

## Noetic Experience and the Morphology of Prayer: Evagrius Ponticus and the Greek Philosophical Tradition

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the role of prayer within the spiritual framework of Evagrius Ponticus, focusing particularly on his definitions and his significant notion of “pure prayer.” It aims to elucidate the nature and key function of this form of prayer within his ascetic and contemplative vision. By conducting a thorough textual analysis of Evagrius’s key writings and spiritual terminology, the study places his teachings within the historical context of early Christian spirituality and its engagement with Greek philosophical ideas. The article contends that Evagrius’s perspective of prayer as the preeminent function and genuine “state” of the intellect (*nous*) emphasizes the originality and relevance of his “imageless prayer” theory, positioning it as a central element in his mystical system.

**Keywords:** Evagrius Ponticus, intellect, contemplation, pure prayer, noetic experience, knowledge of God

### Introduction

This article investigates Evagrius Ponticus’ conception of prayer within his spiritual framework, focusing on distinctive definitions and the key notion of “pure prayer.” The primary objective is to elucidate the multifaceted nature of prayer articulated by this influential fourth-century Desert Father and highlight its central significance within his ascetical and contemplative vision. Through a thorough textual analysis of Evagrius’s principal treatises, including

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*De oratione*, *Skemmata*, and *Kephalaia Gnostika*, the study examines his specialized spiritual lexicon, with a notable focus on key terms such as *nous* (intellect), *theōria* (contemplation), and *noēmata* (representations). This examination is situated within the historical development of early Christian spirituality and addresses Evagrius's engagement with and reinterpretation of Greek philosophical elements. By conceptualizing prayer not merely as a text prayed or a request addressed to God but as the authentic activity, supreme function, and genuine "state" of the purified intellect, the author aims to demonstrate both the originality and enduring importance of Evagrius's theory of "imageless prayer." The article contends that this unique notion constitutes not simply one aspect among many but represents the culmination and driving impetus of Evagrius's mystical system, fundamentally shaping his understanding of the intellect's ascent to direct knowledge of God.

### Evagrius Ponticus as a mystic author

In the 20th century, two significant developments reshaped the modern perception of Evagrius Ponticus,<sup>1</sup> (345/6-399) one of the most prominent Desert Fathers of 4th-century Egypt<sup>2</sup> and, at the same time, "one of the most enigmatic and elusive figures of the early Christian centuries."<sup>3</sup>

The first was the unprecedented pace of the recovery of Evagrius's writings – not only those in the original Greek but also translations into ancient

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<sup>1</sup> The main historical sources referring to the biography of Evagrius Ponticus are: (1) Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 38 (ca. 420 AD); (2) Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.23 (ca. 440 AD); (3) Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.30 (mid-5th century AD) and a Coptic biography from the 5th century. Other sources include: the testament of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the anonymous work *Historia Monachorum* 20.15 (from the end of the 4th century), the anonymous work *Apophthegmata*, s.v. „Evagrius” (from the 4th/5th centuries), Gennadius, *De Viris Illustribus* 6.11 and 6.17, as well as Jerome, *Epistola* 133; *Dialogus adversus Pelagianos*, preface, and *Commentarius in Ieremiam* 4, preface. Cf. Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, "Evagrius Ponticus, the Origenian Ascetic (and Not the Origenistic 'Heretic')," in *Orthodox Monasticism Past and Present*, ed. John A. McGuckin (Gorgias Press, 2015), 159–224, <https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463236656-012>. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Evagrius and Gregory: Nazianzen or Nyssen? Cappadocian (and Origenian) Influence on Evagrius," *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 53, no. 1 (2013): 117–37.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the life, writings, and reputation of Evagrius, see Antoine Guillaumont, *Un philosophe au désert: Évagre le Pontique*, Textes et traditions 8 (Paris: Vrin, 2009), 13–74; Augustine Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy* (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9–71.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. David E. Linge, "Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius of Pontus," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2000): 537–68.

languages.<sup>4</sup> These translations played a crucial role, offering access, albeit through a linguistic filter, to texts that would otherwise have been lost to us.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they contributed decisively to identifying specific Greek works which, although traditionally attributed to other authors, are now recognized with certainty as the work of Evagrius. Critical research on Greek manuscripts has led to the publication of a significant number of volumes containing Evagrius's "notes" (*scholia*<sup>6</sup>) on various biblical texts, as well as his "chapters" (*képhalaia*<sup>7</sup>), in which key aspects of Christian monastic life are analyzed.<sup>8</sup>

From a relatively early date, Evagrius's writings were divided into those considered valuable from a spiritual perspective and those viewed as dangerous from a theological standpoint. Beginning in the 7th century, Evagrius's reputation was so severely compromised that many of his writings were transmitted to

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<sup>4</sup> Evagrius became the target of attacks even during his lifetime, and these intensified after his death, on January 6, 399; this explains the loss of many works in Greek and their survival only in ancient translations, especially in Syriac, but also in Armenian, Latin, and other languages. This survival exclusively in translations is especially true for his speculative works, while his ascetic works, generally considered more harmless, had a different fate. Cf. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Evagrius's Kephalaia Gnostica: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), xxiv–xxv.

<sup>5</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, trans. Robin Darling Young et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 13 sq.

<sup>6</sup> Evagrius describes his commentaries as belonging to the established genre of *scholia*, literally "marginal annotations", on successive, selected verses. See Luke Dysinger, "Evagrius Ponticus: The Psalter as a Handbook for the Christian Contemplative," in *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity, vol. 20 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 97–125.

<sup>7</sup> We usually translate *képhalaion* as "chapter", but this word should not be understood in the sense we give the term today. Unlike the chapters of a modern work, *képhalaia* are not part of a continuous discourse; the *képhalaion* is autonomous, and forms a self-contained whole, each being dedicated to a single subject. See Antoine Guillaumont, "Introduction," in *Sur les pensées*, by Évagre le Pontique, ed. Paul Géhin, Claire Guillaumont, and Antoine Guillaumont, Sources chrétiennes 438 (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 9–10.

<sup>8</sup> Especially those undertaken by Antoine Guillaumont, Claire Guillaumont, and Paul Géhin under the auspices of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris: Évagre le Pontique, *Traité pratique, ou, Le moine*, ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, vol. I, Sources chrétiennes 170 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971); Évagre le Pontique, *Traité pratique, ou, Le moine*, ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, vol. II, Sources chrétiennes 171 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971); Évagre le Pontique, *Le gnostique, ou, A celui qui est devenu digne de la science*, ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, Sources chrétiennes, no 356 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989); Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, ed. Paul Géhin, Claire Guillaumont, and Antoine Guillaumont, Sources chrétiennes 438 (Paris: Cerf, 1998); Évagre le Pontique, *Chapitres sur la prière*, ed. Paul Géhin, Sources chrétiennes 589 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2017); Évagre le Pontique, *Scholies aux Psaumes*, ed. Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, Paul Géhin, and Matthieu Cassin, vol. I (Psaumes 1-70), Sources chrétiennes 614 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2021); Évagre le Pontique, *Scholies aux Psaumes*, ed. Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, Paul Géhin, and Matthieu Cassin, vol. II (Psaumes 71-150), Sources chrétiennes 615 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2021); Évagre le Pontique, *Antirrhétique*, ed. Charles-Antoine Foglielman, Sources chrétiennes 640 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2024).

posterity under less suspect names,<sup>9</sup> while others were entirely lost, at least in their original Greek form. In this context, the separation between writings considered “acceptable” and those deemed “suspect” deepened further, generally drawn between what was perceived as “practical” and what was seen as “speculative.”<sup>10</sup>

Modern revisionist studies, through a critical re-evaluation of traditional paradigms, have come to view Evagrius’s work in a balanced way<sup>11</sup> encompassing both its speculative theological aspects and its ascetic, practical dimension.<sup>12</sup> This academic rehabilitation has also been accompanied by an ever-deeper awareness of Evagrius’s influence – not only as an essential figure in Syriac and Byzantine mysticism but also as one of the thinkers who definitively shaped Western mysticism and asceticism.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Evagrius’s treatise *On Prayer* was transmitted under the name of St. Nilus of Ancyra, *De oratione* J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, vol. 79 (Paris, 1865), 1166–1199. Following the studies of Irénée Hausherr, *De oratione* has been accepted as an authentic composition of Evagrius. See Irénée Hausherr, “Le *De Oratione* de Nil et Évagre,” *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 14 (1933): 196–98. Irénée Hausherr, “Le *Traité De l’Oraison* d’Évagre Le Pontique (Pseudo-Nil),” *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 15 (1934): 34–93; 113–70. Irénée Hausherr, “Le *Traité de l’Oraison* d’Évagre Le Pontique: Introduction, Authenticité, Traduction Française et Commentaire,” *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 35, 36 (1960 1959): 3–26, 121–46, 241–65, 361–85; 3–35, 137–87. Until recently, the treatise *On Thoughts* could be read either from volume 79 of the *Patrologia graeca* collection, edited by J.-P. Migne, 1200D–1233A, or from volume I of the famous *Philokalia* (Venice, 1782; new edition: Nicodemus the Hagiorite and Saint Makarios, *Φιλοκαλία τῶν νηπτικῶν συνερανισθεῖσα παρὰ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ θεοφόρων πατέρων ἡμῶν ἐν ἡ διὰ τῆς κατὰ τὴν Πρᾶξιν καὶ Θεωρίαν Ἑθικῆς Φιλοσοφίας ὁ νοῦς καθαίρεται, φωτίζεται, καὶ τελετοῦται*, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (Athens: Ἀστήρ, 1957), 44–57, the text being published under the name of Nilus of Ancyra and rendered in an incomplete and unequal form. Only the critical edition from 1998 (Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*.) offers, for the first time, the complete text of the treatise. W. Bousset discovered that the important dogmatic letter of St. Basil the Great, known as “The Eighth Letter”, was, in fact, written by Evagrius. His results were confirmed, independently, by the publication of the book by R. Melcher, which supports the same authorship of the letter. See Wilhelm Bousset, *Apophthegmata: Studien Zur Geschichte Des Ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), 335–41; Robert Melcher, *Der Achte Brief Des Hl. Basilius: Ein Werk Des Evagrius Pontikus*, Münsterische Beiträge Zur Theologie 1 (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1923), 1–4, 78–9. This letter, also known as *De fide* or *Epistula fidei*, is the earliest datable work of Evagrius and is considered evidence of his theological legacy. See Joel Kalvesmaki, “The *Epistula Fidei* of Evagrius of Pontus: An Answer to Constantinople,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2012): 113–39, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2012.0001>.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine Casiday, “Gabriel Bunge and the Study of Evagrius Ponticus: A Review Article,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2004): 249–97.

