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CONTENTS

The Flourishing of Creation as a Theological Framework for Human Spiritual Health

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Spiritual Illness, the Ultimate Ailment to Be Feared:
"Do you want to be healed"? (John 5, 6):
Understanding Spiritual Health in the 21st Century,**
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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the use, by a number of contemporary theologians, of the concept of 'flourishing' in relation to the whole of creation and humanity in particular, and examines the connection between the flourishing of creation and the spiritual health of the human race. The paper first draws on Enochic studies to understand the connection between balance and order in creation and the moral rectitude of human life and response to the Creator in ancient Jewish thought. It then contrasts this with Western post-Reformation thought in which creation is seen to exist for, and to exploited to the benefit of, human advancement and well-being. Although this route could lead us into reflections on creation theology this paper takes an alternative route, in the company of Miroslav Volf and others, to examine spiritual sickness in the 21st century and how this can be addressed by attention to the holistic understanding of the flourishing of the whole creation. The mission texts of John 10:10 and Romans 8:19 will underpin the proposition that the ultimate objective of the *Missio Dei* is the eternal flourishing of humanity in the context of a flourishing, God-honouring universe.

Keywords: Flourishing, Creation Theology, Spiritual Illness, Enochic Tradition, Redemptive Judgment

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Apocalypse and Redemption

With spiritual illness being described as the 'ultimate ailment' in the theme of our consultation these two days, I feel it is appropriate to begin my deliberations in the apocalyptic literature of St. John the Divine where the judgement, reformation and the ultimate destiny of humankind are closely tied to the turmoil and restoration of creation. We recall that as the Lamb of God opens the seals of judgement and reaches the seventh and final seal and the sounding of the seven trumpets John declares,

> *The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down on the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.*
> Revelation 8:7-9

John here draws closely on the imagery of the plagues of the Exodus tradition in developing his theme of judgement but goes further than the Torah tradition which focuses mainly on the demonstration of the cosmic power of Yahweh and the punishment of Egypt. Going beyond this, the apocalyptic focus of our first century mystic is not just on judgement but on warning and on the possibility of redemption. In each case destruction is limited to one-third. As Swete writes,

> "*Here his purpose is chiefly to emphasis the partial character of the visitation. Its purpose is the reformation, not the destruction of mankind; it is charged with serious warning, but not the final doom.*"[1]

I have begun with the apocalypse of John because I wanted to focus on the partial nature of the destruction of creation and the space this leave for a Christian hope of redemption[2], but it is also important to revisit the words of Jesus Christ himself in Mark 13 because here we are reminded even more clearly of the interrelated nature of spiritual health, human survival and cosmic destruction. A passage which begins with warnings over spiritual deception[3] and ends with a call to spiritual discernment and watchfulness[4], moves

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[1] Swete,H.B. *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with notes and indices,* London: Macmillan, 1907

[2] Afterall the apocalypse of John concludes with a vision of a new creation at the centre of which stands the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:2)

[3] Mark 13:5-6

[4] Mark 13:32-37

seamlessly through themes of human alienation and warfare, betrayal and persecution, and cosmic destruction[5]. And again, here, in Mark's gospel we get the opening up of the possibility of redemption. Jesus says,

> "*If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them … At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.*"[6]

In this paper I wish to advance two theses, firstly that spiritual illness and the potential for human flourishing are intrinsically linked to the well-being of creation as a whole, and secondly that divine judgement is primarily about the opening up of the possibility of redemption. Up until the emergence of, what as been termed by some, our "Climate Emergency" and the growing awareness of the collapse of bio-diversity and environmental resilience, much theology (I speak primarily of Western theology) had been excessively anthropocentric, paying little attention to the holistic nature of creation. I want to suggest that it has been the sins of pride and narcissism, rather than a faithful reading of scripture that have led us to consider humanity as the sole concern of the Creator and that our own well-being, spiritual, mental and physical, can be maintained whilst at the same time ignoring or abusing the well-being of the rest of God's creation. We will return later to this assertion. At the same time, in the West, Protestant Pietism and Premillennial theology have led us down the false path of abandoning any concern for the earthly condition of men and women and the state of creation as a whole, as a lost cause, and turning our eyes instead on an 'escapist' redemption to a totally 'other' heavenly reality – a theological position forcefully rejected by the pre-eminent Anglican theologian N.T. Wright. In his text on eschatology, *Surprised by Hope,* Wright argues that Christian scripture speaks consistently of the renewal and fulfilment of all things in Christ, not the abandonment of one world in order to seek another. On the Kingdom of God he writes,

> *It is the story of God's kingdom being launched on earth as in heaven, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has been decisively defeated, the new creation has been decisively launched, and Jesus' followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory, and the inaugurated new world, into practice.*[7]

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[5] Mark 13:7-27
[6] Mark 13:20,26
[7] Wright,T. *Surprised by Hope,* London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007, 217

This present created universe which God has from the first moment declared 'good'[8] needs no replacement, but rather waits in eager expectation for the revealing of the sons of God when creation itself "*will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God*"[9].

Having quoted a 21st century Evangelical theologian in support of my thesis I now step back two millennia to reconsider these issues from the perspective of the Enochic tradition.

Enoch : The Watchers' Rebellion and Corruption of Creation

The Enochic tradition is almost unknown in Western theological debate but has remained central to Christian praxis as well as theology within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church as well as in some other Orthodox traditions. In a recent publication, Bruk Asale examines the canonical status in Christian scripture of 1 Enoch, in particular, and concludes that "*1 Enoch was considered as Scripture, or inspired, by the early church and apostolic fathers. … Some Church Fathers held 1 Enoch as inspired Scripture not only because of the book itself, but more importantly because Jude considered it to be Scripture.*"[10] In this paper I am not so much concerned to argue the scriptural reception of the Enochic tradition but rather to explore it's teaching on the unique connection that exists between moral and spiritual failure and the disordering of creation.

The background to the concerns of Enoch is the ordering of creation in Genesis 1. Christian (and Jewish) Scripture opens with the statement, "the earth was without form and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep"[11] which is immediately followed by the oppositional statement "and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters"[12] which leads into the ordering of creation through separation[13], gathering[14], production[15], creation and naming.[16] The creation of God is an ordered creation. Chaos is banished and good order, representing the reign of God, is established. Enoch is taken in his vision to inspect, to measure and to know the order of creation and to observe the disorder, the destruction, caused by the fallen angels, the Watchers.

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[8] Genesis 1:10 et al
[9] Romans 8:19-21
[10] Asale,B.A. 1 Enoch as Christian Scripture: A study in the reception and appropriation of 1 Enoch in Jude and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Canon, Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020, 58
[11] Genesis 1:2a
[12] Genesis 1:2b
[13] Genesis 1:4, 7 and 14
[14] Genesis 1:9 and 10
[15] Genesis 1: 11-12 and 24
[16] Genesis 2:19-20

The Watchers in Enoch are those angelic beings tasked with the knowledge of creation, its origin, its nature, its regulation, its telos and with the maintenance of order in creation through astronomical, meteorological and geographical phenomenon. Each angel has their own specific responsibility, for example, for wind, frost or hail.[17] In contrast to the fallen angels who bring chaos and destruction, the good angels harmonise all existence, heavenly and earthly.[18] As David Jackson notes, "*the* Book of the Watchers *begins with a strong and unqualified statement on the regularity and dependability of God's created order (1 Enoch 2:1-5:3). As we trace this theme throughout the literature, we note a contrast between the emphasis in the* Book of the Watchers *on cosmic regularity and the various accounts of cosmic rebellion elsewhere. … The original regularity of the cosmos as described in 1 Enoch 2-5 forms the basis for condemning all subsequent deviations.*"[19] An important observation for this particular study is the nature of these deviations and the nature of the salvific role proposed for Enoch.

The deviation of the fallen angels in the Enochic canon is three-fold, spiritual as a rebellion against God, moral in their illicit sexual relationship with human beings, and cosmological in their neglect of their God-given role as regulators of creation and their deliberate distortion of creation by, for example, "bringing down" the sun, the moon, the stars and the constellations to be worshiped alongside idols.[20] Hahne, commenting on 1 Enoch 80:2-8 stresses, "*the delicate relationship that exists between moral obedience and the cosmic order. When sin increases among humans and angels even the balance of nature is upset. … The point is not that natural law is fickle, but that the normally structured order of nature will be seriously corrupted by sin.*"[21] By referring to moral fault as 'sin' Hahne has by implication introduced the third connected element, the spiritual, the breaking of the divine-human covenant, into the three-fold impact of the action of the fallen angels.

This binding together of spiritual, moral and cosmic implications of rebellion is further strengthened in 2 Enoch. Andrei Orlov comments,

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[17] 1 Enoch 60:17-19

[18] 2 Enoch 19:4

[19] Jackson,D. *Enochic Judaism: Three defining paradigm exemplars,* Library of Second Temple Studies, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004, 49.

[20] 3 Enoch 5:7-9

[21] Hahne,H.A. *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation. An Exegetical Study of Romans 8:19-22 in Light of Jewish Apocalytic Literature* (Doctoral dissertation, Toronto: Wycliffe College, 1997, 168

> *One of the notable features of the mysteries of creation that Enoch receives directly from God, a facet which is absent in other early Enoch writings, is a tendency to link cosmological realities with human anthropology, and more specifically, with elements of the human body. In this conceptual move, the familiar Enochic tendency to connect cosmology and the moral condition of humankind takes a new turn. … signif[ying] that the corruption of human nature through the violation of moral codes in its turn may lead to the corruption of cosmological realities since they represent the archetypal elements from which the human body was once created.*[22]

Throughout the Enochic tradition, in contrast to the disruptive impact of the actions of the fallen angels, Enoch is given a salvific, or healing, role. In his visionary tour of the divine realms Enoch is constantly taught to observe, to measure and to record the workings of creation. In 1 Enoch 12:3 he is described as the "scribe of righteousness" and Andrei Orlov unpacks this role as, "*transferring and sharing divine knowledge that can restore order and harmony*". Orlov continues,

> *The purpose of Enoch's recording routines is not to compose entertaining stories for public amusement. He does not create a product from his own imagination, rather he transmits the knowledge of others. … Clearly, Enoch is envisaged as a scribal mediator, one who uses knowledge for the rectification of creation. The idea that Enoch's writings will bring harmony and righteousness to humankind is a leitmotif in the earliest Enochic booklets.*[23]

The purpose of Enoch's mission is clearly salvific for both humanity and creation as a whole as it seeks to return both to the divine order.

