experience God’s presence in what Gregory calls “the mirror of the soul, the spiritual senses, and the indwelling Word.” With this understanding, for Gregory, it is not enough to know about God and His infinitude but positive experiences of God, such as seeing Him in the inner person and participating in His divine attributes, are also essential in making epektatic progress. Yet, choosing to characterize Gregory as a mystic, Louth ultimately attributes the experience of God (beyond a simply knowledge-based understanding of God) to the mystical realm beyond sense perception. Participation in God is felt but not perceived by the senses. It is curious, however, in a process in which “the soul becomes like God as it is purified by increasing in virtue,” that sense perception would not overlap with an intimate experience of and even unity with God. It seems that Louth may draw the line between the sensory and the mystical too sharply for a model that blends together the three stages suggested by other scholars.

Based on the texts presented above, I would argue for a reading of Gregory that allows for a more intricate scheme in which sensory and non-sensory experiences of God both contribute, though in varying degrees, to union with God. This is important because the notion of accessibility is at the heart of this project’s concerns. The final stage of an ethic of grace-enabled,

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382 Ibid., 88.
383 The language of God-likeness and participation, intimacy, growth in, and assimilation to God’s characteristics has been used throughout this project instead of the terminology of theosis or deification. The latter risks denying the unbridgeable chasm that Gregory asserts is fixed between creation and the Uncreated God, unknown in His nature and essence. Gregory used the concepts of diastema and adiastema to make sense of how humans can participate in God without becoming God and how the eschaton will be distinguished from the present through the absence of time and space. For a full and pertinent discussion of this term, see Boersma, *Embodiment*, 19-52. Also see Alexander L. Abecina, *Time and Sacramentality in Gregory of Nyssa's Contra Eunomium*, Early Christian Studies. Vol. 16, (Strathfield, NSW: St. Paul's Publications, 2013), 26; Ludlow, *Divine Infinity*, 19-44; and Smith, *Passion*, 132. Ultimately, it seems the concepts of diastema and adiastema can be used exegetically for the curious language found in 2 Peter 1:4 and can be used to address the polemics surrounding the concept of theosis between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches in recent times.
384 Louth., 88-89.
385 Ibid., 93.
386 Ibid., 94.
387 Ibid., 90.
God-centered, spiritual struggle is not in a realm entirely outside of human sense perception. To divide the sensory and the mystical too sharply would compromise this accessibility, which in turn could compromise the pursuit of the final stage. At the same time, the assertion that the final stage of the journey is accessible to the senses does not discredit the possibility, similar to St. Paul’s journey in 2 Corinthians 12, that language may fall short in describing some of these sensory experiences.

Ronald Heine, in his interpretation of Gregory’s commentary on the Psalms, points to a reason it is so difficult to systematize the Cappadocian’s model. The starting points of the spiritual journey detailed in Gregory’s writings are all different. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Gregory describes a soul already united to God. It is in a spiritually mature state and for this reason skips some concepts Gregory would include for spiritual novices. In the De Vita Moysis and his commentary on the Psalms, he instead covers the entire spectrum, which Heine posits is a beginner stage, an intermediate stage, and a mature stage.\textsuperscript{388} Yet to complicate matters more, Gregory, in his commentary on the Psalms speaks of five stages, which turn out to be different from the stages mentioned in his commentary on the Song of Songs.\textsuperscript{389} Heine then concludes that Gregory’s goal was not to be precise, as other scholars have noted, but instead to offer a theory in which he made clear that the Christian life is a continual process of the soul’s ascent to God.\textsuperscript{390}

\textsuperscript{388} Heine, Psalms, 75.
\textsuperscript{389} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{390} Ibid., 78-79.
4.1.1 – The Spiritual Journey as a Non-linear Spectrum

I, however, suggest an alternative understanding to Gregory’s theory. The interpretation I offer combines several claims noted above, namely the general tripartite structure, the process of purification preceding a more intense experience of God, the constancy of grace-enabled struggle, and the infinitude of the God who is the orienting principle of this journey. Ultimately, my suggestion falls most in line with Herbert Musurillo’s breakdown of the *epektatic* journey. Musurillo, similar to others, offers three stages in his interpretation of Gregory. The first includes a struggle against the passions, which leads to *apatheia*—detachment from worldly distractions—and *parrhesia*—childlike confidence in God. In the second stage, as the soul becomes more like God in the denouncement of evil and growth in the good, one grows in knowledge of God. The third stage is a continuation of growth in knowledge of God but this time in the darkness.\(^{391}\) Based on Musurillo’s stages and the assessment of Gregory’s primary texts above, if I were to offer a suggestion for three categories, they would include: 1) material and bodily detachment; 2) the strengthening of the soul in a process of increasing similitude to God; 3) intimacy or union with God that is felt and experienced in ways beyond the intellect’s capacity to articulate.\(^{392}\)

Regarding the first stage, to be freed from enslavement to bodily cares and desires is critical in the ability of the soul to grow in deeper relationship to its spiritual Creator. This first stage is a primer of sorts for the second stage. Similarly, childlike confidence is a state of mind acquired from an awareness of God’s grace and forgiveness, and the bestowal of His Holy Spirit.

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\(^{391}\) Gregory, *Glory to Glory*, 22-23.

\(^{392}\) Morwenna Ludlow points out that it is not entirely clear whether or not Gregory understands the realm beyond articulation as accompanying or surpassing the intellect. What is clear, however, is that language is always insufficient to express the experience. See Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)Modern*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 231.
It is in this stage that a virtue such as self-control is acquired through grace-filled self-denial. This stage should not be understood, however, as a devaluation of the body. Instead, it is for the benefit of the body and soul that the body in this stage becomes less encumbered with the burdens and enslavement of bodily desires. Detaching from bodily passions ought never to be equated with any sort of neglect or abuse of the body given by God to be cared for and adorned. Chapter 4 will delve deeply into spiritual struggle applied to the body in asceticism and will demonstrate the honor given a person’s body and soul through this practice. Lastly, this first stage is where novices on the spiritual journey find themselves, and yet it tends to be ever present even among those more experienced in spiritual struggle. For this reason, the model suggested here is non-linear, and this will be discussed in detail below.

In the second stage, as one begins becoming like God, one begins to experience real character change—central to any ethic of virtue. This second stage is characterized by a more profound internal transformation of the person who has already achieved a significant amount of detachment from bodily passions. This person can focus, in the second stage, less on shedding the negative and more on acquiring the positive. One is to pursue goodness, love, humility, and all virtues attributed to God. It is for this reason that this project serves to (re)unite ethics and theology in a very explicit manner. What a person believes about God and His character through His self-revelation becomes central to the pursuit of semblance to God. One becomes what one worships. The task of dogmatic theology, in this light, goes hand in hand with the task of moral theology. Moreover, it is insufficient to replace God, in this model, with a list of virtues. The principle governing the second stage is that it is through focus on and relationship with God that one becomes like God. It is the experience of God, not the struggle to acquire virtue, that is inherently transformative.
The third and final stage is the stage in which a higher form of union with God is experienced. Often described as mysticism, this stage includes any experience of God for which words fall short of expression. The romanticized notion of mysticism that may be associated with notions such as luminosity, levitation, telepathy, teleportation, and the like, is not the purpose of this stage. Instead, one’s experience in this stage can simply include moments in which a person prays so deeply, gets lost in God’s Scriptural words so immensely, or experiences God in a way that is so transforming that all other sensory experiences in those moments seem to dissipate. It is such a keen and sharp experience of God’s presence that the presence of anything and everything else becomes insignificant or altogether absent.

Regarding the first stage, Gregory often mentions bodily passions as the most base of impediments to embarking on this journey. Passionlessness, or apatheia, through spiritual struggle is the most fundamental requirement in Gregory’s theory.\textsuperscript{393} The clarity with which the Cappadocian delivers these basic but unambiguous requirements is comforting. Yet, it is precisely after this first stage that Gregory seems to lack a strict systematization—a supposed ambivalence by which he is often characterized.\textsuperscript{394} As a complement to these stages, I suggest further nuance in interpreting Gregory of Nyssa’s theory of epektasis. The journey is best envisioned as a non-linear spectrum. The latter part of this suggestion—its spectral character—is not far from the observation by Louth that Gregory’s categories blend together. Those who have suggested stages, myself included, do not necessarily mean to imply that the reality of Gregory’s

\textsuperscript{393} See Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, \textit{Protestant Virtue and Stoic Ethics}, (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), for an interesting analysis of apatheia—a fundamental doctrine of Stoic moral thought—and how it relates to a Christian, and more specifically, Protestant ethic of virtue. She ultimately does not see apatheia as being at odds with a Christian virtue ethic. Instead, the Stoic ethic of assent is one directed toward a higher divine character. I also suggest the language of “passion” instead of “emotion,” at least to grasp more accurately the type of Christian apatheia suggested in this project and in Gregory’s theory.

\textsuperscript{394} Ibid., 135-47.
spiritual journey is not spectral in nature. It would be difficult to make a sure claim in light of his *De Vita Moysis* and commentaries on the Psalms and Beatitudes.

Conceiving of *epektasis* as both a spectrum and as consisting of stages are not mutually exclusive. The latter serve as markers or points within the former. That is, the greater number of stages or details within each stage that one is able to point out in the journey, the more points along the spectrum that are defined. Hans Urs von Balthasar describes this spectrum as one in which there is one type of knowledge of God that differs in degrees of elevation. What propels one further along the spectrum is an increase in this knowledge, yet even the lower levels of the spectrum are participating in this knowledge, albeit in lesser degrees.395 While I agree that the differences between elevation are differences in the knowledge of and intimacy with God, I am suggesting that this spectrum is often non-linear. What this means is that a person does not necessarily always have to make progress through the spectrum sequentially. Instead, it is possible for occasional “jumps” between stages or between different parts of a single stage.

For example, one who has been deemed sufficiently detached from bodily passions (stage 1) has not necessarily been tested by every temptation possible. Seldom has it been a prerequisite, for Gregory or anyone for that matter, to undergo all temptations humanly possible before successfully considering a person detached, able to grow strong spiritually. One can have already acquired a general spirit of detachment—allowing one’s soul to be strengthened (stage 2)—while at the same time, or even intermittently, struggling with base temptations that are either new or have been rekindled (stage 1). Another example of the non-linear nature of the spiritual journey can be seen among those who claim to experience God in ways that cannot be articulated (stage 3) but are still expected to interact with their surrounding communities in the

395 Balthasar, 97, 175.
rich and complex tapestry of human existence. Such people are not expected to reflect perfection in a way that allows for no human errors, disagreements, or weakness.

Take, for example, Paul, who describes experiences with God for which language is insufficient yet describes weaknesses and disagreements both in his ministry and personally. Paul’s “stage 3 experiences” did not entirely diminish the importance of unrelenting struggle within the first two stages. In fact, it is St. Paul in Philippians 3:13 who is Gregory’s very source for the epektatic journey. In the De Vita Moysis, he writes, “For that divine Apostle, great and lofty in understanding, ever running the course of virtue, never ceased straining toward those things that are still to come. Coming to a stop in the race was not safe for him...stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil.” Even St. Paul, according to Gregory, was not in a position in which he could cease his struggle. Instead, straining onward for eternal life and unity with God—“those things that are still to come”—was the only way to safeguard against participation in vicious deeds. Later in his work, Gregory uses the same Pauline verse to make the explicit connection between the ascent of the soul and the need for continuous struggle: “If nothing comes from above to hinder its [the soul’s] upward thrust, the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher—by its desire of the heavenly things straining for what is still to come, as the Apostle says.” Thus, striving for eternal life, for Gregory, was required even of a soul that has already ascended to great heights.

A final example among the many possible examples of the non-sequential reality that characterizes the epektatic journey is also found within Scripture. Similar to the discussion of flawed saints and the unity of the virtues in chapter 1, there are a number of examples of those

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396 Acts 15; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Gal. 2:11-14 (NRSV).
397 Gregory, Life of Moses, 30.
398 Ibid., 113.
deemed kings, prophets, righteous, saints, and martyrs historically, whose temporary lapses can only be explained through a non-linear scheme. A perfect example for the topic at hand is Moses’ disobedience at the waters of Meribah in Numbers 20 that prevented him from entering the Promised Land even after speaking to God in the depths of the darkness (stage 3). Similar examples include David the prophet and king who committed vile acts of adultery and murder, though he was described by God as a man after his own heart. Likewise, Peter in the New Testament is seen denying Jesus Christ and even being referred to as Satan when he refuses to accept the necessity for the Messiah to be crucified. Yet, both of these events occurred after Christ told Peter, “[O]n this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” Thus, it seems that a perfectly linear and sequential spectrum might not be at play in this epektatic journey but instead a sort of upward spiral ascent that oscillates between a variety of struggles, sometimes even among different stages.

I am not suggesting that this is the scheme that the Cappadocian details but that it is the scheme that most accurately captures and depicts his theory that seemed to be developing as his writings matured. Understanding the spiritual journey as non-linear might provide insight into Gregory’s seeming lack of systematization. His aim is not to, nor is it within his ability to, propose an ethic in which all of the complexities of life and the multitude of circumstances therein are addressed. His aim, instead, is to encourage his readers in the struggle that is the spiritual journey, and this he repeats a number of times especially in his De Vita Moysis. Epektasis, as a theory that in its essence points to a reality in which there is always more for which to strive, promotes this forward and upward motion toward the good. It is a theory that

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399 1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22 (RSV).
400 Matt. 16:18, 23; 26 (RSV).
401 Heine, Psalms, 71, 79.
bridges the temporal with the eschatological and captures the essence of Christianity in its imitation of and assimilation to divine goodness—a restoration of humanity’s broken image. Should a person who has been growing in likeness to God demonstrate weakness of a lower stage, that person should not lose hope but should instead be confident in God’s grace, as this is characteristic of the non-linear spectrum. At the same time, *epektasis* as non-linear requires humility, since no one is free from the need for spiritual struggle—a concept not unfamiliar to ancient and contemporary Christians alike—despite a purported level of holiness or intimacy with God. No one can claim perfection, and perfection—as redefined by Gregory—is accessible to any and all who desire it and pursue the end of that desire—God.

4.1.2 – *God as Infinite, Goodness, and Virtue*

*God is infinite.* This principle is formative to Gregory’s theory of *epektasis,* as evidenced in the texts above, especially in the *De Vita Moysis,* where Gregory uses Moses’ ascent to and through the darkness as the basis for his discussion. The statement that God is infinite brings with it important corollaries, the most important of which—for this project—are its implications for virtue ethics. God’s infinitude, for Gregory, means that in His essence and nature, He is unknowable. Often termed apophaticism, the unknowability of God that results from His being infinite is a reason Gregory and others use the concept of darkness. The image of darkness implies invisibility, incomprehensibility, and inexhaustibility. Gregory points his readers to Psalm 17:12 where “God made darkness his secret place.” Yet, God does not remain all

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402 Keenan, 178.
404 Ibid., 129.
together unknowable, and this is critical to forming the desire that propels the *epektatic* journey. God is accessible through his loving activity toward humanity, and as such, He is knowable relatively through His attributes.\(^{405}\) Often termed cataphaticism, ascribing positive characteristics to God will always be limited since humanity is limited and since humanity’s limited knowledge can never fully grasp the unlimited God. Gregory acknowledges the positive and negative attributes of God and is described by Joseph O’Leary as torn between two currents: metaphysical (cataphatic) reasoning and apophaticism.\(^{406}\) The more God is approached, the more concepts and images fall short of His description.\(^{407}\) This reality, however, is not a deterrent from embarking on this journey.

“Apophatic theology is not a theology of distancing or discouragement, but a song to the infinity of the Life and the Good.”\(^{408}\) It is precisely because God is infinite and humans are finite that growth in knowledge of and intimacy with God is eternal.\(^{409}\) In the human soul’s capacity for infinite growth, it experiences a “continual crescendo,”\(^{410}\) resulting directly from God’s concomitant incomprehensibility and accessibility.\(^{411}\) The fixed chasm between the infinite Creator and finite creation, upon which Gregory insists,\(^{412}\) is not a boundary to participation in God but serves as the very platform by which humans are drawn to God.\(^{413}\) More specifically, it is not simply the presence of this permanent chasm in combination with humanity’s curiosity that

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\(^{405}\) See Joseph S. O'Leary, "Divine Simplicity and the Plurality of Attributes," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II*, ed. Lenka Karfikova, Scot Douglass and Johannes Zachhuber (Olomouc: Brill, 2004), 326; and Williams, 118.

\(^{406}\) O’Leary, 326, 337.

\(^{407}\) Williams, 130.


\(^{409}\) Abecina, 217.

\(^{410}\) Brill Dictionary, 265.

\(^{411}\) Smith, *Passion*, 127.

\(^{412}\) Balás, 22-23; Louth, 79.

\(^{413}\) Ludlow, *Divine Infinity*, 221-22.
encourages participation in God. Instead, the cataphatic traits known by humanity through God’s self-revelation serve as important attractors to the *epektatic* journey.

Though Gregory’s theory hinges primarily on Philippians 3:13, it seems that at the same time he is providing an exegetical expansion of John 17:3: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” In this way, eternal life, understood *epektatically*, begins now and continues eschatologically.\(^\text{414}\) The endeavor at hand is one of knowing God and participating in Him. For this reason, in interpreting Gregory, Coakley recognizes that “[i]t is…the doctrine of Christ that is at stake, whereas the spiritual senses are the epistemological means of progressively internalizing that doctrine.”\(^\text{415}\) At the center of the ethic proposed in this project are the doctrine of Christ and the understanding of who the God is into which humans are expected, for Gregory, to grow in similitude. I will highlight those characteristics which seem to be most relevant to our analysis of *epektasis* in light of virtue ethics—God as Goodness and the Paragon of Virtue.

*God is Goodness.* Fundamental to all of his texts above concerning *epektasis*, Gregory of Nyssa asserts that the Divine nature remains unchangeable and unlimited in the Good.\(^\text{416}\) God’s very infinity is understood to be one of Goodness.\(^\text{417}\) The perfection of human life, as described by Gregory, is to grow in God’s Goodness and become stable in the good by following an innate inclination toward the Good.\(^\text{418}\) Though Beauty is more than this, the attractive “pull” toward Goodness is sometimes termed Beauty. God’s infinite Beauty, as such, is not redundant but always new and desirable. The more one discovers this Beauty, the more one is enticed to

\(^{415}\) Coakley, 54.
\(^{416}\) Gregory, *Song of Songs*, 119.
\(^{417}\) Williams, 57.
continue its discovery.\textsuperscript{419} David Balas’ reading of Gregory’s \textit{Contra Eunomium I} reveals Gregory’s understanding that the principle means of participation in God is through His goodness. God in His very essence and nature is absolute Goodness, and humans are able to participate in this Goodness through humanity’s sensible and intellectual capacities.\textsuperscript{420} Thus, the \textit{epektatic} journey can be summed up with this consideration of God’s Goodness: “Spiritual life consists in an ever growing participation of Divine Goodness, i.e. in an infinite progress of our knowledge of and union with God; and this progress is to continue in all eternity.”\textsuperscript{421} But Balas is aware of the broader implications of referring to God as Goodness. Goodness “includes all perfections with a special emphasis on virtue.”\textsuperscript{422} That is, Goodness extends beyond a simple attribute, encompassing the essence of what it means to be virtuous.

\textit{God is the Paragon of Virtue.}\textsuperscript{423} Gregory captures this well when he describes God’s positive traits and characteristics as “incorruptibility, eternity, immorality, goodness, power, holiness, wisdom, and every majestic and sublime conception.”\textsuperscript{424} All five primary sources summarized above are inundated with “virtue” terminology, and in his \textit{De Vita Moysis} and commentaries on the Beatitudes and the Psalms, Gregory is explicit in describing God as the Paragon of virtue. God is virtue’s very source; it is through God that humans come to know what virtue is.\textsuperscript{425} At the same time, growth in God is growth in virtue.\textsuperscript{426} Christian Scripture points to numerous descriptions of God’s characteristics and attributes, whether in the person of Jesus

\textsuperscript{419} Smith, \textit{Passion}, 136.
\textsuperscript{420} David L. Balás, [\textit{Metousia Theou}]: \textit{Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa}. Studia Anselmiana Philosophica Theologica (Romae: I.B.C. Libreria Herder, 1966), 56-60, 64-71, 75.
\textsuperscript{421} Ibid., 161.
\textsuperscript{422} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{423} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{424} Anna Silvas, \textit{Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters} [translated from the Ancient Greek], Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2007), 194-95.
\textsuperscript{425} Gregory, \textit{Psalms}, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{426} Boersma, \textit{Embodiment}, 211-50. In this chapter, Boersma describes how growth in Christ is at the same time growth in virtue yet not moralism.
Christ or in more general terms. It would be tedious to go through the Scriptural examples of God as the source of virtue, but the hope here is to clarify that this concept is an important feature of Gregory’s overall theory. Since God is the Paragon of virtue, it is through knowledge of, emulation of, and union with Him that virtue is to be pursued. Just what it means to grow in participation with God will be detailed in the following section, but here it should be noted that the emphasis placed on spiritual struggle in regards to virtue is directly related to the claim that God is the Paragon of Virtue.

Spiritual struggle, as noted in chapter 2, is the detachment from bodily, worldly, and other pleasures that weigh down a person’s soul from ascent toward God. To become detached, one’s passions must be rightly ordered and redirected toward attachment and assimilation to God. In short, since God is the Paragon of Virtue, a person must be oriented towards Him, with the hopes of becoming like Him. Orienting oneself toward God is another way of summing up what it means to struggle. Spiritual struggle and orientation toward God are two themes that Gregory highlights in a number of works, including *De Perfectione*, *In Canticum Canticorum*, and *De Vita Moysis*. Whether the struggle is against base passions, whether it is a struggle against external temptations, or whether it is struggle with God Himself, the only hope of perseverance is to orient oneself to God’s aid, grace, and guidance. No one can become like God without God. Submission to Him and reliance on Him are the means by which to progress toward God, and again as noted in the previous chapter, complete reliance on God requires a persistent and exertive self-denial that is best captured through the concept of spiritual struggle.

Emphases on God as the origin of virtue, and the importance of a constant orientation to God in order to make progress on the journey have important implications for virtue ethics. Most obviously, orienting oneself toward knowledge of God and assimilation to Him shifts the focus
away from the self and away from virtue for its own sake. If a person exercises good actions but
never becomes good, this is undoubtedly a deficiency. Yet, it seems just as critical for a person
who is becoming good to ensure that this goodness is geared toward God and others. The point
of the moral life is not one’s own goodness. Instead, one’s goodness is subordinated to, and is an
outcome of, the project of loving God and neighbor. This task, however, is not an easy one since
acquiring virtue is often seen as the final end resulting only from the desire for self-
improvement.

The problems of self-centeredness and self-effacement in the discussion of virtue are
ameliorated in direct proportion to the intensity of one’s constant effort in orientation toward
God. When one orients oneself to God through spiritual struggle, that person is embodying the
chief commandments of Christianity—love of God and neighbor. The person is no longer
working for a reward, whether that reward be self-satisfaction, growth in virtue, eternal life, or
even assimilation to God, which has been presented here as a sort of telos of epektasis. Though
this point may seem paradoxical at first, an epektatic orientation is a fulfillment of the inherent
inclination toward God to which Gregory points. It is a response to what it means to become
human in a process of the soul’s purgation, ascent, and assimilation. It is in a sense the “ought”
of humanity and of this ethic. It serves to shift one’s focus from virtue and self to God and
others.

To continue, detailed in the first chapter was the contemporary debate over the existence
of a unity to the virtues. What this means is that in order for one virtue to be complete, it requires
the existence of all other virtues. For example, generosity is not complete without others virtues
such as selflessness and charity, among others. The theory of the unity of the virtues would
imply that if certain virtues are missing, other virtues supposedly possessed are necessarily
incomplete. Yet, Gregory’s theory sheds some light on why there has been some disagreement concerning the unity of the virtues. On one hand, in theory there exists a unity of the virtues because God—the Paragon of Virtue—is their source in whom resides the perfection of all goodness and virtue. In this sense, virtue indeed necessitates a unity, as God possesses this perfect unity. The departure of any virtue from its ideal perfection would imply a deficiency in another virtue. Humans, on the other hand, embark on the journey toward God, growing in virtue along the way. The human journey, in Gregory’s scheme, is always short of complete and perfect virtue. Any one single virtue, no matter how perfectly it seems to have been acquired, is always necessarily short of the perfect form found in the Paragon Himself. However, the closer one gets, the more the complementarity is made obvious and the more it seems that there is a unity. Humans can progress so far along this path that compared to other humans, they may appear to possess virtues indefinitely, as parts of their transformed selves. This transformative process, in a sense, is the goal of virtue ethics in creating virtuous agents, and is at the same time a result of Gregory’s model.

5 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I have delved deeply into Gregory of Nyssa’s theory of epektasis. I began by exploring some of the opposing philosophical and theological currents contemporary to Gregory, including those of the Stoics, Plato, Aristotle, and Origen. I then assessed some of Gregory’s theological methodology, which included a seemingly unorganized yet all-encompassing approach that was more concerned with promoting transformation than it was with providing his readers with a system of precise terms and concepts. This allowed me to summarize and unpack Gregory’s theory of epektasis in his De Perfectione, his commentaries on
the Psalms, Beatitudes, and Song of Songs, and his *De Vita Moysis*. The subsequent analysis of these readings led to the conclusion that *epektasis* is best understood as an upward and spiral ascent through a non-linear spectrum. It is a journey that requires constant struggle from any who wish to make progress toward God-likeness, even those who may purport spiritual maturity. It is at the same time a journey immediately available to all who desire it.

With God as the center of the theory toward which one must be oriented in order to make progress, describing God, albeit with limitations, became central to my exploration of *epektasis*. While only three of a plentitude of descriptions of God—God as infinite, Good, and the Paragon of Virtue—were described, Gregory helped clarify why the doctrine of God—theology proper—might be so critical in the development of an ethic of virtue, that is, why theology and ethics cannot afford separation. The *epektatic* spectrum of virtue is one of growth in the knowledge of and intimacy with God, and at the heart of this knowledge is a basic understanding of who God is. The three characteristics of God on which Gregory’s theory is built also begin to address the challenges in virtue ethics of self-centeredness, the self-effacement of virtue, and the unity of the virtues. By defining God as Virtue, toward whom humans are to direct their actions, and from whom humans are to receive their virtue, the love of God and neighbor resolves the tensions that might otherwise encumber a Christian ethic of virtue.

Finally, I have not entirely detailed in explicit terms exactly what participation in God might mean for the Cappadocian.\(^427\) He is clear that participation is growth in God’s likeness through assimilation to His known characteristics and in virtue. However, the means by which to assess one’s level of participation in God and the details therein are not immediately obvious. This may have been intentional for Gregory, since: it was not his primary goal; assessing one’s

\(^{427}\) There is no extant text of Gregory’s that specifically takes up the task of describing what participation in God is. See Balás, 121.
participation in God is not critical to actually participating in God; and the task itself may be impossible in light of apophatic limitations. Still, J. Warren Smith’s interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa does help shed some insight onto this question. Presenting Gregory’s basic anthropology with specific attention to the existence of body and soul, Smith sees Gregory’s emphasis as one in which the body’s role is crucial to the transformation of the soul. A conclusion alluded to previously with Coakley, Smith describes this relationship as one in which the soul and body co-originate and require each other in order to successfully develop and mature. In fact, “rationality is an acquired power that comes from nothing but the transformation of the soul in accordance with the body’s development.”428 In this way, the human soul is predisposed for dynamic maturation but not without the body.429 It seems, then, that Gregory does not leave us entirely without answers to the question of participation. Participation is through the transformation of the body, which at the same time transforms the soul. Brian Daley describes this transformation in God of human nature as one from a changeable and fleshly state to a stable and luminous one—a clearly identified purpose and presumed result of asceticism as it developed in the early Church.430 Thus, we turn to the ancient Christian realization of the principle means by which to epektatically orient oneself to God and to embark on this transformative journey—asceticism—with the goal of understanding its import for a contemporary account of virtue ethics and its relevance for non-monastic 21st-century Christians.

428 Smith, Passion, 146.
429 Ibid., 147.
Ch. 4 – Asceticism as Epektatic Spiritual Struggle: Sexuality, Angelification, and Divine Indwelling

I – Introduction

Until this point, the presentation of spiritual struggle and its relation to virtue has been primarily theoretical. In this chapter on asceticism, and in the next on sacred reading, I hope to demonstrate ways in which the theory of the first three chapters can be applied and embodied. Asceticism is particularly interesting when considering modern Christian practices because of its history in early Christianity. It served as a focal point for the acquisition of virtue among monastics and non-monastics alike. In fact, the monastic movement originated as a movement among laity who saw themselves as embodying the Christian gospel. In light of this reality, it is curious that a practice so central to early Christians and to their Scriptural hermeneutic would undergo such a decline contemporarily. This chapter argues that the asceticism that is at the core of Christian monasticism often takes on a different contemporary form—one that is not delimited by monastic walls and garbs but that is primarily interior. This chapter will also maintain that the tripartite model of spirituality based on Gregory of Nyssa’s theory of epektasis is a helpful framework by which to envision an ethic of Christian spiritual struggle, generally, and this internalized asceticism, specifically. However, in order to suggest asceticism’s contemporary appropriations, it is first important to understand the aims, grace-enabled process, and origins of Christian asceticism, to which a significant portion of this chapter will be dedicated.