<sup>11</sup> Ramelli, *Evagrius’s Kephalalaia Gnostica*, xxix: “Evagrius’s thought must be approached in its entirety: it cannot be appreciated only for its ascetic insights and advice, while rejected for its metaphysical, protological, and eschatological Origenian implications.”

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Casiday, “Gabriel Bunge and the Study of Evagrius Ponticus: A Review Article,” 249, 251.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Pontikus,” *Zeitschrift für Askese und Mystik*, 1939, 31–47. (31): “Alongside this external rehabilitation, the growing realization

The vastness of the *Corpus Evagrianum* and the astonishing diversity of its themes were fully appreciated only in the modern era. Evagrius was recognized as “one of the most important names in the history of spirituality,” and his teaching was evaluated as “the first complete system of Christian spirituality.”<sup>14</sup>

Against the backdrop of increasing interest in researching the “Evagrian phenomenon”<sup>15</sup> and the expansion in the number of studies and translations, the Pontic monk has come to be viewed as “the first systematic”<sup>16</sup> theologian of the spiritual life”<sup>17</sup>, “among the most original mystical authors of Eastern Christianity,”<sup>18</sup> “and probably the most remarkable in all of Patristic literature.”<sup>19</sup>

Evagrius was a prolific writer.<sup>20</sup> His fundamental ideas, such as “imageless prayer,” the ascent of the intellect (*nous*) towards God, “the eight evil thoughts,”

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runs parallel that Evagrius is not only the almost unlimited ruler of the entire Syriac and Byzantine mysticism but has also influenced Western mysticism and asceticism in a quite decisive manner.” Cf. Antoine Guillaumont, *Les “Képhalaia gnostica” d’Évagre le Pontique et l’histoire de l’origénisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens*, Publications de la Sorbonne série patristica Sorbonensia 5 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962), 15: “Evagrius Ponticus left a work that ranks among the most vigorous and original of the 4th century. In it were expressed jointly, in a strange and powerful synthesis, the traditional and entirely empirical teachings of the first Desert Fathers, gathered and codified by a mind endowed with remarkable psychological subtlety, and perhaps the highest and boldest speculations ever conceived by a Christian theologian. The influence it exerted on the development of Christian ascetic and mystical doctrine was immense, in the West and even more so in the East, among the Syrians and the Greeks.”

<sup>14</sup> Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, trans. Mary P. Ryan (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 381. Bouyer mentions Wilhelm Bousset, who first drew attention to Evagrius’s importance in 1923. See Bousset, *Apophthegmata*, „Euagriosstudien”, 281–341 (281: “Evagrius, the interesting monk of the Scetic desert, whom we can call the initiator of monastic mysticism.”)

<sup>15</sup> Julia Konstantinovskiy, “Evagrius in the Philokalia of Sts. Macarius and Nicodemus,” in *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality*, ed. Brock Bingaman and Bradley Nassif (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 175.

<sup>16</sup> However, as G. Bunge states, Evagrius’s works do not have the character of a theological manual, and their author is by no means the straightforward “systematizer” he is often considered to be. Gabriel Bunge, “The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus,” in *Letters from the Desert*, by Evagrius Ponticus (Sibiu: Deisis, 2022), 126–75.

<sup>17</sup> William Harmless, “‘Salt for the Impure, Light for the Pure’: Reflections on the Pedagogy of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Studia Patristica* 37 (2001): 514–26.

<sup>18</sup> Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Noûς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” *Zeitschrift Für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 15, no. 2 (2011): 291–321. (291) Cf. William Harmless and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, “The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 3 (2001): 493–529. (498): „One of the pioneers of Christian mysticism.”

<sup>19</sup> Ramelli, “Evagrius Ponticus, the Origenian Ascetic (and Not the Origenistic ‘Heretic’),” 159.

<sup>20</sup> Columba Stewart, “Evagrius Ponticus and the Eastern Monastic Tradition on the Intellect and the Passions,” *Modern Theology* 27, no. 2 (2011): 263–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2010.01675.x>.

etc., were to influence Christian mystical spirituality essentially in both the Greek East and the Latin West.<sup>21</sup> Evagrius's spiritual teaching has significantly impacted the entire Christian spirituality in the East and the West, and one can rightly speak of an "Evagrian spirituality."<sup>22</sup>

G. Bunge<sup>23</sup> has shed light on several essential themes that define the key to Evagrian thought, revealing its fundamental mystical character, which recommends the desert father primarily as a mystic<sup>24</sup> and "much less" as a speculative philosopher.<sup>25</sup>

As a disciple of the Cappadocians and an admirer of Origen and his successor, Didymus the Blind, Evagrius attributes particular importance to the issue of Scripture interpretation. He practices spiritual exegesis and a "multidimensional reading of the word of God," which may seem confusing to modern people.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Harmless, "Salt for the Impure, Light for the Pure": Reflections on the Pedagogy of Evagrius Ponticus," 514.

<sup>22</sup> Hausherr, "Le *Traité De l'Oraison* d'Évagre Le Pontique (Pseudo-Nil)," 169.

<sup>23</sup> See Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 126 sq.

<sup>24</sup> Gabriel Bunge, "The Life and Personality of Evagrius Ponticus," in *Letters from the Desert*, by Evagrius Ponticus (Sibiu: Deisis, 2022), "§9. The Mystic," 88–102. Cf. Balthasar, "Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Pontikus," 31–47; Alois Dempf, "Evagrius Pontikos Als Metaphysiker Und Mystiker," *Philosophisches-Jahrbuch* 77 (1970): 297–319.

<sup>25</sup> For a view that interprets Evagrius's writings as "the first and most profound effort made by any of the Desert Fathers to correlate the techniques and fruits of Christian ascetic practice – as it had been developed in the Egyptian desert – with a kind of metaphysical map of the monk's journey back to God", cf. Linge, "Leading the Life of Angels," 538. For a general presentation of Evagrius's "metaphysics", see Guillaumont, *Les "Képhalaia gnostica" d'Évagre le Pontique*, 37–9. Trying to give systematic expression to Evagrius's thought, where the author himself refused to offer it, A. Guillaumont brings to the forefront ideas that are found in the *Képhalaia Gnostica*, but which appear there secondarily and are expressed "only in an allusive and veiled way" (37). In the beginning, there was a *henad*, a unity formed by the totality of rational beings (*logikoi*), pure intellects (*noes*), created to know God ("essential knowledge") and to be united with God, a non-numerical Trinity, but also Unity or Monad (37). Due to the negligence of these intellects, which weakened in "the contemplation of essential knowledge", a rupture of the original *henad* occurred, by which these intellects, fallen from Unity, became "souls" (*psychai*) (38). A new creation followed – of "secondary" or material beings – distinct from that of the *logikoi* – purely spiritual beings – a creation whose purpose was to unite each fallen intellect with a body and to place it in a world proportional to its degree of fall (38). Depending on the degree of beings and the nature of bodies, there are different types of contemplation: thick contemplation, proper to demons and impious people; "secondary natural contemplation," which properly belongs to humans (at least those who dedicate themselves to *praktikè* and work towards freeing themselves from passions); "primary natural contemplation," which corresponds to the angelic state and is accessible to people who have acquired *apatheia*; and above all is the knowledge of Unity, or "essential knowledge," reserved only for completely purified intellects. The intellect must ascend step by step from one contemplation to another – and thus salvation is fulfilled, by passing from one contemplation to a higher one (38).

<sup>26</sup> Evagrius practices allegorical, typological, tropical, and/or symbolic exegesis (cf. *Scholia on Psalms and Proverbs*). Origen set down in writing the four principles, which became classic, in *Peri Archon* IV. As for symbolism as a theory of religious language, and not just as an allegorical interpretation of Scripture, Evagrius owes much also to Clement of Alexandria, cf. Claude

Evagrius articulated his vision of the spiritual life around a tripartite model<sup>27</sup>, structured into three distinct stages: asceticism (*praktiké*), the

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Mondesert, "Le Symbolisme Chez Clément d'Alexandrie," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 26, no. 1 (1936): 158–80. This "mystical" interpretation is not arbitrary, but follows certain rules already received through Scripture and Tradition. This encoded imagery, Bunge notes, however exotic or even esoteric it may seem to the modern reader, must have been to some extent familiar to the ancient reader. Regarding questions of protology and eschatology, Evagrius avoids divulging the deeper meaning of his meditations, as Didymus the Blind taught him (cf. *Gnostikos* 48), because the "mystical meaning" is difficult for the ordinary person to penetrate, cf. *Scholia in Proverbia Salomonis* 23.1 sq. and 23.0. See Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 126–131. These questions will be dedicated to a separate treatise, *Kephalaia Gnostika*, a work in which his "multiply encoded language" presents the most significant difficulties in interpretation. It was one of the sources of inspiration for the Origenist monks of the 6th century and thus contributed directly to Evagrius's condemnation. See Guillaumont, *Les "Képhalaia gnostica" d'Évagre le Pontique*, 124 sq., but which does not make a sufficiently clear distinction between Evagrius and the Origenists of the 6th century, cf. Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 162 and n. 153.