Our reflections on Enoch could take us into the contemporary urgent field of environmental theology but our concern in this paper is rather with human flourishing so we must leave the former to others.[24]

Patristic understandings of human flourishing

I am, not a patristic scholar myself, but it is important in this context to gain some understanding of how the Church Fathers and Mothers understood the 'ultimate sickness' of humankind and where routes to a recovery of spiritual health and flourishing might be found. I rely therefore firstly on the Anglican patristic scholar, Christopher Beeley, who writes,

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[22] Orlov,A.A. *Divine Mysteries in the Enochic Tradition,* Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2023, 147-149
[23] Orlov,A.A. *Divine Mysteries in the Enochic Tradition,* 195
[24] See for example, Stuckenbruck *Words from the Book of Enoch on the Environment* in Esler, P.F. (ed) *The Blessing of Enoch: 1 Enoch and Contemporary Theology*, Eugene OR: Cascade, 2017, 111-127

> *Paul's confession, which stands in opposition to the many so-called gods and lords of the nations, is that the one God and the one Lord Jesus Christ together are the source of all things and the aim of human life (1 Cor. 8:5-6). Theologians across the patristic period followed the same line of thinking when they looked to Jesus as the one in whom true life is to be found. As Maximus Confessor comments, Christ crucified and risen is nothing less than the principle of creaturely existence. Although we do not normally view things that way—one must be "initiated" into this mystery—for the cardinal theologians of the patristic period, Jesus Christ is the basis of human life and the very rationale of the entire universe. To inquire into the nature of human flourishing, then—what it means to live a good life individually and socially, to thrive, to have a sense of purpose, and to know joy in the midst of life's challenges—is, in the mind of the early Fathers, an invitation to see Christ as the source, the definition, and the means of a life worth living.*

> *Attention to human flourishing in relation to Christ runs from the beginning to the end of the patristic period—from the teaching and witness of the martyrs, the apologists' attempts to recommend Christianity to its cultured despisers, and the great hermeneutical and ascetical synthesis of Origen, to the intensification of Christian practices in the emerging monastic movement and the major theological syntheses of the fourth century and beyond.*[25]

In his article Beeley then goes on to explore this patristic theme in terms of Christology, Theosis, and the practice, in Christ, of love and peace. We see here a pattern of life being lived in order and harmony with creation and with God, but a harmony which can only be achieved in so far as that life is being lived, individually and corporately, in Christ, for as Paul reminds us at the start of Ephesians, it is only 'in Christ' that all things in heaven and on earth are held together.[26] And in Colossians he states boldly that all things in heaven and on earth were "*created through and for Christ*" and that Christ's eternal purpose is that He should "*reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.*"[27]

John McGuckin picks up the same theme in Gregory of Nyssa in terms of the 'radiant fullness of purpose, of creaturely human being'. He writes,

> *On the part of Gregory of Nyssa … we see a concern to clarify what metamorphosis involves. The eschatological New Kairos of deification, he suggests, will not be a posthumous supercession of human nature, rather a passing beyond the current limits of human nature, by and in the same nature, whose metamorphosised*

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[25] Beeley,C.A. Christ and Human Flourishing in Patristic Theology, Pro Ecclesia Vol. XXV, No. 2, 2016, 129

[26] Epesians 1:10

[27] Colossians 1:16-20

> *transcendence is co-terminous with its glorification in a bounded infinity. The restricting limitations that were once imposed on human nature by long ages of its common experience as a "nature that was separated from God," will be lifted, in Gregory of Nyssa's understanding, by the admission of the creature into the radiant fullness of the very purpose of creaturely human being, which is intimate communion with the endless mystery of the Life-Giving Presence[28].*

In the early centuries of the Christian faith we see then a firmly established conviction that humanity may flourish not by escaping this difficult world but by entering into an "intimate communion with the endless mystery of the Life-Giving Presence", by finding our true humanity as we lose ourselves in the life of Christ.

Protestant Reformation and utilitarian views of creation

As an Anglican it is often assumed by others that my theological position will be that of a reformed Protestant but in this debate I would rather lay claim to my Anglican heritage to be found in the Catholic and Celtic traditions which informed early Anglican theology just as much as the later influences of the European Reformation. I say this because I have little or no sympathy with Protestantism when it comes to post-Reformation creation theology which takes a largely utilitarian approach[29] based on the, often misunderstood, Genesis command to Adan and Eve to "fill and subdue the earth" and "rule over" every living creature,[30] rather than the subsequent command to "work with it and take care of it".[31]

There is no space for a full exploration of Protestant creation theology in this short paper but we cannot escape noticing the damage that has been done to creation and to our own human flourishing by centuries of "subjection" and "ruling over" when what was, and still is, needed is "working with" and "caring for" creation. Far too often humanity has entered into a mindset in which human flourishing requires, and justifies, the exploitation of every usable natural resource and the subjection, and even extinction, of other species, and,

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[28] McGuckin,J.A. *Eschatological horizons in the Cappadocian Fathers* in Daly,R.J. (ed) *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, Brookline, MA: Baker Academic, 2009, 20

[29] Utilitarian here is not being used in the technical sense as in the Christian Utilitarianism of William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), although there are connections, but rather to indicate a mindset that prioritises the use of resources at hand to maximise the good for oneself, one's community and humanity generally.

[30] Genesis 1:28

[31] Genesis 2:15

through slavery, even our own species. We are only just beginning to learn that we do not flourish when we gain subjection over insects with insecticides and plants through genetic modification but rather we flourish when we can learn the ways of co-existing and co-flourishing with the whole of creation, and ultimately with God. We come right back to Enoch who wrote down for his successors and heirs the ways, the measurements, the rhythms of divine harmony in creation, so that they could adjust to these, live in peace with creation and discover true fulfilment in life.

A theology of subduing and ruling over creation has not only brought large swaths of creation close to distinction and our planet to crisis point, but it has also given human beings a totally false approach to discovering the fullness of life that we crave. A neglect of the rhythms and harmony of life lived in human and divine community has led us into a sterile individualism which leads us down the false road of self-actualisation, directed by a sea of self-help books and social media influencers which is fast turning us into a narcissistic society unable to see anything beyond our own wants.

Thankfully the thin veneer of self-actualisation and individualism fed by materialism which has been used to disguise the, deeply Godless, malaise of humanity is beginning to crack revealing once again a deep hunger for authentic human flourishing. I now turn to a brief description of some of the new movements seeking to address this hunger, to bring healing to the 'ultimate sickness of humanity'.

Contemporary "Floursishing" movements

The first movement I want to address is often referred to as the "Mind, body, and spirit" movement. Its origins are hard to define but some time around the 1960s three shifts took place in how European and North American populations set out to address their sense of sickness, unease and mental fragility. The first of these three shifts was an increased interest in alternative medical interventions from homeopathy to osteopathy and acupuncture. Secondly we see an attempt to de-clinicalise mental health care, moving away from drug treatments, with their inevitable side-effects, and seemingly barbaric treatments such as ECT (Electro-convulsive therapy) and blood letting, to counselling and so called "talking therapies". The third shift in this triplet was an increased interest in spiritual matters outside traditional religions and drawing on religious traditions from Asia and the East. This was the era, for example, when we began to see Hari Krishna bands on the streets of London, Yoga classes in local

community halls, and teachers of transcendental meditation gathering bands of disciples around them. Gradually, during the closing decades of the twentieth centuries these movement coalesced and entered the mainstream of society. Many sick people then looked not to their doctor or priest for healing, but rather to their homeopathist, therapist or spiritual guru.

In 2001 Marie Krueger wrote,

> *Patient dissatisfaction may be one of the reasons why thousands of conferences are being offered each year, on topics ranging from spiritual growth, to self-growth, to direct experience with complementary medicine practices. Many individuals attend conferences to find out what the "hype" is all about regarding this movement. Others may be attending these conferences in hopes of seeking answers to their unanswered questions and "untreatable" ailments by modern healthcare standards.[32]*

Krueger goes on to suggest that this movement may have arisen partly because of a failure of medical practitioners to pay attention to the whole human person rather than just the disease itself, but I would also want to ask whether it is points to a failure within our churches to understand and address the deep sickness of contemporary society.

Since the turn of the millennium, over the past quarter of a century, this Body, Mind, and Spirit movement has become a permanent part of society's approach to well-being and human flourishing in most western countries with regular conferences, a mountain of self-help books, and a sea of online guides and advice centres. As part of their missional outreach at least one Anglican mission agency now regularly attends Body, Mind and Spirit gatherings to offer a Christian approach to healing through prayer, "holy habits" and the reading of sacred scripture. This approach to mission is controversial but seems to meet a need at long queues build up, next to homeopathic stalls and sellers of crystals, waiting for prayer and Christian teaching.

More recently much attention has been paid, at least in my own context in Britain and in the USA, to what is called "mindfulness", an essentially secular concept which some practitioners have seen as having its Christian manifestation in the Pauline theology of the reception of the Mind of Christ[33], although I would maintain that the two are in many respects radically different concepts.[34] I

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[32] Krueger,M.B. *Identifying the movement with no name: an evaluation of the 2000 UW-Stout Body, Mind and Spirit Conference*, The Graduate School of University of Wisconsin-Stout, 2001

[33] 1 Corinthians 2:16

[34] See the discussion of this point in Reynolds,S.G. *Living with the Mind of Christ: Mindfulness in Christian Spirituality,* London, UK: Darton, Longman, and Todd, Ltd., 2018

personally became more interested in understanding this movement when five years ago a priest in Oxford, the city where I live, left his pastoral ministry to work fulltime as a mindfulness consultant. One of the earliest manifestations of this movement was the 'Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction' programme advocated by Kabat-Zinn[35] in 1990 as a treatment for both psychological and physical ailments. In their review article in 2006, Shapiro, Carlson, Astin and Freedman, suggest that, "*Mindfulness … is more than meditation. It is "inherently a state of consciousness"* [36] *which involves consciously attending to one's moment-to-moment experience".* They go on to develop a model of mindfulness built on the three axioms of Intention, Attention and Attitude. In their paper published in the Journal of Clinician Psychology they claim for their model that,

> *Intentionally cultivating nonjudgmental attention leads to connection, which leads to self-regulation and ultimately to greater order and health. Through the process of reperceiving, we are able to attend to the information contained in each moment. We gain access to more data, even those data that may have previously been too uncomfortable to examine. … Through this process, dysregulation and subsequent disease can be avoided.*[37]

This final sentence interests me in the way that it links disease with dysregulation, sickness with a lack of order. This takes us back to the Enochic concern with the divine orderliness of the creation and its relationship with human morality and flourishing. My concern however, with the pursuit of mindfulness is that it brings with it a narcissistic concern for personal well-being and fulfilment with no reference to the flourishing of the whole creation and the worship of God the creator. The *theotic* reception[38], on the other hand, of the Mind of Christ, retains the concern for salvific reordering and healing but with a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric focus.

I want to turn now to a Christian theologian who addresses the issue of flourishing, well-being and health, in this much wider theocentric context.

In publishing his book, *Flourishing,*[39] in 2015 Miroslav Volf, the Croatian theologian known for his work on memory, reconciliation and fulfilling living, added the sub-title "*Why we need religion in a globalised world?*". Having looked

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[35] Kabat-Zinn,J. *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain and Illness*, New York, Delacorte, 1990

[36] Shapiro,S.L., Carlson,L.E., Astin,J.A. & Freedman,B. Mechanisms of Mindfulness, Journal of Clinical Psychology Vol 62 Issue 3 (March 2006), 374

[37] Ibid. 380

[38] Reception of the Mind of Christ as an integral part of the process of *theosis* (or sanctification).

[39] Volf,M. Flourishing: Why we need religion is a Globalised World, New Haven,CT: Yale University Press, 2015

at two contemporary movements towards flourishing that are essentially secular, although sometimes adopted by Christians, I want to turn now to Volf's global vision for a flourishing human community which is clearly grounded in Christian theology but seeks to transcend religious divides. To be clear he is not here advocating some sort of united world religion but rather suggesting that there are, within all world religious traditions, elements that make them sympathetic to the clearly Christian vision that he spells out.

The book begins with a critical analysis of contemporary globalisation and suggests that,

> *World religions press globalisation in its current form on two main issues. The first directly concerns ordinary life. Does globalisation contribute to life going well for all people, or does it favor some, allowing them to amass power and wealth while the great multitude bear the burdens of abject poverty and environmental degradation? The second relates to the transcendental realm. Does globalisation contribute to the general flourishing of people, or does it seduce them with false promises of happiness while trapping them in an endless cycle of work-and-spend and sapping their lives of deeper meaning and more complex enjoyments? The answers to these questions are the key to religions' responses to globalisation.*[40]

After a careful critique of globalisation and its capture by scientific materialism and power politics, Volf goes on to explore how religions are often tempted to retreat to the realm of personal and private spirituality whilst neglecting their role in the public sphere. He writes, "*Religions structure relationships between people and craft cultures, rather than merely shaping the interior lives of individuals and their private practices. World religions aim at adjusting people's public lives as well as their private ones to the unseen order.*"[41] Notice here again the reference to the Enochic theme of adjusting our lives to the 'unseen order' of creation.