There exists a good deal of overlap between asceticism and spiritual struggle. Why not use asceticism instead of spiritual struggle to conceptualize the exertion involved in the pursuit of virtue? Here we will continue the argument chapter 2 began, that asceticism is just one

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instantiation of spiritual struggle. Asceticism is a practice of self-discipline and self-control, embodied in devotional practices, with the hopes of exacting a more profound, inner transformation of being, character, or personhood. This chapter analyzes asceticism as a form of spiritual struggle using the three stages (detachment or purification from passion, strengthening of the soul, and union with God) of the *epektastic* journey detailed in chapter 3. Spiritual struggle, then, functions more as a worldview, lens, and even *modus operandi* for Christian life, and as such, can be applied to different aspects within that life, i.e. to prayer, Scripture, sacramental life, mission, charity, and in asceticism’s case, to the body.

The presentation of asceticism in this chapter will proceed in four main sections based primarily on the themes that tend to emerge when surveying early Christian texts on asceticism. First, in line with the first stage of *epektasis*, this chapter will describe ways in which sexuality was central to early discussions of Christian asceticism. Many of these ancient Christian views

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432 See Ilaria Vigorelli, "Soul's Dance in Clement, Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa," In *Evagrius between Origen, the Cappadocians, and Neoplatonism*, ed. Ilaria Ramelli, Studia Patristica Vol. LXXXIV, (Leuven; Paris; Bristol, CT: Peeters), 2017, for the Platonic origins and Clementian resemanticization of this general tripartite model in Gregory of Nyssa.


While any of these models could generally suffice, to present all of these models would be redundant. I chose Gregory of Nyssa’s because *epektasis* carries with it a concomitant and more explicit emphasis on spiritual struggle and perpetual progress in God who is Himself eternal. Gregory’s model is certainly less explicit in its tripartite structure but is more explicit in its Pauline basis on perpetually striving forward. See Gregory’s following works: *De Perfectione, Commentary on the Beatitudes, Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms, Commentary on the Song of Songs, and De Vita Moysis*. See also "Epektasis," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010); and Gregory, *Ascetical Works*, translated by Virginia Wood Callahan, The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation, ed. Roy Joseph Defferrari Vol. 58 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999).
tend towards an extreme and warped view of sexuality, yet there remain lessons to be uncovered regarding the intent of asceticism. The second section of this chapter will explore asceticism as a means of ascending to an angelic state or of restoration to humanity’s primordial state. It is a state in which one’s soul is strengthened (second stage) to be no longer encumbered excessively by bodily attachments. The third major section of this chapter will describe asceticism’s ultimate goal—allowing the body to become the place of the presence of God (stage three). This section will delve more deeply into the significance of the body as an instrument of Gregory’s *epektatic* ascent. The significance of the body as locus resides in the process of internalization of a number of Old Testament, Second Temple, apocalyptic, and apocryphal concepts, images, archetypes, and rituals. This internalization, or interiorization as it will be referred to in this chapter, most notable in early Syriac Christian authors, will provide further insight into the understanding of sexuality, purity, and asceticism in the early Church period. Both monastic and non-monastic communities, by internalizing their religious ancestral heritage, were alerted to the importance of the purity of the body temple. It is for this reason that they soon came to be associated with angels, as they acquired the status of the dwelling place of the Presence of God.

By way of conclusion, the final section of this chapter will suggest ways this early Christian asceticism should be adopted in the 21st century as an instantiation of the larger framework of spiritual struggle. This section will take a brief look at contemporary understandings and re-appropriations of monasticism, asceticism, celibacy, and marriage mainly among Orthodox Christian authors. Asceticism, to be upheld in all three stages of Gregory’s theory, will emerge in this section as a sort of microcosm of his *epektatic* theory. It will become clear that placing asceticism within the framework of spiritual struggle comprises a modern
exercise of an otherwise antiquated practice, thereby opening an important gateway into virtue’s pursuit and Gregory’s perpetual ascent to God.

2 – Asceticism and Sexual Continence

Control of one’s sexual appetite is a significant dimension of the first stage of the *epektatic* journey when applied to spiritual struggle in the form of asceticism. The goal of this section will be to separate the wheat from the chaff—sift through a spectrum of reasons for the importance of sexual purity in order to locate a sort of mean between extremes. The hope is to identify the aspects of this dimension of asceticism that might benefit 21st century Christians and cast out any apparent distortions in understanding. Since its inception, asceticism has been associated with some level of sexual renunciation ranging from periods of abstinence within marriage to complete rejection as an inherently impure act. As we will see, a number of theologians and monastics of the early centuries of Christianity commented on the important place sexual purity held in Christian asceticism.

2.1 – Clement of Alexandria

Among these writers was Clement of Alexandria, who was a notable theologian in Alexandria who lived from the mid 2nd to early 3rd centuries and who gained much notoriety in the early Christian Church.\(^433\) Familiar with the Stoic and Pythagorean ethics that rejected pleasure as a viable basis for sexual intercourse, Clement presents an austere and influential

Christian sexual ethic. Peter Brown and Ilaria Ramelli elaborate on Clement’s position toward sexuality and virginity. There existed circles of Encratitic Gnostics in Syria, who believed they could bypass the moral and intellectual discipline required of Christians through a moment of instant redemption. For Clement, the true Gnostic was formed through a gradual and steady life of goodness that included every aspect of daily life. All aspects of this life were supposed to be composed, calm, and peaceful, and the Stoic doctrine of ἀπάθεια set parameters for the realization of such a life. However, as Ilaria Ramelli points out, in “condemning excessive asceticism in general,” Clement held a more lenient outlook on sexuality than did the Encratites. For the Encratites, sexual intercourse was a mark of fallen humanity, but for Clement, sex was permitted within marriage albeit only for the purposes of procreation; neither pleasure nor unity were legitimate reasons. In this way, Clement was preserving the sanctity of sexuality in marriage, though he ultimately lauded virginity as the best option, against those in his time who considered sex always a bestial act. However, the ideal that Clement proposed would soon be deemed unrealistic, required only of monks and not of those living outside the confines of monasticism. Clement did well to uphold the possibility of Christian perfection for

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436 Ibid., 125-26.

437 Ibid., 127.


440 Ibid., 383.

441 Ibid., 137.
married non-celibates, but he would soon be drowned out by 3rd and 4th century bishops and clergy who were keen on advocating for virginity. One of these extreme bishops was Methodius of Olympus.

2.2 – Methodius of Olympus

Methodius of Olympus, bishop and martyr who lived in the 3rd and 4th centuries, sheds light on some of the ideals that surrounded Christian asceticism in its inception. In his *Symposium on Virginity* spoken through the mouths of a number of different characters, Methodius lauds virginity and its benefits. Virginity, sent to mankind from heaven, is likened to having one’s head in the heavens while still walking on earth. Methodius asserts the light airiness of those who are detached from the passions of this world because of their chastity, which is superior to all other advantages of virtues. While chastity, according to Methodius, does include the control of sexual desire, it is not limited to this control but instead encompasses all of the virtues. Those who are chaste have “wings,” allowing them to fly above the concerns of mortals and see the immortal realm, which consists of indescribable beauty, similar to Clement’s description of those “stretching upwards in soul, loosed from the world and our sins, touching the earth on tiptoe so as to appear to be in the world.” Moreover, “a magnificent array of lights bathes them in the glow that God pours down on them like water, making the world beyond

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442 The apparent redundancy in language here is to differentiate between the few who were purported to be married and yet still celibate.
443 Ibid., 138-39.
446 Methodius, 106. See also *Paed.* 1.5.16.3 (SC 70, 140).
bright with mystical illuminations." The body is a temple that is to remain pure and undefiled; virgins represent the altar or the ark within the Holy of Holies, where sacrifices and libations are forbidden. As such, according to Amy Brown Hughes, it is through virginity that a person ascends to greater levels of likeness to God in a process that is both active in needing to carve out space for and accepting Christ and passive in its need for Christ’s transformative mediation in the ascender. It is through virginity that one participates in Christ and grows in virtue.

Virginity is an emulation of the “Archvirgin” (αρχιπαρθένος)—Christ Himself, who leads the chorus of the virgins. Virgins come second only to Christ’s very Bride, who Methodius maintains is His own undefiled flesh. This exaltation of virginity at times went too far in Methodius’ thought, and this warranted disagreements. Peter Brown compares a pagan philosopher and follower of Plotinus—Porphyrius—with Methodius. Porphyrius hated the Christian ideal of complete virginity and celibacy, and was more in line with Clement’s ideology. He held abstinence from food much more highly than he did celibacy. In response to this current, Methodius’ Symposium, in obvious emulation of Plato’s famous work, consisted of virgins who were able to access the unfallen primordial state of Adam. Methodius asserted the following: marriage was permitted as a concession to human frailty; human sexuality pointed to a higher and better reality—a spiritual one; human history was the gradual taming of sexuality; the bridge between God and man was through virginity; and the virgin body was lifted up above earthly matter. In all of this, it is clear that the strictness and forcefulness with which

447 Methodius, 108.
448 Ibid., 89.
449 Hughes, 60-63.
450 Ibid., 66.
451 Methodius, 46-47.
452 Brown, 179-81.
453 Ibid., 184-85.
454 Ibid., 185-87.
Christianity came to associate virginity with purity underwent a gradual development. It was not obvious to Christianity’s Jewish ancestors that celibacy implied purity. In fact, Aphrahat’s text, as we will see, suggests the exact opposite; it was procreation that was given the upper hand in Jewish conceptions of purity. Developments that evolved from Scripture, conversions of non-Jews, and the philosophical currents of the time all contributed to the associations of monasticism with celibacy of 3rd and 4th century Christianity.

Beyond this high praise of virginity, there are three more especially intriguing concepts in Methodius’ writings in relation to asceticism. First, Methodius links asceticism with knowledge of the truth—a concept foreign to the modern reader but prevalent within Patristics. “For it is only after the mind has been cleansed by laborious ascetical exercises from the different notions which obscure it, that it can look with sharp gaze upon the truth.”455 This concept, rooted in Scripture’s message,456 is consonant with Patristic exegetical methodology that requires a life of detachment, action, and virtue in order to properly interpret the words of Scripture. It requires the light of purity in order to understand the words given by the Light. Scripture enlightens and at the same time requires en-light-enment in a very real way.

Second, Methodius holds that intercourse ought to be avoided at all costs.457 Even those who are married must be chaste if they want to decorate their tabernacles. Here, in contrast with the Shepherd of Hermas discussed below, Methodius is not talking about abstaining from fornication, but his understanding of what constitutes a lack of chastity includes “lawful” intercourse.458 He expects those who marry to attain a chastity that includes sexual abstinence,

455 Methodius, 137.
456 For one of numerous examples, see 1 Pet 4:2 (NRSV): “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God.”
457 Ibid., 45, 69-70, 89.
458 Ibid., 138.
since this is the only way for them at least to produce little sprouts if not the large branches of the trees of virgins. This little sprout-large branch comparison, though, is at odds with the third point worth highlighting.

In the epilogue, one of the characters “Gregorian,” is arguing that those who experience no concupiscence are better than those who struggle against it, since the former are far from any lust and have the Holy Spirit always dwelling in them. Yet another character, “Eubolion,” (the character that Methodius is in agreement with) makes a number of analogies (the pilot who has steered many ships, the wrestler who has beat many opponents, the doctor who has healed many patients, the wise man who built his house on the rocks) to make the point that the soul that struggles against concupiscence is stronger than the soul that has no such passions to begin with. The force that makes virtue stronger is perseverance. Methodius’ line of thought here is the same spirit with which the concept of spiritual struggle is developed in this project. Within the larger framework of epektasis, the end goal of God-likeness or perfection is always being approached yet never being reached. This means that what is most important is the progress made toward virtue through spiritual struggle. The one who struggles toward virtue, and in Methodius’ case, toward chastity, is better off than the one who does not.

The question, then, would remain why those who persevere for chastity (especially the extreme chastity suggested by Methodius) within marriage would not be considered more righteous (“decorated”) than those who do not struggle in this way. It could be that Methodius is pointing to an innate disposition toward lust that some have to fight against and others do not, but it would be hard to envision a married person who has no inclination toward intercourse. In

459 Ibid., 159.
460 Ibid., 161.
461 Ibid., 162.
any case, Methodius will fall to the far end of the spectrum on the rigidity with which he defines chastity. He does indeed make room for procreation as a (lesser) good, and in this respect, his views line up closely those of Aphrahat, a 3rd to 4th century Syriac ascetic.

2.3 – Aphrahat the Persian Sage

Aphrahat’s *Demonstration 6* “On the Sons of the Covenant” and *Demonstration 18* “On Virginity” contain strong advocacy for early Christian practices of celibacy. Aphrahat’s *bnay qyama* (children of the covenant) and *ihidaya* (single ones) are presented as Christians par excellence. Sidney Griffith explores the etymology of ascetic and monastic vocabulary in early Syrian writings in an effort to readjust misconceptions concerning early Syrian monasticism. More specifically, he uses the writings of Aphrahat (and St. Ephraem the Syrian) to explore three words that have been historically subsumed under Greek corollaries. The first term is *idihaya*, whose position was comparable to widows and virgins already in the New Testament, and which consisted of both males and females. These “single ones” were expected to be celibate, to have faith, humility, simplicity, and to fast and pray. They were not only single in their celibacy but in their single-mindedness. They were considered to have a special relationship to Jesus Christ, who was the only-begotten Son in the bosom of the Father. They were seen in a sense as putting on divinity similar to Christ putting on humanity. Thus, in contrast to the Greek *monachos*, asserts Griffith, *ihidaya* is scriptural, linked to Christ Himself, and contains dimensions that were not

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463 Ibid., 225.
part of the Egyptian and Greek monastic cultures, as will be demonstrated in the following term.\textsuperscript{464}

The second term, \textit{bnay qyama}, in Aphrahat’s usage denoted the same community as the term \textit{ihidaya}.\textsuperscript{465} It has often been translated as sons/daughters of the covenant, but it also has a connotation of (and etymological semblance to) sons of the resurrection.\textsuperscript{466} While this referred to the same community, it highlighted a different dimension of that community. Their names as covenanter reflected the solemn pledge they took at baptism, a pledge that all Christians take in different forms and degrees.\textsuperscript{467} They were examples to the rest of the community. In a similar fashion, the angelic life to which they aspired through their asceticism was reflective of the divine light acquired in putting on Christ and serving God’s people as He did.\textsuperscript{468} Finally, the third related term that Griffith briefly mentions is \textit{abila}, which literally means “mourner.” \textit{Abila} was used to describe a penitent ascetic who liked to spend some time in the desert in solitude. This term came to be conflated with anchorites and hermits, but Griffith’s essay intends to separate these conflations. Instead, the term was focused on ascetic penitence, and did not require a specific vocation beyond that.\textsuperscript{469}

Griffith’s point demonstrates that there existed a culture in Syria that enabled and supported asceticism and celibacy while in regular communities, not hermitic or coenobitic lifestyles.\textsuperscript{470} This is meant to distinguish Syrian tradition from 4\textsuperscript{th} century Egyptian tradition and the monasticism that developed therefrom.\textsuperscript{471} Thus, on one hand, spiritual struggle as applied to

\textsuperscript{464} Ibid., 228.
\textsuperscript{465} Ibid., 229.
\textsuperscript{466} Ibid., 231.
\textsuperscript{467} Ibid., 238.
\textsuperscript{468} Ibid., 234.
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid., 235.
\textsuperscript{470} Ibid., 220-45.
\textsuperscript{471} Ibid., 237-238.
the body in asceticism was not reserved for the tonsured or consecrated but for all Christians. On the other hand, a closer look at Aphrahat’s texts reveals significant distortions in his understanding of sexuality, not far from those of Methodius. In Demonstration 6, the vocation of the bnay qyama and ihidaya encapsulates many of the same tenets of 4th century Christian monasticism, but as Griffith makes clear, these communities are not in secluded areas of the desert or living in communal institutions as are the monks of Egypt. Nevertheless, asceticism is just as well of prime importance. Iliaria Ramelli describes this community’s asceticism as one that is linked to the denunciation of oppression, the greed of the rich, and the ownership of slaves, and one that embraces voluntary poverty.  

The covenners are also expected to let go of the world and all its passions and desires, stand firm in battle against satanic adversaries, struggle to attain the likeness of angels, and take off the old sinful person and put on Christ. Only those who are trained spiritually in good works and in dispassion will be able to acquire wings that allow them to fly above the arrows of Satan who is ready to attack.  

Aphrahat points out that as presented in the Bible, women have often been the cause for the fall of men. He hinges on this point as an important reason for abstinence from women and sexual relations with them. However, it is to both sexes that he advises against cohabitation, clarifying that the prophets did not require the service of women, so neither should any of the male idihaya. Moreover, earthly husbands are feeble compared to Christ the bridegroom, yet only one can be chosen. While this line of thought seems decisive to Aphrahat’s reasoning, it is

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474 Ibid., 114-15.
475 Ibid., 115-16.
not entirely clear why the two (earthly and heavenly grooms) are mutually exclusive.\textsuperscript{476} He does not take up the Christian doctrine of marriage and procreation, even as presented in Scripture, though he seems to be acquainted with most, if not all, parts of Scripture. With all this, he claims that what is most important of all is that asceticism be taken seriously, which includes but is not limited to fasting, praying, having fervent love for Christ, being humble, composed, alert, kind, wise, and sober-minded; in a phrase—acquiring virtue through imitation of Christ’s asceticism, struggles, way of life, and passions.\textsuperscript{477}

In \textit{Demonstration 18}, Aphrahat again makes a strong case for the preeminence of celibacy above all other lifestyles. This time, though, he presents his case in opposition to the Judaic critique of celibacy that claims that procreation is better than celibacy and that the latter is in a sense impure.\textsuperscript{478} Against this, Aphrahat maintains that it is celibacy that is most pure, citing a number of examples of righteous celibates in the Old Testament, including Moses, Joshua, Jeremiah, Elijah, and Elisha.\textsuperscript{479} He goes into significant detail regarding Moses’s celibacy and the three days of celibacy that was required of the Israelites in Exodus 19 before seeing God for one hour. How much more, he asks, would Moses need to be celibate who stood in front of God numerous times and spoke with Him face to face?\textsuperscript{480} There are at least two points, however, that present difficulties in this argument. First, Moses and the Israelites, withholding the consideration of celibacy, were of different moral development. Just because the Israelites would need three days of abstinence for one hour with God does not necessarily mean that Moses would need the same; it is not necessarily directly transferable proportionally. Second, Aphrahat

\begin{footnotes}
476 Ibid., 117-21.
477 Ibid., 121-25.
479 Ibid., 77-81.
480 Ibid., 78-80.
\end{footnotes}
is clearly conflating licentiousness with marriage in most of his examples. When he finally comes to speak of marriage as commanded by God and as practiced among Christians, he grants that it is good, just not as good as celibacy.

Naomi Koltun-Fromm picks up on a polemic that makes itself clear in the writings of Aphrahat. As seen in Demonstration 6, Aphrahat makes a strong case for equating holiness with celibacy. Only those who observe sexual abstinence exhibit purity in its greatest capacity.  

However, this is in tension with another string of interpretation—that of rabbinic Jews in Aphrahat’s time, the 4th century AD. Many posited the exact opposite—that only those who procreate are pure and are fulfilling God’s command to the fullest. Aphrahat is aware of their interpretation and think they have it wrong, at least according to Demonstration 6. However, in Demonstration 18, as Fromm points out, Aphrahat gives room for procreation and Christian marriage, admitting that they are good as ordained by God, but they are not as good as celibacy. Nonetheless, he maintains that if Moses in Exodus 19 commands the Israelites to observe celibacy for three days in order to see God for one hour, a person would have to be celibate all their lives to be with God all the time.

Fromm demonstrates that the tannaitic Jews and Aphrahat recognize this tension and agree on the following points: 1) Both Aphrahat and the tannaitic Jews agree that since Moses spoke to God mouth to mouth, he could not concern himself with earthly matters such as marriage and children. 2) Rabbinic interpretation of this text does indicate an association between sexual abstinence and holiness, but this did not effect how the rabbis thought life should

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482 Ibid., 375-76.
483 Ibid., 385-86.
484 Ibid., 389.
485 Ibid., 390.
be lived generally; it applied only to Moses’ case.  

3) The rabbis hold an ambivalence toward Moses’ life: they respect and admire his celibacy but still are aware that God ordered procreation. One of their solutions included the possibility of exhibiting particular attributes of Moses after one has procreated, just as Moses procreated with Zipporah. All this, for Fromm, shows that Aphrahat and the Jews were not using entirely different methods of interpretation. For example, they are both using Moses, whereas Christian schools of thought, according to Fromm, had tendencies to use Abraham as a more universal character. Each school of thought reveals the other’s ambivalences.

In the same vein, both assert the necessity for Moses’ constant celibacy in order to be in God’s presence for so long on so many occasions. However, Aphrahat reveals the struggle of rabbinic studies with sexual abstinence’s appeals and offenses. At the same time, Aphrahat’s discourse with the rabbinic stance reveals his own ambivalences regarding marriage. It was not to be taken for granted that what may appear to be a ubiquitous stance on sexual abstinence among early Christian ascetics did not have its opposition, and more than that, Scripturally-based opposition. It would be very rare to find an early Christian writer making an argument for which biblical support is not provided. The discussion of sexual continence was not an entirely straightforward one, complicated by texts such as 1 Corinthians 7:1–9, 32–35, in which St. Paul gives concession to marriage primarily as a means of countering uncontrolled sexual appetite, recommending continence if possible, and Luke 20:34–36 where Jesus Christ asserts that there is

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486 Ibid., 391.
487 Ibid., 394.
488 Ibid., 389.
no marriage in the afterlife after the resurrection of the dead. Clearly, there are challenges in interpretation and reasons for such strong opinions on sexual continence in the early church. Without requiring a full exegetical exploration through these texts and others, it is the goal of this section to uncover a gamut of opinions within the early Church that functioned as the backbone of asceticism, while acknowledging the variety and discrepancies therein. Unveiling these variations allows the wheat to separate from the chaff; the good intent behind even the strangest of views can uncover good underlying ideals and principles while providing space for the exposure of insufficient interpretations and thus implementation.

2.4 – Acts of Thomas

The Acts of Thomas provides an account, albeit not later regarded as canonical, of the spread of Christianity to India through Thomas, one of the twelve of Christ. For the purposes of this chapter, this text lends helpful insight into early Church boundaries and initiatory tendencies, a focus on bodily purity, and the pragmatic effects of early Church eschatology. Regarding early Church boundaries and initiation, Thomas drew the line in two important places. First, it was incumbent on a person considered to be part of the followers of Christ to believe that Jesus Christ is able to do the impossible.\(^{491}\) He is God, and as God, faith in Him could accomplish what would otherwise be out of the reach and bounds of humanity. Secondly, those considered faithful to Christ had to express this faithfulness through their actions. For example, there was a story recorded in the text that a man’s hands withered when touching the Eucharist he was about to receive. While this man was already initiated, he experienced a “contrary reaction” to the

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Eucharist because of his laxity in maintaining the purity required for participation in this community.\textsuperscript{492}

Purity is presented in the \textit{Acts} as the virtue par excellence for Christians. It is the thread that pieces together much of the narrative found in the \textit{Acts}. This is even at times exaggerated and unbalanced; the apostle is found breaking up a number of marriages, contrary to what canonical Scripture witnesses.\textsuperscript{493} Still, strong favor is given sexual purity—a recurring theme in these ancient texts. The focus on bodily purity when coupled with a belief in an imminent eschatology rendered a Christian, in Thomas’ narrative, able to let go of one’s attachment to the world with ease.\textsuperscript{494} A Christian who believed that Christ would return soon and that the world to come would be established imminently found little reason to hold on to material matters, be they fleshly desires, relational problems, or polemics of any sort. In the same vein, the virtue of women is exalted through a depiction of longing for Christ in the world to come instead of longing for their husbands. Promises of the kingdom were realities to believers in Christ, and this provided the thrust needed to resist the impurity noxiously portrayed in this text and in others.

\section*{2.5 – The Shepherd of Hermas}

The Shepherd of Hermas was the most circulated non-canonical writing before the 4\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{495} It was even considered as a potential book of the developing New Testament corpus, though eventually it was not included in later codices.\textsuperscript{496} Relevant to this project, sections of this text highlight the concepts of purity, asceticism, and self-coercion. All of these are basic

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item \textsuperscript{492} Ibid., 127-141.
\item \textsuperscript{493} Ibid., 161-251.
\item \textsuperscript{494} Ibid., 90-107.
\item \textsuperscript{495} Carolyn Osiek and Helmut Koester, \textit{Shepherd of Hermas : A Commentary}. Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 1.
\item \textsuperscript{496} Ibid., 4-7.
\end{thebibliography}
principles that helped shape early Christian asceticism and eventually monasticism. As Bogdan Bucur points out, “by ‘using and reworking the imagery of Temple sacrifice and angelic liturgy current in Second Temple Judaism,’ the Shepherd ‘anticipates developments that will come to full bloom in later Christian ascetic and monastic traditions.’”497 This imagery for early Christian ascetics was interiorized and thus took on its full form within the monastic corpus. There is one selection that deserves special attention—mandate 4.1 on chastity and adultery. While this mandate primarily describes prohibitions and suggestions for different circumstances surrounding adultery, the way it defines chastity is notable. In contrast to the rigidity with which chastity is defined in Aphrahat and Methodius, the Shepherd clearly refers to chastity as fidelity and not celibacy.498 Within the bounds of chastity lies the man who refrains from thinking of other men’s wives but thinks only of one’s own. The parameters of thinking about one’s own wife are not set. Instead, within these wide parameters, “you will never sin.”499 This is in stark contrast to Methodius who recommends celibacy even within marriage. Only those who are celibate can decorate their tabernacles with the fruit of the chastity tree. The Shepherd here seems to give the most lenience within marital relations than the other ancient texts presented in this chapter, of which the most lenient acquiesces to permit marriage and procreation as a lesser evil than adultery but a less virtuous alternative to celibacy.

498 Osiek, 110. See commentary portion of this reference regarding the relationship between chastity and fidelity.
499 Ibid., 109.
2.5 - Conclusion

Other than the refreshing perspective found in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, one cannot deny the encouragement in the early centuries of Christianity of complete abstinence from sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{500} It is specifically not the suggestion of this section to encourage such a stringent view of sexuality, but it is often the case that behind extreme views lies a lesson to be learned, often in a less extreme form. While some, such as Clement, found room for a relatively healthy sexuality, and while others, such as Hermas, focused on fidelity instead of celibacy, many others did not. Moreover, even Clement—though progressive in his own right, arguing against those who maintained that sexual behavior is inherently evil—did not acquiesce to the utilization of sex as a means for pleasurable or unitive purposes. Asceticism promoted the control of any appetitive desires to which one could become attached or reliant. This included the pleasure of food, sleep, and certainly sex, among other things. Yet, this only explains why Clement may have refrained from permitting sex for pleasurable purposes. It seems more stringent to prohibit sex even for unitive purposes between spouses. The other texts in this section elucidate why early Christian ascetics, like Clement, advised for control of sexual appetites even among the married.

The disdain with which sexual intercourse was viewed seemed to be more reflective of the society of these authors than it was of sexuality itself. For example, Aphrahat clearly conflates sexuality with bestiality as though there was no choice for a middle ground. It was hard for him, as it was for others in his time, to imagine a temperate, controlled, responsible exercise of sexuality. This, as has been noted in scholarship, is not far from the *Acts of Thomas* that

conflates virginity with purity—the virtue par excellence. Complete abstinence was the only solution to the bestiality that these writers saw, though this may not strike the modern reader as the most obvious of solutions. Instead, it seems that—similar to other fleshly desires that in this epektatic scheme of spiritual struggle must be fought against and controlled—sexual urges, even within marital relationships, should be under a person’s control.

The opposite can often be true—one can find oneself under the sway of one’s sexual appetite—and this has proven no less true in the 21st century. Sexual perversion has proven problematic throughout much of human history, and the regaining of control over one’s sexual impulses through the concept of spiritual struggle applied to the body, i.e. asceticism, could be one means to the virtuous flourishing of any community. At times, the authors in this section tended to be extreme in their positions, presenting what may be too austere a sexual renunciation. However, since fundamentally they envisioned the application of their lifestyles for their entire communities, their call to the control of the sexual appetite is just as relevant today as it was in their time. They were calling for asceticism beyond the bounds of the monastic garb, using their belief in the imminent return of Christ as incentive for their struggle toward fleshly detachment, the first stage of epektasis.