<sup>27</sup> For the origin and evolution of the tripartite and bipartite model, see Antoine Guillaumont, "Étude historique et doctrinale," in *Traité pratique, ou, Le moine*, by Évagre le Pontique, ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, vol. I, *Sources chrétiennes* 170 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 38–63. The pair *πρακτική* – *γνωστική* has its origin in Plato. He, seeking to define political science (*Politicus* 258e–259c), divides the whole of sciences into two parts: *πρακτική* (*ἐπιστήμη*) and *γνωστική* (*ἐπιστήμη*) – the first is that which is involved in manual arts, while the second pertains to the activity of the spirit (40). The opposition between *πρακτικός* and *θεωρητικός* is Aristotelian: *νοῦς πρακτικός* and *νοῦς θεωρητικός* are distinguished by the fact that *θεωρητικός* finds its purpose in its own activity and deduces necessary consequences from a principle, while *πρακτικός* reasons about the contingent and has action as its purpose (cf. *De anima* III, 10, 433a). In *Metaphysics* (α, 1, 993b.20–21), "theoretical philosophy" has truth as its purpose, while the purpose of "practical philosophy" is action, effectiveness. (41). According to the Stoics, the wise person must be, at the same time, active and contemplative – an ideal summarized by the term *λογικός* (Chrysippus, Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* VII, 130) (42). Evagrius inherited the word *πρακτικός*, but attached a new meaning to it, which we can consider paradoxical to its previous uses. In St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the term designates the clergy who lead the "active life" and bishops who have responsibilities in spiritual guidance, in opposition to monks who dedicate themselves to contemplation and live in *hesychia* (48). Understanding *ἡ πρακτική* as the first of the two great stages of the spiritual life, whose purpose is "the knowledge of God," Evagrius developed a sense already reached in Philo of Alexandria (where the term acquires a moral and religious sense) and, especially, in Origen (where the "active life" and "contemplative life" are symbolized by Martha and Mary); however, compared to these authors, Evagrius was innovative, conferring on the term *praktiké* an essentially ascetic content adapted to the state of the anachoretic life, defining "practical life" to its purpose, "impassibility" (*apatheia*). However, this does not represent the ultimate purpose; it is sought only because it reflects the condition of "spiritual knowledge" (cf. *Praktikos* 32). Therefore, the true purpose, in Evagrius's view, is "the knowledge of God," which is reached through the spiritual contemplation of visible and invisible natures, and this contemplation is possible only through "impassibility." "Placed within this scheme, which has an almost scholastic rigor, whether in the bipartite form (*πρακτική*, *γνωστική*) or the tripartite form (*πρακτική*, *φυσική*, *θεολογική*) – which constitutes the true Evagrian scheme – the word *πρακτική* appears with all the characteristics of a technical term." (49)

contemplation of creation (*theōria physikē*), and theology (*theologia*). In specific contexts, he resorts to a more simplified scheme,<sup>28</sup> distinguishing between the “practical life” (*praktikos bios*) and the “contemplative life” (*theōrētikos bios*).<sup>29</sup>

“*Praktikē* is the spiritual method that purifies the passible part of the soul (*psychē*)”<sup>30</sup>. Elsewhere, Evagrius uses the term “teaching” (*didaskalia*)<sup>31</sup> instead of “method,” suggesting that it is not a fixed formula, but rather a “path” or way of living. *Praktikē*, occasionally called *ethikē* by Evagrius, aims to put Christ’s commandments into “practice.” In a positive sense, it involves acquiring virtues, while, from a negative perspective, it signifies the struggle against the passions (*pathē*).<sup>32</sup> *Physikē* denotes the knowledge of nature, i.e., of all created things, in the sense of “reading” the divine *logoi*, hidden in every created thing.<sup>33</sup> *Theologikē* – also called “vision” or “mysticism” by Origen – indicates a living knowledge-vision of the mystery of the Holy Trinity and the intra-Trinitarian life of the Three Persons.<sup>34</sup>

Through a commitment to *praktikē*<sup>35</sup>, one achieves liberation from the passions, which Evagrius refers to as *apatheia*<sup>36</sup>. Only in this state of impassibility

<sup>28</sup> Stewart, “Evagrius Ponticus and the Eastern Monastic Tradition on the Intellect and the Passions,” 267.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Bunge, “The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus,” 145.

<sup>30</sup> *Praktikos* 78 Évagre le Pontique, *Traité pratique*, 1971, 666: Πρακτική ἐστὶ μέθοδος πνευματικὴ τὸ παθητικὸν μέρος τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκκαθαίρουσα.

<sup>31</sup> *Scholion 4 on Psalm 2.12* (1): εἴγε πρακτικὴ ἐστὶ διδασκαλία πνευματικὴ τὸ παθητικὸν μέρος τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκκαθαίρουσα.

<sup>32</sup> Bunge, “The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus,” 134.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 134–5 and n. 29.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>35</sup> The object of the *praktikē* “method” is the soul, more precisely its passible, passionate, or passive part. According to ancient tradition, the soul was composed of three parts: a “concupiscible” or “desirous” part (*epithymētikon*), an “irascible” one (*thymikon*), and a “rational” one (*logistikon*) (cf. *Praktikos* 89) – the latter also being called the “ruling part” (*hēgemonikon*) (cf. *De malignis cogitationibus* 41). Concupiscence and irascibility make up the passive or passionate part of the soul, through which it – and through it, the intellect – is connected by the five senses with the body, and through the body with the material, sensible world. Evagrius invokes St. Gregory of Nazianzus, his “wise teacher”, as the source of this tripartite division, although the inheritance is Platonic. Cf. *Ibid.*, 135 and n. 31. Plato names the three parts of the soul in the *Republic*. In Book IX, he recommends that, before sleep, the rational part (*logistikon*) be awakened by sound arguments and reflections, the irascible part (*thymikon*) be calmed, and the desiring part (*epithymētikon*) be given only enough to sleep peacefully (571d–572a). Here, Plato considers the desiring part particularly dangerous, as it has a lawless dimension (572b). Evagrius uses the terminology from Book IX, changing “*logistikon*” to *nous*, perhaps because this term is closer to the biblical sense of the “heart”, or the center of the human being. Cf. Hilary OSB Case, “Becoming One Spirit: Origen and Evagrius Ponticus on Prayer” (MA Thesis, Collegeville, Minnesota, Saint John’s University, 2006), 160, n. 267 and 161, n. 268.

<sup>36</sup> In G. Bunge’s interpretation, passion appears as a “disintegration” of the human person, so that the recovery of integrity is equivalent to “impassibility” (*apatheia*) – which Evagrius calls the “health of the soul” (cf. *Praktikos* 56). The essence of *praktikē* corresponds to a healing



does a deeper understanding of the divine work in creation become possible, through “natural contemplation” (*theōría physikḗ*) – first of the visible created order, then of the invisible. The supreme goal is, of course, “theology”<sup>37</sup> (*theologia*), that is, the return to the “essential knowledge of the Holy Trinity”<sup>38</sup>.

G. Bunge has demonstrated that “in its deepest being, Evagrius’s mysticism is a Trinitarian mysticism.”<sup>39</sup> The essence of Evagrian mysticism is profoundly gnoseological and introspective, founded upon the activity of the intellect (*nous*). According to Evagrius, the *nous* is ceaselessly active on different levels of divine knowledge, from sensible knowledge to the experience of “pure prayer”<sup>40</sup> – which is assimilated to an “immaterial and formless knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, contemplation (*theoria*) is inseparable from prayer, as the two act together to “awaken the intellective power of the intellect towards the contemplation of divine knowledge (*theōrian tēs theias gnōseōs*).”<sup>42</sup>

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process that results in the purification and unification of the whole human being: body, soul, and intellect. The purpose of *praktiké* is impassibility as the natural health of the soul. However, impassibility is not the terminus point of the spiritual path, but only its first step. Only in the state of *apatheia* can spiritual love (*agápē*) – which is the goal of *praktiké* (cf. *Praktikos* 84) – raise the “spiritual intellect” (*noûs pneumatikós*) to the knowledge of God in vision (cf. *De oratione* 53) – which is also union. Only if the “image of God” is united and healed in itself can it unite with its Prototype (cf. *Epistula ad Melaniam* 15.23). Cf. Bunge, “The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus,” 137–8 and 140.

<sup>37</sup> *Ad monachos* 136: “The knowledge of the incorporeals raises the intellect and presents it before the Holy Trinity” – Γνώσις ἀσωμάτων ἐπαίρει τὸν νοῦν καὶ τῇ ἁγίᾳ τριάδι παρίστησιν αὐτόν; cf. Evagrius Ponticus, *Ad Monachos*, trans. Jeremy Driscoll, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 59 (New York: Newman Press, 2003), 66. This final knowledge has several names. Usually, it is called the “knowledge of the Holy Trinity,” but Evagrius also mentions it when he speaks, more simply, about the knowledge of God. Sometimes, he refers to the knowledge of Unity or the One. Evagrius use the term theology (θεολογία) to designate the Holy Trinity. Furthermore, the Trinity is also called the “final blessedness” (ἐσχάτη μακαριότης, *Praktikos*, Pr. 8). Cf. Jeremy Driscoll, “Introduction,” in *Ad Monachos*, by Evagrius Ponticus, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 59 (New York: Newman Press, 2003), 1–37.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Kephalaia Gnostika* 4.77, 2.11.

<sup>39</sup> Bunge, “The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus,” 172. Even if this has often been ignored or unrecognized. See, for example, Balthasar, “Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Pontikus,” 39: “Certainly he knows the Trinity – but it practically becomes an almost boundless supremacy of the Unity over the Triad, with clear traces of the subordination of the Persons.”; Hausherr, “Le Traité De l’Oraison d’Évagre Le Pontique (Pseudo-Nil),” 117: “Despite the theology which is its supreme goal, Evagrian mysticism remains more philosophical than properly theological.”

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 66–8.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 69: ἄϋλον καὶ ἀνείδεον γνῶσιν Augustine Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2006), 193.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 86: Ἡ γνώσις, καλλίστη ἐστίν· συνεργὸς γάρ ἐστι τῆς προσευχῆς, τὴν νοερὰν δύναμιν τοῦ νοῦ διυπνίζουσα πρὸς θεωρίαν τῆς θείας γνώσεως; cf. *Ibid.*, 195. Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Noûs): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” 292–293.

### Prayer – “an activity proper to the dignity of the intellect”

Evagrius Ponticus ranks among the speculative mystics, who regard the intellect (*nous*) as the supreme organ of knowledge and union with God.<sup>43</sup> Evagrius will systematize and consolidate Origen’s doctrine of the intellect in the *Kephalaia Gnostika*<sup>44</sup> and will adopt Origen’s doctrine of prayer in his own treatise *De oratione*<sup>45</sup>.

The intellect represents the personal core,<sup>46</sup> the place of the indelible image of God, and the organ through which man knows God<sup>47</sup> and responds to his call. It is, therefore, the seat of human freedom and responsibility as well as the means by which God acts upon man. Although Evagrius most often speaks only about the intellect, nevertheless, as Bunge explains, he always considers the whole man, explicitly viewed as the “image of God,” oriented towards a personal encounter with God through knowledge (*gnosis*)<sup>48</sup>.