Volf reaches the climax of his argument as to why we need religion in a globalised world when he writes:

> *Explicitly or implicitly, world religions insist that stretching out to the divine realm isn't something human beings do or don't do depending on whether they are religiously inclined or not. Reference to transcendence isn't an* add-on *to humanity; rather it defines human beings. That's the structural restlessness of human hearts. When we come to "rest" in the divine – when we come to love God*

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[40] Ibid. 44-45
[41] Ibid. 65

> *and surrender to God in faith … the relation to the divine becomes the axis of our lives. It shapes how we perceive ourselves and the world, what desires we have and how we are satiated. For world religions, life lived only on the flat plane of this-worldliness is too caged, too hollow, too "light"; to be free, full and flourishing, life must be lived in relationship to the divine, which gives meaning, orientation and unique pleasure to all our mundane experiences and endevours.[42]*

A very different and more biblical textual approach to understanding human flourishing is adopted by Pennington in a 2015 paper for the Institute for Faith, Work and Economics. In this paper he looks at three biblical terms which are used to describe aspects of what we might today understand as flourishing. In his summary section he writes:

> *The first of these ideas is shālôm/eirēnē/peace. Shalom has many and varied uses throughout the Bible, but its consistent idea is one of wholeness that results in well-being. … Shālôm/eirēnē paints for us a picture of what a flourishing life can look like through relationship with God. When God reigns over his people in joy and righteousness, and his children relate to him and others rightly in love, this is shālôm, both individually and corporately. … The second in our cluster of flourishing ideas is ʾashrê/makarios/blessedness/ happiness. … Like shālôm, the vision behind the Bible's claims about ʾashrê are not peripheral but come from the core of God's revelation. When the Bible makes claims about who is ʾashrê /makarios/truly happy and blessed, it is casting a vision for a way of being in the world that will result in true human flourishing. … They are statements that inform us how to orient ourselves and reframe our understanding of what it means to really live the good life, to have genuine well-being individually and in society. … Human flourishing, which the Bible can describe as ʾashrê /makarios, comes to us only through God. The third and final idea … is that of tāmîm/teleios/wholeness. Tāmîm describes the means by which, and that state wherein, a human can experience God-directed and God-blessed flourishing, through wholeness. It is not an overstatement to suggest that the essence of God's call upon his creatures morally and spiritually is a call to wholeness.[43]*

The identification of the three semitic terms for peace, blessedness and wholeness as essential contributions to a Christian understanding of human flourishing takes us back again to the Jewish traditions of Enoch with which we began this paper and the conviction that health is deeply related to our relationship to God and our willingness to live in alinement with his created order.

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[42] Ibid. 81

[43] Pennington,J.T. A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing Institute for Faith, Work & Economics, 2015 https://tifwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Pennington-A-Biblical-Theology-of-Human-Flourishing.pdf accessed 08.10.2024

The latest contribution to the development of a theology of flourishing is Vanderweele's book, *A theology of health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing*[44] published earlier this year. Vanderweele has previously contributed to secular journals[45] on this topic and has undertaken empirical research into the relationship between health, wholeness and religious belief.[46]

Conclusion

This paper has set out to demonstrate a consistent witness, from the ancient Jewish scriptures of the Enochic tradition up to the current era, to an intrinsic relationship between our understanding of, and conformity to, the divine orderliness of creation and our own human health and flourishing. The inevitable implication of this understanding is that sin, a rebellion against the ways and will of God will lead in different ways to a disruption of human wellbeing, to sickness and disease and to the eventual fracturing of the relationship with God on which depends not only our flourishing but our very existence.

The argument I have been trying to make is that, despite all the advances of modern medicine, the new insights into psychiatry, and the exploration of movements such as mindfulness, much of which should be welcomed, humanity, both as individuals and as communities, will never achieve health, harmony and true human flourishing if it fails to pay attention to its relationship with its creator and the order he has built into his creation. That was the lesson that the fallen angers of 1 Enoch learnt and it is the less we learn today as communities in Spain are ravished by floods and suicide rates amongst young men in secular Europe soar.

Faith and Flourishing can never be separated, and (to be explored more fully in another paper) it is sinful pride to think that we can delink our individual flourishing from the flourishing of the whole human community, indeed the whole of the created order.

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[44] Vanderweele,T.J. *A theology of health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing,* Notre Dame, ID, University of Notre Dame, 2024

[45] See for example Vanderweele,T.J. *On the Promotion of Human Flourishing*, Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the USA 114(31) (July 13,2017) 8148-8156

[46] See for example Vanderweele,T.J. *Religion and health: A synthesis.* In M. J. Balboni & J. R. Peteet (Eds.), *Spirituality and religion within the culture of medicine: From evidence to practice,* Oxford University Press, 357-401

"Get Up and Heal Yourself!"
Self-Enhancement Technologies and Sanctification

Michael BIEHL[*]

ABSTRACT. This paper critiques the use of self-enhancement technologies through the lens of sanctification, avoiding a simplistic binary between affirmation and rejection. It examines the cultural fascination with self-tracking and optimization tools, which promise physical, mental, and spiritual improvement. By contrasting these technologies with theological concepts, the paper raises critical questions about their anthropological and spiritual assumptions. It highlights how these technologies perpetuate a reductionist view of the human self, rooted in data-driven self-regulation. The paper also critiques similarities between self-enhancement and transhumanist aspirations, pointing to their shared emphasis on control, efficiency, and self-perfection.

A Christian theological response is proposed, emphasizing the transformative process of sanctification as an alternative to the performance-oriented paradigm of self-optimization. By engaging critically with the promises and limitations of self-enhancement tools, the paper advocates a nuanced understanding of human flourishing that respects the mystery and relationality inherent in Christian anthropology.

Keywords: Self-enhancement, quantification, self-sanctification, Christian anthropology

The modern predicament

The case study presented here reflects my interest in mission within a secular context. My central conviction is that Christians—specifically those in Western European societies—exist in a secularized milieu. The secular framework

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profoundly influences how faith is understood and practiced. I opine, it should not be construed as antithetical to faith.[1] Consequently, mission must engage meaningfully with individuals shaped by such a mindset rather than attempting to establish a counter culture.[2]

In the broader popular imagination within these secular societies in Western Europe, one observes a pervasive longing for wholeness and healing—a yearning that transcends the recovery from physical illness or reliance solely on conventional medical practices. Well-being is often articulated as the pursuit of a holistic sense of completeness, happiness, and fulfilment in life associated with spirituality. This aspiration, dynamic yet diffuse, finds one expression in the numerous self-help resources and lifestyle guides that aim to expand life's possibilities to their fullest potential.[3] One prominent dimension of this fluid concept of wholeness is the premise that individual well-being is contingent upon deliberate self-enhancement[4] and optimization. For instance, even guides addressing time management and productivity frequently advocate for a comprehensive strategy of setting goals for one's life, transcending mere efficiency in organizing tasks. Other resources propose so-called bio-hacks, employing techniques such as neurolinguistic programming or nutritional interventions, to facilitate mental and physical transformation.[5] Yet another category of advisory literature explores processes to heal trauma and achievea sense of contentment.

In its more extreme manifestations, this quest for wholeness can converge with the ideals of transhumanism, as exemplified by Yuval Harari's popular book *Homo Deus*. Here, the human aspiration for self-perfection is extrapolated to envision a posthuman future wherein technological and biological

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[1] For Germany, for example, see the critical review of the last Church Membership Survey (Kirchenmitgliedschaftsumfrage). The practical theologian Kahle critiques the narrow understanding of religion applied by the survey, contrasting it with spirituality, which many understand as a non-churched form of lived pietism. Isolde Kahle, "Religion am Ende?, *Deutsches Pfarrerinnen- und Pfarrerblatt* 124 (2024): 591-596.

[2] See Michael Biehl, "Believing in a Secular Way: A West-German Perspective," in *Mission in Secularised Contexts of Europe: Contemporary Narratives and Experiences*, ed. by Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, Michael Biehl and Knud Jørgensen (Oxford: Regnum, 2018), 62-73.

[3] As an example, check the website of the journal „happinez", https://www.happinez.de. The number of self-help books abound as a quick check with booksellers or platforms like https://www.blinkist.com demonstrate.

[4] See Matthias Felder, *Christliches Leben und die Verbesserung des Menschen: Enhancement und Heiligung bei Calvin* (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann, 197) (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2022), 17-23.

[5] See for example, Olli Sovijärvi, Teemu Arina, and Jaakko Halmetoja, *Biohacker's Handbook: Upgrade Yourself and Unleash* (Kustantaja: Biohacker Center BHC Inc, 2019).

enhancements redefine the limits of human existence.[6] Harari's projections about the future intersect significantly with current discourses on "technoscience" and "cyberculture." These paradigms are already reshaping fundamental understandings of life, particularly in Western contexts. A review article in an academic anthropological journal underscores in that line a transformation in societal attitudes towards birth: from perceiving it as the "miracle of life" to regarding it as a calculated task—integrating a "perfect number of perfect children that fit 'perfectly'" into predefined life plans.[7] This shift signifies a profound reorientation, where life ceases to be viewed as a divine gift received passively. Instead, the individual is increasingly burdened with the responsibility to shape and design their existence. Such developments, viewed through the lens of theological anthropology, invite critical reflection on the implications for human dignity and relationality in a context increasingly dominated by technological materialism. This marks not merely a cultural but an ontological turn, reshaping the human condition itself.

Tools of "cyberculture"

With the exponential use of smartphones beginning around 2010, these devices have increasingly become platforms for digital tools supporting the tendency of self-enhancement, such as tracking and promoting, health, fitness and wellbeing. With smartphones at users' fingertips, digital applications for setting goals and enabling individuals to pursue their achievement have proliferated. Wearable technologies and associated applications not only monitor physical activities, such as workouts and nutrition, but also offer tools to enhance mindfulness and support meditation, promising users an improved—if not ideal—state of body and mind. These applications have gained widespread acceptance, appealing to the growing cultural emphasis on maintaining control over one's life.[8]

According to a report published in a German IT magazine in spring 2024, approximately 833 million individuals worldwide utilize sports apps. Although the number of users engaging with meditation apps is relatively smaller, these apps generate more than three times the revenue per user compared to

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[6] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Vintage, 2017).

[7] The review article argues that even birth and death are affected by consumer's choices, Sirkku K. Hellsten, "The 'Meaning of Life' during a Transition from Modernity to Transhumanism and Posthumanity", *Journal of Anthropology,* 2012, Article ID 21068, 4. (doi:10.1155/2012/210684).

[8] Without naming any specific product a quick search in the app stores will give evidence of this. Compare for example, the statistics on this website https://www.statista.com/topics/11045/meditation-and-mental-wellness-apps/.

sports apps and significantly outpace nutrition apps in profitability. It is projected that, by 2024, revenue from all such applications will total €15.88 billion, while revenue from fitness wristbands, smart scales, and other smart wearables will reach €68 billion. In Germany, approximately 33% of the population use such applications and associated tracking tools, with the highest rates observed among individuals aged 18 to 39. In 2023, 38% of respondents aged 18 to 29 reported using apps for fitness exercises, 17% for awareness and breathing exercises, and 16% for meditation. Half of these respondents noted that such tracking tools encouraged them to exercise, improved their motivation, or helped them achieve a sense of balance, whereas 13% reported no perceived benefit from using these devices.[9]

It remains unclear whether Christian apps were included in the aforementioned research. However, an exploration of the internet and the Play Store (Android) reveals a significant number of applications designed to support a Christian lifestyle digitally. These include apps for daily Bible reading,[10] as well as platforms offering specifically "heilsame Unterbrechungen" (wholesome interruptions) by meditation practices and prayer time.[11] In an orthodox context it may be worthwhile to note that one such app is called theosis-app which succinctly markets itself as providing nourishment for the mind, fostering peace through prayer, and strengthening Christian faith.[12] Another application, aptly named an App for Jesus, aims to enhance discipleship and facilitate networking among Christians in Germany.[13] These examples affirm that Christians actively engage with such digital tools, integrating them into their spiritual practices. It is reasonable to conclude that Christians are in general neither averse to utilizing tracking devices or apps nor to integrating digital technologies into their personal and community life, to mature in faith or to promote the mission of the church.[14]

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[9] „Zahlen, Daten, Fakten. Fitness-Hardware und -Apps", in: c't issue 2 (2024): 112-113.