3 – Asceticism as Angelification and Restoration

Bodily purity was seen as one aspect of the first stage (struggling against one’s own desires) of the epektatic journey presented in this project. Yet, the association between sexual continence and purity and their exaltation as the most desirable of virtues did not encompass all it meant to be ascetic. More than that, asceticism was a return of humanity to its original state

501 Klijn, 161-251.
before Adam and Eve’s fall in the garden, and it was also a transformation into the likeness of angels. At first glance, these two statements appear to be in opposition—is one restored to a sort of ideal human nature, or is one transformed into an angelic nature? The answer is both. As will be discussed in texts from Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Shepherd of Hermas, a restoration of primordial nature is the same as a transformation into angelic nature. Both in effect describe ascending above or conquering fallen human nature, and both are essentially the fulfillment of God’s will and the response of God to humanity’s fall.  

These concepts of restoration or transformation prepare one for the ultimate goal of asceticism described in the section to follow—becoming a dwelling place for the presence of God.

3.1 – Clement of Alexandria

More than just his teachings on purity and sexuality, Clement of Alexandria’s proto-monastic theories had a far-reaching impact for Christendom. These theories are extant

502 Restoration of primordial nature and the acquisition of angelic nature are also seen in 4th to 7th century Syriac clothing metaphors. See Sebastian P. Brock, “Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition,” in Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter, ed. Margo Schmidt and C. F. Geyer (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1982), 11-38. Sebastian Brock begins by outlining the trajectory of clothing metaphors within the four main scenes of salvation history (12). First, before the Fall, Adam and Eve wore clothes with robes of glory or light. They were stripped of these robes at the time of the Fall, with little concern for what replaced them. Syriac writers tended to be focused more on the garments of light then on what replaced them. The third stage was remedial—the Divinity Himself puts on Adam/body by incarnating. The goal is to reclothe mankind with robes of light. When He enters the womb of the Jordan, He deposits the robes of glory/light in the waters, making it accessible for all in the waters of baptism. Then final stage, then, is when the waters at baptism through prayer become the same waters as Christ’s Jordan river in sacred time. The baptized put on the robe of glory that Christ left there. Baptism in this way is reentry to Paradise, and that not just of the beginning of time, but an eschatological Paradise. The robe of glory is only partially received in baptism, but is perfected at the end of times, when humans will be even more glorious than mankind was at the beginning of time (13). Examining the thread of clothing metaphors as it runs through salvation history provides an insightful way to make sense of humanity as a whole and how God, the Creator of that humanity, related and relates to the various states in which humanity has found itself. These clothing metaphors provide a framework to understand the telos of humanity—to become angelic, godlike, to wear divine garments only as a gift resulting from the Divine One putting on human garments.

primarily in his Prophetic Eclogues, Adumbrations, and Excerpts from Theodotus, all which shed light on his understanding of asceticism. Clement, along with a number of other early Christian writers, sees humanity’s destiny as a constant progression from image to likeness, so much so that even if humanity had not fallen, the Word would have incarnated to give humans heavenly rebirth. Humans are made for constant progression that, for Clement, begins with baptism and is continued and fulfilled through ascetical life until reaching perfection. In his *Paedagoge*, he writes,

> The view I take is, that He Himself formed man of the dust, and regenerated him by water; and made him grow by his Spirit; and trained him by His word to adoption and salvation, directing him by sacred precepts; in order that, transforming earth-born man into a holy and heavenly being by His advent, He might fulfil to the utmost that divine utterance, “Let Us make man in Our own image and likeness.” And, in truth, Christ became the perfect realization of what God spoke; and the rest of humanity is conceived as being created merely in His image.

Thus, there exists in Clement a clear progression that recognizes the commonality of the image between all humanity and the growth in likeness as a sort of heavenly being. In his *Stromateis*, Clement describes these angels as having reached perfection through *απάθεια*, here translated as impassibility:

> He, then, who has first moderated his passions and trained himself for impassibility, and developed to the beneficence of gnostic perfection, is here equal to the angels. Luminous already, and like the sun shining…

Bogdan Bucur’s reading of Clement insists that this process consists of stages in which the human does not merely mimic the state of angels but experiences a sort of ontological, that is, a real not metaphorical, change. The human being moves from abstention of evil to active

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504 Ibid., 8-9.
505 *Paed.* 1.12.98.2-3 (SC 70, 284).
507 Here, “ontological” is used to distinguish real from metaphorical transformation. Clement is thinking of a change—albeit a real and spectacular one—in degree, not kind.
beneficence, embodying the goodness of God and divine providence and acquiring “the unchanging habit of well-doing after the likeness of ‘God.’”  

Clement continues describing this angelic transformation:

> And the latter [saving change] terminating in love, thereafter gives the loving to the loved, that which knows to that which is known. And, perchance, such an one has already attained the condition of “being equal to the angels.” … For he who has come to this state is in a condition to be holy, falling into none of the passions in any way, but as it were already disembodied and already grown holy without this earth.

To continue, the ascetic is able to reach a state of perfection through levels of cosmic hierarchy: angels, archangels, the seven-created first angels (protoctists), and the Logos. The governing principle of this hierarchy is the Face of God, which the protoctists can see and contemplate because of their proximity to God. These protoctists are the model for perfected souls and function as high priests lifting the prayers that come from below. The ascent through this hierarchy is a dynamic one of fluidity. Clement held that every thousand years, there would be a promotion of ranks beginning with humans and ending with protoctists. While Origen, Evagrius, and Clement understood the process of angelification as only a distinction of degrees between humanity and not necessarily one of nature, Christians eventually understood this to be only metaphorical; humanity will be “christomorphic” at the end of time when Christ comes, but they will not actually become angelified. Clement’s process of angelification was developed from prominent notions in Jewish apocalypticism and certainly impacted the Christianity that followed, while eventually losing its ontological thrust. Even by the time of Gregory of Nyssa,

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508 Bucur, 15.
509 Strom. 7.10.57.5 (SC 428, 186); Strom. 7.14.86.7 (SC 428, 266)
510 Bucur, 24.
511 Ibid., 27-28.
512 Ibid., 33-35.
513 For a discussion on the features of apocalypticism and mysticism and the former’s (sometimes oppositional) relationship with notions of eschatology among so-called Jewish and Christian Middle- and Neoplatonists and in imperial and late antiquity, see Ilaria Ramelli, "Mysticism, Apocalypticism, and Platonism, in Platonic Pathways,"
as will be seen below in his description of his angelic sister, he maintains that she keeps her human essence while exhibiting angelic proclivities and desires.

Further, the perpetual progress to angelic perfection was not a journey to be taken alone; the process through the cosmological hierarchy required eldership and discipleship. It is through the Gnostic ascetic that humans connect to the angelic realm. “I would venture to propose that, for Clement,”—writes Bucur—“a perfected Christian—one who is ‘living as an angel on earth, already luminous’, having ‘already attained the isangelic condition’—embodies in his very being and offers to those with whom he interacts a foretaste of the ‘rest’ in God to which the seeker aspires.” The perfected Christian—that is, the Gnostic leader—has treded the path of angelification and as a result is able to channel the Logos to human beings. “Eldership and discipleship are thus sine qua non conditions for the ascetic reshaping of the believer.”

Prodding ever so slightly at the tendency for the modern reader to approach a text with a kind of moral detachment, Bucur asserts that Clement’s call, then, is for the experience of his readers of this transformative process and not a distant theoretical analysis of his propositions. In other words, the vocation of all humans has been ordained even “pre-primordially”—to embark on the perpetual journey of angelification first through baptism and then through ascetical adherence to an angel-elder.

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514 Ibid., 43.
515 Ibid.
516 Although Clement does not explicitly use the language of perpetual progress, in his parallel between the various glories in heaven and church hierarchy in Stromateis 6.13, he gives room for a similar model: “Since, according to my opinion, the grades here in the Church, of bishops, presbyters, deacons, are imitations of the angelic glory, and of that economy which, the Scriptures say, awaits those who, following the footsteps of the apostles, have lived in perfection of righteousness according to the Gospel. For these taken up in the clouds, the apostle writes, will first minister [as deacons], then be classed in the presbyterate, by promotion in glory (for glory differs from glory) till they grow into ‘a perfect man.’” He then continues in his description of the various states of glory in heaven. (SC 446, 270).
Already, it is not difficult to see the relations between Gregory’s theory of perpetual progress detailed in chapter 3 and Clement’s understanding of the goal of the monastic vocation. Clement likely influenced Gregory, but as the goals and functions of early Christian monasticism continue to unravel in this chapter, it will become clear that asceticism was often understood as a microcosm of Gregory’s *epektasis*. In other words, it was the goal of asceticism, as demonstrated in its Christian ancestors, to observe the commands of God in Scripture to aspire to perfection; it is in the same vein that Gregory understands *epektasis*. As noted earlier, early Christian monastics did not see themselves as part of a clerical body but as a movement of lay people who wished to embody the words of Christ in the gospel.517 While some understood this calling as a solitary one, the majority came to find that communal or coenobitic monasticism was the best way to adhere to Christianity’s chief commandments of love of neighbor and self. Clement, as early as the 2nd century presents a number of concepts vital to our exploration of asceticism in the early Church: control over sexual desire as a means to (angelic) purity and freedom from compulsory desires (*apathêia*); the centrality of community in order to love God and neighbor, thereby progressing toward perfection; and the goal of asceticism as a continual ascent to God and *through* God in order to become *like* God.

3.2 – *Antony the Great*

St. Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii* takes its reader through Antony’s ascetical journey from his

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517 Kavanagh, 6. See also Athanasius, John of Shmun, and Serapion of Thmuis, *The Life of Antony* [in Greek Life and Coptic Life on facing pages], translated by Tim Vivian, Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Rowan A. Greer. Cistercian Studies Series (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 2003), 59, 61, in which Antony is not described as going through a ritual of consecration or tonsuring, but was moved by God’s word in Scripture. He saw himself as embodying the command to sell what he has in order to follow God and to be perfect. Though monasticism became formalized and came to be seen as a community distinct from lay communities, adhering to the gospel remained central to the practice. (GL 2.1-2.5; SC 400, 132, 134).
early life, to his encounter with the word of God during liturgy, to the beginnings of his solitary
life, and through what would later be appropriated as a monasticism that would have widespread
impact in the East and to all corners of Christendom. More than this, Athanasius’ account of the
father of monasticism’s life and struggle highlights a dimension of virtue, mentioned in chapter 2
of this project, that speaks much to the concern of contemporary readers. Regarding debates on
grace versus works that would continue to develop in much of Christianity’s reception history
after Athanasius’ time, he developed a clear conception of the co-operative or synergistic
relationship between God and man, though, of course, his language differs. The cooperation
between Antony and God was central to his renown as a man of God and father of
monasticism.

It is clear in the *Vita Antonii* that exhibiting grace-enabled exertion allowed the human
who struggled for virtue in concert with God’s grace to enter a sort of ethereal life. The more one
progressed on this path, the more primordial one became. Athanasius described this as the
“natural condition” that Antony acquired. This natural condition is that of virtue and is the
condition that God intends for humanity—thus, the term “natural.” It is natural in that the human
being becomes fully human. Athanasius’ description of Antony in this state was a man who
appeared polite, calm, cheerful, and graceful, all resulting from the detached disposition attained
by Antony’s denunciation of worldly pleasures. What is even more astounding is his

518 Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 73 (Greek Life 7.1; SC 400, 150): “This was Antony’s first contest against the
Devil; or, rather, through Antony it was the triumph of the Saviour…”; 143 (GL 39.3; SC 400, 240): “And by these
prayers, these demons were turned away by the Lord”; and 237 (GL 84.1; SC 400, 352): “Antony healed people not
by issuing orders but by praying and calling on the name of Christ. As a result, it became clear to everyone that it
was not he who was doing these things but the Lord, who through Antony was demonstrating his love for
humankind and healing those who were suffering.”
519 For another and potentially fuller account of cooperation or synergy—as the term is popularly referred to in
Orthodox Christian circles—see Jean Cassien, “Conference XIII,” in *Conférences II* Sources Chrétiennes. Vol. 54,
2009.
520 Athanasius, 93 (GL 14.3, SC 400, 172).
521 Ibid., 93 (GL 14.3-14.4, SC 400, 172, 174).
description of Antony at 105 years old, just before his death and after decades of strenuous asceticism and a diet of only bread, salt, and water:

“Indeed, maintaining even undiminished eyesight and with perfectly healthy eyes, he had good vision. Not one of his teeth fell out, though they had been worn down beneath the gums on account of the old man’s advanced age. His feet and his hands also remained healthy. In short, he appeared more radiant, stronger, and more energetic than all those people who enjoy a wide variety of foods and baths and different types of clothing.”

Earlier in the biography, when Antony emerges from his cave after twenty years of solitude, he is described as one “having been initiated into divine mysteries and inspired by God,” and neither fat nor emaciated, grieved nor frantic, stressed nor lax. In a word, he had made progress toward restoration of his human nature. However, in the Syriac version of the Life of Antony, this very same scene is described differently. Antony is described as an “angel of light” upon his emergence from the cave.

There are a number of interpretations of this textual variance among others between the Greek, Coptic, and Syriac versions of this text. However, that discussion is less relevant here than pointing to the uses of “angel of light” and restored human to describe the same process of transformation in Antony. The bodily struggle of asceticism rendered Antony detached, which allowed him to live a life unencumbered by the weight of habitual sin that carries with it death. Instead, he lived a life of lightness and freedom—a life intended by God in which restored humanity mimics angelic life—despite, or more accurately because of, his intense struggle against and rejection of temptation.

522 Ibid., 257 (GL 93.2, SC 400, 374).
523 Ibid., 93 (GL 14.2, SC 400, 172).
525 For more on this debate, see Athanasius and René Draguet, La Vie Primitive De S. Antoine : Conservée en Syriaque. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 2 vols. (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1980); and Barnes, 353-68. Samuel Rubenson, The Letters of St. Antony : Monasticism and the Making of a Saint, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 128, also serves as a helpful source in this conversation.
Thus, the *Vita Antonii* depicts a clearer picture of the early Christian asceticism that led to monasticism. Athanasius documents the means to, effects of, and reasons for the cooperative journey to virtue through which one can attain true humanity as intended by the Creator. The steps for Antony were clear: weaken the body to dispel its desires and attachments; this in turn will strengthen the soul; the soul’s strengthening implies greater intimacy with one’s spiritual Creator; finally, this intimacy ensures that one’s humanity fulfills its greatest potentiality and is restored to its intended primordial state. The irony of asceticism comes to the fore—what appears as suppression to the body is actually intended for its ultimate flourishing. Asceticism, as presented in the *Vita Antonii*, is not hatred of the body but a spiritual struggle applied to the body in order to expel the part of the human (fleshly tendencies, proclivities, attachments, etc.) that is affected by the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden.

3.3 – *Gregory of Nyssa*

*The Life of Macrina* is a work of notable ancient Christian figures—Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, their brother Peter a presbyter, their sister Macrina, and their mother. Gregory in this work points to the vigor with which purity was a priority to Macrina. She was unwilling to be married, especially after her betrothed died, and she refused to uncover her body to physicians even when she fell very ill.\(^{526}\) Gregory’s approval is clear when he holds her virginity and purity with high regard, even pointing out that the more she went through trials the more she was purged of impurities, as metal going through a furnace.\(^{527}\) These trials were not


\(^{527}\) Ibid., 31-32.
only through difficult life events, such as deaths of close family members, but were struggles against the flesh in the asceticism she exhibited.

Gregory applauds the seriousness with which Macrina upheld her ascetical struggle, whose end was Christ and virtue. He explains, “For it was really towards her beloved [Christ] that she ran, and no other of life’s pleasures ever turned her eye to itself away from her beloved.”\(^{528}\) Her relentless focus significantly impacted her mother and brothers. One example Gregory cites is when Basil returned from his rhetorical training with pomp. Macrina brought him back to the life of renunciation of all worldly cares in order to continue “without impediment towards virtue.”\(^{529}\) Gregory sees a strong link between ascetical struggle, focus on Christ, and the acquisition of virtue. Austere asceticism in this light, describes Gregory, allows one to progress towards angelic nature, though not ontologically (contrary to Clement’s assertions above). Still, Gregory presents human nature here as something to be resisted and conquered. Gregory describes Macrina and her mother as follows:

For to have freed nature from human passions was a feat beyond human strength, while to appear in body, to be encompassed by bodily shape and to live with the organs of sense was thereby to possess a nature inferior to that of the angelic and the incorporeal. Perhaps one might even go so far as to say that the difference was minimal, because, although they lived in the flesh, by virtue of their affinity with the incorporeal powers they were not weighed down by the attractive pull of the body, but their lives were born upwards, poised on high and they took their souls’ flight in concert with the heavenly powers.\(^{530}\)

Gregory describes in different ways the same journey. To acquire virtue, one must be sincere in one’s ascetical struggle, which is at the same time geared towards Christ. Transformation through bodily detachment and inner purity begin humans on a journey toward that which is incorporeal and angelic.

\(^{528}\) Ibid., 39.
\(^{529}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{530}\) Ibid. 29.
In his *De Virginitate*, Gregory explicitly links virginity to this incorporeality. He writes,

> Virginity is exceptional and peculiar to the incorporeal nature, and, through the kindness of God, it has been granted to those whose life has been allotted through flesh and blood, in order that it may set human nature upright once more after it has been cast down by its passionate disposition, and guide it, as if by the hand, to a contemplation of the things on high.  

Virginity, in its dispassionate disposition, is participation in God Himself. It is entrenchment in a way of life that resembles the angels, that is, those not attached to the material but whose foci transcend worldly pleasures. In the same text, Gregory asserts that angelification occurs as a result of virginity. He asks, “How could anyone fly up to heaven unless, equipped with heavenly wings, he be borne upwards because of his lofty way of life?”\(^{532}\) Ilaria Vigorelli demonstrates that in this text of Gregory, virginity serves as the link between humanity and God, since this virginity belongs to God and since in St. Mary the virgin, God descends and unites. So too those who rid themselves of fleshly desires in a life of virginity accept the descent and subsequent unity of God.\(^ {533}\)

Similarly, Hans Boersma describes Gregory’s understanding of virginity as participation in God through the acquisition of the divine characteristics of purity, blamelessness, holiness, and incorruptibility.\(^ {534}\) Bodily virginity functions as “an initial embodied manifestation of the defeat of death.”\(^ {535}\) While virginity, for Gregory, is more than only sexual renunciation, “he clearly regards the latter as the initial participation in genderless, angelic existence, and so as participation in divine purity, incorruptibility, and impassibility.”\(^ {536}\) Though Gregory does not

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\(^{532}\) Ibid., 40.  
\(^{533}\) Vigorelli, 72-73.  
\(^{535}\) Ibid., 117.  
\(^{536}\) Ibid., 144.
mention anything by way of *epektasis* in these works, since it is believed to have come later in
his life, his emphases on orientation to and participation in God when discussing asceticism and
virginity are reflective of the broader *epektatic* model of the chapter I am presenting here.
Despite his lack of explicit reference to what would could be called a “modern rendering of the
theory of *epektasis,*” the ethic proposed remains unchanged—struggle for an angelic detachment
against the passions, and lay hold of Christ and acquire virtue and He will lay hold of you.

3.4 – Conclusion

A number of other texts can be vetted to extend the idea that asceticism is a means to
overcome the fallenness of human nature, but these texts do well to highlight this point. We are
then left at this point with greater clarity regarding one of the more critical purposes of
asceticism. Asceticism is not a disdain for the body, nor is it only focused on sexual purity, but it
is a restoration to primordial nature and a transformation to angelic nature. Asceticism in this
sense is a fulfillment of God’s plan for salvation. Jesus Christ, in His incarnation, restored
humanity, but as discussed in the opening of this project, He did not intend to save us without us,
that is, without human participation. Asceticism is the physically exertive aspect of this
participation, and in this light, is believed to be congruent with God’s will for humanity. This
form of spiritual struggle applied to the body captures all three stages of the *epektatic* journey.
The concept of angelification most notably captures the second stage of the strengthening of
one’s soul, though definitive categorization can be difficult. Distinctive lines between stages do
not necessarily exist, and this is part of the model suggested in the non-linear spectrum of
*epektasis.* More than simply confirming the stage of angelification, it remains that asceticism
understood as a process of humanity’s restoration, points to the fruitfulness of applying the
concept of spiritual struggle to the various dimensions of Christian life within a framework of perpetual progress to God. This paves the way for the final stage of *epektasis*—union with and similitude to God.

4 – The Body as the Dwelling Place of God

4.1 – Interiorization of Ancestral Heritage

The climax, so to speak, of the purpose of asceticism is the transformation of the body into a locus for the Presence of God. Making room for God’s indwelling is the chief concern for the apparent obsession with notions of purity and angelification and their association with asceticism. Yet, as with any conceptual development, these associations did not arise in a vacuum. Instead, the idea of the human as a locus for the Presence of God resulted from numerous literary and ritualistic strands, including the Old Testament, Second Temple literature, apocalyptic literature, and the New Testament, taking its most developed form in the Patristic era.

To begin, C.R.A. Morray-Jones presents the progression of the communication of the Holy of Holies, the Divine, and the Glory before it is later adopted into Christianity. First, according to the Old Testament, the heavenly temple is a copy of the archetypal heavenly palace and throne room—the dwelling place of God. At its center God dwells, with surrounding layers (initially three, and by the second century AD, seven) throughout the temple. The closer one gets to the center of the temple, the closer one gets to the Divine. In later Second Temple literature, cosmological significance gets assigned to this temple imagery. The levels of the

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temple become celestial levels through which the visionary in this literature ascends and encounters God and His throne.  

Jones is particularly interested in using the Sabbath songs of Qumran, which form a liturgical cycle, to connect this Second Temple literature with Christian conceptions of and assimilations of temple and cosmological archetypes. The ritualization of these liturgical songs functioned as a sort of communal mysticism that produced an intense experience of being present in the heavenly temple and participating with heavenly angels. In other words, the ritual functioned as a journey of ascent towards the Glory. Jones maintains that the descent within and ascent without are two dimensions or aspects of the same process; they are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Just because they are structural opposites does not mean they are functional opposites. As such, a celestial ascent functions as a temple descent, or an entering into. The work of the community and its angelic counterparts are the substance that constructs the temple. The community itself is identified with the temple also; the hierarchy embodies the living structure of the cosmic temple. The interior of the temple functions concomitantly as the primordial garden as well as the eschatological place of the righteous.

It is all of this imagery that eventually becomes interiorized, and this is seen clearly in Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations.* For Aphrahat, the ideal Christian is the “place” of the Presence of God, “the heavenly temple, the throne within it, the radiance, and God himself, together…with God’s eschatological manifestation.” This is the ultimate aim of the *idihaya* and *bnay qyama* mentioned above. This ideal Christian, which he refers to as the sage, ascends to the Presence and the Throne through knowledge of the creation. Aphrahat successfully captures in this sage a

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538 Ibid., 424.
539 Ibid., 420.
540 Ibid., 428.
541 Ibid., 421.
thread of theology clear in Second Temple literature. 3 Enoch’s Metatron exhibits a number of similarities to the sage, including the recovery of Adam’s divine image, which was lost.\footnote{Alexander Golitzin, “The Place of the Presence of God: Aphrahat of Persia’s Portrait of the Christian Holy Man,” in ΣΥΝΑΞΙΣ ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΙΑΣ: Studies in Honor of Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonos Petras, Mount Athos, Holy Monastery of Simonos Petras of the Holy Mount (Athens: Indiktos, 2003), 424.} But Aphrahat has taken the Second Temple literature’s apocalyptic seer and understood him in light of the risen and transfigured Christ of the New Testament.\footnote{Ibid., 435, 438.}

For Aphrahat, Christ is the wisdom and Glory of God, the Eucharistic Presence, and the true tabernacle of Worship.\footnote{Morray-Jones, 402.} It is love for Christ, imitation of Him, and the reception of baptism and the Eucharist that transform the apocalyptic seer into this sage. The sage interiorizes all of the Second Temple imagery described and becomes a god in the likeness of God.\footnote{Golitzin, “Glory of Adam,” 297.} Just as Christ humbled Himself and became incarnate, so too is the ideal Christian to acquire humility in the likeness of God. One must make oneself small in humility as Christ did; God gave up what was His, so humans may become like Him.\footnote{Ibid., 300-301.} The theophanic presence of the sage is not only eschatological, but is something experienced here and now. He “is the presence of God for those who come to him. His gifts, his experience of the Presence, and his wisdom are to a purpose, and that purpose is to make God present, manifest, and visible.”\footnote{Golitzin, “The Place of the Presence of God,” 428.} He functions as the proof and living image of hope in Christ—the divine and the humble.

Another early Christian author that proves helpful in understanding the process of the interiorization of this literature in the formation of the Christian as a locus for the Divine Presence is pseudo-Macarius. His language is strong in describing the magnificence of the soul illuminated by Christ, who mounts the soul as His throne. In homily 1, Macarius writes,
For that soul that is deemed to be judged worthy to participate in the light of the Holy Spirit by becoming his throne and habitation, and is covered with the beauty of ineffable glory of the Spirit, becomes all light, all face, all eye. There is no part of the soul that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light…For the soul has no imperfect part but is in ever part on all sides facing forward and covered with the beauty of the ineffable glory of the light of Christ, who mounts and rides upon the soul.\textsuperscript{548}

Some, however, have accused Macarius of overemphases in these discussions. In what turns out to be a defense of Juana Raasch’s analysis of pseudo-Macarius, Alexander Golitzin clarifies recent developments in the study of apocalyptic literature that clarify Macarius’ discussion of the experience of the divine light in this life. The accusation against Macarius was his mystical overemphasis on experience and feelings.\textsuperscript{549} Golitzin addresses the latter portion of that accusation—the feelings—as reflective of the internalization of the experience of the visions of light, pointing out that Macarius was not as systematic in his discourses as someone like Evagrius.\textsuperscript{550}

Macarian language of vision, light, and glory, shining within a purified temple of the heart or intellect draws on ancient Christian and pre-Christian Jewish literature, with deeper roots in the liturgy of the First Temple and prophetic revelations.\textsuperscript{551} This literature holds the revelation of transcendent realities highly. What Macarius did was take the main components of this transcendence—the glorious visions, ascents to heaven, and transformation and participation in the liturgy of heaven—and internalize them without ridding them of their believed realities. He held that the share of the divine glory was promised in the Old Testament, fulfilled in the New

\textsuperscript{548} Pseudo-Macarius, The Fifty Spiritual Homilies ; and, the Great Letter, Classics of Western Spirituality, (New York ; Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), 37.


\textsuperscript{550} Ibid., 125-29.

\textsuperscript{551} Ibid., 117.
Testament, and experienced now through the Holy Spirit. For example, he makes the connection between the temple of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when he writes,

> For the King of Glory, ardently desiring her beauty, has deigned to regard her, not only as temple of God, but also as the daughter of the king and also the queen. Indeed, she is the temple of God, since she is inhabited by the Holy Spirit.

For Macarius, it is this same Holy Spirit that left the physical temple, leaving it for destruction. He writes, “The Holy Spirit left them when the veil of the Temple was rent in two. And so their Temple was handed over to the Gentiles, destroyed and made desolate…”552 According to Golitzin, the Gospel for Macarius was summed up as follows: there was limited accessibility to the Glory of God in Israel through the cultus and the high priest; the Glory of God came veiled in the flesh in New Testament; and now (that is, after the New Testament), the heart or the inner man of the baptized Christian becomes the locus of theophany.553

Continuing the theme of interiorization, in another work, Golitzin analyzes aspects of apocalypticism that are sometimes overlooked—the ascents to heaven, visions of angels, and “direct revelation of heavenly mysteries.”554 In particular, he points to the works of Niketas Stethatos, a disciple of the 10th century Symeon the New Theologian. Niketas was not unaware of these aspects of apocalyptic literature; his writings reflect a profound understanding of the interiorization of ascent, transformation, and participation. Golitzin refers to this approach as “interiorized apocalyptic,” “the transposition of the cosmic setting of apocalyptic literature, and in particular of the ‘out of body’ experience of heavenly ascent and transformation, to the inner theater of the Christian soul.”555 Niketas describes witnessing this out of body event when Symeon was permeated by the immaterial divine light and transformed inwardly as a result.