For Evagrius, the knowledge of God is not a dialectical process, but a direct intuition: “The knowledge of God does not require a dialectical soul, but one who sees.”<sup>49</sup> In *Reflections* 34, Evagrius states: “The intellect is a temple of the Holy Trinity” – Νοῦς ἐστὶ ναὸς τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος. It is precisely this intrinsic quality of the intellect that makes it capable of knowing God, prayer being its natural state: “The intellect, by its very nature, is made to pray (πεφυκὸτα

<sup>43</sup> Ysabel de Andia, “Le statut de l’intellect dans l’union mystique,” in *Mystique: la passion de l’Un, de l’Antiquité à nos jours*, by Alain Dierkens and Benoît Beyer de Ryke, Problèmes d’histoire des religions, T. 15 (Bruxelles [Le Plessis-Paté]: Éd. de l’Université de Bruxelles Tothèmes diff, 2005), 73–96.

<sup>44</sup> *Kephalaia Gnostika* was initially composed in Greek, but only a few fragments of this work have survived. The loss of such a large part of the material is due to a series of theological debates and complications that arose after Evagrius’s death Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 17–18. As a result of Evagrius’s posthumous condemnation, starting in the 6th century and continuing until the 9th century (and beyond), there was a concerted and widespread effort in the Byzantine churches and monasteries to suppress and/ or destroy Evagrian writings (Ibid., 21–3).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. de Andia, “Le statut de l’intellect dans l’union mystique,” 82.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 177–8: “the *nous*, the image of God and the core of personal identity.”

<sup>47</sup> Monica Tobon, “*Apatheia* in the Teachings of Evagrius Ponticus” (University College London, 2011), 54: “The image of God consists in its receptivity to knowledge of God.”

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Bunge, “The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus,” 136.

<sup>49</sup> *Kephalaia gnostica* 4.90, S2, Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, 355. In the Platonic tradition, dialectic was considered the first and highest expression of philosophy (so that the philosopher had to be διαλεκτικώτατος – “perfect in dialectic”). Nevertheless, the knowledge of God transcends philosophical knowledge, in that it is a mystical vision that takes place in the presence and union with God (cf. *Kephalaia Gnostica* 4.89), being deification itself. Cf. Ramelli, *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostica*, 245.

προσεύχεσθαι);<sup>50</sup> “Prayer is an activity that befits the dignity of the intellect, that is, its best and uncontaminated activity and use.”<sup>51</sup>

The Evagrian teaching on prayer is based on three primary texts: firstly, his treatise *On Thoughts*<sup>52</sup>; secondly, a collection of concise statements on various aspects of the spiritual life, called *Reflections*<sup>53</sup>; and, thirdly, his famous treatise *On Prayer*<sup>54</sup>. Columba Stewart refers to these three works as “a trilogy on the psychodynamics and theology of prayer,” which are chronologically placed after the first two parts of Evagrius’ better-known trilogy – *Praktikos*<sup>55</sup>, *Gnostikos*<sup>56</sup>, and *Kephalaia Gnostika*.<sup>57</sup> These texts can be understood as advanced works that deepen subjects previously addressed and are most likely the fruit of his mature reflections. The treatise *On Prayer*, the best known and most widespread of these three works, comprises 153 chapters, each consisting of one to three sentences. This treatise reflects “all of the ambivalences of its author’s teaching on the nature and experience of prayer.”<sup>58</sup>

Evagrius considered that true theology is lived in prayer: “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly, and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Praktikos* 49 Évagre le Pontique, *Traité pratique*, 1971, 613.

<sup>51</sup> *De oratione* 84: Προσευχή ἐστὶ πρέπουσα ἐνέργεια τῇ ἀξίᾳ τοῦ νου, ἥτοι ἡ κρείττων καὶ εἰλικρινὴς ἐνέργεια αὐτοῦ καὶ χρῆσις; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 195.

<sup>52</sup> Περὶ λογισμῶν, see Évagre le Pontique, *Sur Les Pensées*, ed. Paul Géhin, Claire Guillaumont, and Antoine Guillaumont, Sources Chrétiennes 438 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998), 122–126.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Muyldermans published the Greek text (MS. Paris gr. 913) of the Σκέμματα in two studies: Joseph Muyldermans, “Note Additionnelle à: *Euagrianā*,” *Le Muséon. Revue d’Études Orientales* 44 (1931): 369–83. Joseph Muyldermans, “Évagre Le Pontique: Les *Capita Cognoscitua* Dans Les Versions Syriaque et Arménienne,” *Le Muséon. Revue d’Études Orientales* 47 (1934): 73–106.

<sup>54</sup> The work *Περὶ προσευχῆς* was transmitted under the name of St. Nilus of Ancyra, *De oratione* Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 1166–1199. As a result of the studies of Irénée Hausherr, *De oratione* has long been accepted as an authentic composition of Evagrius. See *supra* n. 9.

<sup>55</sup> The original Greek text of *Λόγος πράκτικος*, composed of one hundred “chapters” or propositions, has been preserved (having also been transmitted in Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Georgian, and Arabic), as have several other ascetic works, mainly collections of maxims. Cf. Ramelli, *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostika*, xxvii.

<sup>56</sup> *Γνωστικός*, composed of fifty chapters, has been preserved in Greek only fragmentarily, but survives integrally in Syriac, in various redactions, as well as in Armenian. Cf. *Ibid.*, xxviii.

<sup>57</sup> *Κεφάλαια γνωστικά*, translated as *Chapters on Knowledge* or, more precisely, *Propositions on Knowledge*, comprises six books of ninety propositions (sometimes called “chapters”) each. *Kephalaia Gnostika* represents Evagrius’s masterpiece: although he wrote it in Greek, the complete work has been preserved only in oriental versions: in an Armenian adaptation, in Arabic, and, especially, in Syriac, in two different redactions. Cf. *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>58</sup> See Columba Stewart, “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2001): 173–204, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2001.0035>. (182–4)

<sup>59</sup> *De oratione* 61: Εἰ θεολόγος εἶ, προσεύξῃ ἀληθῶς· καὶ εἰ ἀληθῶς προσεύξῃ, θεολόγος ἔσῃ (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 192).

“Just as bread is nourishment for the body and virtue is for the soul, so, too, spiritual prayer constitutes nourishment for the intellect.”<sup>60</sup>

In Evagrian spirituality, the spiritual progression from ascetic practice to knowledge and contemplation, and the surpassing of both in “pure prayer” and entry into the “formless state” demonstrates the experiential character of the intellect, active on the three levels of spiritual life: *praktiké*, *gnostiké*, and *theologiké*<sup>61</sup>.

When the intellect is in *praktikē*, it remains among the representations (*noēmata*) of this world; but when it is in *gnosis*, it dwells in contemplation (*theōria*); but when it enters into prayer (*proseuchē*), it is in the “formless state” (*aneidēō*), which is called the “place of God” (*topos Theou*)<sup>62</sup>.

In *Reflections*, Evagrius distinguishes between the three aspects of the intellect, highlighting the specific activity of each level: thus, the “ascetic intellect” (*nous praktikos*) “barks, like a dog, at all the unjust thoughts (*logismos*)”<sup>63</sup> and “always receives passionlessly the representations (*noēmata*) of this world”<sup>64</sup>; the “contemplative intellect” (*nous theoretikos*) – by moving the irascible (part of the soul) – chases down, like a dog, all impassioned thoughts (*logismos*)<sup>65</sup>, and the “pure intellect” (*nous katharos*) at the time of prayer is a censer<sup>66</sup> – no object of the senses (*prágmatos aisthētou*) connected to it”<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>60</sup> *De oratione* 101: “Ὡςπερ ὁ ἄρτος τροφή ἐστι τῷ σώματι καὶ ἡ ἀρετὴ τῇ ψυχῇ, οὕτω καὶ τοῦ νοῦ ἡ πνευματικὴ προσευχὴ τροφή ὑπάρχει; cf. *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Ramelli, “Evagrius Ponticus, the Origenian Ascetic (and Not the Origenistic ‘Heretic’),” 162.

<sup>62</sup> *Skemmata* 20: “Ὁ νοῦς ἐν πρακτικῇ ὦν, ἐν τοῖς νοήμασιν ἐστὶν τοῦ κόσμου τούτου· ἐν δὲ γνώσει ὦν, ἐν θεωρίᾳ διατρίβει· ἐν δὲ προσευχῇ γινόμενος, ἐν ἀνειδέῳ ἐστὶ, ὅπερ ὀνομάζεται τόπος Θεοῦ.

<sup>63</sup> *Skemmata* 10: πάντας τοὺς ἀδίκους καθυλακτῶν λογισμούς William Harmless and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, “The *Skemmata*: A Translation,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 3 (2001): 521–29. (522)

<sup>64</sup> *Skemmata* 16: ὁ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἀπαθῶς αἰεὶ δεχόμενος τὰ νοήματα (*Ibid.*, 523).

<sup>65</sup> *Skemmata* 9: διὰ τῆς κινήσεως τοῦ θυμοῦ πάντας ἀποδιώκων τοὺς ἐμπαθεῖς λογισμούς (*Ibid.*, 522).

<sup>66</sup> This image evokes Psalm 141:2, which speaks of prayer as incense rising before God. In Evagrius’s view, if prayer is like incense, then the vessel of prayer, the intellect, is like a censer. See Evagrius, *De oratione* 1, 75–77, 147. Cf. William Harmless and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, “The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 3 (2001): 493–529. (513–4)

<sup>67</sup> *Skemmata* 6: Θυματήριόν ἐστι νοῦς καθαρῶς κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς, μὴ ἐφαπτόμενος πράγματος αἰσθητοῦ Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The *Skemmata*,” 522. Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Νοῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” 305–6.