[10] See for example the review "10 Best Bible Study Apps" on
https://rootedandgrounded.com/blogs/news/bible-study-app.

[11] See, for example, the app "Evermore", advertised by the German Evangelical Church, as: "Erlebe Heilige Momente. Mehr Achtsamkeit und Kontemplation im Alltag". https://evermore-app.de/. The app succeeds the app XRCS, launched in 2019, so support "Gott mitten im Alltag wahrzunehmen". "*Der Name XRCS leitet sich ab vom engl. eExercise (Übung) ab [sic]. Er bezieht sich auf die urchristliche Tradition der Exerzitien. Sie sind ein spiritueller Weg, neue Erfahrungen zu machen im Kraftfeld der Liebe Gottes.*"
https://www.landeskirche-hannovers.de/presse/archiv/tagesthemen/2019/01/04.

[12] https://www.theosis-app.com/en.

[13] https://oikos-projekt.org/christen-in-deutschland/jesus-app.

[14] Next to the examples quoted above, see, for example, the thesis Andrea Onduku, *A Contribution to the Discussion on Theologically Motivated Digital Mission among Children* (London: Spurgeon's College, School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, 2023).
https://cte.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/06/Andrea-OndukuDissertation-2023-Final-B.pdf.

The modern self and sanctification

The panorama outlined thus far highlights a notable trend in Western societies: the pursuit of a fulfilling life through self-enhancement, often facilitated by digital tools and applications, particularly among younger and middle-aged demographics. Building on my broader argument that the secular framework deeply shapes the understanding and practice of faith, I suggest that this phenomenon is closely linked to the declining significance of the concept of sanctification in regions where Christianity has been profoundly secularized.

Soteriology, the reflection on how salvation through God's redemptive action is appropriated, addresses a central dogmatic question: "How can God's transformative work within humanity be described in a way that preserves its divine distinctiveness while remaining distinct from human effort?"[15] This tension has given rise to various Protestant articulations of the relationship between justification and sanctification. The challenge lies in outlining a process of sanctification that avoids works-based righteousness while affirming the believer's active response to grace in spiritual growth. The modern mindset has seemingly resolved this tension by situating the human being as the sole agent of transformation. This individualistic orientation supplants concepts such as *embodied relationality*, as articulated by German philosopher and psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs in his critique of the modern anthropological condition. Embodied relationality refers to the understanding that human beings are fundamentally relational and corporeal, with their identities and actions shaped through interactions with others.[16]

The divergence between these outlined perspectives is aptly illustrated by contrasting the modern self-conception with narratives of healing in the Gospel. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:46–52; cf. Matthew 20:29–34), and in another instance tells a paralytic, "Get up, take your bed, and walk" (Mark 2:1–12). In contrast to the modern self-conception such interactions can be understood through Fuchs' concept of embodied relationality: a dynamic encounter between two persons, where one acts upon the other to facilitate an outcome that the recipient could not achieve alone. This interaction, however, is not one-sided, as it leaves a lasting impact on both participants. The modern self, however, is conceived as an autonomous being who must ask itself constantly, "What do I need to do?" and "What do I want to do?". It is the modern self that eventually needs to command

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[15] Friedrich Mildenberger, *Grundwissen der Dogmatik. Ein Arbeitsbuch* (Stuttgart et al.: Kohlhammer, 1982), 163.

[16] Thomas Fuchs, *Verteidigung des Menschen. Grundfragen einer verkörperten Anthropologie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2020).

itself to get up and act. It is thrown back unto itself with the lesson: Do not expect the transformation of your life from anyone. No one can do this for you, only you can do it.

The philosopher Charles Taylor, in his examination of the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of secularity, describes this modern self as a *buffered self*. The modern subject is conceived as a rational, self-determined individual whose inner self is insulated from external spiritual or transcendental forces.[17] Such a person autonomously constructs their identity and sense of well-being, focusing on shaping their life in accordance with personal desires and goals, independent of any transcendental agency. Taylor highlights that this disenchantment of the outer world "has been accompanied by an interiorization; … the growth of a rich vocabulary of interiority, an inner realm of thought and feeling to be explored."[18] The modern self asserts sole authority over its development, prioritizing self-realization in a way that stands in tension with traditional notions of a higher, divine calling. This disenchantment of the world not only isolates the self from external spiritual forces but also undermines the fundamental Christian reliance on God's transcendent action in bringing about transformation and healing. Within this framework, the imperative for achieving fulfilment and healing becomes: "Get up and heal yourself," a sentiment increasingly prevalent even within popular discourse on medicine. The individual is presumed to bear the full responsibility for their transformation, with no expectation of intervention or assistance from an external, transcendent source.

The *buffered self* finds its dignity in autonomy and the capacity for self-determination, whereas the Christian perspective regards humanity as fallible, finding true freedom and identity in devotion to Christ and in communion with others. In Lutheran theology, healing and sanctification are understood as fruits of justification by grace through faith, manifesting not as self-driven projects but as the Spirit's work in the believer, oriented toward love of neighbor and union with God. The divergence becomes particularly evident in attitudes toward the practice of life. For the *buffered self*, commandments and moral values are personal choices, selected to facilitate self-development and individual fulfilment.[19] This anthropological shift away from relationality has profound implications for theological understandings of salvation, as it redefines the locus of transformation from divine intervention to autonomous self-realization. By contrast,

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[17] This concept is present throughout the book; it is particularly developed in Chapter 15 "The Immanent Frame," Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 539-593.

[18] Taylor, *The Secular Age*, 540.

[19] See Taylor, *The Secular Age,* 559.

Christian sanctification interprets God's commandments as a divinely ordained path toward healing and flourishing. This path is not solely focused on the self but is oriented toward the well-being of others and communion with God.

A Sanctification perspective on self-enhancement

Critique of dataism

While a full exploration of the implications of this contrast lies beyond the scope of this article, I argue that the trends outlined at the beginning are significantly reinforced by self-enhancement technologies supported by digital tools. Following Taylor's characterization of the buffered self, these technologies may seem to be able to illuminate the inner realm of sensitivity and states of mind, yet they remain closed to the breath of the Holy Spirit. In line with my broader argument—that the secular framework profoundly shapes how faith is understood and practiced—the prospects for persuading individuals to embrace the traditional Lutheran interpretation of justification and sanctification as a path to a fulfilling life appear bleak. Nevertheless, the Lutheran tradition itself, along with its ability to navigate challenges across centuries since the Reformation, offers critical resources for identifying problematic aspects of the self-enhancement movement.

For such a critical examination, I propose focusing on how reality is perceived and represented through the technological devices driving the self-enhancement trend. A key underlying assumption of these tools is that the essential aspects of human existence can be captured as data.[20] This claim—that reality can be numerically represented—results in a reduction of reality to quantifiable aspects. Depending on their purpose, whether related to fitness, health, nutrition, mindfulness, or meditation, these tools prompt users to collect measurable data about their behaviors and lifestyles. This data is then compared with previously stored information, and algorithm-based advice is provided for improvement. Feedback loops provide detailed insights into users' behavior and performance, as well as summaries of progress over specific periods, such as the previous week. Many apps also incorporate a feature allowing users to compare their data with others. Additionally, these tools often contextualize individual data within the scope of big data, offering feedback that indicates, for instance, what percentage of people perform similarly. The app may then propose

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[20] See Thomas Fuchs, „Menschliche und künstliche Intelligenz. Eine Klarstellung," in Thomas Fuchs, *Verteidigung des Menschen. Grundfragen einer verkörperten Anthropologie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2020), 21-70.

strategies for users to surpass this benchmark, encouraging them to achieve higher levels of performance. Notably, this feature contributes to the app's perceived indispensability, as the pursuit of progress becomes an open-ended process with no clear point of completion.

The interpretation of these data by algorithms relies on weighing a variety of factors in an equation and employing statistical evidence drawn from correlations in large datasets. No app can genuinely assess a user's happiness unless the user assigns a numeric value to their state of mind—such as rating it 7 out of 10. Based on these self-reported inputs and their correlations with other factors—such as sleep quality or whether users engage in activities they enjoy or dislike—the app might propose that the user feels better or even happy. While these tools can offer users a sense of self-awareness and structure, particularly in managing specific aspects of their lives such as sleep or exercise, it is important to recognize their inherent limitations. Anyone experienced in quantitative or qualitative research will recognize that such feedback is a correlation based on selective inputs and numerically represented aspects of experience. It is an interpretation of reality, not a statement about reality. Despite this, many users appear willing to overlook these limitations, as digital devices are often perceived as more objective and trustworthy than human judgment.

Mämecke studied the self-enhancement movement and offers a critique along similar lines, arguing that the movement positions itself as the culmination of a long-standing scientific progress, leading to an objective self-improvement of individuals. He identifies one of its unacknowledged roots in the emergence of statistics, which he traces to the late 18th and early 19th centuries.[21] From the perspective of Foucault's studies on governmentality, statistics emerged as a mechanism to govern and discipline the population.[22] In the 18th and 19th centuries, statistical methods were used to categorize populations in order to manage public health and social structures. Individuals and their activities were quantified and categorized, enabling the identification of statistically relevant correlations—particularly in areas such as health, hygiene, and security—which were essential for exercising governance.[23]

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[21] Thorben Mämecke, *Das quantifizierte Selbst. Zur Genealogie des Self-Trackings* (Digitale Gesellschaft, 34) (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021), 47-52.

[22] Michel Foucault, *Die Geburt der Biopolitik. Geschichte der Gouvernementalität*, 2. Vorlesung am Collège de France 1978-1979, ed. by Michel Sennelart (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2006). See Mämecke, *Das quantifizierte Selbst,* 26-31.

[23] Christopher Clark, *Revolutionary Spring. Fighting for a New World 1848-1849* (London et al.: Penguin, 2023), 16-25.

Building also on Foucault's insights, Mämecke further observes that the shift from authoritarian rule toward governance based on biopolitics was increasingly accompanied by self-regulatory processes of individuals. This historical development, he argues, laid the groundwork for the contemporary self-enhancement movement, in which individuals internalize and reproduce the logic of quantification and self-discipline as part of their pursuit of self-improvement.[24]

Mämecken argues that, contrary to the self-enhancement movement's perception of itself as the pinnacle of scientific progress, its approach is rooted in a reductionist worldview.[25] One source for this worldview is the use of statistics to categorize different strata within society for more effective governance. The irony, however, lies in how self-enhancement apps appear to reverse this process: they promote individual self-regulation by feeding personal data back into the vast pool of big data, rendering it meaningful through algorithm-based probabilities.