552 Pseudo-Macarius, 59.
553 Ibid., 122-23.
554 Ibid., 128-29.
555 Ibid., 141.
Internal transformation is an experience attested by a number of spiritual elders in ancient Christian monastic communities.\textsuperscript{556} Elder would be seen as transfigured through the purification of the heart. They are described in a number of texts as ascenders to the Throne of Glory. They were earthly angels or heavenly men. This is also apparent among others aforementioned, including Pachomius and Macarius. Furthermore, Golitzin points to a number of 4\textsuperscript{th} century Christian writers, including Ephraem, Evagrius, and pseudo-Macarius who describe the same process of interiorization as Niketas.\textsuperscript{557} What he wishes to demonstrate is that Niketas, writing in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century, was aware of the implications of apocalyptic and Old Testament pseudepigraphy and incorporated this apocalyptic interiorization in continuity with many of his 4\textsuperscript{th} century predecessors, despite the spatial and geographical discontinuities. By responding to those who understood visions and ascents as literal, Niketas, as one of a number of condemners between the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 14\textsuperscript{th} centuries of those who took visions and ascents literally, saw himself as affirming the teaching of the Apostles of Christ, not as straying from that tradition.\textsuperscript{558}

Thus, the process of interiorization, taken from all of the genres presented, understood the individual person, and more specifically the ascetic, as the locus for God’s presence. The fact that this interiorization was influenced by so many different literary strands only emphasizes the importance of the body as temple. Yet, as history demonstrates, asceticism among Christians generally, and Christian monastics specifically (except in the case of a few exceptions) took on a communal form—a liturgical form. In fact, the Christian liturgy served as an indispensible vehicle by which the process of interiorization was accomplished. Even among the “exceptions”

\textsuperscript{556} See examples below in the section on Section 3.3 – “Particular Instantiations of Interiorization.”
\textsuperscript{557} Ibid., 143-48.
\textsuperscript{558} Ibid., 150-51.
that included hermits and solitaries living isolated lives in deserts, liturgy was often the one communal activity not neglected.

4.2 – Liturgy as Interiorizer

The liturgy has long remained a central component to Christian life. Though the liturgy from its inception took on various forms among different regions, the liturgy, in addition to the initiation rites that were also pluriform and developing, became associated with a Christian’s very identity.559 The emphasis on the liturgy was at the same time an emphasis on the power of liturgy to transform its participants into dwelling places of the Divine. This was a fitting outlook on the rite, since many associated the bread and wine with God’s body and blood—an association supported by Scripture’s accounts of the Last Supper.560 God was present in and at the meal from the earliest of Christian Eucharistic accounts. Andrew McGowan writes,

In the fourth century as in the first, a diverse group of believers gathered around a table to share simple food, and the Christians prayed and gave thanks to God for the life and work of Jesus remembering his own acts of eating as they performed their own, affirming his presence in and at their meal.561

559 For good discussions on early Christian identity and the pluriformity that characterized early Christian worship and initiation rites, see Paul F. Bradshaw, The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), where Bradshaw debunks numerous assumptions that have colored the last several decades of liturgical scholarship, opening a path for the ten principles Bradshaw suggests for interpreting early Christian liturgical evidence; Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2012); Paul F. Bradshaw, Reconstructing Early Christian Worship (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2010); and Andrew Brian McGowan, Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective, Paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014). In my assessment, McGowan’s work is the most helpful in painting a picture of the development of ancient Christian worship from its predecessors into some of its most common forms. Still, all of these authors at the fore of the conversation point to the regional variety that was typical of early Christian liturgical practices.

560 Bryan D. Spinks, Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Eucharist from the Early Church to the Present Day (London: SCM Press, 2013), 27-29, 67. Bryan D. Spinks sees Christology and the presence/association of identity as an important concept in early Christian liturgy, even from the very beginning. He writes, “The interpretative words of Jesus regarding the bread suggest some prophetic identity of the bread with himself. In the narratives that have a command to repeat the rite, for the Christian communities the saying quite naturally associates the identity with some sort of presence of the Risen Lord. The Emmaus meal suggests that the elements are a means of divine disclosure of the Risen One.”

561 McGowan, 64.
This real presence—distinguished by McGowan from a medieval and modern metaphysical understanding of what it might mean for God to be present in the Eucharistic elements—is the source of the transformative nature of the Divine Liturgy. The transformation offered through the liturgy was twofold—one had to struggle to purify oneself in order to be made worthy of receiving the Eucharist, but one also received a purifying grace through the mystery or sacrament in order to aid in further purification of the participant.

St. John Chrysostom, a late 4th century monk and archbishop of Constantinople, notes both of these junctures in the process of transformation. In his first instruction to the catechumens, he writes,

One who is about to approach those sacred rites and awesome mysteries ought to be alert and wide-awake, cleansed of every earthly care, abundantly filled with temperance and zeal. He should banish from his mind every thought which is foreign to the mysteries and should make his house clean and ready in every respect, just as if he were about to receive the emperor under his roof. That is the way to prepare your mind, such are the thoughts you should think, such should be the purpose of your will.562

Similarly, in homily 46 on the Gospel of St. John, he warns his reader of the dangers of approaching the body and blood of Jesus Christ without purity of body and conscience. Otherwise—he maintains—that person would be just as guilty as those who nailed Christ to the cross.563 If this were not extreme enough of an expression, in section 6 of Homily 82 on the Gospel of St. Matthew, he asserts that partaking of the mysteries while openly and unrepentantly

in sin is worse than demon possession. He goes on to claim that he would rather give up his own life than have someone receive the mysteries in this manner.

Such intensity of language is a direct reflection of the transformative nature of participation in the Eucharist. Chrysostom exclaims:

This blood is the salvation of our souls, by This the soul is washed, by This is beautified, by This is inflamed, This causeth our understanding to be more bright than fire, and our soul more beaming than gold; this blood was poured forth, and made heaven accessible.

He continues, “They who share this Blood stand with Angels and Archangels and the Powers that are above, clothed in Christ's own kingly robe, and having the armour of the Spirit. Nay, I have not as yet said any great thing: they are clothed with the King Himself.

It is through the liturgy that one attains the purity that is needed in order to reach the ultimate stage of the epektastic journey—unity with God.

Pseudo-Macarius’ writings, dated to the 4th century, also demonstrate an awareness of the liturgy as a vehicle to the soul’s ascent to God. He wished to “reconcile the individual mystical longings of his correspondents with the liturgical and sacramental life of the Christian Church.” In this way, asceticism as a function of the epektastic journey becomes a communal, not an individual, activity. It is through the work of the people (λειτουργία) that any part or individual of that community is transformed. Macarius continues by asserting that the liturgy shapes the soul for encounter with God. The liturgy, for Macarius, functions as a double icon: the Eucharistic assembly as an icon for the heavenly liturgy and as an icon for the soul. The ritualization of the Church order and hierarchy assists the ascent to heaven, that is, the epektastic

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565 Ibid., 1094.
566 Chrysostom, Gospel of John, 400.
567 Ibid., 401.
569 Ibid., 293.
570 Ibid., 294.
journey to God, and the locus of the ascent is the individual body that has acquired the extraordinary significance of the temple.

As the understanding developed, especially notable in Pauline literature, of the individual body as a microcosm of the temple and, of course, the cosmos, the ascent into the heavens began to be understood in light of the descent within the temple of the body.\textsuperscript{571} This carries with it a transformative power, since the vision of the Glory transforms the visionary into an angelic likeness of that Divine Image.\textsuperscript{572} As Christianity came to assimilate the functions of temple imagery, cosmological archetypes, and liturgical ritualization of those images and archetypes, Christ, His Church, and its members became one. The middle wall of separation was abrogated; the purity laws were no longer needed since Christ abolished the distinction between sacred and profane since He fills all in all. What this ultimately means is that the momentum that the Old Testament, Second Temple literature, and New Testament carried in light of this research, continues and should continue to function as a transformative operation in those who inherited all of this—namely Christians. Christ is the temple; He “belongs to the people” (λειτος) gathered for liturgy; and He is the Glory of God that fills the temple and the cosmos. Christians are thus cast in a new light: they are temples and microcosms who receive the Body and Blood of Christ, the mediation of the Divine Glory through a process of interiorization.

The liturgy is the vehicle of interiorization, and Niketas Stethatos realizes this in an analysis of the genre of interiorized apocalyptic. The liturgy was understood as concelebration with the multitudes of angels surrounding the Throne of Glory and hymning His praises.\textsuperscript{573} The

\textsuperscript{571} Morray-Jones, 426.
\textsuperscript{572} Ibid., 427.
spiritual father celebrating the liturgy was seen as the mediator of the divine presence. He was the vehicle through whom God made Himself available to the people and through whom the people had access to God, both literally in the Eucharist and metaphorically through interior transformation. But in order to experience this effect fully, one must be purified internally, as there can be no discord between good and evil, virtue and vice, within a person who desires to be transformed.

So long as the nature of the powers within us is in a state of inner discord, we do not participate in God’s supernatural gifts. And if we do not participate in these gifts, we are also far from the mystical liturgy…of the heavenly altar, celebrated by the intellect through its spiritual activity…[but, once the intellect has been purified through askesis and prayer] we participate in the ineffable blessings of God, and worthily, together with God and God the Word, offer up the divine mysteries of the intellect’s spiritual…altar as initiates…and priests…of His mysteries.”

Thus, the liturgy absorbs the images and archetypes of apocalyptic literature and makes sense of purification through spiritual struggle, expressed here through asceticism and prayer. Golitzin notes that preparations for visionaries in Old Testament pseudepigraphy included a good deal of askesis. In Golitzin’s conclusion that, “Niketas could easily have read these much older texts as testimonies to the same experience of the light and liturgy of heaven that both he and especially Symeon claimed as their own,” he marks medieval Byzantium as participating in an awareness of interiorized apocalyptic’s importance.

To conclude, Alexander Golitzin makes two important notes regarding the process of interiorization. First, there is a seriousness of the struggle and its depth in the soul of a visionary. War must be waged since the cosmic struggle has now become internalized. Second, the Eucharistic liturgy and ecclesiastical assembly are revealed allegory or iconography of the soul’s

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574 Ibid.
575 Ibid., 136.
576 Ibid., 149.
life in grace.\textsuperscript{577} In other words, the Church is the macrocosm, and the soul is the microcosm. Just as work is done liturgically in the Church yet is nothing without the grace of the Holy Spirit, so too does the struggle of the soul toward virtue function in relation to the grace of God. In this way, the grace-enabled struggle, or the model of cooperation between divine and human agencies discussed at the outset of this project is unpacked in light of the literary and ritualistic heritage that preceded it. Life in Christ, in this way, becomes interiorized without becoming individualized. On the 	extit{epektatic} journey, the temple within receives the light of the Trinity upon the altar of the heart and through the altar of the Church.\textsuperscript{578}

\textbf{4.3 – Particular Instantiations of Interiorization}

The goal of asceticism presented here, in becoming the dwelling place of God, i.e. uniting with God or assimilating to Him, is not a far cry from reality. What this means is that it is not, among these authors, intended as a mystified, impractical, or impossible state to reach. It is in fact precisely because of ascetics who exude a sort of aura of peace and fortitude, as a result of their intimacy with God, that asceticism becomes all the more accessible, relevant, and transformative. Alexander Golitzin points out that to Orthodox Christians, the existence of the sage is of no surprise, as they surely meet holy men and women in their lives who seem illumined with the glow of divinity—those who experience \textit{theosis}.\textsuperscript{579} For Golitzin, one of these illumined elders was Fr. Aimilianos, who to Golitzin exemplified the very “Presence of the King.”\textsuperscript{580} Golitzin further emphasizes that Orthodox Christians’ common patrimony (of Israel)

\textsuperscript{577} Golitzin, “Temple and Throne,” 126.
\textsuperscript{578} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{579} As noted in the previous chapter, and as will be discussed further in the final chapter, I have tended away from the language of “theosis” because of its polemical charge between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox. Here, it is the language Golitzin uses, so I include it to stay true to his own presentation.
\textsuperscript{580} Golitzin, “The Place of the Presence of God,” 444.
with non-Orthodox, and the scholarly work that the latter accomplish, contain within them and
deep within the Hebrew Scriptures an understanding of theosis that is very real now and that is
an urgent message to all.\footnote{Ibid., 446-447.} As a deeply embedded seed of Scripture and a central facet and
reality of life with Christ, it has transpired from extra-biblical sources, through the Old
Testament, New Testament, and early Christians to our present day.

The examples do not end with Fr. Aimilianos but also extend back to early Christian
monastics. One such instance is seen in the father of coenobitic or communal monasticism—
Pachomius. Mark Burrows does well to present a thesis that instantiates the embodiment of the
divine image that Morray-Jones alluded to above. Pachomius, most known for his structuring
and spreading of coenobitic or communal monasticism, is known as the apa of the community he
Pachomian Vitae,” \textit{Vigilae christianae} 41 (1987), 12, 16.} What Burrows argues is that he structures this community not necessarily through
what he \textit{does}, but through who he \textit{is}.\footnote{Ibid., 11.} Recalling the opening discussion of this project
regarding ethical methodology, Burrows is focusing more on an ethic of virtue that flows from
Pachomius’ being instead of his ability to follow a strict set of prescribed laws as a utilitarian or
consequentialist ethic would put forth. As a being transformed and outpouring with dynamic
virtue, Pachomius represented the invisible God as a visible man; he was God’s temple—a
vehicle for the divine presence.\footnote{Ibid., 15-28.} Moreover, Pachomius was not only to be the agent of the
divine for the monastic community—the \textit{koinonia}—but for the whole world—the \textit{oikoumene}.\footnote{Ibid., 18.}
His task was to be a father who led to the Father—to mediate between heaven and earth. It was

\begin{footnotes}
\item[581] Ibid., 446-447.
Pachomian Vitae,” \textit{Vigilae christianae} 41 (1987), 12, 16.
\item[583] Ibid., 11.
\item[584] Ibid., 15-28.
\item[585] Ibid., 18.
\end{footnotes}
and verified in a very real, material sense. His example was to be imitated, as He was the express imitation of Christ in the community. He took up his cross rather literally, standing up in cruciform as he prayed. Moreover, as the lawgiver of the community, he functioned as the image of Moses—the new Moses giving the new law.\textsuperscript{586}

Pachomius’ function as the visibility of the invisible God is demonstrated in the life of his successors. Though many who followed technically assumed his position as \textit{apa}, they were not held to the same esteem as was Pachomius. His successors would refer back to Pachomius’ life, since the power did not reside in the title or position of \textit{apa} but in the transformed being of Pachomius.\textsuperscript{587} Similar to Golitzin’s admission when discussing the presence of God in Elder Aimilianos, the description Burrows gives of Pachomius does not strike as a surprise to many Christians, the least of which are not Orthodox. Morray-Jones’ analysis of the Old Testament imagery, Second Temple archetypes, liturgical ritualization and hymnology, and New Testament appropriation of the Divine Glory and Presence of God does make itself available through Christians—temples of the Holy Spirit in the unbroken line of divine mediation from Abraham to Moses to Christ to the martyrs and to the fathers, such as Pachomius.

The last example of the embodiment of the ascetical transformation that renders a person a locus for the divine presence is in an anonymous author analyzed by Golitzin. To crack the code of the authorship of the Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel (SAD), Golitzin applies many of the themes previously discussed, which include: his comparison of Old Testament, Second Temple, and pseudepigraphal literature with early Syrian Christian monastic texts; his description of interiorized apocalyptic; and discussions such as those of the covenan ters, sages, and visions. The thesis he presents is that the SAD is best explained when a monastic leader is considered as

\textsuperscript{586} Ibid., 19-24.
\textsuperscript{587} Ibid., 26-28.
its author.\textsuperscript{588} For a “historical apocalypse,” there is too little concern (none, to be more accurate) in the SAD about actual events happening outside of the author’s doors. Moreover, there is also no concern about separating the good and the bad—that is, for theodicy or punishment. These two anomalies are solved through Golitzin’s proposition.\textsuperscript{589}

Regarding the first problem, theodicy is usually the concern of bishops and philosopher-theologians, not monastics. Monastics are focused on the world to come in a different way; they want their insides to be properly attuned to the world to come, not to the present world. When the inside becomes like the outside, there is no fearful expectation of judgment but a fulfillment of the Kingdom instead.\textsuperscript{590} The heavenly fire remains a real and harmful fire in those who are not clean from within; the righteous experience it as dew and rain.\textsuperscript{591} Those who have not conformed their interiors to the transfigured body will have condemned themselves at the end of times. Judgment will just be a revelation of what they have become. This is seen in monastic texts as well as the SAD, and this is Golitzin’s point—that the author of the SAD is likely a monastic.

This is further evidenced by the fact that the externalized mystical experience described in the SAD and the interiorized apocalyptic that Golitzin speaks of conform together very well. “[N]early everything we find externalized in these apocalypses … we have also found internalized in the citations from John of Dalyatha, Evagrius, and Macarius.”\textsuperscript{592} The call of the monastic is to embody the \textit{eschaton}, to become here and now the dwelling place of the Presence, to become living temples. This must be accomplished through asceticism and through casting away the cares of this world, and this is precisely what Golitzin sees the author of the SAD


\textsuperscript{589}Ibid., 68-73.

\textsuperscript{590}Ibid., 70-71.

\textsuperscript{591}Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{592}Ibid., 94.
accomplishing. Imagine a time of chaos and turmoil in one’s immediate surroundings, and a monastic leader who is trying to keep his monks focused on the important daily tasks of preparing oneself and letting go of the passions. In the meantime, there are other leaders who are preoccupied with predictions of the signs of the end of times and the interpretation of all this external havoc. The author of the SAD, then, is trying to keep his monastic community focused on fulfilling the actions that matter—ones that will prepare them to become temples of God here and in the eschaton.\(^593\) In this way, the second anomaly is addressed, since the goal of a monastic leader in such circumstances would be to in fact “ignore” his surrounding political and social circumstances. The avoidance of his “current events” is intentional and is part and parcel of his very message.

Thus, Golitzin points to an early Christian appropriation of ancient concepts to help cope with very real and imminent hardships. In fact, he seemingly bypasses the hardship. Moreover, the “confusion,” or better yet overlap, between the SAD as an apocalypse contemporary to the prophet Daniel, the SAD as wrought with Second Temple imagery and archetypes, and the SAD as a text of early Christian monasticism demonstrates the common heritage the latter have to the former and the indebtedness of Christian monasticism and developments of later Christian spirituality to their Semitic ancestors. Lastly, Golitzin offers a deeper look into the goal of early Christian monasticism. It was never intended to function as a remedy to any surrounding region’s difficulties; it functioned as a factory for the transformation of a dedicated group of people who constituted a community and agreed to abide by the elders’ wisdom on how to do so. The monk’s task was to remain focused on his inward vocation of purification and transformation so as to be united with God and conformed to the angelic, the inhabitants of the

\(^{593}\) Ibid., 94-95.
heavenly Kingdom. By way of conclusion, the final section of this chapter is a natural move from this section in that asceticism, just as it was instantiated by strugglers pursuing intimacy with God, will be suggested for a contemporary setting and not as an outdated mode of ancient Christianity. Asceticism is one important instantiation of spiritual struggle and as such is a tool by which the *epektatic* journey to union with God is accessible and in which its implementation is encouraged for all.

5 – *Conclusion: Contemporary Asceticism*

Thus far, asceticism has been presented as the application of spiritual struggle to the body and has thus emerged as a microcosm of *epektasis*. The goal of the ascetic is to become a locus for the dwelling of God Himself—specifically, a fulfillment and interiorization of the ancestral heritage of Christianity and more generally, the broader goal of Christianity and arguably humanity. When applying spiritual struggle to the body, asceticism can be seen as being comprised of three loosely delineated stages to complement the *epektatic* non-linear spectrum suggested in the previous chapter. The first stage is struggle for purity against one’s base desires and weaknesses. The second stage is acquiring likeness of angels or being restored to an elevated or primordial humanity, synonymous with the strengthening of the soul. The third stage is become the dwelling place of God, synonymous with uniting with God, assimilating to God, or becoming godlike. It is the suggestion of this project that spiritual struggle applied to any of the realms of Christian life will proceed in a similar fashion. Each stage will have its place along the non-linear spectrum of *epektasis* in chapter 3.

A concern in suggesting an ethic that is so entrenched in early Christian thought is the inapplicability that may be assumed in such a project. It may be that asceticism was helpful to
early Christians, but is it helpful in the 21st century? While this project is certainly atavistic, the thesis is not mainly one of lamenting a mode of the past that has been lost but recovering a Christian mode that is fundamental to the gospel, that has been overlooked in modernity, that has been largely missing from Christian accounts of virtue, and that addresses concerns within contemporary accounts of virtue ethics. The number of monastics across most, though not all, churches has declined, but this is not necessarily a bad thing, since it is asceticism that is the focus here, not monasticism. Asceticism is not reserved for the non-married, and this concept was not foreign to the early Church.

In his discussion on marriage versus non-married celibates, John Behr surveys a number of readings for his discussion: the Old Testament, the New Testament Gospels, St. Paul, Irenaeus, Clement, and Gregory of Nyssa. Traditionally, asceticism within marriage implied abstention and procreative intent, but Behr is arguing that there is more to it. He examines each of these authors, interpreting them in such a way that marriage is elevated in status and that virginity is an interiorized disposition of the soul, not an external feat of the body. The only author that Behr had difficulty interpreting in this light was Clement of Alexandria. As detailed above, Clement was writing among many who held that all sexual activity was inherently vicious. To this, Clement replied that sexuality with marriage and for the purposes of procreation was permissible.

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594 See Robert H. King, Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization, (New York ; London: Continuum International, 2001), 26. He writes, “Christian monasticism flourished throughout the Middle Ages and produced some of the most profound mystical writings of all times, but then it began to decline.” Eastern Christian monasticism seems to have declined as well (though the statistics remain unavailable). However, since monks have remained the main source for Eastern Christian bishops and since monasticism is still often viewed in the East as the source for a paradigmatic Christianity, it could be that the decline has been less drastic in the East.

595 Examples of asceticism among lay people have been noted above in Aphrhat’s lay ascetic community.


597 Ibid., 37-38.
Nonetheless, Behr takes his argument a step further than Clement and concludes that marriage is not about procreation nor is it even about the unitive goal between the man and woman (nor is it even about the two combined). Marriage is about manifesting and making Christ present. It is, in a sense, “procreating” Christ.\(^{598}\) Christian marriage challenges the notion that marriage as an institution or celibacy as an institution is sufficient in and of itself. They are not sufficient; the only sufficiency is in longing for, holding on to, and manifesting the God who is the Source of all. Abstinence is not normative, but it can be used to redirect a married couple’s focus and attention to God if they have lost this focus.\(^{599}\) Once this focus is lost, everything is lost, whether or not the couple is abstaining from sex. Purity and asceticism are critical for the soul’s ascent or in the development of spirituality, that is, the proximity of the soul to its spiritual Creator. But what has become clear that was not always clear is that this purity and asceticism is accessible to both married and non-married alike.

But the question still remains what asceticism might look like in the 21st century.\(^{600}\) Noted above were the imagery, literature, and rituals that became internalized in monastics who practiced asceticism. Everything that came before these monastics was fulfilled and encapsulated in those who became dwelling places of God Himself; they became living tabernacles. But Paul Evdokimov offers a contemporary Orthodox instantiation of this early Church asceticism, suggesting how asceticism might be understood in modernity among non-monastics. Interestingly, he appropriated asceticism in a manner analogous to the early church’s appropriation of Old Testament imagery, literature, apocalypticism, and rituals—through what

\(^{598}\) Ibid., 49.
\(^{599}\) Ibid., 50.
he calls “interiorized monasticism.” Just as the early church monastics interiorized Old Testament, Second Temple, and apocalyptic literature, so too did Evdokimov interiorize early church monasticism. Ascetic monasticism is a practice that is to be interiorized in the 21st century lives of non-monastic non-celibates. Thus, a double interiorization is rendered, since what was interiorized in early church monasticism remains interiorized in his suggestions. The form that this modern asceticism takes, according to Evdokimov, is calmness, silence, rest, prayer and contemplation.

In such busy and stressful environments that many find themselves in today, being able to be collected and present for the service of others is a struggle but is vital. This asceticism should lead one to seek humility and purity of heart in order to help others do the same. The precepts of interiorized monasticism must be applied to everyone in their own special way so as to create hearts that love God and neighbor. He insists that this applies to everyone and not just the monk; it is a vocation and identifier for all Christians. The three vows of monasticism—poverty, chastity, and obedience—are to be acquired by all humans if they desire to be truly free.

Modern asceticism is the “interior combat necessary for the spiritual person to acquire a mastery over the material world.” This internalization of asceticism, however, does not exclude its essential physicality. Traditional ascetical practices that aid in one’s control over one’s body are

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602 Ibid., 64.
603 Ibid., 135-39.
604 In my analysis of ancient Christian monasticism and asceticism, I focused on only one of three monastic vows—chastity. Yet, much can be gained by examining the other two pillars of monasticism—poverty and obedience—within the same tripartite *epektatic* model offered in this project. Ilaria Ramelli demonstrates that the practice of asceticism, even in its ancient Christian form, expands beyond matters of sexuality. With an eye to voluntary poverty as requisite to asceticism, she demonstrates the link, spearheaded by Gregory of Nyssa, between philosophical asceticism and the rejection of slavery and social injustice. See Ramelli, *Social Justice*. For a fuller picture of contemporary asceticism, it would indeed be fruitful to examine each pillar within an *epektatic* framework.
605 Ibid., 159.
as essential contemporarily as they were during the Patristic era. In the end, it is the grace of God that enables, empowers, and sustains, but humans are responsible for the good disposition of a free and unencumbered will.

Evdokimov suggests that ascetics (ancient and contemporary) possess a different kind of virtue. It is a virtue that designates human dynamism set in motion by the presence of God. In keeping with the model of divine-human co-operation of this project, this different kind of virtue is not merit based. Additionally, it is not the result of adherence to ethical imperatives. Instead, ascetics seek dynamic life with Christ, through Christ, and in Christ. Humans are to open up the door of the soul through *askesis* so that God Himself can enter. This is precisely the *epektatic* reorientation I am suggesting for Christian virtue ethics. It is not moralism, nor is it even a goal of acquiring virtues, but these smaller goals are mere consequences of the journey with, through, and in Christ. In addition to the asceticism presented in this chapter, Evdokimov recognizes that this journey requires seriousness in reading and living the word of God, Scripture. This will be the topic of chapter 5.

For now, the progression of this invisible ascetical struggle for purification proceeds as follows. The ascent is gradual, and it begins with knowing oneself. Humility, not humiliation, and *metanoia* are central and form the foundation of the human spirit. Further, ascending requires that one have Christ within oneself not through a particular rule of life but a style of life. The soul is elevated above every representation and image and is oriented toward the Kingdom. “The soul, the image and mirror of God, becomes the dwelling place of God.” The person in

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606 Ibid., 164.
607 For a good discussion of the difficulties of implementing *askesis* contemporarily and an alternative suggestion on how this can be accomplished, see Maria Antonaccio, "Contemporary Forms of *Askesis* and the Return of Spiritual Exercises." *The Annual Of The Society Of Christian Ethics* 18, (1998): 69-92.
608 Ibid., 251.
this way is guided by the light, but the light is the very object of the soul’s gaze as well. Even more, “[a]pproaching the light, the soul becomes light.” The soul is thus transformed and does not receive simple intellectual knowledge of God. It progresses until it reaches face-to-face vision of God over eternity.

However, those who do not enter an ascent can very well experience a descent. This begins with contamination from a representation, image, idea, or desire crossing the mind. In this stage, this is not yet sin. This is followed by indulgence and then by the imaginary enjoyment created by anticipation. At this point, the decision has been made; sin has been mentally committed. The fourth stage consummates the act, which forms the beginning of a passion. When the passion becomes a habit it neutralizes all the power of resistance against it. “The person disintegrates into powerlessness.” This results in “despair, fearful acedia, disgust or anxiety, madness or suicide, in all cases, spiritual death.”

In this way, Evdokimov simultaneously fuses traditions through ancient Judaism to the Second Temple period, the New Testament, and the early Church and offers its instantiation in modern times. The principles that were interiorized in monasticism and served as means of purification are further interiorized by not requiring the presence of the monastic garb or vocation for the modern ascetic. Instead, the God of Israel is the target of all humanity, and through the self-restraint, self-control, restoration, transformation, and unity with God attained through asceticism, 21st century Christians can offer the world a distinctive peace, love, humility, and fulfillment.