### Prayer – “a conversation of the intellect with God”

For Evagrius, God is beyond (*hyper*) any perception (*aisthēsis*) and notion (*ennoia*)<sup>68</sup>. Therefore, the encounter with God in prayer does not involve perceiving a form (*morphē*) or shape (*schēma*), as God possesses neither.<sup>69</sup> “True prayer” requires the abandonment, even if for a short time, of concepts and mental representations that tether us to the world of ordinary experience. We are urged to “approach the Immaterial One in an immaterial way”<sup>70</sup> and to realize that attempting to “localize” or limit God through a mental image is not only futile but can even be demonic.<sup>71</sup> The ultimate goal is for man to turn towards God in prayer, without any notion of form (*amorphia*), in an immaterial (*aulos*) and dispassionate manner, renouncing all sensible perception (*anaesthesia*). Thus, Evagrius warns us against the tendency to shape the encounter with God according to our expectations regarding what He or the prayer experience should look like.<sup>72</sup>

In his *Scholia on the Psalms*, Evagrius Ponticus writes:

And one form of prayer is the conversation (*homilia*) of the intellect (*nous*) with God, preserving the intellect unimpressed (*atypōton*). And by ‘unimpressed intellect’ (*atypōton noun*) I mean an intellect that imagines nothing corporeal (*sōmatikon*) during the time of prayer (*kata ton kairon tēs proseuchēs*). For only those names and words that signify something of sensible things (*tōn aisthētōn*) imprint (*typoi*) and shape (*schēmatizei*) our intellect, but the praying intellect (*proseuchomenon noun*) must be completely free from sensible things (*tōn aisthētōn*). But the *noema* of God preserves the intellect necessarily unimpressed (*atypōton*); for God is not a body/corporeal (*sōma*)<sup>73</sup>.

This dense description encapsulates the significant components of Evagrius Ponticus’s well-known theory of “imageless prayer.” While the specific term “pure prayer” (καθαρὰ προσευχή) or its synonyms, “true prayer” and spiritual prayer, do not appear in the *Scholia on the Psalms*, Evagrius offered the exact

<sup>68</sup> *De oratione* 4: τὸν ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν αἴσθησιν καὶ ἔννοιαν.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 67–75, 114–118.

<sup>70</sup> *De oratione* 67: ἀλλὰ ἄυλος τῷ ἄϋλῳ πρόσιθι. See also *De oratione* 114.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 67–68, 74, 116.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Stewart, “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” 191–2.

<sup>73</sup> *Scholion 1 on Psalm 140.2* (1): Τοῦτου κατευθύνεται ἡ προσευχή ὡς θυμίαμα τοῦ δυναμένου εἰπεῖν· Χριστοῦ εὐωδία ἐσμὲν ἐν τοῖς σωζομένοις καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις. Καὶ ἔστιν ἐν εἶδος προσευχῆς ὁμιλία νοῦ πρὸς θεὸν ἀτύπωτον τὸν νοῦν διασώζουσα· ἀτύπωτον δὲ λέγω νοῦν τὸν μηδὲν σωματικὸν κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς φανταζόμενον. Μόνα γὰρ ἐκεῖνα τῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων τυποῖ τὸν νοῦν ἡμῶν καὶ σχηματίζει τὰ σημαίνοντά τι τῶν αἰσθητῶν, προσευχόμενον δὲ νοῦν πάντη δεῖ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐλεύθερον εἶναι· τὸ δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα διασώζει τὸν νοῦν ἀναγκαίως ἀτύπωτον· οὐ γάρ ἐστι σῶμα θεός.

core definition in his *Chapters on Prayer*: “Prayer is the intellect’s conversation (*homilia*) with God.”<sup>74</sup>

While it is uncertain whether the *Scholia* predates Evagrius’s more detailed treatises on contemplative prayer, such as *Chapters on Prayer*, *On Thoughts*, and *Reflections*, it nevertheless provides a poetic and fragmentary summary of his profound theory, in which the intellect (*nous*) plays a pivotal role. Evagrius defines prayer as a “conversation with God,” thereby aligning himself with a long-standing Late Antique tradition<sup>75</sup>, Christian and non-Christian, which similarly conceived prayer as *homilia*<sup>76</sup>. However, Evagrius significantly

<sup>74</sup> *De oratione* 3: Ἡ προσευχή ὁμιλία ἐστὶ νοῦ πρὸς θεόν (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 188).

<sup>75</sup> For various approaches to prayer in the philosophical environment of Late antiquity, see John M. Dillon and Andrei Timotin, eds., *Platonic Theories of Prayer*, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition, volume 19 (Leiden Boston (Mass.): Brill, 2016).

<sup>76</sup> Bunge [Gabriel Bunge, *Das Geistesgebet: Studien Zum Traktat De Oratione Des Evagrius Pontikos*, Schriftenreihe Des Zentrums Patristischer Spiritualität Koinonia-Oriens Im Erzbistum Cologne 25 (Köln: Luthe-Verlag, 1987), 20] emphasizes that Evagrius’s famous definition of prayer formulated in *De oratione* 3 – as being “a conversation (ὁμιλία) of the *nous* with God” – represents Evagrius’s adaptation of a definition found in Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis*: “Therefore, to speak more boldly, prayer is a conversation with God.” – Ἔστιν οὖν, ὡς εἰπεῖν τολμηρότερον, ὁμιλία πρὸς τὸν θεόν, ἡ εὐχή [7.7.39.6; Clément d’Alexandrie, *Les Stromates*. *Stromate VII*, ed. Alain Le Boulluec, Sources chrétiennes 428 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 140]. The exact phrase is also found in *Stromata* 7.7.42.1 ἢ 7.12.73.1. Evagrius repeats this definition in *Scholion 1 on Psalm 140.2(1)*. According to L. Dysinger, “it is tempting to speculate that this phrase may have been current among the Cappadocian fathers who taught Evagrius.” Although it is not found in the works of St. Basil the Great or St. Gregory of Nazianzus, nevertheless St. Gregory of Nyssa describes prayer as follows, in *De oratione dominica*, *Oratio I*: Προσευχή θεοῦ ὁμιλία, τῶν ἀοράτων θεωρία, τῶν ἐπιθυμουμένων πληροφορία, τῶν ἀγγέλων ὁμοτιμία – “Prayer is conversation with God, contemplation of the invisible, fulfilment of desires, [an] honour equal to that of the angels” [Gregorii Nysseni, *De Oratione Dominica, De Beatitudinibus*, ed. John F. Callahan, Gregorii Nysseni Opera, v. 7 pt.2 (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1992)], 1124M.3–32, 8–9. Cf. Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 74 and n. 52. This definition of prayer is also found in Maximus of Tyre, cf. *Orationes* 5.8, 188–190, Maximus Tyrius, *Dissertationes*, ed. Michael B. Trapp, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Stuttgartiae: B. G. Teubner, 1994), 45: ἐγὼ δὲ ὁμιλῶν καὶ διάλεκτον πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς περὶ τῶν παρόντων καὶ ἐπίδειξιν τῆς ἀρετῆς – “whereas in my opinion it is a conversation or discussion with the gods about what he does have, and a demonstration of his virtue.” Maxime of Tyre, *The Philosophical Orations*, trans. Michael B. Trapp (Oxford (GB): Clarendon Press, 1997), 49, which might indicate that it “has a Greek origin”. However, in Plato’s *Symposium* (203.a1–4), the expression ὁμιλία καὶ διάλεκτος has a completely different meaning: διὰ τοῦτου πᾶσά ἐστιν ἡ ὁμιλία καὶ ἡ διάλεκτος θεοῖς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους, καὶ ἐγρηγόροσι καὶ καθεύδουσι – “God does not mix with man, but every conversation and dialogue of the gods with men, whether awake or asleep, is mediated by the *daimonic*.” Here, it is about “*daimons*” (δαίμονες), whose existence makes it possible for the gods to have, in general, a conversation and dialogue with humans through oracles and dreams. Therefore, it is not about the prayer addressed to the gods by humans, but about oracles and dreams sent

expanded this philosophical definition by introducing the intellect as the subject of prayer and emphasizing its cardinal role. He further defined prayer as the “ascension (*anabasis*) of the intellect towards God.”<sup>77</sup> The centrality of the intellect and its ascent distinguishes Evagrius from Neoplatonism, particularly the theurgical tradition of prayer based on the principle of “the union of the like with the like”<sup>78</sup> and the concept of the soul’s “return” (*epístrophē*)<sup>79</sup>. Furthermore, his imageless prayer theory bypasses the theological and exegetical context of the Lord’s Prayer<sup>80</sup>, harmonizing ascetic and monastic principles with transcendent thought<sup>81</sup>.

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by the gods through “*daimons*”. The formula appears, therefore, inverted. André Méhat suggests the hypothesis that this inversion might be the work of Aristotle himself, who was the author of a treatise *On Prayer*, which is completely lost (except for a phrase preserved by Simplicius). “It is very probable, concludes Méhat, that in the literature ‘of prayer,’ which has been transmitted to us by pagan and Christian authors, “*topoi*” originating from Aristotle are found, for example in the discussion “whether one should pray” which opposed the Cyrenaics and the Platonists in the 4th century before being treated by Maximus, Clement, and Origen. In the absence of precise references, research remains uncertain.” See André Méhat, “Sur Deux Définitions de La Prière,” in *Origeniana Sexta. Origène et La Bible: Actes Du Colloquium Origenianum Sextum, Chantilly, 1993*, vol. 30 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995), 115–20. (119) The fact remains that the Bible offers numerous examples of human conversations with God, and Clement of Alexandria applies the term ὁμιλία to Moses (cf. *Stromata* VI 12.104.1). Cf. Clément d’Alexandrie, *Les Stromates. Stromate VII*, 140–141, n. 3.

<sup>77</sup> *De oratione* 36.

<sup>78</sup> For Iamblichus’s theory, see Andrei Timotin, “La Théorie de La Prière Chez Jamblique: Sa Fonction et Sa Place Dans l’histoire Du Platonisme,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 70, no. 3 (2015): 563–77, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1032792ar>, 563–577.

<sup>79</sup> Plotinus recognizes, in a rare passage in the *Enneads* regarding prayer, only this: “Let us speak of it in this way, first invoking God himself, not in spoken words, but stretching ourselves out with our soul into prayer to him, able in this way to pray alone to him alone” – ἀλλὰ τῇ ψυχῇ ἐκτεínaσιν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς εὐχὴν πρὸς ἐκεῖνον, εὐχεσθαι τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον δυναμένους μόνους πρὸς μόνον. *Enneads* 5.1.6.10–11; Plotinus, *Enneads V.1–9*, trans. Arthur Hilary Armstrong, Plotinus (Cambridge, Mass./ London: Harvard University Press/ W. Heinemann, 1984), 29. Prayer, in this context, is understood as *epístrophē*, the “return” towards the reunification of the second hypostasis (*nous*) with the first hypostasis (*to hen*). Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Νοῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” 299.