Mämecke is equally interested in the origins of this mentality and the nature of the goals to which self-enhancers aspire. These goals, he observes, must be quantifiable and reducible to numerical summaries. In the case of digital apps, this becomes particularly evident: the ideals pursued by self-enhancers reflect the growth ideology and performance-oriented thinking characteristic of modern capitalist society. Even practices like meditation, often associated with stress relief and mindfulness, are co-opted within this framework, becoming tools to enhance resilience to stress and, ultimately, a resource for increased productivity.[26]

Critique of the enhancement anthropology

The issue with self-enhancement apps—and even more so with the aspirations of transhumanism—is that they do not use technology to help humans become more human. Instead, they conform humans to a mechanistic way of thinking. They relate to a broader vision in which reality is reduced to what can be calculated in numbers and grasped by algorithms; the brain is viewed as hardware running a "software" that can be hacked, reprogrammed, and optimized; and the body is treated as an assemblage of parts with limited capacities that must be upgraded.[27] The underlying myth of human potentiality within this framework mirrors a consumer-producer model, where individuals must continuously improve themselves, much like machines.

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[24] Mämecke, *Das quantifizierte Selbst,* 15.

[25] Mämecke, *Das quantifizierte Selbst,* 52.

[26] Mämecke, *Das quantifizierte Selbst,* 68-70. See also Felder, *Christliches Leben und die Verbesserung des Menschen*, 81-84.

[27] For such arguments, see Harari, *Homo Deus*.

In contrast, viewing human nature in light of its ultimate purpose—eschaton and judgment—offers a profoundly different Christian perspective. This understanding does not endorse a bio-conservatism that defines human nature solely by its origins, such as an assumed zero point in evolution. Rather, in the Christian understanding, sanctification is fundamentally about a transformative process—a process for which humanity has been set free through justification in the first place.

Sanctification, as a result of justification, stands in stark contrast to anthropocentric ideologies by emphasizing transcendence and locating salvation outside the self, in Christ. The concept of *incurvatus in se*—the individual turned inward upon itself—serves as a powerful image of fallen human nature. Rather than pursuing infallibility and perfection, the perspective of sanctification challenges individuals to acknowledge the limitations of their own actions, fostering a more compassionate understanding of human nature. This critique highlights both the inherent limitations of the human condition and the relational nature of human existence. It reintroduces the tension between the necessity of personal effort and the recognition that such efforts are ultimately insufficient for achieving perfection or self-salvation. From a Christian perspective, humans are fundamentally dependent on God's justification. Sanctification, therefore, is not a static endpoint but a dynamic journey shaped by the stages of life towards its end and the relationships encountered along the way—one that cannot be reduced to an algorithmic formula.

From the perspective of sanctification, the use of the technological devices for self-enhancement appears to reflect a pervasive sense of unease—a deep longing of the individual for control in the face of a complex and often chaotic world, coupled with an earnest desire to improve one's life. At its core, the self-enhancement tools prioritize self-mastery, framing progress as the result of quantifiable metrics, algorithmic feedback, and a matter of individual effort. These tools risk reducing the human experience to measurable outputs, sidelining deeper questions about meaning, purpose, and relationality.

Four key distinctions

In line with my broader argument, I do not position sanctification in opposition to tracking and self-enhancement apps but rather use it as a lens for critically examining their underlying assumptions.[28] For those who no longer

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[28] For a similar argument from a Calvinistic perspective, see Felder, *Christliches Leben und die Verbesserung des Menschen,* 202-218.

adhere to the Christian faith, this critique can be framed like this: the ideal of a self-sufficient individual striving for a holistic and perfectly harmonious life is not only unattainable but also a burden that can lead to disillusionment and despair. The challenge lies in engaging with the mindset behind these technologies from the perspective of sanctification while avoiding a binary exclusive opposition. In the context of self-enhancement, the theological tension between justification and sanctification is replaced by a different tension: the constant striving of the self, paired with the realization that any achieved state is always subject to further improvement.

My aim is to unpack the assumptions embedded within self-enhancement technologies and consider their broader implications for understanding sanctification. It is crucial not only to evaluate what these tools do but also to interrogate the image of humanity and the self they promote. By fostering a clear awareness of their approach to reality and the type of information they provide, these technologies can still be seen as helpful for achieving specific goals or supporting a disciplined lifestyle, even as their limitations are critically assessed.

In that line I propose four key distinctions for a critical look at self enhancement from a Christian sanctification perspective.

Critique of the reductionist and scientistic perception of reality

The first distinction addresses the reductionist and scientistic view of reality —one that narrowly prioritizes materialistic and empirical approaches while excluding the richness of humanistic and spiritual dimensions—that underpins many self-enhancement tools. These tools often reduce human experience to data expressed in numbers and framed in statistical probability. This perception misses the complexity and richness of human existence. Life cannot be fully understood or measured by quantifiable dimensions alone.[29]

From the perspective of sanctification, humans are more than what can be tracked or enhanced by algorithms. A critique here challenges the narrow focus on optimization and invites a rediscovery of the fullness of what it means to be human—limited but relational, spiritual, and embodied.

Recognising human limitations and dependence on grace received

Christian sanctification reminds us that salvation and true transformation come not from our strength but from the grace of God. This contrasts with the culture of self-improvement, which celebrates autonomy and individual performance. Apps

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[29] For a thorough critique of the positivistic reductionist approach to reality, see Markus Gabriel, *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2013).

should reflect the human dependence on the help of others and guide the user not to rely solely on their own strength and discipline. While some apps claim to foster community, their design often leads to competitive challenges—who walks more steps, who eats fewer calories—rather than fostering genuine relationality. True relationality transcends these shallow comparisons, inviting us into genuine, embodied community.

A critique here underscores the need to embrace human limitations and dependence. Instead of viewing failure as a personal shortcoming, users might reflect on how the unattainable goals set misrepresent the human condition. The Christian perspective also challenges the transhumanist dreams embedded in some self-enhancement narratives, reminding us of the dignity found in shared vulnerability and mutual support, thus reflecting the relational nature of maturing in faith and life.

Focus on relationship rather than self-centredness

Sanctification emphasizes the relational nature of human life—our relationship with God and with others. In contrast, self-enhancement apps often foster a self-centered perspective by focusing on individual performance and well-being. A shift is needed to encourage users to see themselves within a larger context of solidarity and bold humility, to borrow David Bosch's phrase. The aim is not simply to maximize personal well-being but to nurture the growth of humanness in community. Apps can be a tool to foster genuine community to connect with a supportive community and relational engagement by facilitating to share prayer requests or spiritual reflections. Helpful functions could be to connect 'spiritual companions' or 'accountability partners' to encourage mutual support and faith-based reflection.

Transformation through spiritual discipline rather than mere self-improvement

Sanctification calls for discipline that foster spiritual deepening rather than mere personal optimization. While self-enhancement apps aim to make users more productive, healthier, or mentally balanced, sanctification invites mindfulness of our limitations and gratitude for what we receive from others and from God.

Apps could support spiritual growth by helping users in practices such as daily prayer, Bible reading, or fasting. However, the emphasis should not be on performance metrics but on maturing in faith through reflection and engagement with others. For example, prompts could encourage users to reflect on their

spiritual journey, fostering growth in faith and relational depth. The goal is not to create the most disciplined Bible reader but to nurture a life of deeper faith, shaped by relational and spiritual growth. Apps and tools can motivate initial steps but should remain secondary to the deeper transformation found in communion with others and with God.

Conclusion

Self-enhancement tools and apps hold undeniable potential for fostering personal growth, discipline, and self-awareness. However, when approached uncritically, they risk reinforcing a reductionist view of humanity, prioritizing self-centered optimization and promoting unattainable ideals of perfection. From the perspective of sanctification, these tools can be evaluated and reimagined to align more closely with a holistic and grace-filled understanding of human life. These apps can motivate us to get up and start.

Sanctification offers a profound critique of the underlying assumptions of self-enhancement technologies. It challenges the reduction of human identity to quantifiable data, calls for a relational rather than self-centered approach, emphasizes human limitations and dependence on God, and directs transformation toward spiritual depth. Apps and tools, when designed with these principles in mind, can serve as valuable instruments—not for replacing faith or community but for supporting them.

The Christian message does not deny the desire for growth or transformation but reframes it: true flourishing comes not from striving to optimize oneself as though one were a machine but from embracing our dependence on God and growing in relationships with others. In this light, the invitation of sanctification is not to reject tools of self-improvement but to critically assess their purpose and limitations. It calls us to rise above a mechanistic, performance-driven narrative and to embrace a vision of life shaped by grace, humility, and relational depth.

The words of Christ in the Gospel remain ever relevant: *"Get up and heal."* Not in the sense of self-sufficiency or isolated striving, but as a call to step into a transformative journey—one that is sustained by grace, deepened in community, and oriented toward the wholeness found in relationship with God and others.

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Knowing Through Unknowing: Unveiling the Reverse Perspective in Lossky's Apophatic Theology and Its Implications for Orthodox Epistemology

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ABSTRACT. The reverse perspective is a drawing technique of medieval Byzantine iconography, in which the viewer is the point of view of the object depicted in the icon and experiences various perspectives. There is no vanishing point, and the perspective lines do not overlap the mystical reality of the sacred art, but inversely, they start from the depths, ending with the onlooker standing before it. Such distortion of the realistic perspective is a subject of significant scholarly interest. However, theological analysis remains notably absent, leaving an extremely interesting area of study out of focus. Accordingly, this article delves into the theological concepts and implications of the reverse perspective, with a primary focus on Orthodox epistemology through the work of theologian Vladimir Lossky. It aims to demonstrate that the reverse perspective is not merely a stylistic choice but manifests profound theological meaning exploring its relevance for contemporary theological scholarship.

Keywords: Reverse Perspective, Byzantine iconography, Vladimir Lossky, Apophaticism, Epistemology

Introduction

The reverse perspective[1] is a drawing technique of medieval Byzantine iconography, in which the viewer is the point of view of the object depicted in

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1 This is also known as the inverted perspective, inverse perspective, and Byzantine perspective. The term 'Reverse Perspective' or 'Inverted Perspective' (*die umgekehrte Perspektive*) was coined by art historian Oskar Wulff, see Clemena Antonova, "On the Problem of 'Reverse Perspective:' Definitions East and West," *Leonardo (Oxford)* 43, no. 5 (2010): 464-69. Although more extensive scholarly works on this topic belong to theologian, philosopher, and mathematician Fr. Pavel Florensky, see Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art,* edited by Nicoletta Misler and Wendy R. Salmond (London: Reaktion, 2000), 201-222.

the icon and experiences various perspectives. The photo-realistic spatial structures of the composition and classic rules of geometry are entirely ignored; thereby, medieval artists refuse the naturalistic representation of the transcendent realm. Unlike the linear perspective, which aims to imitate how objects appear smaller as they reduce the distance, the reverse perspective operates on a different set of visual principles. There is no horizontal space beyond the depicted figures; thus, the closed background blocks the linear perspective, expressing the ungraspable and impenetrable nature of the divine. Therefore, there is no vanishing point, and the prospective lines do not overlap the mystical reality of the sacred art, but inversely, they start from the depths, ending with the onlooker standing before it. However, in the linear perspective, depicted figures decrease with the increase of distance and create an illusion of depth.

Most academic papers on the inverted perspective pertain to its visual narrative styles, ethnocultural, geometric-composite, and religious-philosophical significance.[2] However, none of them analyses the theological significance of the medieval Byzantine iconographic technique, leaving the extremely interesting area of study out of focus. There are strong correlative conjunctions between Byzantine iconography and the theological tradition of the Orthodox Church. Accordingly, this article delves into the theological concepts and implications of the reverse perspective, with a primary focus on Orthodox epistemology through the work of theologian Vladimir Lossky. It aims to demonstrate that the reverse perspective is not merely a stylistic choice but manifests profound theological meanings.