609 Ibid., 252.
610 Ibid., 176.
Ch. 5 – Virtue Ethics, Scripture, and Early Christianity: Patristic Sacred Reading as a Transformative Struggle

1 - Introduction

The oft-cited exhortation from Vatican II to utilize Scripture more seriously in moral theology has since spurred many theologians, ethicists, and biblical scholars to consider potential ways to adhere to this directive.\(^{611}\) Depending on any given scholar’s particular training, that scholar would naturally present a partial solution to problem of the modern separation of Scripture and ethics. Brian Brock offers a helpful systematization of these suggested solutions. The first is the *hermeneutical* solution in which a person asks how the task of interpreting Scripture, i.e. biblical exegesis, affects the lives of those in any given society.\(^{612}\) The second is the *communitarian* solution, in which one seeks to understand the role of Scripture in reinvigorating a community of character.\(^{613}\) The third solution is that of *biblical ethics*, where one searches Scripture with the hopes of synthesizing its ethical teachings.\(^{614}\) The fourth solution of *biblical theology*—allowing doctrine to dictate ethics—and the fifth solution—the *exegetical* solution of doing theology directly with the text—belong to Barth and Bonhoeffer, respectively.\(^{615}\)


\(^{615}\) Ibid., 52-95.
In this chapter, I will offer an alternative solution to the problem of the divorce of Scripture and ethics. My solution, grounded in Orthodox Christian and Patristic Scriptural methodologies and simultaneously in the Orthodox model of spiritual struggle within Gregory’s framework of *epektasis*, will at the same time take into account a wide breadth of suggestions. In brief, the suggestion in this chapter is that applying to Scripture the ethos of spiritual struggle and the tripartite model of *epektasis*—detachment, strengthening, and union—will allow for the direct formation and transformation of Christians in community. The goal is to demonstrate that the consideration of an Orthodox Christian model of spiritual struggle and *epektasis* when applied to any Christian practice (in this case Scripture reading), can serve as a basis for an ethic of virtue. Additionally, Patristic exegetical approaches to Scripture—including the centrality of Christ as the interpretive key to Scripture, the importance of holistic, typological, and allegorical readings of Scripture, and the need for openness, purity, and community, among others—will serve as the foundation for more concrete ways to approach Scripture for its ethical application. What will begin to emerge is a pragmatic virtue ethical suggestion for Scripture in which Scripture serves as an ethos, a former of character, and a portal to unity with God. This approach, termed “sacred reading” in this chapter, ultimately will not discard the various hermeneutical solutions noted above but will utilize them mainly in the first of three stages of the *epektatic* journey to God. In this way, these hermeneutical solutions will at the same time be essential and yet insufficient.

The term “sacred reading” rendered from the Latin “lectio divina” gained its prominence in the medieval west as a systematized method of prayerfully reading Scripture in order to participate in God’s very self.616 *Lectio divina* names one particular method of sacred reading,

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but other methods exist. This chapter’s discussion concerns sacred reading as a general practice and not simply the particular method of *lectio divina*, which suggests that one read, meditate on, pray, and contemplate on the words of Scripture. Most manuals on *lectio divina*, in giving brief synopses of its history, mention three stages of its use: early Christian Patrists, Benedict, and Guigo II. It was not until the twelfth century that Guigo II named and ordered the four steps of the ladder of *lectio divina* that bring one from earth to heaven. Before then, similar tenets had been in place but not necessarily in this particular order or with these specific systematizations. In fact, the early-second to mid-third century Alexandrian theologian and scholar Origen is responsible for coining the term, originally in Greek. This chapter, then, is an exposition of the “sacred reading” that came before Guigo II and even before Benedict, focusing primarily on the Golden Age of Patristics—the first four centuries of Christianity.

In attempting to reconstruct what may be a Patristic exegetical methodology, the task to present any monolithic or harmonious *consensus patrum* with regards to Scripture, even if possible, may be counterproductive to the pluralities that decorated early Christian thought and that continue to characterize our time. At the same time, such an endeavor is beyond the scope

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618 Ibid., 50.
620 For a good discussion of the relationship between East and West regarding *lectio divina*, see John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 67-86.
621 I do not mean that the plurality of Christian reality in the modern world is similar to that in the ancient world. In fact, I praise the latter and denounce the former. The ancient pluralism to which I am referring is that which existed within the bounds of the one Christian Church. An example of this pluralism would be a variety of interpretations on a given Scriptural parable through use of allegorical exegesis. However, when pluralism is discussed contemporarily, it usually implies a difference of fundamental faith and doctrine. While I am not overlooking this glaring difference, my only point is that since neither era can be characterized as entirely monolithic, presenting a monolithic Patristic voice would not only be inaccurate but counterproductive. Further, regarding the notion of a *consensus patrum*, this project falls in Hilarion Afeyev’s camp when he writes: “How is the so-called *consensus patrum*, the ‘accord of the Fathers,’ to be understood? This concept, borrowed from Western theology, is quite questionable. Some understand the *consensus patrum* as a kind of ‘theological summa’ or ‘common denominator’ of patristic thought produced by cutting away the individual traits of every author. Others consider that the ‘accord of
of this chapter. Still, there are elements of Scriptural methodology that are gaining traction contemporarily, that are grounded in ancient Christian practices, and that many early church fathers adopted. Three of these elements include reading Scripture 1) as a whole, 2) with attention to character formation, and 3) in community. Moreover, other Patristic methods, including typology, allegory, and Christo-centricity will be interspersed among these elements as suggestions to a transformative practice of sacred reading.

The current landscape of integrating the use of Scripture in ethics is vast and complex as suggested above. Thus, it is important to understand the current status questiones regarding Scripture and ethics before turning to the methods that I am suggesting will be most helpful in recovering an ethic grounded in Scripture, struggle, and unity with God. The entire discussion of methodology—modern and ancient—will finally be organized into three stages following Gregory of Nyssa’s model of epektasis grounded in the concept of spiritual struggle. Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate that the transformative power of Scripture remains largely untapped in methodological discourse and that tapping into this transformative depth would allow Scripture to become a good guide to a Christian ethic. Spiritual struggle applied to sacred reading unveils this latent transformative power in Scripture and makes an appeal to the virtue ethical suggestion of this overall project.

the Fathers’ presupposes their consent on essential matters, with possible disagreement on isolated issues. Personally, I support the second point of view. I believe, as I have said on other occasions, that the many private opinions of the fathers, the fruits of the spiritual quest of men of faith illuminated by God, may not be artificially pruned in order to produce some simplified theological system or ‘summa.’” H. H. Alfeyev, “The Patristic Heritage and Modernity,” The Ecumenical Review 54, (2002): 91-111. Hans Boersma agrees that though distinctions certainly exist between the fathers and different patristic schools of thought, there still exist shared sensibilities. See, Hans Boersma, Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 13.
There exists a sort of mutual exclusivity between Scripture and ethics generally, and that between biblical scholars and ethicists, specifically. As noted earlier, the gap between Scripture and ethics has not been entirely bridged though many scholars have been concerned with bridging this gap at least since Vatican II called moral theologians to engage more deeply with Scripture. Nevertheless, there is little agreement as to how this integration ought to take place. To use Victor Paul Furnish’s language, we are wrong to think of Scripture as a sacred cow, that is an idol that requires no discernment, or as a white elephant, that is by discarding any text that seems irrelevant or untimely. The answer lies somewhere in between, within a vast sea of complexity.

It is beyond the scope of this section to provide a comprehensive review of all attempts to develop an ethical framework using Scripture, but I will note a few here that give a good approximation of the variety of approaches therein. Take, for example, Paul Jersild’s summary of the ethical content and usage of Scripture. He identifies laws and commandments, paradigmatic conduct in narrative form, principles and ideals, and exhortations and imperatives. Yet, in his assessment of the attempts of other scholars, his list does not include what might be a moral formation or transformation from Scripture itself. In a similar vein, James Gustafson admits that while the Bible’s authority is central and will serve “as a charter document for the Christian movement in history,” Scripture alone is never the final court of appeal for Christian

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622 For a full explanation of these two hermeneutical extremes when reading Scripture, see Victor Paul Furnish, The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).
ethics.” It only provides “the basic orientation toward particular judgments,” without ever dictating what those particular judgments ought to be.

Another opinion is that of Jack T. Sanders, who views Jesus’ ethics and eschatology as so intertwined that to separate one from the other would do injustice to both. He writes, “Jesus does not provide a valid ethics for today. His ethical teaching is interwoven with his imminent eschatology to such a degree that every attempt to separate the two and to draw out only the ethical thread invariably and inevitably pulls loose strands of the eschatology, so that both yarns are ruined.” In this view, Scripture’s chief contribution to the formation of an ethic is incumbent on a high eschatology, that is, an elevated awareness of and watchfulness toward the imminent return of Jesus Christ and the end of times. Primarily in this way, suggests Sanders, is one’s ethic formed by the content of Scripture.

To demonstrate the complexity of determining the best way to approach Scripture for ethical guidance, Charles E. Curran points to a number of limitations regarding this endeavor. He notes that biblical ethics is not Christian ethics but is only one component of the broader category of Christian ethics. Moreover, there exist limitations in the application of Scripture across history and cultures, the dangers of proof texting, the dangers of taking texts out of their original context, the problem of eschatology, and problems of systematization and selection. In all of this, he concludes that Scripture is supplementary to human reason and wisdom. According to Curran, Scripture should not be used as a book of revealed morality because of the

626 Ibid.
629 Ibid., 198-99.
hermeneutical problem—a problem that occupies much space in the discussion of Scripture and ethics. Christians should instead reflect on experiences in the Bible for analogous application contemporarily. This is similar to the way William Spohn applies David Tracy’s concept of analogical imagination. Spohn suggests that in thinking analogically people ought to read Scripture and go and do “likewise,” not “the same.”630 Put another way, a clear understanding of Scripture alone is insufficient—understanding one’s own social location and the appropriate application of Scripture in new contexts, among other considerations, is just as important.

However, emphasizing social location too emphatically could lead to a thin view of the distinctiveness of a Christian ethic shaped by Scripture compared to any other ethic. Curran writes, “[T]he ethical wisdom and knowledge portrayed in the Scriptural experience remains quite similar to the ethical experience of all mankind.”631 In this way, Curran leaves us with a bit of a thin description as to the uniqueness of Christian morality, a morality that Lisa Cahill suggests should not overlap too much or too little with surrounding communities. Early Christian communities, says Cahill, were able to balance between overlapping enough with other cultural communities’ conceptions of morality while still maintaining their distinction and contribution.632 It is precisely to these early Christian considerations that we will turn for a possible approach to Scripture in light of this hermeneutical problem.

There are those, however, who find the issue of hermeneutics much less problematic. In Christopher J. Holmes’s construction of a biblically centered ethic, he defines ethics as “a description of what kinds of human acts the individual and the church ought to undertake, so as

632 Cahill, 12.
to be most transparent to the saving Gospel that lies at its center and to which it is continually being summoned and conformed." He approaches Scripture in a way that does not limit Christ to His historical context but that allows the church to access the ever-existent presence of Christ. Christian ethics in this light is much less a matter of historicity—though to be sure history remains important but not central—and more a matter of individual autonomy and communal ecclesiology, dynamically living in the presence of the risen Christ.

Christo-centricity is the focus of other scholars attempting to form a Christian ethic from Scripture, yet the question remains to what extent the content of Scripture remains relevant. Similar to pulling thematic generalizations from Scripture for their application, one must be wary of reducing the content of Scripture to simple concepts or principles that may neglect the practice of intensely and closely engaging the text of Scripture. While the importance of the text itself will be discussed below as part of the suggested methodology of reading Scripture in this chapter, it is worth visiting a very influential, late twentieth century work on Scripture and ethics.


The difficulty of living in conformity with the New Testament vision does not, however, let us off the hook: my experience of struggle and failure to respond to the New Testament’s challenge concerning possessions does not authorize me to

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634 Ibid., 23-25, 152-53.
disregard the New Testament’s summons, or to pretend that the New Testament does not mean what it says, or to devise less costly standards for myself and for the church.637

He describes a fourfold task by which Scripture should be read: 1) the descriptive task: reading the text carefully638; the synthetic task: placing the text in canonical context639; the hermeneutical task: relating the text to our situation640; and the pragmatic task: living the text.641 Hays describes his project as a “framework for discernment” by which reading the New Testament does not result in creating a rule book but in a transformed life in submission to Jesus.642 Ultimately, Hays suggested model, as presented in New Testament Ethics, is the metaphorical embodiment of narrative paradigms, which requires serious exegesis.643

At this point, it is clear that there is no immediate consensus between all of these views, though I will point to certain recurring themes that I will present below as suggestions for moving forward. That there is no consensus is further complicated by the reality that the scholarship of moral ethicists and biblical scholars have remained separated each in their respective fields. This separation has been noted by a number of scholars toward the end of the twentieth century. Jeffrey S. Siker notes that theologians and ethicists demonstrate little interaction with biblical scholars.644 Perhaps Gustafson puts it best when he writes, “[T]hose who are specialists in ethics generally lack the intensive and proper training in biblical studies, and those who are specialists in biblical studies often lack sophistication in ethical thought.”645 In

638Ibid., 3-4, 13-185.
639Ibid., 4-5, 187-205.
640Ibid., 5-7, 207-312.
641Ibid., 7, 313-461.
642Ibid., 462, 469.
643Ibid., 18-19.
Lucas Chan’s assessment of the state of Biblical ethics in the twenty-first century, he notes that of utmost importance is an acknowledgement of both the importance of the text itself and of a hermeneutical lens that is cognizant of the interpreter’s social location.\textsuperscript{646} He points us to a common awareness of the need for interdisciplinary scholarship in this regard and suggests a balanced view between biblical text and ethical hermeneutic as the most appropriate way forward and as a feat yet to be adequately accomplished.\textsuperscript{647}

The purpose of this section, then, has not only been to demonstrate that there is a real and urgent need to integrate Scripture and ethics, but also that among all the disagreements, certain commonalities emerge contemporarily. These will be discussed in section 3 explicitly and will be placed in their appropriate places in the stages of sacred reading in section 4. It will become clear that the \textit{epektatic} stages of sacred reading require this contemporary scholarship and at the same time go beyond these suggestions to a more transformative Scriptural experience. In the same vein, there is an implication that the potential transformative power in Scripture remains untapped because there is no simple consensus to the ways in which Scripture and ethics should be reintegrated. With hopes of accessing more transformative methods, this chapter will offer an Orthodox Christian approach to sacred reading rooted in centuries of communal devotional practices of spiritual struggle and God-centeredness.

\subsection*{2.1 – Integration as Orthodox Christian Methodology}

This project pushes against a contemporary tendency—the disintegration between distinct yet complementary fields. It is my belief that theologians, ethicists, biblical scholars,


\textsuperscript{647}Ibid., 31.
philosophers, etc. all offer a distinctive and indispensable piece of the larger puzzle when discussing the function of Scripture in ethics. Capturing multiple components of various fields allows for a fuller and more accurate grasp of Scripture’s function for a twenty-first century Christian. Most—if not all—arguments, made among respected scholars, carry with them at least some merit or truth. Of course, saying everything is similar to saying nothing. In suggesting an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Scripture and ethics, of course I do not mean to imply that any opinion and every suggestion that all scholars give are valid. Instead, the impetus for interdisciplinary scholarship here is the reintegration of Christian elements that have been separated in modernity and that were integral in ancient times.

As examples, I will offer brief observations here before elaborating on potential virtue ethical grounds for consensus. First is the issue of pulling mandates and principles from Scripture for ethics—a method argued against by a number of scholars above. As a practice of the integration to which I am referring, I do suggest that while principles might not be the primary means of constructing a biblical ethic, they certainly cannot be discarded. Lisa S. Cahill is one supporter of the view that mandates are not of primary importance. Instead, Scripture should be used to form a Christian worldview, communal life, and character. 648 She points out that the Bible does not have to produce specific moral codes in order to be authoritative. However, this does not mean that the principles gathered from Scripture are altogether useless. She points to certain principles and themes including love of neighbor, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and nonviolence. 649 While in this chapter I will focus less on mandates and themes by arguing for primarily a transformative engagement with Scripture, my intent will never be to minimize the importance of the direct Scriptural text itself. On the contrary, the emphasis in this

648 Cahill, 16.
649 Ibid., 10.
chapter will be placed on engaging the text in a way that takes into account the complexities of life and their holistic engagement. The deliberation of proper methodology is not a choice between one or the other, nor should it be. In all of this, I hope to welcome much of the scholarship surrounding Scripture and ethics until now while adding to the discussion a method of moral transformation grounded in the concepts of *epektasis* and spiritual struggle.

The integration to which I have been referring is, in my estimation, characteristic of Orthodox Christian theology. For example, religion and ethics have not suffered the same separation among many Orthodox Christians as they have in the post-Enlightenment West. It seems that the reason Orthodox Christians may have kept this integral relationship intact is because of Orthodox theology’s significant reliance on Patristic writings that promote a harmony between belief and practice. A good example is found in St. Basil’s *On Christian Ethics*—a work the modern reader might assume to be a sort of manual on controversial ethical issues and their respective (“Christian”) solutions. Instead, Basil—brother of Gregory of Nyssa—presents an almost tedious list of detailed and rather specific ethical instructions with extensive biblical citations supporting each directive. At times, there are single verses from which he creates a single-lined ethical imperative. In the two works that precede *On Ethics*—*On the Judgment of God* and *On the Faith*—Basil defends his methodology. Many in his time have deserted the direct teaching of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures and have resorted to their own laws according to their own reasoning. These have minimized sin and convinced themselves that only grave sins are to be lamented while conscientiousness regarding minor sins is not required.

Yet in developing his arguments for the importance of Scripture, Basil is not ignorant to the implausibility of concocting an exhaustive ethical model strictly from Scripture. He is well aware that Scripture cannot possibly exhaust the infinite number of ethical possibilities humans
can come across. Even if this were somehow possible, language serves as another barrier to communicating the ethics of Scripture. For this reason, in response to those who accuse him of being non-biblical in some of his other writings, he clarifies that it is the spirit of Scripture that ought to be followed, not only the letter. Yet, what is faith, says Basil, if it is not the unwavering conviction in the veracity of the words of God, even at times against one’s reason? He even finds room to detail this overarching principle in *On Ethics*: “[I]t is necessary not to be fixed on one’s own reasonings to the rejection of what is said by the Lord, but to understand that the words of the Lord are worthier of belief than one’s own convictions.” Even when Basil does not directly quote Scripture, he believes himself to be abiding by its spirit.

The point here is not necessarily to defend or promote Basil’s exact method, since there are many other elements at play that will be uncovered below. What I am hoping to highlight here is that he cannot imagine conceptually what the separation of spirituality and morality would mean or look like. St. Basil cannot envision what it might mean to read Scripture devoid of ethical implications, or to conceive of ethics apart from Scripture’s spiritual and theological formations. The modern West is not ignorant to the realities of the separation between theology and ethics. James Gustafson writes, “For the people of the Bible, morality was not separated from religion in the way that it has been both in theory and in practice in later developments; ethics was not separated from theology.” Thus, part of the methodology of this chapter is to see an inherent harmony between belief and action. What one believes dictates one’s actions, and how one acts also shapes one’s beliefs.

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651 Hans Boersma makes a similar note of Basil’s brother, Gregory of Nyssa: “Saint Gregory knows of no such gap between exegesis and application. Rather, he regards virtue as (1) a prerequisite for good reading, (2) the proper contents of the biblical text, and (3) the aim of the exegetical process.” (Boersma, 19).

Another example will help settle a tension that has developed over the course of this project (especially in chapter 4 on asceticism)—the tension between spiritual interiority and exterior exertion. Orthodox Christianity has preserved an essentially Patristic outlook on the integrity between the spiritual and the material. From an Eastern perspective, spirituality excludes no facet of the human experience. Spirituality consists of the elevation of the spirit in perfect harmony with the heart, mind, and body to the eternal progression of knowledge of God, which is a personal and conscious experience.\(^{653}\) That spirituality includes the body is important, since never does this project intend to devalue the body. Instead, the body is to be disciplined and controlled for proper orientation to God.

Moreover, the emphasis on experience when discussing spirituality implies that spirituality does not include fantasy, imagination, or conjecture. It is because of this that Vladimir Lossky is able to make the following claim concerning negative or apophatic theology: “Negative theology is not merely a theory of ecstasy. It is an expression of that fundamental attitude which transforms the whole of theology into a contemplation of the mysteries of revelation.”\(^{654}\) Spirituality and the expression of negative theology are focused on real experience, and while this often includes ascent beyond the material, it is not limited to this. In fact, the material is required and is never separated from any aspiration to spiritual cultivation. Contemplation or inner disposition is not and cannot be separated from action or practice.\(^{655}\)

In my assessment, and despite all of the distinct opinions noted above, there appears to exist contemporarily a more general consensus grounded in a virtue ethics approach to Scripture. This consensus maintains that Scripture ought to be read as a whole, with attention to character.

\(^{653}\) Lossky, 202.
\(^{654}\) Ibid., 42.
\(^{655}\) Ibid.
formation, and in community. While I am not claiming that all scholars agree on these three points, there is enough overlap to identify these criteria as elements by which to move forward in the discussion of Scripture and ethics. It would seem that these three methodological elements have been reached after decades of scholarship, but it is my contention that these elements are in fact based in ancient Christian sentiments and are only being recovered. Thus, the following section will work as a conversation between the modern and the ancient in order to lend a certain credibility to the ancient, especially as it relates to the broader framework of spiritual struggle. In other words, the consensus toward which modern scholars are beginning to move, especially with the recent resurgence of virtue ethics, is more a recovery of the ancient (and at the same time, of Orthodox Christian Patristic exegesis) than many may realize. I will then suggest additional ancient Christian exegetical methods that, while present in modern literature, are by no means the status quo when considering Scripture and ethics. Finally, all of the discussion of methodology will then be categorized into the three stages of epektasis of chapter 3. In this final section, it will become clear that the majority of scholarly discussions only begin to delve into the transformative power of Scripture. Instead, spiritual struggle applied to the practice of sacred reading allows Scripture to become a robust ethic, or more properly an ethos, able to address the current issues between Scripture and ethics.

3 – Contemporary Solutions and Patristic Methods

I have been referring to this discussion thus far as one of methodology, but it is important to make a nuanced clarification. While I cannot deny that method is ultimately what is being discussed here, it is a sort of bottom-up methodology in which method results from practice and  

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656 John Breck offers a good analysis of Orthodox patristic exegesis. See Breck, Scripture in Tradition.
not the other way around. I am not suggesting a methodology that is defendable only because of its sound logic or philosophical integrity. Instead, and similar to Brian Brock’s approach to Scripture as a dynamic and unpredictable process, I approach this section first with experience—my own and that of others—only later to be organized and articulated. This is important because I am approaching the text as Scripture and not as Bible. That is, I am approaching the text as though it has something to offer beyond its immediate hermeneutical analysis, historicity, and textual analysis. Brock puts it well when he writes, “Attempts to dismiss the Bible’s moral relevance with the claim that its authors ‘couldn’t have known’ about our moral dilemmas or conceptual distinctions are sure signs that the Bible has ceased to be Scripture for that interpreter, for whom some other text or group of texts has become Scripture, against which the Bible must now be justified.” The starting point to which Brock is referring is one of openness to the possibility of transformation, not seeking opportunity for textual interrogation. Thus, the purpose of this section is not to resolve tensions or apparent contradictions in the Bible or to claim any stake in an infallible method of reading Scripture. The purpose is rather to highlight the methods of transformative sacred reading most acclaimed since the early Christian era and reinforced by many today.

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658 This distinction is made in Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, “Scripture, Exegesis, and Discernment in Christian Ethics,” in *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after Macintyre*, ed. Nancey C Murphy; Brad J Kallenberg; Mark Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 112, 119. It is helpful here to highlight a specific approach to the text. To approach the text as Scripture is to elevate the status of the text from only a historical document to a faith document of potential, and even likely, transformative power.
659 Ibid., 247.
3.1 – *Unity and Holism*

The first of these methodological elements—cited by Allen Verhey as a methodological necessity—is approaching Scripture as a whole. 660 It is what Frank Matera’s popular twentieth century work refers to as a synchronic method of reading Scripture as a unity. 661 One risk of not employing a holistic reading of Scripture is that of proof-texting—a problem noted by many biblical scholars and ethicists alike. 662 It is likely that if a holistic interpretative method is not employed, the method of proof-texting will be utilized to some degree, i.e., portions of texts and conclusions abstracted from singular events will be taken in isolation from other related Scripture and from the context within which they are found. This then naturally leads to a circular logical deduction in which preconceived ideas seek out support from scriptural texts, which in turn support and intensify the initial claim. Instead, a holistic interpretation allows for a genuine approach, at least in terms of intent or presumptuousness, to the reality within the Biblical canon. This method, less susceptible to proof-texting, promises more fruitful results in extracting ethical instruction from Scripture.

The second problem of using a hermeneutic different from a holistic approach is that many other approaches can misconstrue the meaning of one pericope as a result of neglecting other pericopes. This problem is more subtle and has more cumbersome consequences than what first glance offers. Similar to proof-texting, neglecting parts of Scripture, even those not clearly or directly related, is the root cause of the insufficiency of any biblical method that does not employ a holistic hermeneutic. If a part of Scripture is segregated from the whole, it is easy to

662 To list a few denouncements of the method of proof-texting, see Verhey, *Remembering Jesus*, 74; Chan, 1, 50; and Curran, 187.
overemphasize the importance of that segregated portion. The disproportionate focus given isolated texts creates a sort of literalism by providing more (and in some cases less) meaning to those isolated words than would normally be attributed. The words of Scripture can be viewed, in a sense, as a human network. Humans become who they are as a result of their interactions, whether it be with other humans, nature, the environment, and so on. Isolating a human being from the interactions that constitute the very fiber of his or her being is not appreciating the person for his or her true self or complexity.

This sense of wholeness presented in this section is on two levels. First, what is meant by wholeness is that the Old and New Testaments are to be taken as a united canon. The Scriptural canon was formed against a false theology that saw a dualism between the Old Testament and the New Testament.\(^{663}\) It is still a risk today to promote this false dichotomy by understanding the God of the Old Testament as different from the God of the New Testament, or to emphasize the importance of one testament at the neglect of the other. The New Testament must be seen in light of the Old Testament; the former is insufficient and incoherent on its own.\(^{664}\) Yet, the opposite holds true for Christians—that the Old Testament can only be fully understood in light of the New Testament—and this is not always easy to maintain in the face of the historical particularities and contexts of Old Testament texts.

Yet, part of a premodern, Patristic approach to Scripture was understanding Jesus Christ Himself as the interpretive key to the entire canon still solidifying in the early Church. The church fathers, as John O’Keefe and Russell Reno point out, saw a coherence in the Bible that


was a “Christ-centered unity of Scripture.” According to Ignatius of Antioch, Christ is the “original documents.” According to Irenaeus, it is the economy of the Son of God—Jesus Christ—that provides the logic and framework through which Scripture should be interpreted. In this way, the Old Testament cannot be interpreted outside of the logic of Christ applied to the text. To put it another way, to understand Genesis’ “In the beginning,” one must first understand John’s “In the beginning.” This is, of course, not to promote any supercessionism, but to point out a key feature in the Christian hermeneutic of this chapter.

Because the church fathers saw Christ as the interpretive key to the entirety of Scripture’s canon, they saw Christ in all aspects of life and at the same time used Scripture constantly. “The notion that the church fathers were smug and complacent, using their doctrinal commitments to oppress open-minded and liberal adversaries, is a lamentable anachronism.” Scripture and doctrinal commitments developed dynamically. Since the fathers held Scripture in such high regard, so too would they hold the doctrines that resulted therefrom. The church fathers wanted to achieve a total reading of the Bible by paying close attention to every single word. They read intensively, looking out for any signs and clues amidst the most minute of details, and at the same time looking for contradictions, which when resolved, would result in deeper understanding of the God of Scripture.

In asserting Christ to be the interpretive key of all of Scripture, the early Church also relied heavily on typological interpretation of Scripture. Typology is a connection between Scriptural texts, not on the basis of particular images or words, but with larger, unifying patterns.

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666 Ibid., 28.
667 Ibid., 37-42.
668 Ibid., 43.
therein. Typology, as used in the early Church, transcended the particularities of time and space, connecting characters to Christ, the “Master type” in which all other types, before and after, are fulfilled. Any sense of participation between my life and Christ’s life requires typology. To understand Christ’s actions as authoritative for my way of life is to read typologically. Moreover, to understand the Old Testament readings in light of Christ, and therefore in light of my Christianity, is to read typologically. Without typology, few connections, and thus little sense, can be made between various parts of the Bible.

This leads to the second sense of the wholeness of Scripture in which Scripture unlocks Scripture. That is, one part of Scripture helps make sense of another, more obscure part of Scripture. One text cannot be understood apart from the rest of the cohesive canon. This is not only to say that the Old and New testaments cannot be separated, but that inner biblical exegesis, even within the same testament, is necessary for an accurate and transformative reading of Scripture. This intertextuality, for someone like Origen—a 3rd century scholar whose influence on the Patristic corpus cannot be overstated—could be summed up by ‘Scripture unlocks Scripture.’

John Breck labels this intertextuality as a Patristic exegetical method:

> Scripture, according to the patristic vision, is uniformly and integrally inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore it can be interpreted according to the rule of exegetical reciprocity. This holds that any obscure biblical passage can be interpreted in light of another biblical passage which is more clear, irrespective of the author, date of composition or historical circumstances represented by the writing(s) in question.