<sup>80</sup> On how Origen compares Christian prayer with that of the pagans, in his effort to demonstrate the superiority of the former over the different expressions of the latter, see Lorenzo Perrone, “Prayer in Origen’s ‘Contra Celsum’: The Knowledge of God and the Truth of Christianity,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 55, no. 1 (2001): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1584733>.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind: Evagrius Ponticus’ Theory of Prayer and its Legacy in Syriac Christianity,” in *Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Sciences Religieuses*, ed. Andrei Timotin and Philippe Hoffmann, vol. 185 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 327–44, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.BEHE-EB.5.120039>.

## Prayer – “a state” of the intellect

For Evagrius, *nous* is the highest dimension of man, the image of God in us.<sup>82</sup> Being oriented by creation towards its Prototype,<sup>83</sup> the Intellect is most capable<sup>84</sup> of knowing God<sup>85</sup>, and prayer<sup>86</sup> is the most natural act of the human being.<sup>87</sup>

From this perspective, the intellect becomes the center of the human being, the equivalent of the “inner man” (*esō anthrōpos*)<sup>88</sup> in Pauline theology:

When the intellect (*noûs*), having taken off the old man (*palaios anthrōpos*), puts on clothes itself with the one from grace (*ek charitos*) [cf. Col 3.9–10], then at the time of prayer (*kata ton kairon tēs proseuchēs*) it will see (*horaō*) its own state (*heautou katastasis*) resemble sapphire or sky-blue (*ouranio chromati*) – which Scripture also calls ‘the place of God’ (*topos tou Theou*), seen on Mt Sinai by the elders [cf. Ex 24.9–11].<sup>89</sup>

In *Reflections 2*, Evagrius emphasizes that, “if one wishes to see the state (*katástasis*) of the intellect, let him deprive (*sterēsátō*) himself of all representations (*noēmáton*).”<sup>90</sup> Considering the intellect as the cardinal entity that prays, Evagrius will develop a theory in which prayer is understood as a “state of the intellect,” rather than a spoken text or a request addressed to God<sup>91</sup>. Thus, prayer is no

<sup>82</sup> Cf. *Skemmata* 34.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Bunge, “The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus,” 153.

<sup>84</sup> According to G. Bunge, Evagrius, based on Scripture and Tradition, teaches that man, endowed with “*logos*,” was created, “in the beginning,” in God’s image, as his icon. (cf. *Epistula ad Melaniam* 12 sq.) The essence of this likeness to God is correlated by Evagrius especially with the capacity for knowing God (cf. *Kephalaia Gnostika* 3.32, 4.34), in personal being and the capacity to enter into a direct relationship with the Person of God. As Bunge explains, the meaning is not “intellectualist,” but deeply personal and excludes any emanation. The intellect, as the image of God, is receptive (*deiktikos*) to its divine Prototype, cf. *Epistula ad Melaniam* 16. Cf. *Ibid.*, 163–4 and n. 158.

<sup>85</sup> *Praktikos* 49.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 84.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The Sapphire Light of the Mind,” 513–4.

<sup>88</sup> *Capita cic auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 58 Évagre le Pontique, *Chapitres Des Disciples d’Évagre*, ed. Paul Géhin, Sources Chrétiennes 514 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007), 158.

<sup>89</sup> *De malignis cogitationibus* 39: Ὅταν ὁ νοῦς τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον ἀποδυσάμενος τὸν ἐκ χάριτος ἐνδύσῃται, τότε καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ κατάστασιν ὀψεται κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς σαφείρῳ ἢ οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερῇ, ἦντινα καὶ τόπον θεοῦ ἡ γραφή ὀνομάζει ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὀφθέντα ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 114.

<sup>90</sup> *Skemmata* 2: Εἴ τις βούλοιοτο ἰδεῖν τὴν τοῦ νοῦ κατάστασιν, στερησάτω ἑαυτὸν πάντων τῶν νοημάτων Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The *Skemmata*,” 521.

<sup>91</sup> The essential role of the intellect in prayer, for Evagrius, also appears in the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:1, where he deviates from earlier approaches by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, offering “a remarkable example of his new approach.” Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind,” 331.



longer merely an activity of the intellect; it becomes *katastasis*: “a state of the intellect, destructive of every earthly representation (*noēma*)”<sup>92</sup> and “that comes to be from the single-light (*phōs*) of the Holy Trinity (*Hagia Trias*).”<sup>93</sup>

This state of prayer reflects a “imperturbable habit” (*héxis apathēs*) which, through supreme eros (*éros akrotáto*), raises (*apartízō*) the “spiritual intellect” (*pneumatikòn noûn*), even if only for a moment, to its natural state (*kátastasis*) – that is, to the “noetic heights” (*eis hypsos noeton*)<sup>94</sup>. This ascension (*anabasis*) of the praying intellect to God<sup>95</sup> involves a transformative inner experience.<sup>96</sup>

Following the Greek philosophical tradition, Evagrius identifies the intellect (*nous*) as the seat of “representations” (*noēmata*). Spiritual contemplation (*gnōsis pneumatikē*) takes place through the means of “representations” (*noēmata*). Evagrius differentiates between representations that leave an “imprint” upon the intellect and those that leave no imprint:<sup>97</sup> “Among representations (*noēmata*),

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. *Skemmata* 26: Προσευχή ἐστὶ κατάστασις νοῦ, φθαρτικὴ παντὸς ἐπιγείου νοήματος (Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The *Skemmata*,” 526).

<sup>93</sup> Cf. *Skemmata* 27: Προσευχή ἐστὶ κατάστασις νοῦ, ὑπὸ φωτὸς μόνου γινομένη τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος (Ibid., 526).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 52: Κατάστασις ἐστὶ προσευχῆς ἕξις ἀπαθῆς, ἔρωτι ἀκροτάτῳ εἰς ὕψος νοητὸν ἀπαρτίζουσα τὸν φιλόσοφον καὶ πνευματικὸν νοῦν; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 192.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 36: Προσευχή ἐστὶν ἀνάβασις νοῦ πρὸς Θεόν. Evagrius did not envision this spiritual ascent as a literal skyward elevation, in the manner of Christ’s ascension (Acts 1.9). Instead, as Hausherr indicates through comparisons with *KG* 4.49, 5.40, 5.60, and *Letters* 39 and 58, this progression ought to be conceived as a “mountain climb” – Mount Sion or Mount Sinai. See Irénée Hausherr, “Le *Traité de l’Oraison d’Évagre Le Pontique* (Suite),” *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 35, no. 138 (1959): 121–46. (145–146) Cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 235, n. 17.

<sup>96</sup> Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Νοῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” 301. Cf. Ann Conway-Jones, “The Greatest Paradox of All’: The ‘Place of God’ in the Mystical Theologies of Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius of Pontus,” *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 5, no. 2 (October 25, 2018): 259–79, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jbr-2018-0006>.

<sup>97</sup> The Evagrian term νόημα designates the image evoked by the perception of a sensible object (αἰσθητὸν πρᾶγμα), similar to what the Stoics called φαντασία, a term usually translated as “representation”. The verb τυποῦν denotes the “imprinting” (τύπωσις) left by this image upon the intellect, thus echoing the Stoic idea reported by Diogenes Laertius (*Vitae philosophorum* 7.45.10–7.46.1). In Aristotle, νόημα is based on the image produced by the perception of a sensible object (φάντασμα), but it differs from this in that, once received by the intellect, the image is in a certain sense “conceptualized” (see *De anima* III, 431b–436a). Probably, this conceptual dimension explains Evagrius’ preference for the Aristotelian term νόημα over the Stoic one, φαντασία. The Stoics made a distinction between φαντασία (the representation stemming from the direct perception of sensible objects) and φάντασμα (the image of an absent object, but recalled from memory, or of an unreal object, like one in a dream) (cf. *Vitae philosophorum* 7.50.1–9). In this context, Evagrius’ terminology aligns more with that of Aristotle, who used the term φαντασία to designate imagination. Evagrius uses this term, in the plural, to indicate the “imaginings” (φαντασίαι) that appear during sleep (*Praktikos* 54), but also for the images of objects retained in memory (*De malignis cogitationibus* 4; 2). See Guillaumont, “Introduction,” 24–8.

some imprint (*typoō*) and shape (*schēmatizō*) our governing faculty (*to hēgemonikon*), and others only provide knowledge (*gnōsis*), without imprinting (*typoō*) or shaping (*schēmatizō*) the intellect (*nous*).<sup>98</sup>

Unlike *logismoi*, which often carries a pejorative sense in Evagrius, and was preserved after him,<sup>99</sup> the term *noēmata* has a more neutral connotation, referring to mental images originating from either external sources (sight, hearing) or internal sources (memory, temperament).<sup>100</sup> The moral character of these “representations” depends on how the intellect uses them, either for good or ill. Some “representations” can leave a “form” deeply “imprinted” in the intellect, like a calligrapher writing on a wax tablet. This “imprinting” can be difficult to erase, especially in the case of visual images.<sup>101</sup>

The “representations” (*noēmata*) that leave an imprint on the intellect arise from the sensory perception of sensible objects (*pragmata aisthēta*). However, when the gnostic ascends from sensible objects to the contemplation of their “reasons” (*logoi*) – understood as the ontological basis and the explanatory principle – the representation becomes devoid of imprint or form. When the intellect transitions to the contemplation of incorporeals (*asōmatos*) – whether their essence (*ousia*) or their “reasons” (*logoi*) – the representations also lack any imprint on it; here, Evagrius speaks of “representations” (*noēmata*) only by analogy, referring, in fact, to “contemplations” (*theōrēmata*)<sup>102</sup>. The term

<sup>98</sup> *De malignis cogitationibus* 41.1–3: Τῶν νοημάτων τὰ μὲν τυποῖ τὸ ἡγεμονικὸν ἡμῶν καὶ σχηματίζει, τὰ δὲ γνῶσιν παρέχει μόνον μὴ τυποῦντα τὸν νοῦν μηδὲ σχηματίζοντα; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 115.

<sup>99</sup> Evagrius identifies “thought” so closely with the demon that he frequently uses the two terms interchangeably (see *Praktikos* 7–14). Cf. Antoine Guillaumont, “Un philosophe au désert: Evagre le Pontique,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 181, no. 1 (1972): 29–56, <https://doi.org/10.3406/rhr.1972.9807>.