In this theological exploration, Lossky can provide one of the most relevant methodologically functional systematic tools since the essential point, as well as the uniqueness of Russian theologian, lies in the relocation of perspective lines from physical to metaphysical dimension, stressing the fundamental inversion of the entire thought and perceptual system, which explicitly reveals the inverted dimension of his theological discourses. Through apophatic theology, Lossky offers a unique understanding of how to conceive Orthodox epistemology and, in general, the existential structure of creation from the reverse perspective. Accordingly, Lossky's apophaticism, i.e., *the inverted dynamism of metaphysics*, will be the guiding principle or *modus operandi* of this article.

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[2] The inversion of perspective has been interpreted and critically reformulated by various authors. Some noteworthy studies in this regard are: André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins,* Bollingen Series, 35 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Борис Раушенбах, *Пространственные построения в живописи: Очерк основных методов* (Москва: М.Наука, 1980); Boris Uspenskij, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Lisse: De Ridder, 1976); Clemena Antonova and Martin Kemp, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God,* Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010).

Lossky's reception of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and patristic exegesis in the context of apophaticism can serve as a foundational framework for this article, providing insights into the ethos and a deeper understanding of the reverse perspective. In this regard, this research explores how the concept of theological inversion employs apophaticism as a key hermeneutical instrument to illustrate the reversal of Orthodox epistemology. Accordingly, the central method of this study involves identifying how Lossky rearticulates the Byzantine inverted perspective. To attain the primary objective, the systematic method of this research will outline one central aspect of the reverse perspective: the human being cannot control or objectify the divine. This aspect stresses the limited cognition of the creature, suggesting that positive attributes are merely metaphors for the transcendental realm, always carrying the risk of enclosing God within determined boundaries. Therefore, the spatial structure of Byzantine iconography symbolically manifests the inverted dynamism of the divine projection.

1. Apophatic Theology: The Inverted Perspective of God

Lossky's apophatic theology (negative theology, i.e., expresses understanding of God through negation, stating what God is not) can be considered one of the key theological instruments for understanding the reverse perspective in modern Orthodox theology. For Lossky, everything that the human being can express through cataphasis (positive theology, i.e., making positive assertions about God) vis-à-vis the divine does not reveal the substance of God but the attributes that describe the divine nature.[3] Hence, there is always the risk of idolizing the divine since the true face of God is not on the icon but behind the icon. Therefore, Lossky's apophatic inquiry requires a perceptual shift, i.e., there is no mode of ascension or contemplation to master the divine, but only ecstasy and cognitive ignorance. In this fashion, the negative way of theologizing relocates perspective lines from the immanence to the transcendent reality and stresses the radical unknowability of God. As illustrated in Byzantine iconography, the divine projection from the apophatic perspective comes inversely from the Kingdom of God and penetrates into physical reality. Accordingly, Lossky draws a correlative bond between the iconography and the unknowable nature of the Godhead, where the anti-naturalistic spatial structure of the icon symbolizes the apophatic vision of God.[4] However, while the paradigm of closed reality finds its legitimation in apophasis, the Incarnation of the Son as a climax of

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[3] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1976), 36.

[4] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God,* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1974), 14.

theophany makes iconography and theology attainable.[5] Yet, from the apophatic standpoint, God in the very essence remains hidden, and the perspective that starts from the creature is always surpassed by projection coming inversely from the Triune God.

Lossky's theological scheme can be illustrated as follows:

(i)   Cataphatic theology: the linear perspective from the human to God;
(ii) apophatic theology: the inverted perspective from God to the human.

Lossky's intention to prominently place the *Corpus-Dionysiacum Areopagiticum* is quite clear. Accordingly, his entire theology emanates from an apophatic perspective that transforms gnoseological dilemmas into the supremacy of ontological reasoning. The limitation of the conscious mind that is succumbed to epistemic puzzles cannot construct the supernatural image of the Godhead. Instead, the only way to attain the divine is to deconstruct what is known vis-à-vis the unknowable.

1.1. The Human Person Cannot Control or Objectify the Divine

The negative way of theologizing can be regarded as one of the most paradoxical discourses of Eastern Orthodox tradition. In its very essence, apophasis embodies the metaphysical mystery of 'nothingness', the quest into the darkness where God dwells. However, it does not elude a denial of the divine or a mere sophistic abstraction but the negation of logic since there is an insurmountable abyss between immanence and transcendence. Nevertheless, these two distinct poles of existence can be brought closer through radical changes of perspective, which should be crowned by an ontological synergy with the divine.

Human perception is inherently constrained and limited when it comes to naming God since, as Lossky accentuates, if one perceives the divine, then what is perceived cannot truly be God but rather "something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him."[6] Therefore, the divine is attainable *via* unknowing (ἀγνωσία), which does not imply the denial of understanding God, but instead, according to Dionysius, it is a new mode of wisdom, which is a higher degree of knowledge than any form of science.[7] Thus, negative theology begins with contemplation, but the dynamic progression of apophaticism is, at the same time, paradoxically regressive, i.e., the emptying of consciousness is necessary

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[5] Lossky, Image and Likeness, 14.
[6] Lossky, Mystical Theology, 25.
[7] Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-human Communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 17.

to be filled up with what comes inversely, i.e., the divine projection. Hence, regression is not spiritual but intellectual: the renunciation of theological imperatives that are a product of human reasoning, therefore, somehow unnatural. Consequently, in order to achieve the real state of the 'mystical contemplation' (μυστίκά Θεάματα) and genuine communion with God, who is entirely transcendent, one should ignore logic and reasoning.[8] Therefore, spiritual progress toward the divine requires purification (κάθαρσις) of the mind.[9] It is clear, for Lossky, that apophasis is not an intellectual quest to achieve God since spiritual dynamism into the divine darkness does not display only a κάθαρσις of mindset.[10] However, at the same time, it implies the total ignorance of material reality, which is more of an existential quest, going beyond beingness as such and encompassing the human person in its totality.[11] Furthermore, theologian Sarah Coakley points out that by emphasizing the total unknowability of the divine, Lossky advances the notion that negative theology transcends not only logic but also all forms of negation, a concept she refers to as 'radical apophaticism'.[12] From this radical stance, Lossky endeavours to prevent philosophical speculation from apophatic theology and, simultaneously, to intensify the sense of self-denial and renunciation of all the intellectual instruments that a human person hitherto possesses before entering into the divine darkness.[13]

The 'Radical apophaticism' can be regarded as one of Lossky's most provocative approaches. Given that, the locus of his theology is the total unknowability of the divine, excluding all rational concepts that might lead to false images of God. In this vein, Lossky points out that the human person should not seek the tradition of the negative way of theologizing through a linear perspective 'on the horizontal lines', but in its more profound sense, "Tradition is Silence."[14] Therefore, all theological manifestations are shrouded in apophatic darkness and bear inverted characteristics, i.e., true theology is God-given in

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[8] Lossky, *Mystical Theo*logy, 27.

[9] Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 27.

[10] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar,* transl. from the original Romanian by Archimandrite Jerome (Newville), a.o.; forew. by Alexander Golubov (South Canaan, PN: St. Tikhon's Religious Center, 2003), 234.

[11] Stăniloae, Orthodox Spirituality, 234.

[12] Sarah Coakley, "Eastern 'Mystical Theology' or Western 'Nouvelle Théologie'? On the Comparative Reception of Dionysius, the Areopagite in Lossky and de Lubac," in *Orthodox Constructions of the West,* edited by George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 129-132.

[13] However, one cannot consider Lossky an anti-intellectualist since he highly valued the academic experience of Christian theology. Moreover, for Lossky, as is evident in his works, mysticism and intellectual reasoning do not exclude but complement each other.

[14] Lossky, Image and Likeness 150.

silence. Indeed, for Lossky, theologizing commences by acknowledging that the mystery of God in its very nature is unknowable and incomprehensible. Only silence can speak about the divine. Here is the perfect manifestation of the paradoxical nature of apophaticism since it invokes the human person to hear the silence. Likewise, it operates inversely, i.e., the silence surrounds and overwhelms the creature and not *vice versa.* Thus, even though, according to Christian teaching, God became the flesh, the Incarnation is still a mystery.

For that very reason, Lossky considers the Incarnation an 'incomprehensible paradox' wherein God wholly commits Himself to creation and even undergoes death for the sake of humanity, all without diminishing His divinity.[15] Therefore, he refuses to conceptualize even the physical manifestation of the divine since, although God appeared among human beings, divinity still remains an enigma, an unfathomable mystery that the human consciousness cannot objectify.

In the humanity of Christ,' says Dionysius, 'the Super-essential was manifested in human substance without ceasing to be hidden after this manifestation, or, to express myself after a more heavenly fashion, in this manifestation itself.[16]

The positive way of theologizing, for which the sacred humanity of the Incarnate Son is the object of contemplation, has the most intensive force of negations.[17] For Lossky, two natures, divine and human, exist without fusion in the hypostasis of the only-Begotten Son; they are indivisible and inseparable and, at the same time, do not annihilate the difference between them.[18] This union reveals the apophatic character of the Incarnation.[19] That is because "the union of the two natures is expressed by four negative definitions: ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαιρέτως, αχωρίτως."[20] Suffer and death on the cross belongs to the humanity of Christ; and, at the same time, He has never ceased to rule the universe "in virtue of His Divinity which suffers no change."[21] Lossky always underscores that the quintessence of personhood, the supreme state of beingness, is self-purification and self-abandonment when the person is entirely receptive to the divine will. The Incarnate Son exemplifies the perfect model of the

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[15] Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1978), 91.
[16] See 'Epist. III', P.G., III, 1069 B., quoted in Lossky, *Mystical Theology,* 39.
[17] Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 39-40.
[18] Lossky, Mystical Theology, 143.
[19] Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 143.
[20] (ἀσυγχύτως - unmixed, ἀτρέπτως - unbreakable, ἀδιαιρέτως - indivisible, αχωρίστως – inseparable). See Lossky, *Mystical Theology,* 143.
[21] Lossky, Mystical Theology, 144.

inverted dynamism of personal ascension.[22] It is the mystery of the self-emptiness of the divine person, the state of *kenosis* that equally serves the cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of theology. However, it bears more apophatic qualities in a more profound sense since the state of *kenosis* transcends the capacity of the human mind to objectify or comprehend.

Therefore, for Lossky, theology is doomed to failure without apophatic awareness as long as intellectual endeavours to name God can become the cause of idolizing the divine. The idolized God is a dead God, static and one-dimensional, unmoving and fossilized in historicity. In contrast, the God of Christians is the living God, ubiquitous, timeless, and multi-dimensional, existing both within history as well as beyond history. This complexity renders God ultimately unknowable. Lossky makes it very clear that to see the divine through the positive attributes only is futile since, as set forth in the *Book of Kings,* God dwells in "sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:11-12). Certainly, apophaticism is a mystical silence; thus, for this very reason, Lossky's theological hero is Dionysius, who inverted the Christocentric attitude of the early Church and questioned the legitimation of human-created images of God. Indeed, that is a good start to entering into the quest of the divine mystery.

Such a quest has no alternative for Lossky. In its profundity, apophasis embodies an inverted mode of theologizing, wherein the darkness of unknowability signifies a total ignorance of the conscious mind, excluding active participation at all levels. To understand how apophaticism embodies *the inverted mode of metaphysics*, it is essential to examine how human perception operates within material reality. Perception can be conceptualized as arising from the encountering of two distinct points: one that comes from the external world and the other that belongs to the individual, including traditions, beliefs, and values that constitute a specific cultural domain. The human person receives sensory information and converts it through intellect, forming chaotic data as knowledge about something, for instance, God. While apophatic vision implies the entire deactivation of the conscious mind as such (which is an active agent in the process of perception) since the intellectual quest to define God is doomed to failure. There is no collision of two different points, only receptiveness to the divine projection. Thus, in the face of *the inverted mode of metaphysics*, the human person is inactive by reasoning but active by the heart; that is, the state of *metanoia* and *kenosis*.