He goes on to cite St. John Chrysostom’s homily on Romans 16:3 in which he blames partial readings of Scripture, i.e. proof-texting, as a reason for the weakening of faith:

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670 This is a paraphrase from the fragment from the preface to Commentary on Psalms 1–25, preserved in the Philokalia, trans. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.
671 Breck, Scripture in Tradition, 46.
This is why we have become so tepid in our faith: we no longer read the Scriptures as a whole. Rather, we select certain passages as being more clear and useful, and we say not a word about the rest. This is just how heresies are introduced: we have refused to read the entire Bible; we have declared certain parts to be essential and others secondary.672

Brian Brock articulates a concept similar to that of Origen. He writes, “Christian biblical exegesis as meditation on Scripture is grounded in learning the unique connections between passages of Scripture, thereby discovering the biblical topography.”673 He continues by making a loose reference to premodern biblical exegesis that would not exclude Patristic methods:

[U]ntil the intervention of modern concepts of reading, biblical interpretation was defined as a very particular facility of enriching the understanding of a given passage by making connections, and quite often novel connections, with other passages in a way that brings added theological density and explanatory power to both.674

Theoretically, this methodological suggestion sounds sensible, but how does it work within the text itself? The following brief analogy will help demonstrate why fidelity to the intertextuality and unity of Scripture is essential for sacred reading.

The use of metaphors in Scripture informs our understanding of God. Scripture offers many metaphors to describe God. Metaphors such as Shepherd, Eagle, Rock, Fire, Mother Hen, Groom, Lover, Friend, (Dt 32:4, 6; 1Sa 2:2; 2Sa 22:2; Ps 28:9, 62:2, 78:35, 80:1; Song., Isa 64:8; Eze 34:11-16, Mal 2:10; Eph 4:6), and others all aim to name characteristics and experiences of God. Each description pushes against the other, adjusting and adding to the insufficiency of each. No single metaphor offers a comprehensive understanding of God, and the paradigmatic assimilation of one will necessarily be detrimental because all metaphors must work in congruence if the most satisfactory, accurate description is to be attained. But if one of

672 Ibid., 76.
673 Brock, Ethos of God, 258.
674 Ibid., 259.
the metaphors is missing, a less accurate depiction will be deduced and the center to which all of these metaphors should point will be unsatisfactorily shifted. Despite the inability to ever describe God in a comprehensive manner, this analogy helps communicate the limitations that result from incomplete knowledge and use of Scripture. Each piece of Scripture pushes and adjusts all other related pieces to pinpoint clearer images. The more a portion of Scripture is held in isolation, the less faithful the interpretation and the less apt the moral implications deduced.

3.2 – Scripture and Virtue

The second suggestion for moving forward methodologically is to read Scripture virtuously, that is, as a virtuous person and for the acquisition of virtue. In attempting for the past four or five decades to reconnect Scripture and ethics in the modern world, scholars have not always turned to virtue ethics as the most obvious solution. According to William C. Mattison III, “a virtue-centered approach to morality” is sometimes even “assumed to be non-scriptural.” Yet, virtue ethicists like Mattison put forward convincing cases for the appropriateness of approaching Scripture with a focus on character formation. Of the significant and recent interventions in the field of biblical ethics is Lucas Chan’s *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century*, who offers a hermeneutical proposal for Scripture grounded in virtue ethics. Chan highlights ways in which virtue is mentioned throughout Scripture and how Scripture points to four fundamental dimensions of virtue ethics: dispositions and character formation, practices and habits, exemplars, and community and community identity. The first and fourth of these

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676 Chan, 84-92, 107-112.
dimensions are brought out in this section on methodology as part of the overarching, though covert, consensus I find in the literature surrounding Scripture and ethics.

Character formation and the centrality of community since the time of the early church have been pivotal in the practice of sacred reading, and they have recently begun their slow reemergence into a more prominent contemporary light. The character formation specified in this section, however, is not necessarily the development of a theory on the types of virtue laid out in Scripture, though this is a good endeavor on its own. Instead, when Scripture is read with attention to and desire for moral formation, the practice becomes transformative. Chan notes that Christ and conformity to Him are the teloi in the teleological and grace-filled process of sanctification.\(^{677}\) This process of sanctification is similar to, though more general than, the schematics of Gregory of Nyssa’s epektatic process. Just how the practice of sacred reading is transformative and how it fits into Gregory’s model will be detailed below.

At this point, however, the importance of sanctification is reflected in its necessity for a “good,” wise, or virtuous reading of Scripture. For many church fathers, the virtue par excellence that promoted a wise reading of Scripture was the pursuit of purity grounded in spiritual struggle. The interpretation of Scripture for many of the fathers required focused exertion to reach a level of sanctified vision by which one would think in and through the Scriptures. They did not only know the Scriptures inside and out but maintained that a certain way of life was necessary to properly interpret Scripture. Even with all of these strategies\(^{678}\) in place, purity held potentially the most important place in the practice of sacred reading.

\(^{677}\) Ibid., 94.

\(^{678}\) This is more a modern rendering, with emphasis on strategy and methodology. It is my contention that in ancient Christians were less concerned with methods as intellectual strategies and more concerned with holistic means of life from which certain tendencies developed in relation to their circumstances. In other words, as noted in the introduction to this section above, method was not method because it was (only) logically sound but because it is that to which experience in community attested.
Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the three prominent fourth-century Cappadocians (along with Gregory of Nyssa and Basil), held that a pure mind was necessary to understand the pure matters of Scripture. As Scripture is pivotal in discerning theological matters, regarding the discussion of theology, he writes:

   It is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness. 679

Thus, it is “dangerous” for the impure to study what is pure. It is only a life of purity that allows a person to most accurately interpret Scripture. Otherwise, one can rely only on intellect and conjecture—each important in their own right, but insufficient without purity. This would render a plethora of opinions and hermeneutical impasses, much as is seen today.

Basil similarly highlights the necessity of “cleansing the eye of the soul” when reading Scripture. He writes, “As the power of seeing is in the healthy eye, so the activity of the Spirit is in the purified soul.” 680 The Spirit, that is, the presumed Author of Scripture, is enlivened in the person who has a purified soul. That person is more apt for Scriptural interpretation, not at the neglect of any other necessary “methods,” but in combination with these elements. It is in harmony with the Holy Spirit, who purifies all creation, by which a person is to grapple in interpreting Scripture.

As an added emphasis, this purity is not attained passively but requires a sort of moral asceticism. In fact, Origen believed that the very difficulty of interpreting Scriptures was to point towards the need for this moral asceticism in the exercise of interpretation. He writes,

680 Ibid., 99.
The aim [of divine Scripture] was that not everyone who wished should have these mysteries laid before his feet to trample upon… but that they should be for the man who had devoted himself to the studies of this kind with the utmost purity and sobriety and through nights of watching, by which means perchance he might be able to trace out the deeply hidden meaning of the Spirit of God, concealed under the language of an ordinary narrative which points in a different direction, and that so he might become a sharer of the Spirit’s knowledge and a partaker of his divine counsel.  

He continues by describing sacred reading as an intentionally laborious task that requires attention and harmony with God. Scripture cannot be interpreted superficially, but one must struggle with the text wholeheartedly.  

He continues,  

[T]he divine wisdom has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks and interruptions of the historical sense to be found therein, by inserting in the midst a number of impossibilities and incongruities, in order that the very interruption of the narrative might as it were present a barrier to the reader and lead him to refuse to proceed along the pathway of the ordinary meaning and so, by shutting us out and debarring us from that, might recall us to the beginning of another way, and might thereby bring us, through the entrance of a narrow footpath, to a higher and loftier road and lay open the immense breadth of the divine wisdom.

O’Keefe and Reno make a similar observation of Origen’s commentary on Scriptural methodology. They write, “Divine wisdom, he [Origen] argues, has made the scriptures difficult to interpret for the same reason that the world is set up according to an ascetic logic—so that the project of interpretation might be a properly disciplining exercise of every fiber of the reader’s being.” In the same vein, O’Keefe and Reno continue, “Reading is difficult because God wants us to suffer the dry desserts of incomprehension as so many days of interpretive fasting. Thus disciplined by the body of scripture, our vision is sanctified prepared for us to enter into the narrow footpath.”

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682 Ibid., 376.
683 Ibid., 378-79.
684 O’Keefe and Reno, 137.
685 Ibid., 139.
Virtue serves both as a prerequisite for and a consequence of sacred reading. Any person’s virtuousness determines how well one could read and interpret Scripture, and it also serves to further inculcate virtue in that person. Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones are aware of this reality in their work on Scripture and ethics. They maintain that ethical formation precedes and follows Scriptural reading.\(^{686}\) Interpreting Scripture, according to Fowl and Jones, “involves a lifelong process of learning to become a wise reader of Scripture, who is capable of embodying that reading in life.”\(^{687}\) Moreover, sin undermines a person’s ability to read Scripture well.\(^{688}\) At the same time, sacred reading requires other virtues including humility and practical wisdom. Allen Verhey agrees that there exists an intimate relationship between reading Scripture and the moral life and adds to humility and discernment the virtues of holiness, sanctification, fidelity, creativity, and discipline.\(^{689}\)

Surely, it would be difficult to assess each person’s level of purity or virtuousness in order to determine if any person’s interpretation is better than another’s, but this would be to miss the point. The emphasis on a virtuous reading of Scripture is a matter of assimilation to God—the telos of this virtue-ethical proposal. When a person becomes united to God through similitude in virtue and open to Him through purification of the soul, that person is more sensitive to and more able to discern the voice of God. This experience is not far from that between a husband and a wife who better understand each other’s words—expressions, tones, tendencies, etc.—the more they grow in unison. At the same time, there is not necessarily an interpretive manual that can provide all of the “answers” or interpretations. Just as my intimate relationship with my wife is necessary for me to understand her, so is intimacy with God through

\(^{686}\) Fowl and Jones, “Scripture, Exegesis,” 111.
\(^{687}\) Ibid., 112.
\(^{688}\) Ibid., 114.
assimilation to Him in the virtue of purity necessary to understand His words. For this reason, while there are interpretations outside of the bounds of a good reading of Scripture, there is no final interpretation within Scripture’s multivalency. This multivalency is supported by the typological reading, noted earlier, and allegorical reading of Scripture, discussed below, found in Patristic exegeses. Yet at this point, it is clear that sacred reading is transformative both as a process that requires virtue in order to do well and as a process that itself provides this transformative acquisition of virtue.

To read Scripture allegorically is to read with a presumption that there often lies a deeper, hidden, spiritual sense under the immediately obvious understanding of the text. There can exist multiple layers and multiple spiritual senses, each underscoring a truth that the author of the text is conveying. These different meanings are not different or opposing truths, but, according to John Breck, certain layers are fuller or higher senses of the truth. The allegorical nature of Scripture is one reason Scripture requires serious study and struggle. Historically, Origen and the Alexandrians that followed his example are responsible for popularizing the allegorical approach to Scripture. At first glance, it seems that in a modern, scholastic setting, allegory can be dismissed as “exegetical heresy” or “allegorical fantasy,” since it seems to bypass historicity. However, the history of a given text of Scripture is important in accurately interpreting that text. What allegory does is urge the reader not to stop at that initial interpretation. It urges the reader to dig deeper and ask what might be meant by the text not just what the text means. That is, a reader ought to take each word seriously, examining what the author of the text intends to communicate beyond what the text seems to immediately convey.

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691 Ibid., 129.
O’Keefe and Reno underscore certain requirements for the modern reader reading allegorically. Modern readers may find the allegorical method of reading Scripture distasteful and unsophisticated, but this may be a result of fundamental differences between premodern and modern beliefs. The first is that premodern readers really believed in God as Creator of all things, in His Son, and that God is the Author and Inspirer of Scripture. To believe that Scripture is inspired by the breath of God is to believe that there exists a message that nourishes the human person at her core, not just in intellectual or historical theory. It is only a disbelief in God and His authorship that should leave a person insistent that the historical and literal meanings of a text are the only possible interpretations. This is not how the church fathers approached Scripture. A message is being conveyed in every sentence of Scripture (literally every sentence for many church fathers), and allegory helps approach this message. To read allegorically requires humility, and it also requires placing Christ at the center of each text. One must submit oneself to an encounter with the text and interpret the text—even historically distant texts—in light of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ. This is how, for example, Origen was able to interpret the Song of Songs as a spiritual relationship of love with God, not an erotic relationship between sensual lovers. Thus, allegorical interpretation focuses on readings of the text that are not inaccurate by any means but that struggle for spiritual enlightenment, acquisition of virtue, and character formation. The purpose of Scripture is to

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693 Breck, God with Us, 129.
694 See Breck, Scripture in Tradition, for a helpful discussion of early Patristic exegesis in relation to modern hermeneutical approaches to the Bible. He writes, “Whether or not they [the fathers] found a ‘spiritual’ sense in every phrase of the text, they were convinced that every word was inspired by God for the purpose of guiding the faithful along the way toward life in the Kingdom of Heaven. To their mind, exegesis has one purpose only: to enable the people of God to hear his Word and to receive it for their salvation” (3).
695 O’Keefe and Reno, 105.
696 Ibid., 104.
attune its reader to God’s voice, to unite its reader with God, to move its reader towards closer semblance of God, and thereby to transform the people and world around its reader.

3.3 – Scripture and Community

The final emerging commonality or realization among ethicists and biblical scholars is the need for Scriptural interpretation and embodiment within community. Chapter 2 discusses what it means to be in community and describes how spiritual struggle is at its core communal. Here, the emphasis is on the centrality of the community in biblical interpretation. Characteristic of Orthodoxy and other Christian groups, accurate and transformative biblical interpretation is incumbent on the practice of reading within community. Thus, the previous section on reading with good character is insufficient on its own. One’s own “individual righteousness” must never be seen as separate or distinct from the larger Christian community—the Church. This project’s model is one that “aims to situate individual moral agency within a community of formation,” despite what may seem to be an attention to personal spiritual struggle. The emphasis on reading in community was a mark of Patristic exegesis.

It would be unthinkable for a church father to agree that Scripture can be properly interpreted by a person outside of the Body of Christ, the Church. Origen, for example, writes,

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697 John Breck does well to summarize the communal nature of Orthodox religious experience when he writes: “From an Orthodox perspective, every aspect of what can be termed ‘spiritual experience’ is essentially ecclesial. This is because our very identity is defined by our participation, our ‘membership,’ in the Body of Christ. Any ‘personal’ reading of Scripture, then, takes place within the Church, as a function of the life of the Church. Like prayer, it draws us into a living communion with the universal Body of Christian believers. Our quest will lead to a lectio divina faithful to Orthodox tradition, therefore, only to the extent that it confirms and deepens our commitment to the ecclesial Body of both the living and the dead who constitute the communion of saints” (Breck, Scripture in Tradition, 68.)

698 Cahill, 4-5.
“[F]oreigners may not [approach certain teachings] unless they have already been enrolled in the Church of the Lord…”\textsuperscript{699} That is, a person outside of the Church may not have the same ability as those within the Church, implying that there exists an inherently communal and Spirit-filled dimension of biblical interpretation. Similarly, Irenaeus, the second-century bishop and martyr, in his treatise \textit{Against Heresies} is clear regarding the interpretation of Scripture as one ecclesial body of Christ when he writes, “We need to view with suspicion those who turn from the primitive succession and assemble themselves together elsewhere,” outside of the Apostolic Church, perverting matters of truth.\textsuperscript{700} He goes on to use much stronger language than claiming that their only error is in misinterpreting Scripture, but the point stands that it is only within the Church assembly that the truth of Scripture is to be interpreted. “The Church treasures such presbyters,” he writes, “and they expound the Scriptures to us without danger, neither blaspheming God, nor dishonoring the patriarchs, nor despising the prophets.”\textsuperscript{701} It is the nourishing Church that forms those who are able to interpret.

The Church, in turn, is graced with the gift of interpretation through the Holy Spirit. Origen makes this point when interpreting Leviticus 7:9. He writes, “[L]et us see according to the spiritual sense, which the Spirit gives the Church…”\textsuperscript{702} Of course, here he is referring to allegory, which itself is communicated by the Holy Spirit to the Church to the priest and the people. The Holy Spirit also gives the priests the flesh of Christ, the word of God. This is evident when Origen continues and says, “The flesh, which is allotted to the priests from the sacrifices, is ‘the word of God’ that they teach in the Church.”\textsuperscript{703} The flesh, here, is referring to the flesh of

\textsuperscript{699} Origen, \textit{Homilies on Leviticus}, 96.
\textsuperscript{701} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{703} Ibid., 105.
Christ in the Eucharist—the locus for early biblical interpretation and dissemination in the early Church. Justin Martyr, a second-century apologist and martyr, provides an early example of the communal nature of reading and hearing Scripture communally in the Eucharistic assembly:

And on the day which is called the day of the sun there is an assembly of all who live in the towns or in the country; and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then the reader ceases, and the president speaks, admonishing us and exhorting us to imitate these excellent examples.\(^\text{704}\)

Thus, the liturgy was the place for Christians to gather and read and hear the word of God communally and was at the same time the place of homiletic exposition in the community of the Church. As a community, the Church was not only expected to read together, but to understand and to implement that reading. The president’s or bishop’s exhortation and admonition was for the imitation and embodiment of the words of Scripture by the entire Christian community.

The focus on community becomes especially important when discussing the proper use of Scripture for ethics contemporarily, and many scholars have recovered this realization today. First, interpretation within a larger community ensures a dynamic, ongoing process of interpretation that is embodied, checked, and corrected in that order and in constant cycle. Allen Verhey characterizes the early church as primarily a place of moral discourse, where personal responsibility was exercised within community.\(^\text{705}\) “[J]udgments rest not so much on an exegetical demonstration as they do on the experience of the authority of scripture in the context of one’s own moral struggles, on the one hand, and the believing community and its moral tradition, on the other.”\(^\text{706}\) In these communities, questions of morality were discussed based on their coherence with the gospel of Jesus Christ, not on philosophical principles or ethical

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\(^{705}\) Verhey, *Remembering Jesus*, 15-17.

\(^{706}\) Verhey, “Use of Scripture,” 228-29.
checklists.\footnote{Verhey, \textit{Remembering Jesus}, 19-21.} Paul Jersild agrees that contemporary Christians ought to practice a similar model of ethical deliberation when reading Scripture. He writes, “My conclusion is that the ethical authority of Scripture is expressed with an ongoing process of dialogue and conversation by the community of believers among themselves and with their Scripture and tradition.”\footnote{Jersild, 81.} Such a community shares a common identity constituted by a collective past that lives in them.\footnote{Verhey, \textit{Remembering Jesus}, 67.}

Richard Hays does raise an important objection to the communal approach to reading Scripture for ethics. There is no way, according to Hays, to challenge or correct the communities’ interpretation.\footnote{Hays, \textit{New Testament Ethics}, 15-18.} However, Hays may be overstating this problem, since there will always exist multiple communities that, when in dialogue, will influence, correct, and challenge each other. Moreover, it is not necessarily true that “unbiased” readings of the text are the most accurate. I do not mean that any interpretation by a community must be correct, but just because an interpretation is made by a community does not mean it has to be checked by some external standard in order to be verified. The verification of an interpretation is accomplished by the incarnation and subsequent impact of the interpretation. In fact, there can be no unbiased reading of a text, even if one intended to perform such a reading. Similarly, the canon is not an unbiased group of texts. It is a deliberate system that came to exist for a reason. It has been formative and continues to be formative for a group of people who understand themselves as following through the Holy Spirit the crucified and risen Christ of the Father. In this light, priority in interpretation should be necessarily within this community and with this community’s “biases” or predilections. At the same time, part of the revelation of God internal to Scripture is His description as liberator and lover of the marginalized and oppressed. It is with this and similar

revelations that communities should be sure to denounce any interpretations that might promote racism, gender disparity, and all other negative uses of Scripture.

The emphasis on community in scriptural interpretation also aids in the hermeneutical problem, which maintains that glaring differences between contemporary culture and those of biblical times are too large a gap to bridge. Instead, as Fowl and Jones note in concert with David Tracy’s “analogical imagination,” the task of reading in community should be an analogical and dialectic effort of remaining faithful to the God of Scripture. The problem is not a lack of accurate biblical interpretation, nor is the problem that our time is drastically different from the first centuries (though it is). The problem, instead, is that Christians do not always embody Scripture faithfully in community.

In communities guided by the Holy Spirit, Christians are to undergo an “ongoing process of being formed and transformed through friendships and practices of Christian communities.” In this way, they are to manifest the character of the Triune God, which in turn will ripple into the surrounding communities leading to further transformation. To have this effect requires a keen sense of one’s own surrounding communities. Thus, the Christian community must be inherently dialogical. James Gustafson makes the strong claim that the Christian community should determine what God’s will for humanity is and make moral judgments in light of this. This transformative power is the primary purpose of Scripture for Stanley Hauerwas, who is

711 See Tracy, The Analogical Imagination; and Spohn, What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?, 50-71.
712 Fowl and Jones, Reading in Communion, 80-81.
713 Fowl and Jones, “Scripture, Exegesis,” 114.
714 See Cahill, 3-17. She maintains that since Christian communities do not live in isolation, they must understand the points of intersection between them and other communities of moral identity (4). As noted earlier, Cahill goes on to cite early Christian communities as good examples of communities able to balance between overlapping enough with other cultural communities’ conceptions of morality while still maintaining their own distinction and positive contributions. As part of her conclusion, she asserts that Christians should refocus what overlaps in other communities in relation to their experience with Christ (12).
responsible for the contemporary, virtue ethical focus on Christian community. The narrative of Scripture “does nothing less than render the character of God and in so doing renders us to be the kind of people appropriate to that character.” Scripture does not describe our world but transforms it through Scripturally-shaped communities.

In all of this, it is clear that to read Scripture contemporarily, similar to the early Church, one must read in community. The spiritual struggle that will be described below in the practice of sacred reading is not one that is individualistic or self-centered; this would detract from the God- and other-centered premise of this project. The suggestion of reading in community must be accompanied by the other elements—reading Scripture as a cohesive unit and reading Scripture virtuously—highlighted above. No suggestion in this chapter is to be taken as a separate methodology. As mentioned earlier, the “method” suggested in this chapter is much less a science than an art; it is not a hard set of rules and tools to be implemented without attention to context and without a spirit of openness, flexibility, and charity. In other words, this is a method of the spirit, not of the letter. It is a dynamic method that is an attempt to organize the thoughts and experiences of real people and communities, ancient and contemporary.

4 – Three Epaktatic Stages of Sacred Reading

In this final major section, all of the chapter’s content thus far will be placed into one of the three stages of epaktasis, with further elaborations and clarifications. The majority of the comments on methodology above fall only into the first of these three stages. The goal in this

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717 Ibid., 245.
section is to understand how far the discussion of Scripture and ethics has developed and what the concept of spiritual struggle might add to the conversation. Ultimately, the practice of sacred reading as presented in this chapter will point to ways in which the transformative power of Scripture can often be left untapped in the modern world and how envisioning the Christian life as one of perpetual ascent to God through spiritual struggle can aid into the deeper stages of sacred reading. The tripartite model of *epektasis* and spiritual struggle in its application to sacred reading is not far from the three levels of Scripture reading to which Origen points. In *On First Principles*, he writes,

> One must therefore portray the meaning of the sacred writings in a threefold way upon one’s own soul, so that the simple man may be edified by what we may call the flesh of the scripture, this name being given to the obvious interpretation; while the man who has made some progress may be edified by its soul, as it were; and the man who is perfect and like those mentioned by the apostle…this man may be edified by the spiritual law…which has “a shadow of the good things to come”….  

Origen is speaking specifically about the layers of meaning in Scripture, while I will focus specifically on stages in the modality of reading; the shift is from reading to reader. With this distinction in mind, Origen’s layers can still be paralleled to the three stages of *epektasis* developed in this project from Gregory of Nyssa’s writings, with minor nuances. The first *epektatic* stage is presented as a stage in which a person already embarks on the journey to God. While this first stage below will include a basic, obvious, or fleshly interpretation of Scripture, it will also include progress made beyond this basic reading (effectively moving a person into the beginnings of Origen’s second stage). The remaining two stages remain strikingly similar. In effect, the overall journey remains the same, but the reason for organizing the schema in this way in this project is because of the emphasis in which at all stages, a person can be described as

718 Origen, *On First Principles*, 363-64.
being on a journey toward God. On the contrary, in Origen’s first stage, it seems that a person can be stuck in a lustful or fleshly reading of Scripture. In order to be on the *epektatic* journey, one must have detached, to some degree, from the lusts of the flesh. Though the preliminary stages are important in that they lead to the stages of *epektasis*, there is no progress made before the first stage.

4.1 – First Stage: Struggle, Vulnerability, Trust, Humility

In the first stage of sacred reading—the practice that I am suggesting emerges from applying an *epektatic* spiritual struggle to the Bible—one must trust that what is being read is indeed Scripture and not just Bible or a historical document.\(^{719}\) In other words, to be formed by Scripture requires a trust in and a vulnerability to the text as the word of God in the context of the Church community. To let one’s guard down in the face of a text that may often challenge given assumptions, conceptions, and ways of life is essential to sacred reading. Further, this stage requires detachment from a post-Enlightenment approach to Scripture that often honors reason as the sole arbiter in the interpretation of Scripture.\(^{720}\) One must detach from a notion that limits Scripture to a singular interpretation whose accuracy hinges only on an accurate understanding of the Bible’s historicity.\(^{721}\) This is not to denigrate the importance and possible preeminence of

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\(^{719}\) This distinction, cited earlier, comes from Fowl and Jones, “Scripture, Exegesis,” 112.

\(^{720}\) John Breck points to the need, in patristic exegesis, of submission to the text for proper interpretation of that text: “St John Chrysostom and other Church Fathers insisted that no one can truly interpret Scripture who does not willingly submit to it” (Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 44).

\(^{721}\) Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s (Pope Benedict XVI) assessment of the historical-critical method is helpful here. Although it is not a benefit to get rid of historical-criticism because it has produced much good and we know more than we ever have about the Bible’s history, it has at the same time created much confusion. With an increasing concern over “what really happened” as opposed to what the text says and what it is trying to convey, there has been a methodological bracketing out of faith. Instead, we need to get into the conceptual architecture of modern exegesis with goals of synthesis and philosophical and theological renovation. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, Encounter Series 9, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).
reason and historicity when reading Scripture, but it is a caution not to resist other modes of interpretation that are necessary for transformative readings of Scripture. Just as the reliance on the first stage of detachment from bodily passions was essential to reaching the further *epektatic* stages of asceticism, so too must a person detach from absolute self-trust when practicing sacred reading.

There exists a temptation to limit Scripture to human reason that can potentially lead to the same conclusions if one had never read Scripture at all. In a refusal to approach Scripture vulnerably, one will instead choose to overlay preconceived conclusions onto the text instead of allowing the text to make its own suggestions. To be clear, this first stage is a way of reading that gives Scripture ‘the benefit of the doubt.’ It is a way of reading in which one lets one’s guards down and allows oneself to be guided and formed without inhibition and with the guidance of others within the community of the Church. Interpretation is accomplished only in and through the discourse of the Church, the place for communication, implementation, correction, and service. At this stage, Scripture is to be approached with an expectation of transformation. The direct words of Scripture are taken seriously, are grappled with, and are read slowly, carefully, and meditatively; this constitutes spiritual struggle in relation to sacred reading.722

To continue, in this stage, Scripture can be used for direct instruction. The emphasis on vulnerability and an expectation of transformation should by no means interfere with the rigor of deep biblical study. Scripture should function to form a person’s thoughts *and* actions. Both are

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722 Spiritual struggle, as demonstrated in this project as a whole, is characteristic of all aspects of Orthodox Christianity, Scripture included. Its centrality to the experience of God is celebrated, as demonstrated in this excerpt from Orthodox theologian John Breck: “A final hermeneutic principle or presupposition adopted by the Holy Fathers, then, is the need for ascetic effort, for an ongoing inner struggle, to attain an attitude of repentance and humble obedience before God. This is indispensable if we are to hear God’s Word and to acquire the ability to interpret it fully and properly. For those who accept such a struggle, who willingly engage in spiritual warfare, the difficult task of interpreting and proclaiming the Word of God can be transformed into an act of love and a service of praise” (Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 44).
important in their own respects and should feed into each other; one’s thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and worldviews should shape one’s actions and ethics. In the same vein, attempts to unveil the ethics of Scripture through the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, Pauline list-ethics, and other passages of clear ethical instruction fall into this stage. In fact, the majority of contemporary biblical and ethical scholarship falls into this category in which the text is studied in order either to unveil historical accuracies, to suggest models for direct application of a text or group of texts, or to develop themes from the text for their subsequent applications. These attempts are not unwarranted; they are tremendously insightful. They are necessary yet insufficient on their own. In my assessment, it is in this first stage that many biblical ethicists have begun and ended their attempts to marry Scripture and contemporary ethics. To be sure, the further stages that will be suggested rely on this first stage, but it is in the latter two stages that sacred reading becomes a true ethic or ethos, that is, Scripture becomes an embodied and transformative way of life.