<sup>100</sup> *Skemmata* 17: “There are four ways (τρόποι) by which the intellect (νοῦς) grasps representations (νοήματα). The first way is through the eyes (ὀφθαλμῶν); the second, through the ear (ἀκοῆς); the third, through memory (μνήμης); and the fourth, through temperament (κράσεως). Through the eyes, it grasps only representations (νοήματα) that imprint a form (μορφοῦντα). Through the ear, it grasps representations that either imprint a form (μορφοῦντα) or do not imprint one, because a word (λόγον) (can) signify both sensible objects and contemplative objects (αἰσθητὰ καὶ θεωρητὰ πράγματα). Memory (μνήμη) and temperament (κράσις) follow the ear but each one either imprints a form (μορφοῦσι) on the intellect, or does not do so, in imitation of the ear (τὴν ἀκοήν).” Cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The *Skemmata*,” 523–4.

<sup>101</sup> *Skemmata* 55: “Of the (various types of) thoughts (λογισμῶν), some imprint their form (μορφοῦσι) on the discursive thought (διάνοια); others do not. The ones that imprint their form (μορφοῦσι) are from sight (ὁράσεως); the ones that do not (οὐ μορφοῦσι) are from the other senses (αἰσθήσεων) that travel along with us.” Cf. *Ibid.*, 528. Cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The Sapphire Light of the Mind,” 515.

<sup>102</sup> *De malignis cogitationibus* 41.29–30 Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, 294–5: “Once more, of contemplations (θεωρημάτων) that do not imprint (τυπούντων) on the intellect (τὸν νοῦν), some signify the essence (οὐσίαν) of the incorporeals (ἀσωμάτων), others signify their reasons (τοὺς λόγους).” (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 115.)

*theōrēmata*, frequently used in the plural, fulfills, within spiritual contemplation (*theōria*), the function that *noēmata* serves in the process of sensible knowledge (*aisthētē gnōsis*). In the expression “*to noēma tou Theou*”<sup>103</sup>, the word *noēma* no longer signifies a “representation,” but rather the “idea,” “concept,” or “thought” of God — *hē mnēmē tou Theou*, “the memory of God,”<sup>104</sup> as described in the *Chapters to Evagrius’ Disciples*<sup>105</sup>.

### “Pure Prayer” (*katharā proseuchē*)

Evagrius warns that the intellect (*nous*) must avoid any form of contemplation that might “imprint” a form upon it, because, even after surpassing the contemplation of corporeal nature (*theōrian tēs sōmatikēs physeōs*)<sup>106</sup>, the intellect remains caught in the multiplicity of intelligible things (*noēta*).<sup>107</sup> At

<sup>103</sup> *De malignis cogitationibus* 41.17. The expression τὸ νόημα τοῦ θεοῦ – which appears only here and in the *Scholion 1 on Psalm* 140.2(1): “τὸ δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα” – may seem strange: the word νόημα takes on the meaning of “notion,” “idea,” or “concept” here rather than that of “representation.” Cf. Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, 293, n. 7.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. *Capita cū auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 61.6 (Évagre le Pontique, *Chapitres Des Disciples d’Évagre*, 162). The formula ἡ μνήμη τοῦ θεοῦ is another way, biblically inspired, of designating the state of prayer. See *Scholion 22 on Psalm* 118.55: “for the evil thought (λογισμὸς), lingering in the discursive thought (τῇ διανοίᾳ), distracts the intellect (τὸν νοῦν) and separates it from the memory of God (τῆς μνήμης τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ).” Cf. *Ibid.*, 162, n. 61. “The memory of God” plays an important role in Evagrian spirituality, as evidenced by *Admonitio paraenetica* 3. This expression stands in opposition to “passion-laden memories” (cf. *Praktikos* 34.1: Ὡς τὰς μνήμας ἔχομεν ἐμπαθεῖς), which include bad thoughts and the distractions arising from people and worldly affairs. Cf. Joseph Muyldermans, ed., *Evagriana Syriaca: Textes Inédits Du British Museum et de La Vaticane*, Bibliothèque Du Muséon 31 (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1952), 87, 126, 157.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Guillaumont, “Introduction,” 21–2.

<sup>106</sup> Evagrius frequently explores the concept of contemplation (*theōria*) throughout his *Kephalaia Gnostika* (*KG*). In *KG* 3.19 (S1), for instance, he differentiates between “Primary Contemplation” (Πρώτη θεωρία) and “Secondary Contemplation” (Δευτέρα θεωρία). The distinction lies not in the contemplative subject (the intellect, here termed “the seer”), but in the nature of the object: Primary Contemplation focuses on the immaterial, while Secondary Contemplation engages with the material (Ramelli, *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostica*, 152). Further, *KG* 1.27 presents a broader classification of five distinct forms of contemplation. The highest of these is the contemplation of God the Trinity, followed by the contemplation of incorporeal realities (second), bodies (third), the Judgment (fourth), and divine providence (fifth); cf. *Ibid.*, lii, and 27. See also Guillaumont, “Un philosophe au désert: Evagre le Pontique,” 44.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 58: “Even if the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) rises above (ὑπὲρ) the contemplation (τὴν θεωρίαν) of corporeal nature (τῆς σωματικῆς φύσεως), it has not yet perfectly beheld (ἐθεάσατο) the place of God (τὸν τόπον τοῦ θεοῦ); for it can exist within the knowledge of Intelligibles (ἐν τῇ γνώσει τῶν νοητῶν) and be diversified (ποικίλλεσθαι) by it.” Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 192. Evagrius writes in *Kephalaia Gnostika* 4.77 (S2): “Objects are outside the intellect, but the *theōria* concerning them is established inside it. But it is not so concerning the Holy Trinity, for it alone is essential knowledge.” Cf. Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, 349. When contemplating the Holy Trinity, the distinction between subject and object dissolves, and the intellect (*nous*) participates in the non-numerical unity

the time of prayer, the *nous* must completely detach from the senses (*anaisthēsan ktēsamenos*),<sup>108</sup> because the intellect cannot perceive the “place of God” within itself until it has surpassed all mental representations<sup>109</sup> related to created things: “The intellect would not see the place of God (*ho topos tou Theou*) within itself (*en heautō*), unless it has been raised higher than all the representations (*noēmata*) of objects (*pragmata*).”<sup>110</sup>

Thus, Evagrius will define prayer as “a state of the intellect destructive of every earthly representation (*noēmatos*),”<sup>111</sup> meaning any image of a sensible object. It does not stop at the level of introspection, but becomes an inner experience<sup>112</sup> through which the intellect is freed from the mental representations that leave imprints (*typoō*) upon it<sup>113</sup>, with a view to “approaching the Immaterial

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characteristic of God (cf. *Epistula fidei* 7: ἡ δὲ μὸνὰς καὶ ἑνὰς τῆς ἀπλῆς καὶ ἀπεριλήπτου οὐσίας ἐστὶ σημαντική. – “One and Only” is the designation of the simple and uncircumscribed essence.” Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 48. God is uncircumscribed, and the knowledge of him remains an experience that cannot be encompassed or understood: “But only our intellect is incomprehensible to us, as is God, its creator. Indeed, it is not possible to understand what a nature receptive of the Holy Trinity is nor to understand the unity, that is, essential knowledge.” (*Kephalaia Gnostika* 2.11, S2; cf. Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, 213). Cf. Conway-Jones, “The Greatest Paradox of All,” 272.

<sup>108</sup> *De oratione* 120: “Blessed is the intellect that at the time of prayer attains total freedom from perception (ἀναισθησίαν κτησάμενος).” cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 198. Cf. *De oratione* 118.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 70.

<sup>110</sup> *Skemmata* 23: Οὐκ ἂν ἴδοι ὁ νοῦς τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τόπον ἐν ἑαυτῷ, μὴ πάντων τῶν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν νοημάτων ὑψηλότερος γεγονώς (cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The *Skemmata*”, 525). Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Νοῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” 302.

<sup>111</sup> *Skemmata* 26: Προσευχὴ ἐστὶ κατάστασις νοῦ, φθαρτικὴ παντὸς ἐπιγείου νοήματος; cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The *Skemmata*,” 526. Evagrius emphasizes that man will not be able “to pray purely” (προσεύξασθαι καθαρῶς), “while being tangled up with material things and shaken by unremitting cares. For prayer is the setting aside of “representations” (προσευχὴ γάρ ἐστιν ἀπόθεσις νοημάτων)” (*De oratione* 71; Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 193). Those who desire pure prayer (καθαρὰς προσευχῆς), he exhorted, must keep watch over their anger (θυμὸν) – that is, over “the power of the soul capable of destroying thoughts” (θυμός ἐστι δύναμις ψυχῆς, φθαρτικὴ λογισμῶν, cf. *Skemmata* 8) – control their belly, limit their water consumption, keep vigil in prayer [...] knock at the door of Scripture with the hands of virtues. Then *apatheia* of the heart (καρδίας ἀπάθεια) will dawn for you and you will see, during prayer, the intellect shining like a star (νοῦν ἀστεροειδῆ ὄψει ἐν προσευχῇ).” Cf. *De malignis cogitationibus* 43; Évangile le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, 298-9.

<sup>112</sup> “an inner technique,” cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, “The Sapphire Light of the Mind,” 518.