In this regard, Lossky's theological discourse remains faithful to apophaticism, inasmuch as he endeavours to defend God from abstraction and excessive conceptualization. Theologian Andrew Louth accentuates that, to a great extent,

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[22] Lossky, Mystical Theology, 144.

Lossky's mystical theology implies the 'inner transformation' of one's entire perspective through mind and heart, and it is an experience of another dimension.[23] It is a dimension of the divine realm, "the reality of the love of God, that binds the Trinity in Unity."[24] Thus, the *Theophilia,* the abundance of love in Godhead, is a primary cause of creation from the *Ex Nihilo,* crowned by the *kenotic* act of the Incarnate Son.[25] All in all, concludes Louth, for Lossky, the negative way of theologizing commences from the state of μετάνοια, requiring the internal conversion of the whole being.[26] Here, it is an important characteristic that differentiates Christianity from rational ideologies or logical concepts which intend to find the truth. They are a set of moral codes and laws, which is more a linear outlook, forasmuch as rules demand that humans act to achieve an ideological, so to say, utopian destination.

While mystical theology operates inversely, where God is unfathomable, and the hidden depth of truth is attainable only through self-purification and self-emptiness. That is why Lossky never speaks about sheer praxis but a mystical quest. Without transformation and receptiveness, praxis becomes a formal expression of the faith, and the human person falls captivated by ideological, formal regulations. Moreover, in Lossky's writings, one cannot see a sharp distinction between theology and mysticism, church and society, dogma and social life, but they are entangled and do not exist without one other. Thus, in its very essence, mysticism is not only the theological quest but something more: it is self-givenness and self-emptiness that inverts one's traditional perspectives and finds its fullness in apophasis. That is why Lossky's theology commences "in a kind of shock to, a paralyzing of, the intellect – not by propositions that offend the intellect, but by an encounter with what cannot be mastered."[27] Here is the epistemological issue: the 'paralyzed intellect' cannot master the divine since perspective comes inversely, representing revelation as a God-given gift for humanity. Consequently, the human person serves as a neutral agent open to receiving divine projection. Nevertheless, the mystical union is by no means the disappearance of a person but, through spiritual transfiguration, the fulfilment of personhood as such.[28]

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[23] Andrew Louth, "What Did Vladimir Lossky Mean by 'Mystical Theology'?" in *Mystical Theology and Contemporary Spiritual Practice: Renewing the Contemplative Tradition, Contemporary Theological Explorations in Christian Mysticism,* edited by Christopher C.H. Cook, Julienne McLean, and Peter Tyler (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 31.

[24] Louth, "Mystical Theology?" 31.

[25] Louth, "Mystical Theology," 31.

[26] Louth, "Mystical Theology," 31-32.

[27] Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*. 3rd ed., The Great Theologians, edited by David F Ford and Rachel Muers (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 579.

[28] Lossky, *Orthodox Theology, 34.*

However, speaking about the apophatic dynamism of the creature as a unique being seems vague since there are no clear notions in Lossky's theological quest about what the state 'beyond being' means in relation to the concept of personhood. Williams points out that, for Lossky, ecstasy is a subject of the personal act, a condition of self-forgetfulness.[29] Still, the question arises: how can one realize his/her personal existence if he/she renounces everything that has hitherto possessed, i.e., memory, self-awareness, relations, just to mention but a few. Or, what remains of one's personhood after penetrating into the divine darkness? What is evident is that Lossky makes a clear distinction between personhood and individuality; the former is what can be acquired, but the latter is what has to be fulfilled; therefore, as Papanikolaou accentuates, "One does not acquire a human person, one grows toward being a person."[30] Lossky is an apophatically motivated theologian, and he does not go into deeper existential layers of personalistic inquiry. He says that "the creature, who is both "physical" and "hypostatic" at the same time, is called to realize his unity of nature as well as his true personal diversity by going in grace beyond the individual limits."[31] However, the phrase 'beyond the individual limits' does not have the same meaning as 'beyond beingness' since individuality is only one piece of the puzzle in the complicated structure of the human being.

Apophaticism calls creatures to depart beyond their existence in order to attain the highest degree of exaltation. Nevertheless, there is no precise indication of what Lossky implies when he speaks of the state of self-transcendence in relation to a human person. If this departure from oneself means 'growing toward being a person,' personhood is something superior; it is something one has to become. Thus, it is ambiguous how Lossky claims that spiritual dynamism toward divine-human union and deification is a personal act. If departure from oneself implies overcoming 'individual limits', it is by no means going from one's beingness as such. Therefore, the stress between negative theology and personhood remains unresolved. The state or condition of the human being at the supreme level of apophatic ecstasy is an open question in Lossky's theology. Moreover, as Papanikolaou points out, "the problem for Lossky is that he does not have the conceptual apparatus to link his theological notion of a person with his apophaticism, primarily because of the priority given to apophaticism in theological method."[32]

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[29] Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* edited by Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 13.
[30] Papanikolaou, *Being with God,* 57.
[31] Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, 122.
[32] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 92.

Lossky says that, unlike the accurate doctrine of divine hypostases, he has not found elaborate teaching on the concept of the human person in patristic theology.[33] However, what he has unique with regard to the concept of personhood is the exclusion of any sort of egocentrism and self-centred perspective - there is the combination of two existential modes of beingness, which starts with the realization of the need for self-transformation, i.e., μετάνοια and ends with the realization of absolute self-emptiness, i.e., κένωσις to reflect the inverted projection of the Triune God. Indeed, transformation is the point of departure of Lossky's theological quest. At the first stage, spiritual ascension requires a *kenotic* act (self-denial, self-renunciation), but at the highest stage, when one achieves the divine darkness, material efforts should stop their operation. Possibly for this very reason, Lossky does not enter into a conceptual, so to say, a philosophical quest about human personality. William points out that, for Lossky, theology "must be ascesis, even crucifixion," since the cross manifests the *Kenotic* insight of personalism, that is, the rejection of selfish 'individual will'.[34] However, in the face of the inaccessible essence of the Godhead and the projection that stems from the transcendence realm, the human person, in his/her corporeality, becomes reflective of the divine existence. Consequently, for Lossky, radical apophaticism is the foundation of all theological discourse.

Therefore, there is no mode of ascension or contemplation to master the divine, but the only way to attain unity with God is the state of ecstasy and ignorance when one departs from his/her own existence and totally belongs to God. At this state of beingness, one is not able to perceive any shape or conceptualize the divine; instead, the human person receives the 'deiform image' and reflects the likeness of the Godhead.[35] Consequently, the God-given gift, an icon of this supernatural projection, is the Incarnate Son, visible and, at the same time, hidden in his revelation.

1.2. The Inverted Epistemology: The Superposition of God

According to one of the fundamental principles of quantum physics, particles can be simultaneously in various locations and states, which is the mode of '*quantum superposition'* or so-called '*superposition principle',* i.e., there is not only the state of 'here' and 'there' but the entire constellation of the states and positions.[36] However, it is the case only if no measurement takes place,

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[33] Lossky, Image and Likeness, 112.
[34] Williams, *Wrestling with Angels,* 14.
[35] Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 211-212.
[36] John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.

whereas if the observation is made, the particle becomes fixed only in one specific location, so observation/measurement breaks superposition, i.e., the state of ubiquitousness is 'collapsed'.[37] So, as it is seen, the observation collapses the superposition in a one-dimensional state and reduces it to the only mode of 'here' that is precisely not the authentic nature of the particle. Consequently, in the quantum world, there is no room for a radical binary perception, as in classic physics, in which, for instance, so-called digital logic uses only two numerals, 1s and 0s, where one is 'on' or 'true', and zero is 'off' or 'false'. Therefore, there is no dichotomy between the 'on' and 'off', but multiple states exist simultaneously.

These examples from quantum theory will help us to understand the fallacies and biased nature of the linear perspective more clearly. That is because the measurement from one's particular viewpoint changes reality; the truth (e.g., the position of the particle as well as naming the divine) through the observers' point of view is what one chooses, and the 'objectivity' of this perspective can be seen as a state of cognitive misconception. The misconception is the product of the conscious mind, which, as previously mentioned, is determined by culture, and consciousness is a kind of functional identifier that gives sensory information its meaning according to one's own socio-cultural experience. So, it is the empirical knowledge or data that governs and conditions how one observes and measures the world and how this measurement will be reflected in the conscious mind. Moreover, when we speak about the conscious mind, it cannot be seen apart from the culture, i.e., from a particular context. Thus, consciousness and culture are inseparable and mutually constitutive; that is to say, our cultural ground shapes us, or, as theologian John P. Manoussakis writes, "we simply are our past."[38] So, the hegemonizing of the particular context is the cause of perceptual errors, meaning giving priority to an individual point of perception. Nevertheless, we are always keen on defining God and consequently "collapsing" the divine in a certain position. However, it does not imply rejecting the contemplative essence of Christianity or denying cognitive phases of theologizing (i.e., getting into anti-intellectualism), but applying the above-mentioned quantum theory as an analogy in our theological discourse serves as a warning not to limit or collapse God to a particular context, but to acknowledge the divine multidimensionality, i.e., the divine superposition.

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[37] Mark P Silverman, *Quantum Superposition: Counterintuitive Consequences of Coherence, Entanglement, and Interference*, 1st ed. 2008 (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2008), 26.

[38] John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "The Anarchic Principle of Christian Eschatology in the Eucharistic Tradition of the Eastern Church," *Harvard Theological Review* 100, no. 1 (2007): 30.

This is precisely the case with Lossky's theological discourses, which reveal another intriguing aspect: open epistemology. What makes his epistemology open toward the divine projection is his acknowledgement of the limited nature of human cognition. Lossky views the contemplation of God, as well as the divine-human communion, as an ontological state. That being the case, the only cognitive operation is to recognize the incomprehensibility of the realities that stand beyond the things that have already manifested. Images we depict as analogous to the divine, and the language we use to express the supernatural image of God are not identical to what we attempt to represent. To put it another way, the existential beingness of the things does not coincide with the images of the things themselves.

The dichotomy between the substance and the image or language it endeavours to manifest leads Lossky to give priority to ontology over epistemology since, for him, "all knowledge has one source - God."[39] God is the one who makes knowable what is hidden and unknowable, as well as animates what is static and amorphic. In this regard, Lossky firmly relates epistemology to the Incarnation event, i.e., the knowledge of the divine was made possible because God became flesh.[40] In this vein, he renders epistemological ontology into apophatic ontology, i.e., one is able to speak and express the divine (cataphasis) as far as God manifests him/herself through the energies, but *hyper-essence* remains unknowable (apophasis).[41] Therefore, for Lossky, human beings are part of the gradual development of history, and therefore, the knowledge of God can develop only gradually.[42] To conclude, for Lossky, the knowledge of God is a dynamic progression, where God stands as the primary agent who contemplates creation (which appears inverted from the human perspective). This emphasizes the active role of the divine in the epistemic relationship, in contrast to human attempts to comprehend the divine essence from a limited, anthropocentric viewpoint. Nevertheless, for Lossky, there is an indivisible link between ontology and epistemology;[43] however, not in the sense that existence is coupled with cognition and reasoning, but by relocating perspectives from immanence to transcendence, epistemology becomes a catharsis of the mind. Indeed, such a vision challenges the contemporary approach to epistemology[44] because the perspective is inverted; thus, the priority is given

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[39] Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 105.
[40] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 44.
[41] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 103.
[42] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 47.
[43] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 105.
[44] Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 105.

not to the centrality of human reasoning but to one's receptiveness and openness to knowledge, which finds its roots, not in logic, as modern and postmodern thinking emphasizes, but in the transcendental realm.