In the same spirit of openness, a sacred reader approaches the text not with the intent to debunk its contents but with humility to learn from what it offers. To approach Scripture antagonistically is to be ready to dispose of any texts that appear contradictory on the surface or to lose faith in the inspiration of Scripture as a result of these apparent contradictions. Instead, as noted in Origen above, textual difficulties are opportunities for growth through struggling with the text to expose and access its hidden messages. Thus, at every turn sacred reading requires struggle, inherent to the process of moral formation. In this stage, the use of allegory and typology become important when engaging the text seriously and closely. Communally, Scripture is to be read, reread, and interpreted with a spiritual sense that looks not only to the
immediate literal meaning of the text but to ways in which God may be communicating a deeper reality—a “spiritual” reality, as the fathers often refer to it. In this vein, John Breck writes,

At the same time, it is evident that the literal sense in itself is incomplete. A further step in the hermeneutic process has to be taken, to translate the results of exegesis into a living and life-giving witness for people of today. Our study of the Bible, in other words, should lead us from the literal sense to the spiritual sense: from the original meaning of a passage to its significance as the Word of God for the salvation of those who receive it with faith. It is with this concern that I found myself moving from a purely historical-critical approach to the Bible to one based more specifically on the methods and insights of the ancient Church Fathers.723

This quote comes after a brief note from Beck on the importance of the historical-critical method. Ultimately, however, the historical-critical method will fall short of the depth, beauty, and transformative power of the spiritual sense accessed through an allegorical reading of Scripture. Moreover, to read allegorically is not the same as reading imaginatively or phantasmically, as mentioned above. To read allegorically is to read spiritually, that is, with an *epektatic* aim to grow in knowledge of and intimacy with God. Allegorical reading of Scripture is fundamentally an encounter with the text that is humble and vulnerable to the direction of the Author Himself.

When reading this way, textual variances, incongruences, and contradictions are opportunities for *transformative* sacred reading, not opportunities for disproving the legitimacy of the text. If confronted with such cases, part of the struggle may at times require one to maintain a reading of Scripture that is coherent and holistic on the one hand and that does not deliberately ignore any part of Scripture on the other. Again, Scripture is to be engaged in its particularities, remembering that each word is deliberate and requires due attention. One is not to remain a distant reader of Scripture or follower of Scripture only through extracted themes and ideologies. Most, if not all, church fathers employed a method of reading Scripture in which texts

723 Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, xi.
were constantly quoted to draw conclusions therefrom. While proof-texting, as noted above, is not a laudable method of reading Scripture, there is a danger in overstating this caution that can cause a distancing from the text that renders the text secondary to human reason and experience. What is required in such cases is a holistic reading of Scripture, as practiced by the ancient church fathers, that acknowledges all parts of the text as God’s word not to be discarded or ignored.

4.2 – Second Stage: Struggle, Purity, Embodiment, Prayer

In the second stage, a person is thoroughly nourished by the words of Scripture. Sacred reading has become an essential component of one’s daily life and serves to shape one’s worldview. It becomes a haven of solace and refreshment. Scripture thus affects its reader at a deeper level, shaping them as a person grounded in and accountable to the words of Divine revelation. The interpretive key in this revelation, as noted above, is Christ whose self-sacrificing love calls a person to love God and neighbor. While love is the central command of Christian life, the practice of sacred reading and its formative effects are not reducible to love. Instead, the whole of Scripture (trans)forms a sincere and persistent reader, inculcating virtues like justice, mercy, peace, wisdom, and patience, among others. Furthermore, formation through sacred reading entails more than the development of virtues. Sacred reading shapes one in a worldview that is depicted through stories, actions, characters, and ways of life which feature diverse practices and experiences like asceticism, feasting, dedications, punishments, rewards, and so on. Scripture contains a breadth of transformative power that is able to reach different persons at different times in different places with different experiences and in different ways, and yet all
towards the same goal of union with God. Thus, Scripture is unity in diversity. There is a singularity of focus on God as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ and at the same time a diversity within scripture that can impact all contexts of life.

There are, however, certain key characteristics of this second stage worth mentioning explicitly. First, the labor and struggle that is a marker of the first stage continues in the second stage also. Stephanie Paulsell highlights reading and studying Scripture as an essential and often untapped ancient spiritual practice. She writes, “A long history of reading, writing, learning and teaching as a set of spiritual practices in Christianity lies unremarked upon when it might be recovered and reinvigorated for our own day.”

She explains that she saw this practice transform her father who would read six psalms a day as an integral part of his vocation. This work is active and, slowly but surely, affects “a slow shift of our attachments, a painstaking education of desire,” to borrow Tracy’s language. This reading is not only an expression of a love for God but also for neighbor, since reading may not be a priority for many of those we encounter everyday. Sacred readers are to become carriers of the gospel message of God, both in word and in action. The spiritual struggle of sacred reading is a perpetual labor of love for which there is no end. “We can swim and swim in the deep pool of Christian faith and never sound the bottom. That mystery, that struggle, belongs to all of us. It is the heart of our life work.”

Another component of the second stage of sacred reading—purity as requisite to sacred reading—has already been discussed at length above. The detachment one achieves by God’s grace and through spiritual struggle in the first stage of *epektasis* enables an approach to Scripture that is less encumbered by preconceptions. When one is detached from the materialistic

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724 Stephanie Paulsell, “‘The Inscribed Heart: A Spirituality of Intellectual Work’: Reading as a Spiritual Practice,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 36 (Fall 2001), 141.
725 Ibid., 148.
726 Ibid., 153.
pleasures of the world, that person should have fewer motives and agendas when reading Scripture. Instead, such a person, to the extent that she is purified of worldly desires, is able not only to be vulnerable to Scripture but also to be attuned to the voice of God in the text. Of the most ancient Christian prayers is the prayer to the Holy Spirit: “O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who is present in all places and fills all, the treasury of good things and the Life-Giver, graciously come, and dwell in us and purify us from all defilement, O Good One, and save our souls.”

It is the Holy Spirit who purifies, and this person is understood to be more sensitive to the Holy Spirit who guides to the truth. In fact, the Shepherd of Hermas, an ancient Christian document of high repute and mentioned by St. Athanasius the Apostolic, mentions that the more a person is pure, the more spacious of an abode that person becomes for the indwelling of God. Without any emphasis on which comes first, the more pure a person becomes, the more that person is able to embody Scripture, and the more Scripture is embodied, the more one is able to pursue deeper purity.

Embodiment of Scripture is critical to the second stage of sacred reading. Sacred reading is not simply an intellectual exercise enacted on an inert text. There exists no Scriptural corpus that is meant to be studied without being lived. If from the first stage a person learns to trust in Scripture as more than a historical text, in the second stage the words are to become life. Scripture is to be brought into one’s own context through one’s own living expression of the words. This is what Richard Hays calls the pragmatic task of Scriptural interpretation—


728 “[I]f you are long-suffering, the Holy Spirit dwelling in you will be clear, unobscured by any other spirit of evil. Dwelling in a spacious place, He will rejoice and be glad with the lodging in which He finds Himself….The Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate V.I.1-2 (FOTC 1).” Kevin M. Clarke, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Sayings of the Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 105.
“embodying Scripture’s imperatives in the life of the Christian community.” When Scripture is read utilizing all of the suggestions mentioned in this chapter—Christo-centrically, typologically, allegorically, holistically, with a focus on character formation, and in community—a person brings to life the word of God to those she encounters. The hermeneutical problem is no longer a problem of interpretation but a matter of embodiment. The more Scripture is embodied and lived out in one’s context, the more one’s interpretation of Scripture becomes illuminated. The more a person is illuminated, the more that person is able to embody Scripture, and so on.

This embodiment of the text is also contingent on reading Scripture prayerfully. Allen Verhey describes prayer as a performance of Scripture. It teaches a person humility, gratitude, and hope. Moreover, it serves as invocation, metanoia (repentance, transformation of mind), confession, thanksgiving, and petition. This prayer is twofold: one prays for the ability to read, interpret, and embody Scripture; but one also prays Scripture itself. The words, stories, struggles, commands, and petitions found in Scripture can be offered up as prayer. Praying engages the creativity given to humanity and functions as a means by which to enter into the very history that forms Christian identity. To sing the praise of Moses and the Israelites is to enter into the triumph of victory that a Christian experiences over sin and the evils and injustices of the present world. To ask for the boldness of Abraham amidst a difficult trial in life is to participate in a transformation from faith to greater faith. To meditatively pray psalms can encompass the breadth of all human experience. To join the father of a demon-possessed child in his moment

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730 Verhey, Remembering Jesus, 62, 64-65.
of honesty and submission, pleading, “‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’” is to begin a similar journey of honesty, sincerity, and submission to the God who heals from all spiritual and physical infirmities. The examples are endless. What is clear is that prayer is central to the transformative reading of Scripture, so much so that Brian Brock describes prayer as the only constant in the process of reading Scripture.\footnote{Brock, 269.} Amidst so many different suggestions on how Scripture is to be read, to read Scripture prayerfully is to already understand the transformative nature of the words that are not mere text but are the same breath of God that forms and sustains human life.

4.3 – Third Stage: Full Immersion and a New Creation

The third stage of 
\textit{epektasis} is summarized in this project as union with God. When applied to sacred reading, this stage includes those who have not only seriously grappled with Scripture vulnerably (first stage), nor those who have only embodied its words in purity and prayerfully (second stage), but also those who become subsumed in the words of Scripture. In this stage, a Christian becomes so in tune with the words of Scripture that this person is constantly referencing Scripture either directly or indirectly through association or application. Such people cannot help but view the world through a lens crafted by a comprehensive, sincere, and faithful reading of Scripture. They exude a calmness and fortitude that results from their intimacy with God’s word. They in a sense breathe the breath of God, that is, His inspired words. It is through God’s grace and years of close, frequent reading, meditative nights, prayerful days, embodiment, vulnerability, transformation, and struggling for worldly detachment and inner purity that a person reaches such a state.
Jesus Christ Himself is the example *par excellence*, not just because what He spoke is obviously the good news, the gospel. Christ’s words were “the law and the prophets,” properly interpreted. In His temptation by Satan, Christ replies with Scripture at every turn. He quotes the book of Deuteronomy three times, overcoming Satan with the power of the words that flow from Him effortlessly. Christ asserts that, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Food alone sustains the body, but the word of God sustains the soul. It is a powerful thing to encounter a person whose soul is sustained by the word of God. It should be noted, however, that Satan himself used Scripture to tempt Christ. His misuse of Scripture supports the thesis defended in these three stages. Satan is attempting to use Scripture to his advantage. It would be anachronistic to convict him of proof-texting, but there is a difference between mere knowledge of Scripture and transformation by Scripture. The former remains an intellectual task in which one may still remain defensive, antagonistic, and skeptical. The latter requires all of the steps mentioned above—struggle, vulnerability, trust humility, allegory, purity, implementation, prayer, and unity. To read Scripture without these necessary steps is to misread Scripture. To play on a passage in James 2:19, even the demons *read*! Reading alone will not access the transformative power latent in Scripture.

A powerful example is St. Antony the Great, the father of monasticism, whose transformation by Scripture affected generations of Christians until this day. From the very beginning of his journey, Antony allowed himself to be transformed by the word of God. Upon hearing the command in Matthew 19:21 to be perfect by selling all his possessions, giving them to the poor, and following Christ, he immediately carried out this commandment. Thereafter, he committed himself to the Scriptures. St. Athanasius describes St. Antony’s intimacy with

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734 Matt 4:4 (NRSV).
Scripture as follows: “[H]e was so attentive at the reading of Scripture lessons that nothing escaped him: he retained everything and so his memory served him in place of books.”

His memory of Scripture was so sharp that when monks would visit him for advice, it would be difficult to decipher his own words from those of Scripture.

To this point, Elizabeth A. Livingstone writes that “[i]n his short admonition, Antony quotes Scripture no less than fifty-nine times,” from memory, stating that Scripture is sufficient for the monk’s instruction. Similarly, though a lesser feat than Antony’s, monks would eventually build habits of memorizing the Psalter—a practice that would propagate for dozens of centuries. Interestingly and similar to the example of Christ, Antony describes hearing demons “pretend to sing Psalms without appearing, and to quote sayings from Scripture,” repeating “like an echo what we have read.” This misuse of Scripture by the demons again serves to emphasize the importance of sacred reading as a means by which not only to prevent Scripture’s misuse but to tap into its ultimate transformative power—intimacy and unity with God. The life and works of St. Antony attest to the power of this transformation. St. Antony was so transformed by Scripture, that his body, and not just his soul, was positively affected, despite his austere asceticism. He was described as a man of beauty, calmness, grace, virtue, and strength of soul and body, even before his death at the age of 105.

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5 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the current state of Scripture and ethics as one that finds no immediate consensus among ethicists, theologians, and biblical scholars. This problem is compounded by the disintegration between disciplines that causes modern scholars to work in isolation from each other, capturing only bits and pieces of the larger puzzle. Though this short chapter could not offer a comprehensive approach that reintegrates these disjointed fields, I did offer a methodology arising from contemporary Orthodox Christian approaches to Scripture and ethics grounded in the ancient church fathers. In presenting this methodology, I also highlighted the points of overlap between Patristic methods and contemporary, though loose, consensuses among biblical scholars, virtue ethicists, and theologians.

The suggestions that emerged included reading Scripture holistically as a comprehensive unit, reading Scripture with a focus on character formation, and reading Scripture in community. These methods and the methods utilized by the scholars discussed at the outset of the discussion were then placed into Gregory of Nyssa’s three-stage model of *epektasis* in order to demonstrate how the transformative power of sacred reading remains largely untapped without the approach suggested in this chapter. The first stage consisted of vulnerability, trust, humility, and the use of typology and allegory. This stage includes, but does not end with, the majority of modern scholarship that aids in better understanding Scripture historically and intellectually. In this first stage, however, the reader is urged to go beyond the academic rigor of studying Scripture to a relationship with Scripture as the word of God able to produce transformation. The second stage consists of purity, embodiment, and prayer. In this stage, a person by God’s grace struggles for inner purity in order to open oneself up for further and deeper interpretation. The more a person
embodies God’s word, the more that person is able to comprehend. It is a stage of prayerful, meditative, and struggle-laden reading.

The final stage of sacred reading is complete submersion into God’s word to an extent that a person cannot envision her thoughts or actions apart from their formation in and through Scripture. In this stage, Scripture is not only reserved in one’s memory but causes a person to exude an illumination that cannot be denied. Though transformation by God’s work has no end or bounds, a person in this stage is rendered a new creation, undeniably different than she was prior to engaging so wholeheartedly with Scripture. In all of these stages, struggle and community are common denominators. One’s struggle must be persistent and within the community of Christ’s Body, which keeps a person from being self-deceived, prevents gross misinterpretation or implementation, and ensures humility and love in sacred reading. Within these three stages, it would be difficult to imagine what Scripture or ethics each would look like without the other. Though these stages did at times require a person to focus specifically on the acquisition of virtue, the purpose was always the pursuit of God. It is for and from this pursuit that virtue is acquired. That is, virtue is required in order to make progress, and making progress renders greater virtue. In these ways, to approach Scripture with consideration to *epektasis* and spiritual struggle is to reintegrate Scripture and ethics for the contemporary Christian and to reorient a person to God and others through a transformative and recovered Patristic sacred reading.
Ch. 6 – Conclusion: Orthodox Christianity, Aristotle, and Embodied Ethics

I - Introduction

There are three overarching questions that drive this chapter: 1) In what ways is this project distinctly an Orthodox Christian contribution to the field of virtue ethics? To this question, I hope to further define what it might mean for an ethic to be Orthodox Christian. Lastly, what is the relationship between Orthodoxy and virtue ethics? 2) What is the relationship between this project and the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition in which much virtue ethical thought is rooted. More specifically, I will identify precisely the ways in which this project utilizes an Aristotelian-Thomistic framework and ways in which this project subverts this framework, distinguishing itself as a non-Aristotelian ethic of virtue. 3) What are the benefits and shortcomings of providing concrete examples for this project? The discussions of asceticism and sacred reading are inevitably embedded in tensions, including those of the devaluation of the body, the problem of exclusivity, and the risk of actions devolving into empty gestures. Before assessing whether this project has delivered on its promises by evaluating and situating its contributions and shortcomings, I will briefly recap each chapter and its conclusions.

1.1 – Project Recapitulation

Chapter 1 introduced this project as one that both lauds and critiques virtue ethics. On the one hand, I distinguished virtue ethics as a theological corrective to deontological and consequentialist ethics. Virtue ethics is favorable in that it gives sufficient weight to the inner motives, moral dispositions, and formations of character of any given individual or community. Virtue ethics focuses on inner transformation and the creation of “good” people. While the qualifications of particular actions are still important in that they express and form character,
they are not the sole focus for an ethic of virtue as they would be in other leading ethical systems. Virtue ethics, in this light, is an especially suitable lens by which to view an Orthodox Christian ethical model of spiritual struggle with an *epektatic* orientation.

On the other hand, virtue ethics carries with it some complexities that are in turn mitigated by the model of spiritual struggle and *epektasis*. The first complexity, which will be discussed more fully later in this chapter, concerns Aristotle’s conceptions of the ideal moral agent and the unity of the virtues. The second issue in virtue ethics addressed is the issue of the relationship between circumstance and effort, that is, the issue of moral luck. Spiritual struggle, instead, shifts the focus on virtue from *attainment* to *pursuit*. This shift, in placing an emphasis on effort over attainment, renders the *pursuit* rather than the *acquisition* of virtue accessible to all. Spiritual struggle is a universal call to holiness that destabilizes the importance of luck and that acknowledges the universality of vice. The third problem in virtue ethics regards the risk of self-centeredness and the self-effacement of virtue. These issues are resolved by the inherent reorientation to God in the model of perpetual progress. The model of *epektasis* insists that God is the goal of spiritual struggle; the acquisition of virtue is a consequence of this pursuit of God, which in effect captures the essence of Christianity’s chief commandments of love of God and neighbor. Finally, Chapter 1 addressed the grace and works debate, placing this project as a model of divine-human co-agency or grace-enabled struggle that steers clear of Pelagianism, on one end of the spectrum, and antinomianism on the opposite end. This project only concludes 1) that works are needed—not the *amount* of works needed, that is, without attempting to determine the precise proportion of human works in the economy of Jesus Christ’s salvation; 2) what these works might look like in a model of spiritual struggle and perpetual progress; and 3) and *why* this model of human effort, in its relation to God, is critical to a Christian virtue ethic.
In chapter 2, I took up the task of defining spiritual struggle and delimiting its parameters. Spiritual struggle in this project is defined as the exertion of effort in all conceivable dimensions—physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual—with intent to attain a semblance of, knowledge of, and intimacy with Jesus Christ in community, for God and for others. Spiritual struggle can involve God, one’s own fleshly desires, or extra-personal forces. At the same time, spiritual struggle is not to be conflated with oppression or suffering. Furthermore, I demonstrated that this conception of spiritual struggle is inherently communal.

I continued the chapter by examining the contributions of a wide breadth of thinkers to the discussion of spiritual struggle. Though differences were noted, Aristotle recognizes the transformative nature inherent to struggle. The Stoics doctrinally denied the value of struggle, although they were aware of a contradiction between their experiences and their theories: moral progress was in fact contingent on moral struggle. What the Patristic era contributed to the conversation was an acknowledgement for the need for grace in the pursuit of virtue. In concert with this grace, spiritual struggle requires sustained and intensive effort with full human agency. Examining the Western medieval mystics allowed me to demonstrate the immense conceptual and experiential overlap between them and the earlier Eastern writers regarding spiritual struggle. Spiritual struggle is an ethic vastly attested to historically and is valuable contemporarily. These Western mystics eventually came to similar tripartite structures of spirituality as did Gregory: purgation, the acquisition of virtue, and unity with God. Next, Søren Kierkegaard’s *Anfægtelse* came closest to describing the exact concept of spiritual struggle in its fundamental orientation to God, despite the variety of potential sources of spiritual struggle. Lastly, similar to an emphasis by Kierkegaard, Elder Paisios highlights the importance of intentionality regarding spiritual struggle. Paisios captures the essence of Gregory’s perpetual
progress, presenting a cycle between God’s grace, an increase in purity, a realization of one’s own weakness, and complete submission to God.

Chapter 3 begins with a brief discussion of Gregory’s theological methodology and certain philosophical positions in his time which his theory of *epektasis* engaged. The chapter then explores Gregory’s primary sources from which the modern concept of *epektasis* emerges, including his *De Perfectione, Commentary on the Beatitudes, Commentary on the Psalms, Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and *De Vita Moysis*. In analyzing and interpreting the Cappadocian’s model, I presented a basic three-tiered conception of perpetual progress, beginning with purification and detachment from fleshly passions, strengthening the soul by increasing in similitude to God, and ending with unity with God, that is, in unutterable though real and transformative experience of God. Experientially, I described this journey as a non-linear spectrum, meaning that at any stage in the ascent, a person may be susceptible to reverting to lower parts of the spectrum. That the *epektatic* journey is not linear implies the need for the sustained effort of spiritual struggle and for sustained grace. Finally, the center of this journey is God, the orienting principle. God is infinite, God is Good, and God is the Paragon of virtue. These principles in turn begin addressing the issues of self-centeredness and the self-effacement of virtue. Moreover, the unity of the virtues is found only in God, and the more progress one makes on the *epektatic* journey, the more this unity is also reflected in that person.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide concrete examples of this Orthodox ethical model as applied, respectively, to the body in the practice of asceticism and as applied to Scripture in the practice of sacred reading. The first component of this model—spiritual struggle—as envisioned in this project, can be applied to all different aspects of Christian life. Asceticism, then, as the application of spiritual struggle to the body, emerged as a microcosm of the theory of
epektasis—the second component of this model. In surveying numerous ancient Christian texts on asceticism, three stages emerged—sexual purity or chastity, angelification or restoration to primordial humanity, and receiving the indwelling of God—that parallel the three stages of epektasis noted above. Important to the second component of this model is the orientation of the sojourner toward God. Orienting one’s spiritual struggle toward God is what leads to progress on this journey and is what renders the acquisition of virtue secondary to love of God and neighbor. Moreover, in pairing a recovery of ancient Christian asceticism with this ethical model, a form of asceticism emerged that is suitable for and accessible to the twenty-first century Christian. In brief, the contemporary ascetic, not necessarily limited to the monastic setting, is one in whom all of the Old Testament, Second Temple, apocalyptic, and apocryphal concepts, images, archetypes, and rituals become internalized and embodied.

In chapter 5, after sorting through a variety of contemporary approaches to Scripture, I offered some Patristic exegetical methods to Scripture that overlap with some of the contemporary approaches. The three main methods that emerged included reading Scripture holistically as a coherent unit, with a focus on virtue and character formation, and in community. These suggestions, however, were only part of the larger puzzle of the sacred reading developed in this chapter. The three stages of sacred reading developed in this chapter, paralleling the three stages of epektasis, are reflective of the application of spiritual struggle applied to the task of reading Scripture. In the first stage, one is vulnerable, is humble, places trust in the text as the Word of God, and is open to the methods of typology and allegory. This stage includes most modern academic approaches to Scripture but certainly goes beyond these suggestions to a relational reading of Scripture as God’s transformative word. The second stage consists of a prayerful, meditative struggle for inner purity and embodiment of the text read. The more this
embodiment is enacted and purity is attained, the greater clarity one attains in interpreting Scripture. The final stage of a struggle-filled sacred reading oriented towards God is complete submersion in God’s word. In this stage, the text of Scripture itself becomes part and parcel of a person’s everyday speech. In a sense, people in this stage breath Scripture, relying on its guidance, receiving from it peace and illumination, and spreading it unceasingly through their words and actions.

2 – Outstanding Concerns

In the remainder of this chapter, I will analyze whether I delivered on the promises made at the outset of this project, address some concerns that could have developed throughout the course of this project, and point out potential shortcomings in this project. This concluding chapter will proceed in three main sections. The first is related to the premise of this project as an Orthodox Christian contribution to virtue ethics. My primary concern in this section will be to determine whether I delivered on the promise of offering a distinctly Orthodox Christian ethic and clarifying what, if anything, this ethic might offer a contemporary (Christian) reader. This discussion will naturally lead into the second point of discussion in this chapter—this project’s relation to and potential deviation from Aristotle. In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss my reasoning for and the value of looking at concrete practices of spiritual formation and habituation, while anticipating potential criticisms or concerns regarding the specific practices selected.
2.1 – Orthodox Christianity & Virtue Ethics

In my estimation, the broad and relatively underdeveloped field of Orthodox Christian ethics is characterized most notably by two assertions. The first—discussed in detail in chapter 5—is the inherent integrative nature of Orthodox ethics. This perspective maintains that ethics cannot be separated from any other part of life but must be considered as part of a single fabric of life.740 Most important in this integrity is the unity between ethics or actions, on one hand, and faith or beliefs, on the other. For this reason, many Orthodox Christian ethicists will begin with or at least devote much attention to matters of theology proper (doctrine, liturgy, etc.), rooted in Patristic writings, when presenting ethical stances.741 Methodologically, this project is more a result of practice than of identity. In other words, the integrative method of this project results not out of a desire to stay true to Orthodox methodology but out of a need to present an ethical model that is not divorced from an entire worldview that includes, theology, motives, dispositions, beliefs, traditions, actions, worship, etc. In a word, Orthodox Christians conceive of ethics as resulting from the principle task of uniting with God, which leads to the second hallmark of Orthodox ethics.

God is the central orienting principle by which determinations surrounding good and evil, right and wrong, and virtue and vice are made. More than this, it is the active, dynamic, and unpredictable pursuit of God that dictates, and often convolutes, Orthodox Christian ethics. It is because of the centrality of this pursuit in Orthodox ethics that I developed the concept of spiritual struggle for this project. Spiritual struggle for the Orthodox Christian is consistent, sincere, and humble. It is a struggle that is persistent and does not relent despite the difficulties

that may arise. It is *sincere* in its attempt to pursue God as a Being able to be experienced and known, yet mysterious and unable to be fully grasped. It is a *humble* struggle in its communal model of discipleship to spiritual elders, in its fundamental ecclesiology, and in its submission to God Himself as the principle Guide on the journey. Thus, this Orthodox model would not be complete without the concept of *epektasis* that provides the basis for this orientation. Gregory of Nyssa’s theory of perpetual progress was one Patristic model, among others, by which to convey the pursuit of God as an eternal journey that begins now and continues in the afterlife, and by which to make a case for the necessary integrity between ethics and theology proper. Thus, while it may be the case that each of the components of this project exist in non-Orthodox scholarship, I maintain that the combination of these concepts is distinctively Orthodox not only in academic theory but in popular practice among Orthodox faithful. This project is, in a sense, a conceptual transliteration of Orthodox praxis.

On the topic of perpetual ascent to God, it is worth noting a mild disagreement between Orthodox theologians. Orthodox Christian theology or Orthodox Christian ethics are often made synonymous with that of Eastern Orthodoxy. Despite the majority of Orthodox writings in the West coming from Eastern Orthodox authors, there has been a recent increase in and influence from Oriental Orthodox authors in the academy. I mention this here as a reflection of my choice of language in describing the third stage of the process of *epektasis*. The language of *thesis* or deification, which I have attempted to avoid, tends to be problematic, or at the very least requires thorough elaboration. Some polemics between Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy have arisen from the use of this term. More specifically, one must clarify that when discussing deification, it is not implied that a person becomes God in His very nature or essence.\(^\text{742}\)

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\(^{742}\) Many Eastern Orthodox theologians agree with this clarification. For examples, see Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love : Essays in Orthodox Ethics*. 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 14; and
Discussing the nature of God in relation to humans seems to be more an *apophatic*, rather than *cataphatic*, discussion. This is what Kallistos Ware, an eminent Eastern Orthodox theologian and bishop, asserts in the distinction between God’s unknowable essence and His knowable energies:

Because God is a mystery beyond our understanding, we shall never know his essence or inner being, either in this life or in the Age to come. If we knew the divine essence, it would follow that we knew God in the same way as he knows himself; and this we cannot ever do, since he is Creator and we are created. But, while God’s inner essence is for ever beyond our comprehension, his energies, grace, life and power fill the whole universe, and are directly accessible to us. … When a man knows or participates in the divine energies, he truly knows or participates in God himself, so far as this is possible for a created being. But God is God, and we are human; and so, while he possesses us, we cannot in the same way possess him.  

God as totally Other, cannot be known in His nature and essence, though humans can participate in Him, grow in knowledge of Him, and unite with Him. I have also tended toward the language of “union” because it carries with it the centrality of the *epektatic* process with a focus on God himself and less of a focus on the individual herself, which ultimately helps in guarding against a tendency toward self-centeredness in the acquisition of virtue. Instead, humans acquire a semblance of certain characteristics of God by fulfilling an inner, latent potentiality referred to as *likeness* to God. This semblance of and likeness to God is synonymous with participation in Him and union with Him. It is a union that is always incomplete, always dynamic, and always the *telos* of an Orthodox ethic, both Eastern and Oriental.

Because of the two hallmarks of Orthodox Christian ethics—its theologically interdisciplinary integration and its emphasis of God as *telos*—Orthodoxy experiences a unique relationship with virtue ethics. On one hand, virtue ethics seems to be the most fitting Western

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Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*. Classics Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 22, 74, 109, 125.