<sup>113</sup> This state of prayer assumes that the intellect is devoid of any representation, of any “form” – not only of sensible things and any created reality, but even of God Himself. See *De oratione* 67: “Never give a shape (Μὴ σχηματίζεις) to the divine as such when you pray, nor allow your intellect to be imprinted (τυπωθῆναι) by any form (μορφὴν), but go immaterial to the Immaterial (ἀλλὰ ἄυλος τῷ ἄυλῳ πρόσιθι) and you will understand (καὶ συνήσεις).” Cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 193. Any representation of God, Christ, or angels that might appear at this moment can only be a deception of the demons, especially the demon of vainglory; cf. *De oratione* 116: “The source of a wandering intellect is vainglory (κενοδοξία), by which the intellect is moved to try circumscribing the divine by a shape or figures (σχήμασι καὶ μορφαῖς

One in an immaterial way.”<sup>114</sup>

To attain this “imageless prayer,” ascetic practices are necessary, the struggle with passions, the overcoming of evil thoughts, and a total renunciation, aiming at mastering the irascible (*thymos*) and desiring (*epithymia*) parts of the soul and eliminating “impassioned representations”, as well as those originating from perception (*ex aisthēseōs*), memory, or temperament.<sup>115</sup>

The intellect (*nous*) could not see the “place of God” (*topos tou theou*) in itself (*en heautō*), unless it had become loftier than all representations (*noēmata*) from things/ objects (*pragma*). But it would not become loftier, unless it had put off the passions (*pathē*) that bind it to sensible objects (*aisthēta pragmata*) through representations (*noēmata*). It will put aside the passions through the virtues (*aretē*); it will put aside the bare thoughts (*psiloi logismoī*) through spiritual contemplation (*pneumatikē theōria*) it will even put aside contemplation itself, when there appears (*epiphainō*) to it that light (*phōs*) at the time of prayer (*proseukhē*) which sets in relief (*ektypoō*) the place of God.<sup>116</sup>

As it advances in knowledge and ascends from one contemplation to another, the intellect reaches, at a privileged moment, “true prayer”<sup>117</sup> or “pure prayer.”<sup>118</sup>

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περιγράφειν.” Ibid., 198. Cf. Antoine Guillaumont, “La Vision de l’intellect Par Lui-Même Dans La Mystique Évagrienne,” *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 50 (1984): 255–62.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 67. The contemplative realizes that, in his reality as a creature, the fundamental dimension is not his material body, but his immaterial intellect (*nous*). This intellect, created and perfectly adapted, has the purpose of knowing the Immaterial, that is, God as non-numerical Trinity and perfect unity. The intellect thus becomes the “immaterial icon of the Immaterial God.” Cf. Driscoll, “Introduction,” 15.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 54: Οὐ μόνον θυμοῦ καὶ ἐπιθυμίας δεῖ ἄρχειν τὸν ἀληθῶς προσεύξασθαι βουλόμενον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐκτὸς νοήματος ἐμπαθοῦς γενέσθαι – “It is necessary for one who hastens to pray truly not only to rule his irascibility and concupiscence, but also to become separated from impassioned representation.” (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 192); *De oratione* 62: “Ὅταν ὁ νοῦς σου τῷ πολλῷ πρὸς θεὸν πόθῳ κατὰ μικρὸν οἶον ὑπαναχωρῇ τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐξ αἰσθήσεως ἢ μνήμης ἢ κράσεως νοήματα ἀποστρέφηται, εὐλαβείας ὁμοῦ καὶ χαρᾶς ἔμπλεως γενόμενος, τότε νόμιζε ἡγγικέναι ὅροις προσευχῆς – “When your intellect in great yearning for God as it were withdraws by degrees from the flesh and, being filled with piety and joy, deflects all representations from perception, memory or temperament, then reckon that you have come near to the boundaries of prayer.” (cf. Ibid., 192). Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind,” 332–3.

<sup>116</sup> *De malignis cogitationibus* 40; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 114–5.

<sup>117</sup> “Pure prayer” (*De oratione* 70, 72), which Evagrius also calls “true prayer” (cf. *De oratione* 53, 55, 59, 60, 64) is the highest level of contemplation. Cf. Tobon, “*Apatheia* in the Teachings of Evagrius Ponticus,” 51.

<sup>118</sup> *Capita cíc auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 78 presents a synthesis of Evagrian teaching regarding the exercise of the *nous*, illustrating how the entire monastic path culminates in “imageless prayer:” “As the intellect progresses in *praktikē*, it holds its representations (τὰ νοήματα) of sensible things (τῶν αἰσθητῶν) lightly; but as it progresses in *gnosis*, it will have varied

This “pure prayer” manifests as an intense, transitory process in which the intellect (*nous*), liberated from images and concepts, enters a “formless” state – achieving direct communion with God without intermediaries. This iconoclastic noetic experience also reflects a gnoseological movement from multiplicity to simplicity.<sup>119</sup>

Despite similarities in the definitions of prayer between Evagrius and his Greek philosophical predecessors,<sup>120</sup> Evagrius’s concerns were distinct.<sup>121</sup> He fundamentally changed the understanding of prayer, focusing it primarily on a personal, inner communion that belonged more to the realm of the self than to the ecclesial institution. He conceived it as an “inner technique” to intensify self-attentiveness and draw near to God. He expanded the philosophical vision by introducing the fundamental idea that prayer is the “activity of the intellect (*nous*).”<sup>122</sup> While Origen, in his treatise *On Prayer*, shared several notions of “spiritual exercises” with Late Antique philosophical schools, he did not develop the concept of contemplative prayer or what might be termed “the praying *nous*.” Evagrius’s significant contribution, therefore, was to understand prayer as the driving force of the *nous*, awakening the intellect to exercise its

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contemplations (θεωρήματα); but as it progresses in prayer (ἐν τῇ προσευχῇ), it will see its own light more brightly and more radiantly (λαμπρότερον καὶ φαιδρότερον ὄψεται τὸ ἴδιον φῶς).” Évangile le Pontique, *Chapitres Des Disciples d’Évangile*, 174. Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind,” 334.

<sup>119</sup> *De oratione* 85: ἡ δὲ προσευχὴ προοίμιόν ἐστι τῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀποικίλου γνώσεως – “And prayer is a prelude to the immaterial and simple knowledge.” Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Νοῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” 300.

<sup>120</sup> On prayer among Greek philosophers, see Édouard des Places, “La Prière Des Philosophes Grecs,” *Gregorianum* 41, no. 2 (1960): 253–72. On cultic prayer among the Greeks, see Édouard des Places, *La Religion Grecque. Dieux, Cultes, Rites et Sentiment Religieux Dans La Grèce Antique* (Paris: A. et J. Picard, 1969), 153–70.

<sup>121</sup> For instance, the late 2nd-century Platonic philosopher Maximus of Tyre questioned prayer’s sense and effectiveness. This led him to distinguish prayer: for philosophers, it is “is a conversation (*homilia*) and a dialogue with the gods about the things one has and a demonstration of one’s virtue,” while others ask for what they lack. Cf. *Orationes* V 8, 188–190 Maximus Tyrius, *Dissertationes*, 45. Many early Christian writers adopted this definition but did not restrict it solely to philosophers. Clement of Alexandria, for example, discussed prayer in a polemical context, linking it to the self-identity of the *gnostikos* – the true Christian – in contrast to others. On the definitions of prayer in Clement of Alexandria and Maximus of Tyre, see Méhat, “Sur Deux Définitions de La Prière,” 115–120; Alain Le Boulluec, “Les Réflexions de Clément sur la prière et le traité d’Origène,” in *Alexandrie antique et chrétienne: Clément et Origène*, by Alain Le Boulluec, ed. Carmelo Giuseppe Conticello, Collection des études augustinienes 178 (Paris: Institut d’études augustinienes, 2006), 137–49.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 14:15, where the Spirit (πνεῦμα) and the intellect/ mind (νοῦς) appear as the two praying faculties: “I will pray with the Spirit, but I will also pray with the mind; I will sing with the Spirit, but I will also sing with the mind.” – προσεύξομαι τῷ πνεύματι, προσεύξομαι δὲ καὶ τῷ νοῖ· ψαλῶ τῷ πνεύματι, ψαλῶ δὲ καὶ τῷ νοῖ.

highest and purest function.<sup>123</sup> Thus, Evagrius marks a radical shift in the conceptualization of “inner prayer” and a transformation of Eastern Christianity’s discourse on this spiritual practice in Late Antiquity.<sup>124</sup>

Evagrius’ “pure prayer” teaching represented one of Late Antiquity’s most stimulating and innovative mystical theories.<sup>125</sup> His work, *Chapters on Prayer*, written for a close and learned friend,<sup>126</sup> is a masterpiece of the period’s mystical and philosophical literature, where he developed a comprehensive terminology and theory for this contemplative prayer, naming it “pure prayer” and integrating it into his complex mystical system. The terminology he introduced became widely known and was adopted as normative by Greek, Latin, and Syriac authors of Late Antiquity and later periods.<sup>127</sup>

## Conclusion

This article explored the deep and distinctive understanding of prayer within Evagrius Ponticus’s spiritual system, particularly emphasizing his notion of “pure prayer.” We observed how Evagrius perceives prayer in various forms, notably defining it as “a work befitting the dignity of the intellect” and, importantly, as an authentic “state” (*katastasis*) of the purified *nous*. This interpretation framed prayer not merely as a text or request directed at God but as the intellect’s highest and purest function.

The journey toward this state of pure, imageless prayer represents the culmination of Evagrius’s coherent spiritual path, built upon the foundation of

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<sup>123</sup> *De oratione* 83–84. Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Noûς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” 297–9.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind,” 329.

<sup>125</sup> Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, “Theories of Prayer in Late Antiquity: Doubts and Practices from Maximus of Tyre to Isaac of Nineveh,” in *Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities, 5th to 11th Centuries*, by Derek Krueger and Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 10–33. (20: „Viewing Evagrius’s theory in the larger context of Late antique Christian and non-Christian discourse on prayer reveals its radical originality.”)

<sup>126</sup> Bunge [Gabriel Bunge, “The ‘Spiritual Prayer’: On the Trinitarian Mysticism of Evagrius of Pontus,” *Monastic Studies* 17 (1987): 191–208.] supports the hypothesis that Evagrius addressed his treatise *On Prayer* to his teacher, St. Macarius the Great, although there does not seem to be consistent evidence for this, cf. Antoine Guillaumont, *Un Philosophe Au Désert: Évagre Le Pontique, Textes et Traditions* 8 (Paris: Vrin, 2004), 129. R. Sinkewicz [Robert E. Sinkewicz, ed., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 184] suggests Rufinus, at his monastery in Jerusalem, as a possible addressee.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Limit of the Mind (Noûς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh,” 293–4 and n. 14.

ascetic practice (*praktiké*) aimed at achieving impassibility (*apatheia*) and detachment from the senses and mental representations (*noemata*). Evagrius's in-depth exposition of the intellect's activity and its obstacles revealed the rigorous internal discipline required for the *nous* to return to its pristine "state" and engage in authentic, unmediated communion with God.

Evagrius's systematic articulation of the "praying *nous*" and his emphasis on prayer as an "imageless" encounter with the immaterial God represented a seminal contribution to Christian mystical theology. By providing a detailed experiential model and practical instructions for the intellect's ascent towards contemplation (*theoria*), Evagrius not only synthesized earlier ascetic and philosophical strands but also significantly reshaped the discourse on inner prayer for centuries to come. His legacy lay in this powerful vision of "pure prayer" as the ultimate expression of the intellect's potential and the apex of the spiritual life.

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