743 Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 22.
ethical model by which Orthodoxy can join contemporary discussions of ethics. Similar to the field of virtue ethics, Orthodoxy is concerned primarily with a holistic way of life that emphasizes the formation of agents and communities of character and virtue. The Patristic heritage that is so formative for Orthodox thought is very much concerned with the acquisition of virtue by means of habituation in goodness. In a two-way process, one is to become loving, pure, holy, generous, patient, etc. in order to make good decisions, form good character, and to transform inner dispositions. Vice versa, one is to form good character and inner dispositions in order to perform the actions and acquire the habits necessary to grow in virtue. In this way, it is easy to see, and it was my aim in chapter 1 to demonstrate in detail, how virtue ethics is a fitting field for Orthodox ethics.

On the other hand, in developing this project, utilizing virtue ethics as the most fitting model required a concomitant subversion of virtue. Certainly the acquisition of virtue in an Orthodox model is considered an excellency, and it could even be considered one of the teloi within the epektatic journey. However, as this project maintains, the acquisition of virtue is only an inherent excellence insofar as this acquisition is understood as participation in God and growth in union with Him. The principle task of an Orthodox Christian ethic is becoming like God by loving God and loving neighbor. In this process, the acquisition of virtue and the formation of good habits function as markers in the pursuit of God. In other words, a person can confirm that she is properly oriented to God if she is acquiring virtue on a path of positive moral transformation.

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744 See Joseph Woodill’s important work *The Fellowship of Life: Virtue Ethics and Orthodox Christianity*, Moral Traditions and Moral Arguments Series (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998), in which he creates space for the discussion of virtue ethics and Orthodox Christianity.
While it is possible that focusing on habituation in goodness and in virtuous actions as ends in themselves can and does lead people and communities to this knowledge of God, the assertion of this project as a contribution of Orthodox Christian ethics to virtue ethics is that the value of the acquisition of virtue is minimized outside of a grace-filled, salvific, temporarily struggle-laden, perpetual life with God. This life—eternal life—with God begins here and now and continues in the afterlife. It is a life that is disinterested with one’s own righteousness, virtuosity, or goodness apart from God. It is a life that is critical of the value of virtue, and therefore of a model of virtue ethics whose purview does not extend beyond the scope of virtue. This is of the most direct contributions that the Orthodox ethical model of this project makes. Virtue ethics provides a critical shift away from overemphases on rules, principles, and obligations and towards the transformation of people of goodness, virtue, and character. Yet, virtue is to be lauded and pursued through spiritual struggle primarily as a means to communion with God, at times, and as a result of this union, at other times.

2.2 – Aristotle: Similarities, Differences, and Implications

Though I have suggested some differences between this project and Aristotle’s ethics, I still consider myself to be working within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. It is important, then, to further clarify the exact relationship between this project and Aristotle’s ethics. Sharpening this relationship will in effect sharpen the contributions of this project, especially as a departure from an Aristotelian virtue ethic. In this section, further implications that result from these departures will emerge clearly. Specifically, there are seven points of comparison that will be highlighted below:

1. One affinity between this project and a virtue ethics steeped in Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics is the formation of one’s appetites. The appetitive part of the irrational soul, in an
Aristotelian-Thomistic framework, should be brought under the control of reason. Similarly, in this project, one is expected to detach from or overcome the base or fleshly desires of pleasure, i.e. the appetite in order to progress through spiritual struggle toward the strengthening of soul. Another affinity is the emphasis on virtue as a settled condition of character. For Aristotle, virtues are states that arise out of like activities. Virtues are not emotions or capacities but states that make a person good and allow that person to person a task well. In this project, virtue is also considered a state of character instead of an emotion or capacity. The emphasis on the *epektatic* journey has been one in which a person makes progress only insofar as that person’s state of character or virtuousness transforms into a better state.

A nuance in this project, however, is that the formation of character and progression is construed in a more dynamic way in which each consecutive state is always incomplete. More than this, while Aristotle’s ethics exhibit a similar dynamism, especially in a person’s growth through habituation, Aristotle’s *teloi* are fixed. For Aristotle, ethics is modeled on his understanding of natural processes of change, and yet human nature itself is given and fixed. The virtues as a fulfillment of human nature—and thus the ends of his ethic—are fixed, though the process to those ends are dynamic. For Gregory, the end is dynamic, which in turn shapes the journey itself. The paradox between simultaneously and perpetually being complete and incomplete is the essence of Gregory’s theory of *epektasis*. This paradox also captures how on the one hand, this project agrees with an Aristotelian-Thomistic framework in which virtue is a settled state of character, and disagrees on the other hand, asserting a constant dynamism inherent to the journey toward God. Gregory’s account relies less on a settled account of human

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746 Ibid., 239.
747 Ibid., 244.
nature or its ends, making it more amenable to concerns about who gets to stipulate what gives
characterize human nature.

2. To continue, habituation through practicing the good is central to both an Aristotelian-
Thomistic ethic and to this project. Character grows through habit; the virtues are perfected
through habit. The persistence inherent to the concept of spiritual struggle is premised on this
notion of habituation. The more one practices the good with consistency and determination, the
more one becomes good. One difference to note is that in this project’s model, the process of
habituation is also infused with grace, so that the desire, ability, and energy to do the good and
persist in the good in enabled by divine grace. Moreover, the types of actions at which spiritual
struggle aims are specific in their orientation towards God. That is, in order to determine the
proper actions for habituation, one must orient oneself toward God, and in this project, this
orientation has often resulted in a practice that is familiar to Christian living, e.g. disciplining the
body, reading Scripture, praying, etc. This process, while extending beyond Aristotle’s non-
theistic account, encompasses all of Aristotle’s conditions for acts to become virtues: the agent
must have knowledge, must choose the acts, must choose the acts for their own sakes, must
perform the actions in the way that those who possess that virtue perform the actions, and must
do the action and not just philosophize about them.748

3. There exist, of course, a number of differences between this project and an
Aristotelian-Thomistic account of ethics. For Aristotle, the good life is natural to humans, that is,
it fulfills our nature, which is defined by reason. In this project, however, there is a tension that
exists because fallen human nature in Gregory’s conception and in contemporary Orthodox
circles has been saved, is being saved, and will be saved. Human nature has been saved through

748 Ibid., 243.
Jesus Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. It is being saved through human participation in divine grace. It will be saved at Jesus Christ’s Second Coming from the heavens for the final judgment. Thus, it is a challenge to discuss human nature in this project with precision. Similar to Aristotle, the good life is natural to humans, and the good does fulfill human nature. God, the Good Himself, is the perfect fulfillment of human nature and the guiding principle of this ethic. Thus, growth in good and unity with God, are natural to humans, that is, they fulfill human nature. However, that human nature is at the same time fallen implies that what at times may seem “natural” to humans is in fact contrary to human nature. Any number of vices can become disguised under this pretense, including anger, pride, lust, and selfishness, among others. It is this part of human nature—the part that at times miscalculates or improperly assesses what is natural to itself—that requires transformation. Thus, while this project has tended toward the language of transformation, it has been only in reference to the fallenness that is currently integral to human nature. This does not imply that human nature is not essentially good and that growth in the good does not fulfill our nature. Instead, this project acknowledges a tension between the innate goodness of human nature, the fallenness of that nature, the restoration of this nature in Jesus Christ’s economy of salvation, the transformation of a person on earth through grace-enabled struggle, and the eschatological perpetuity of this transformation in the afterlife.

Thus, this project emphasizes the alignment of human nature with good, as does Aristotle’s ethics, and yet it goes beyond Aristotle’s conception of human nature. For Aristotle, it is within human capacity to align oneself with the good. Since the good life is natural to humans, through reason a person can come through her own power to a realization of this latent potentiality. A person is limited only by knowledge, choice, circumstance, and habituation. On
the contrary, in this project’s emphasis on transformation, there is a realization that the human ability to align themselves with the good is limited. While on the one hand, humans can and must struggle to become good, on the other hand, virtue will never be completely secured without divine grace. It is easy to become dejected when a person does not reach certain levels of virtuousness, but the realization that the process toward virtue is a grace-enabled, progressive, and transformative struggle lifts some of the responsibility off the shoulders of any given agent. As muscular as this ethic of persistent struggle may be, there is always the other side of the coin in which humans can only do so much. Thus, Aristotle’s non-theistic account carries with it a greater burden on the human agent in the process of acquiring virtue than does this project’s account.

4. To continue the discussion of the differences between these two ethical systems, Aristotle reinforces social values of his culture and class, and while this project does not counter contemporary social values explicitly or in a description of Aristotle’s ethics, there is a focus on formation in some counter-cultural ways. For one, this project presents struggle as a good. Of course, the definitions and nuances presented in chapter 2 are key qualifications for this statement, but the idea of struggle as a good may not immediately appeal to popular modern conceptions of the good life. Yet, as demonstrated, recovering the association between spiritual struggle and the good life are critical for the formation of people of virtue contemporarily. Next, regarding proper relation to the body, the elevation of asceticism is counter-cultural. Most cultures and times are concerned with relating properly to the body, and this is certainly the case contemporarily. However, the rigor with which the early Church promoted control and discipline of the body might come as a surprise to modern sentiments. Disciplining the body is instrumental
to the reordering of one’s love to God and neighbor, and the form of God-ward, struggle-laden asceticism in this project could be received as a disruption to current Western culture.

Also counter-cultural is the move away from historical criticism as a principle means by which to approach a sacred text. This move is important in its call to recover pre-modern relations with sacred texts as portals into the good life, the divine life. Sacred texts do not simply provide instructions or suggestions for ethical living but are directly responsible for character formation. These texts also allow people to assimilate into generations of communities who have been formed by and who continue to form that text. Similarly, this project construes virtue in a way that is counter-cultural. Progress in virtue and in emulation of God is prioritized over attainment of virtue. In the same vein, the acquisition of virtue becomes secondary to unity with God. Although the counter-cultural nature of this project may make its reception more difficult, it may also be the case that the fresh, and in many ways recovered, perspective in this project carries with it greater potential of exacting change. At the very least, the counter-cultural nature of this project is a result of an interdisciplinary approach that aims to mend systematic theology, spirituality, and ethics—disciplines that have tended toward separation in modernity.

5. The next difference, which can potentially fall into the counter-cultural category, is arguably the most difficult challenge for this project to face. With a rapid increase in religious pluralism and religious tolerance in the West, the universalism that characterizes an Aristotelian-Thomistic ethic is rather appealing. Virtue ethics in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition has some real value when it highlights a common humanity and therefore contributes to ethical universalism instead of the particularism that seems to be stressed in this project. I will not deny the benefits of this ethical universalism, but I will also not deny the potential benefits of the particularism of this project. In this project, virtue is defined through a recorded account of a
Person and through continued personal and communal relationship with this Person. To grow in intellectual and intimate knowledge with this Person is to embark on the journey toward virtue. Theology becomes ethics, and vice verse. What is universal about this ethic is that anyone who so wishes may enter into relationship with this Person who is the dynamic guiding principle of this ethic. Further, the specifics of this ethic, since they are located in God Himself, are not entirely determined by culture. This means that certain values and virtues of this ethic are common to all humanity, pervading throughout time, not at the behest of cultural relativism. The problem of the particularism of this project is also assuaged by the concreteness that this ethic offers. Not only does it locate the Holy Trinity as its orienting principle, but it defines ethical actions through a specific kind of spiritual struggle applied to certain ecclesial categories. What may appear as a constraint in this ethic is in fact a more robust directive. This ethic is, before anything, pragmatic. Aristotle recognizes the importance of putting into action what one philosophizes about, but it is questionable whether his ethic functions as that bridge between the theoretical and the pragmatic.

6. There are additional differences discussed more explicitly in the first three chapters. Aristotle’s conception of virtue is centered on one’s own goodness. Virtue is acquired for the self and for its own sake as an innate excellence. This view makes room for the issues of self-centeredness and the self-effacement of virtue, already detailed in previous chapters. Briefly, with an emphasis on the self’s own goodness in an Aristotelian ethic, it is not difficult for the ethic to devolve into self-centeredness. Similarly, pursuing virtue for its own sake, without God as the ultimate purpose for or Paragon of that virtue, risks the self-effacement of virtue. In other words, vices such as selfishness, hubris, and complacency, among others often accompany virtue when it is pursued for its own sake. The effect, then, is that as virtue is acquired for its own sake,
it is sometimes countered by unexpected vices. This project, in contrast, decenters the object of
the pursuit of the good life. No longer are the self’s own goodness or virtue the objects of living
a good life. Instead, the good life is envisioned as the eternal and struggle-laden pursuit of
Godlikeness through love of God and love of neighbor. Virtue, in this model, becomes secondary
to life with God.

7. Next, and more pressing, is the issue of perfectionism. It seems that both Aristotle and
this project present an ethic of perfectionism, and yet I maintain that one departure of this project
from Aristotle’s ethics is concerning this very perfectionism. A number of differences are clear
between both of these perfectionist models. For Aristotle, perfection in virtue is a telos that can
be realized through human faculties and potentialities. It is within the power of a human being, in
so far as the proper circumstances are in place, to acquire the virtues, through hard work and
processes of habituation, potentially to an idealized or perfected state. However, the Christian
concept of divine grace detailed in this project pushes against this ideal of perfectionism. What it
means in this project for a Christian to be perfect is discussed below, but preliminarily,
perfection requires a divine grace that both initiates and sustains the acquisition of virtue and the
process toward perfection. Without divine grace, the pursuit of perfection is impossible.

To continue, Aristotle’s ideal of perfection is one that can only be realized on this earth,
here and now. Certainly, the Orthodox Christian model presented here utilizes a high Christian
eschatology in which the road to perfection begins here and now and continues indefinitely, even
and especially after death. This is precisely a consequence of the model of epektasis. Perfection
as full virtuousness is never entirely attained, nor does it need to be attained. Instead, in this
Orthodox model, perfection is understood as a dynamic ascent not as a completed summit. In this
model, it is a given that the acquisition of all virtues will never be attained, and this leads to the third main difference between the two conceptions of perfection.

For Aristotle, the acquisition of all of the virtues is a requisite for perfection. This dimension of Aristotle’s perfection is a consequence of the unity of the virtues. To lack a single virtue is to not fully possess any virtue. In the same vein, in order to possess any single virtue in its perfect state, one must attain all the others virtues. For Gregory, and thus for the model presented in this project, the fullness of all the virtues is found only in the Paragon of Virtues Himself—God. God, the telos of this ethical model, is the One in whom the unity of the virtues resides, and the more one grows in unity with God, the more one’s virtues become complete. In a sense, one can potentially argue that the unity of the virtues is, albeit in different ways, the ultimate goal of both models. However, to understand the perpetual ascent and spiritual struggle as a pursuit of the unity of the virtues would be to miss the essence of the model. Not only is this model centered on God as a Person and Being, but also the unattainability of the unity of the virtues is an essential component of this model.

Earlier I criticized the Aristotelian ideal of the unattainable virtuous agent, and yet it would seem that the Orthodox model falls into this same problem. However, the two “unattainabilities” are quite different, and the difference rests in their contrasting expectations. The expectation for Aristotle is for the actualization of a state of perfection that I am claiming is necessarily outside of the capabilities of a human being. Again, human faculties and potentialities are incapable of ever reaching a state of perfection in virtue, and yet this expectation remains critical to Aristotle. On the other hand, the unattainability of virtue in this project’s model is intentional and must be realized by any person embarking on the journey. While perfection is pursued, it is with an understanding that simply growing towards God is
perfection. It requires, in a sense, redefining in relation to humans what perfection implies; perfection proper is a state that only belongs to God.

In a 1953 sermon by Bishop John Maximovich, a canonized Russian Orthodox saint, he captures the very essence of this mode of perfection as that of a struggler, as opposed to a victor. He writes,

God's grace always assists a struggler, but this does not mean that a struggler is always in the position of a victor; sometimes the beasts did not touch the righteous ones, but by no means did they not touch them always. What is important is not victory or the position of a victor, but rather the labor of striving towards God and devotion to Him. Great is the Apostle Paul. … The Lord wants from the apostle the striving which cleanses his soul. … The power of God is effective when a person asks for the help of God, acknowledging the weakness and sinfulness of his nature. This is why humility and the striving towards God are the fundamental virtues of a Christian.749

The sustained effort of spiritual struggle is the measure of success, not the posture of victory or reaching a supposed state of perfection. A person in the epektatic model should never expect to reach a final state. It is a journey that is inherently unattainable, on one hand, but that is always being attained, on the other hand. The differences regarding expectation, discussed above, on which I have insisted throughout this project, lead to the differences in accessibility between these two ethics.

In each of the ways mentioned above, the reframing of perfectionism in the Orthodox ethical model renders it more accessible than Aristotle’s model of perfectionism. Grace, as a free gift, and in this model as a free gift bestowed on all, means that all people have the option of responding to or rejecting this gift. It is this grace that aids in the process that otherwise seems burdensome and at times impossible. Even if in this model one is cognizant of the fact that the pursuit of God and virtue is more important than the acquisition of virtue, the task at hand can

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seem insurmountable. Yet, grace is one component of this model that leaves it within grasp of any person, in contrast to Aristotle’s emphasis on human faculties. Even with the emphasis on spiritual struggle in this project, I made it clear at the outset that this emphasis was not reflective of how important works are in relation to grace. Instead, I chose to demonstrate that since works are important at least to some extent, that an *epektatic* model of spiritual struggle is a helpful retrieval of Orthodox and Patristic methods of reorientation to the source of virtue Himself. In other words, an egalitarian Christian schema of grace creates a more accessible ethic than an ethic void of grace.

Suggesting a model that is both egalitarian and perfectionistic creates a more accessible and attainable ethic. The goal of this project is egalitarian in its move to emphasize the moral and religious value of sincere efforts to love God, and is perfectionistic in stressing the need to strive endlessly. This project is both an effort to recognize the moral value of flawed persons striving to love God better and a project that distinguishes and elevates those who struggle in contrast to those with more muddled and mediocre hearts. Paradoxical as it may seem, the goal is to promote the value of struggle despite a person’s particular situation. Those who do not struggle are encouraged to embark on the journey of spiritual struggle to God, and at the same time, those who struggle are indeed elevated above those who do not, not on the basis of a fixed, absolute scale, but in relation to each person’s circumstance. In this sense, circumstances become less, not more, relevant, in that they are no longer primary hurdles in the face of any person’s acquisition of virtue. There is no doubt that circumstances will always play some role in one’s ability to acquire virtue. However, since the concept of spiritual struggle shifts the focus from the *acquisition* to the *pursuit* of virtue, to embark on the journey of spiritual struggle is within the reach of most, if not all, people.
This point is not an invitation to neglect certain circumstances that are otherwise comprised of injustice or oppression of any sort, which has already been addressed and will be further addressed below. The point here is that in Aristotle’s ethic there is perhaps too much at stake regarding circumstances. In contrast, in this project, spiritual struggle is relative to one’s own circumstances; there are no circumstances in which the pursuit of virtue and thus of perfection are outside of reach. To be sure, a potential limitation of this project is that there can be no way of determining the complex relationship between, circumstance, spiritual struggle, and proximity to God, but this assessment is ultimately not the job of humans but of God as Just Judge.

Finally, the point of accessibility or attainability, which in my assessment should be central to any proposed ethic, is further bolstered by the posture of this project’s ethic in relation to the unity of the virtues. This ethic is more accessible because of the more realistic and more pragmatically observed expectation of partial virtue. There is no expectation of actually becoming perfect or fully virtuous. Though true, it is not important that this view on the unity of the virtues is attractive since it does not call for a traditional or common understanding of perfectionism. What is important is that decentering the self, decentering virtue, reimagining the implications of perfection, deemphasizing circumstance, and reorienting towards God, the bestower of grace and the One in whom resides the unity of the virtues, all work together to create an ethic that is at the same time more accessible, more pragmatic, and in some ways more noble (in decentering one’s own goodness) than Aristotle’s ethic.
2.3 – Concrete Practices and Inevitable Tensions

Chapters 4 and 5 were attempts to deliver on the promise of providing examples of the implementation of this ethic, to demonstrate what an Orthodox virtue ethic looks like within two of the many components of Christian life. To provide concrete examples is important for any ethic, and especially for an ethic of virtue. It is not difficult to make an argument that a focus on virtue and character formation should take priority to other ethical systems. However, in making such a claim, it is easy to remain only theoretical and to fail in demonstrating the practical implementation of an ethic of virtue. For this reason, I presented two of the many embodied devotional practices that find their roots in Patristics and are common among Orthodox Christians contemporarily. The application of this ethical model to other practices is also not difficult to envision.

For example, a model of spiritual struggle in which a person is focused on growth in and unity with God can be implemented to the practice of prayer, as briefly discussed in the western mystics in chapter 2. Similar to the discussions in chapters 4 and 5, the first stage would include detaching from certain passions and overcoming any urge to pray lazily, insincerely, mechanically, etc. The second stage would be a stage full of refreshment, nourishment, and strengthening of a person who perseveres in prayer. The final stage includes those who have “wrestled” with God in prayer, as did Jacob, entrenching oneself in constant conversation with God. In this stage, a person attempts to obey the instruction to “pray without ceasing,”\(^750\) with certain techniques and with exercises in which a person practices being present to the perpetual presence of God. It is a stage in which a person’s life becomes a prayer, an offering to God. Again, similar to asceticism, sacred reading, and any other implementation of this ethical model,

\(^{750}\) 1 Thess. 5:17 (New Revised Standard Version).
these stages are not sharply delineated but form more of a spectrum that does not necessarily progress linearly. The implication of a non-linear spectrum is that a person is never exempt from struggle despite the deep stage that person may have reached. In all of these stages, a transformative process takes place in which a person becomes not only habituated to a good practice but becomes good in herself. The transformation of one’s character is a marker of this orientation to God, and perseverance through the stages taps into the full transformative potential of each practice. This same model can be applied to any number of Christian practices, including but not limited to repentance, fasting, meditation, and charity.

This project as a whole has been boldly interdisciplinary. This has allowed me to piece together an ethic that incorporates what are otherwise often separated pieces of the same puzzle. However, constructing a comprehensive ethic has also brought with it a difficulty in which it becomes impossible to sufficiently address all aspects of the various fields brought into conversation. This is one reason (other reasons belonging to the nature of the content itself) for some of the unresolved tensions in this project, which I will address in this section. Thus, while I believe to be advancing scholarship in virtue ethics, Patristics, spirituality, and Orthodox Christian theology, I am at the same time circumspect that in knitting together broad concepts and different disciplines, I do so in a way that is unavoidably embedded in tensions.

One tension in the discussion of asceticism concerns potentially interpreting the discussion of spiritual struggle and the body as an invitation to reinforce existing inequalities by promoting the virtues of grit and resilience. This issue is addressed most adequately in the discussion of spiritual struggle in chapter 2, and yet with the discussion of asceticism in chapter 4, there exists the potential for encouraging asceticism when people occupy different social conditions in which they can be encouraged to “offer up” their suffering as opportunities for
spiritual growth instead of working for more just and equitable conditions. Certainly, the intention behind the asceticism presented in this project would never be to promote such a view. First, as distinguished in chapter 2, spiritual struggle is not to be equated with suffering. While the former is voluntary, controlled, and aimed at intimacy with God and growth in virtue, the latter is involuntary, uncontrolled, and detrimental to a life of virtue and growth in God.

The idea behind asceticism, as I have hoped to present it, is not to devalue the body. The idea, instead, is to bring the body under control so as not to hinder the potential for deeper intimacy with God. The body, when overly indulged can become distracted from its true fulfillment, God. It is difficult to avoid what may seem like a body/soul dualism when reading some early Christian authors. However, it is because the body and soul are so intimately connected that curbing the passions has such a profound effect on the strengthening of the soul. In fact, asceticism in this sense is elevation, not devaluation, of the body. To promote asceticism is to admit that the body occupies a profound and central place in the spiritual journey. One is not to neglect the body for the sake of the soul; it would not work. Instead, one is to use the body appropriately for the sake of the soul.

To use the body well, in this project, is to allow the body to rise above base, fleshly desires and to orient the body God-ward, that is, as an instrument by which to grow in intimacy with God. Inequitable social conditions are never to be encouraged under the guise of asceticism, and the elevation of the entire person—body and soul—to God in this project is evidence of the need for both in the epektatic journey. Control over one’s body does not imply hatred towards the body, but on the contrary, it implies love for the health of the body, which is not manifested in situations of oppression, suffering, or unjust social conditions. Asceticism as love for the human being as an inseparable integration between body and soul is seen clearly in St.
Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii* in which St. Antony emerges from decades of austere asceticism and solitude at the age of 105 with a radiant and healthy body.

This entire project has been characterized as a specifically Christian virtue ethic, and the consequences of this distinction are especially pronounced in the discussion of sacred reading in chapter 5. It seems inevitable that tensions will arise in the face of this exclusivity. There are modes of this ethic that can be adopted pluralistically, but it is questionable whether the *epektatic* model works in a framework outside of Christianity. Spiritual struggle and striving are concepts certainly not exclusive to Christianity, but never in this project was the intention to divorce this struggle from the principle orientation to the God of Christianity who not only makes progress on this journey possible but who is the very *telos* of this ethic.

As a project that reclaims the integrity of theology proper and ethics, and as a project that distinguishes itself from other conceptions of virtue ethics with its emphasis on God as the end of the journey and virtue as a means and marker toward that end, it seems the application of this ethic is limited. However, Lisa Cahill puts it well when she writes, “Irreducible pluralism cannot result in decisive and consistent moral action.”751 Pluralism is good for dialogue, she continues, but sheer pluralism is not an adequate Christian moral response to the injustices in the world.752 Instead, and as mentioned previously, early Christian communities were able to balance between overlapping enough with other cultural communities’ conceptions of morality while still maintaining distinction and contribution.753 The tasks of Christians is to focus on what overlaps

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752Ibid., 11.
753Ibid., 12.
between other communities in relation to their own experiences with Christ. As such, Christ is an integral component of this ethic, without Whom the ethic would collapse.

Within the practice of sacred reading, Christ is presented as the interpretive key of Scripture. It is through Christ that Scripture is unlocked and the layers of the truth embedded therein begin revealing themselves. At the same time, submission to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in His ability to interpret for and transform the reader is central to this practice. God, as the believed Author of Scripture, an assertion central to Patristic exegetical methodology, is the One in whom a person should grow in order to read Scripture transformatively. Thus, while one could potentially envision extracting notions of spiritual struggle and even of tripartite schemas of detachment, strengthening, and unity with God outside of a specifically Christian worldview, when it comes to a specific application such as that of sacred reading, the God of Christianity becomes indispensable. In this way, as suggested by Cahill, I acknowledge the tension in this project as a balance between overlapping sufficiently with contemporary conceptions of virtue, goodness, struggle, and fortitude, while offering a distinctly Christian perspective in the experience of God.

A final tension worth mentioning is one that applies generally to religious and devotional practices. There will always exist the risk for a religious practice to devolve into an empty gesture. Though I have not fully developed a detailed account of the concept of sincerity, in this project I have often mentioned the concept of sincerity in effort and intention in order to counter this negative tendency. Admittedly, a shortcoming of this project’s emphasis on pure intention and sustained and sincere effort is that there is no way to measure or gauge any of these concepts. To complicate matters further, sincerity is often relative to circumstances, and there is no way to assess the complexity that lies within the multitude of various circumstances within
which any person can find himself. Gauging one’s sincerity is a complex, life-long process, similar to the journey of spiritual struggle itself. It is a process that requires self-awareness, humility, and dialogue, and discipleship, among others. Though this tension remains unresolved, it seems, then, that one should be less occupied with trying to gauge the level of one’s own or another’s sincerity and should instead focus on perpetually “straining forward.”754

3 – Conclusion

This Orthodox Christian contribution to virtue ethics, which is at the same time a contribution to Orthodox Christian ethics, is ultimately an attempt to express one model by which to imagine an ethic that is already at play for many Christians in the world. The hope is that this project articulates a transformative Christian ethic centered on God and by association on virtue. By focusing on concrete practices of asceticism and sacred reading the project opens new avenues for work in virtue ethics. Moreover, even conceiving of ethics as a perpetual ascent imbued with spiritual struggle contributes to the fields of theology and ethics. It is not only the case that the way a person acts determines who that person becomes, but the way a person thinks determines the way a person acts.

This project was also an attempt to organize aspects of the Christian spiritual journey, especially the Orthodox Christian journey, that might otherwise appear convoluted and disordered, while still leaving space for the complexity that remains an integral part of Orthodox spirituality. The modern renewal of virtue ethics has aptly carved space for this project as a recovery of and discourse with the ancients, who with ease made sense of their world using the language of virtue. As a retrieval of Patristic thought for contemporary practice, the system

754 Phil. 3:13 (NRSV).
described in this project is a “transliteration” of millennia of spiritually formative practices, tested, altered, and developed. In retrieving the concept of spiritual struggle in combination with Gregory of Nyssa’s concept of *epektasis*, and in suggesting the application of this system as a model for various aspects of contemporary Christian spirituality, my goal has been to offer a small contribution to this ongoing and long-lasting intellectual tradition and conversation.

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