Lossky's epistemological scepticism leaves no room for hegemonizing one's religious perspective. One is no longer a central agent or predominant being over others but an equal being known by God and not *vice versa.* Thus, for Lossky, the limited nature of the conscious mind reveals that only the self-revelation of God can unveil knowledge about the divine,[45] and human *episteme* can only be the place where heavenly illumination can be reflected. This leads Lossky to see the human person as a *kenotic* being, reflecting divine self-emptiness. God's immanence, i.e., his/her revelation in the history of salvation, is always *kenotic*,[46] and it is the only perspective from which the Godhead, as well as the entire creation, can be contemplated. Consequently, he explicitly emphasizes the need for a shift from a self-centred to a self-giving perspective in order to experience the knowledge that comes, inversely, from the *eschata*.

The foundation of this self-giving dynamism of life is perfectly seen in Scripture. Christ offers Himself to all as a Paschal Lamb, and this sacrifice cannot be considered simply a heroic action, but it is a manifestation of the highest degree of divine love revealed through his self-giving life. This is the only impulse that should guide the human person to attain the loftier mysteries - without *kenotic* self-emptiness, there is no *theosis*. Thus, Lossky's insistence on the ascesis of the mind is a call to invert the entire mindset and conceive the world from the divine perspective, which, for us, implies perceptual inversion. So, according to him, when one's existential perspective becomes *kenotic*, one attains a true state of personhood, and this dynamic progression of *becoming* is substantial to conceiving the fundamental characteristic of Orthodox epistemology. Therefore, we should contend that Christian *kenotic* dynamism is not circular in the Platonic sense, i.e., to return the initial *archetype*, but it is what transforms the world into the new *earth* and new *heaven*. However, this metamorphosis is only possible if the linearity of the world is entirely reversed. Thus, the *inverted mode of metaphysics* manifests what Christian 'logic' implies in its more profound essence.

What is essential when speaking of the *kenotic* reflection is that Christ has not ceased to exist in the 'form of a slave', i.e., the divine self-denial was not a one-time act but is an ontologically constant *hypostatic* mode of beingness. Epistemologically speaking, the self-givenness of the Incarnate Son is one of the

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[45] Arvin M. Gouw, "Transcendence and Immanence of the Trinity in Barth and Lossky," *Dialogo (Constanța)* 2, no. 2 (2015): 29.
[46] Gouw, "Transcendence and Immanence," 30.

essential perspectives of the scripture itself, which provides theological insight into exploring Christological presupposition and the whole narrative of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, *kenosis* can be considered as the fundamental tenet of how Christians should see the world. In this vein, when theologian Walter Kasper, in his remarkable book *Jesus the Christ*, deals with fundamental principles of Christology, he concludes that the self-giveness of Christ and his voluntary sacrifice is the very essence of the Incarnation and "the cross then can be interpreted only as the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of God."[47] Therefore, if common sense rationality considers the cross as the end, or collapse and humiliation, contrary, in the light of divine perspective, it is a manifestation of God's "power and therefore a new beginning."[48] Respectively, we can spotlight that, from the linear perspective, the cross is the end, but from the inverted perspective, it is the beginning of the new world. Consequently, this existential insight is what gives birth to a new epistemological discourse, namely the inverted epistemology.

The concept of inverted epistemology allows us to conceive an existential structure of the world, as well as contemplate the perceptual perspective the New Testament reveals. Gospel starts with the call - "*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven has come near - *ετανοεῖτε, ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν*" (Matthew 3:2). The Greek word *Metanoia* (*μετάνοια*) denotes a change of mind, that is to say, it is a call for transformation, inversion of the conscious mind. Consequently, in the New Testament, the whole creation is undergoing a kind of metamorphosis: this is the new world where the entire array of value systems can only be perceived and understood from the inverted standpoint. Christ himself completely overturns the traditional linear worldview passed down from generation to generation and brings about the mental, ethical, and religious transformation of the world. Consequently, we can argue that the Gospel itself offers the inverted model of perceptual direction, where "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16). It is from this prism that Christ conveys the new covenant and even puts Himself in this mode of beingness through *kenosis*.

The inverted epistemology can be seen as a hermeneutical key for perceiving the whole structure of the Gospel as well as the entire history of salvation. It is Christ who opens up this existential horizon, shaping a unique paradigm of epistemology. In this fashion, we can argue that sermons and parables of Christ will seem paradoxical if one conceives them through the traditional or common-sense point of view. Jesus' proclaimed beatitudes and other commandments refer to the opposite reality, or to put it differently, God

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[47] Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 156.
[48] Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 138.

him/herself inverts the linearity of the human perceptual system. Thus, it can be considered a new language of communication or the entire constellation of grammar codes that constitutes a Christian way of seeing the world, as well as defines the attitude toward enemies, others, or even God and self. However, this epistemological paradigm requires a move beyond the limited scope of cultural/contextual perception. Consequently, it is impossible to grasp the essential meaning of Christianity without a complete transformation of consciousness, i.e., without inversion of mindset, and it is what the inverted epistemology, in its very essence, implies.

The insights into how inverted epistemology functions are best seen in literature. There are many examples, but we will focus on two of them. One of the greatest Spanish epic novels *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, depicts the image of the man Alonso Quijano who, in his imagination, becomes a knight, namely Don Quixote. He does not see the world from the linear perspective, that is to say, as it is 'naturally', but from the inverted viewpoint, i.e., in Don Quixote's vision, robbers are knights, prostitutes are noble women, and the oppressed and vulnerable are seen as mighty. Likewise, in the novel *Mysteries* by Knut Hamsun, the protagonist, Nagel, arrives back in his hometown and challenges the traditional worldview of inhabitants of the small town in Norway. He befriends the lowest class of society, people who are objects of mockery. These characters embody that type of person the reader can see in the novels by Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Ken Kesey, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, and William Faulkner, to mention but a few. All protagonists share one essential characteristic, in different forms, they experience the ascesis of mind, i.e., there is a shift from a self-centred to a self-giving perspective, and therefore, all have a unique (inverted) worldview from where they perceive the world.

The dramatic conflict arises when characters attempt to destroy the temple of collective thinking, domination, inequality, egocentrism, violence and restore it in the *kenotic* sense. As is the case in the Gospel, where scribes and Pharisees should be the holiest and most respected persons, but Christ says that prostitutes and the vulnerable are more likely to see God - "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matthew 21:31). Christ completely destroys this temple when washes the disciples' feet, those who see Jesus as king, but He inverts their vision and serves those who should be serving him - "Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). The mystery of the incarnation depicts the image of God as the servant, which is the highest expression of the divine love. Consequently, it is the inverted epistemology that

gives an essential insight into exploring the existential meaning of the message of Jesus Christ, expressed in self-emptiness and not in authority and domination.

What inverted epistemology endeavours to represent is the need to deconstruct the narrow perceptual system that is constructed by logic/linearity, or to put it differently, to demonstrate the necessity to proceed beyond binary logic in order to witness the divine in its state of superposition. That is because human perception always leaves room for biased interpretation since, as mentioned above, much depends on individual experience and cultural worldview, as well as on the collective consciousness, which is linear and binary, i.e., the attitude of one's vision stems from concrete empirical knowledge and common-sense rationality. Therefore, human beings are inclined to measure and judge creation based on their own understanding and give priority to the culture/context to which they belong. However, overcoming this limited horizon to conceive the holistic state of the world and the divine can only be attained through the metamorphosis of the way of thinking. For that very reason, the inverted epistemology requires the relinquishment of a self-centred outlook through self-emptiness and mind ascesis. Thus, one is no longer the central agent setting a value system and perceptual framework that prioritizes a particular point of view but instead becomes open to otherness and the unlimited varieties of creation. Consequently, the inverted epistemology reveals uniquely *kenotic* characteristics by offering an existential prism that refracts the linearity of human logic, reversing its direction from God to humans. Moreover, there is a paradigm shift, i.e., everything, visible or invisible, is seen from the perspective of so-called inverted logic. In this new reality, where the cross is, there is resurrection, and where is bodily defeat, there is a spiritual and mystical triumph. It is a transfigured worldview in which the cross, the scandalous and disgraceful instrument of punishment, and death become the most powerful symbol of eternal life.

Conclusion

At the end of the path of exploring the inverted characteristic of Orthodox epistemology, it is evident that apophatic theology explicitly reveals the inverted nature of Eastern Christian thinking. The relocation of perspective lines from immanence to transcendence is not a mere combination to shape conceptual language or sophistic abstraction, but instead, the way of negations is the essential force of Orthodoxy, forming the new mode of perception where the intellectual progression from immanence is interrupted by the inverted dynamism of the divine projection. Therefore, Lossky's theology is not only about the tension

between the two contradictory poles naming and not naming the divine, but witnessing and experiencing what comes inversely from the Kingdom of God.

However, Lossky's radical apophatic approach has its fallacies that, to some degree, limit the theological scope. In this regard, two main issues will be fair to mention. First, there is difficulty in imitating the ineffable and unknowable God. Since apophasis implies departing from beingness and stresses the absolute transcendence of the divine, the concept of the *Imitatio Dei,* therefore, becomes elusive. The negative way of theologizing excludes the intelligible involvement of the human person. Consequently, the relationship between Creator and creature becomes one-sided. Second, the lack of attention to personalist theory seems problematic from a modern perspective. The personalistic paradigm as the supreme value of contemporary times loses its weight in apophasis since the negative way of theologizing (i) implies the departure from existence as such; (ii) personhood is seen not as a stable/static form of beingness but as something that should be fulfilled through the apophatic dynamism. The former is somewhat ambiguous since Lossky does not go into detail to explain from the theological perspective what happens to the person when one enters into the divine mystery/darkness. When speaking about the dynamic progression of personhood, the latter excludes its significance as one's perfect state to perceive and measure truth, which is the basic principle of the modern era. Indeed, personalism is not only one of the qualities of the human being, but in its profound sense, it is an existential condition of beingness; thus, it should be understood as the primary imprint of one's own existence.

However, Lossky is not the type of thinker who attempts to reconcile theological truth with modern challenges. Instead, his aim is to deconstruct intellectual expressions of the divine that evolve over time, emphasizing the need to explore what lies beyond superficial theological concepts. In terms of religious formalism, Lossky accurately avoids it by positioning God outside the subject-object dichotomy, where only a human is an object of divine observation. In this vein, the inverted nature of apophasis, as a theological paradigm forming a new language of communication of Eastern Christianity, and this metamorphosis of the reverse perspective is most clearly seen in Byzantine iconography, where prospective lines come from the depth of the icon or, to say in Lossky's terminology, from the 'supra-essential' realm and penetrate into the material reality. For that very reason, apophatic dynamism requires a fundamental shift: the inversion of the entire perceptual system, which is the so-called inverted logic driving Orthodox theology from a self-enclosed (linear) to an open (inverted) epistemology.

The uniqueness of such theological discourse lies in transcending the cognitive process of theologizing, or, so to say, overcoming religious clichés, and becoming a witness to the ontological dimension of Christian thinking, which implies the liberation of oneself from the cycle of ideologized principles. Christianity is non-conformity. However, it does not allude to anarchy or revolution in a social sense, but it is a rebellion against the illusory, one-sided perception that always bears the risk of turning into authoritarianism or ideological (religious) tyranny. On the contrary, the inversion of theological perspectives offers a different conceptual apparatus that excludes giving a dominant position to any single context or ideology and provides a robust theological basis for critical examination. It stresses the constraint and subjective nature of human cognition and, therefore, challenges epistemological superiority. In this unique hermeneutical framework, primacy is given to the openness and receptiveness of the human person over a narrow perceptual system, thereby preventing the manipulation of theology as an ideology. Therefore, The inverted epistemology as a theological framework emphasizes that the idea serves the person, but ideology employs it and shapes the illusion of faith.

Consequently, the inverted perspective can be considered a hermeneutical framework that finds its applicability in contemporary theology, which is often utilized as a political tool. It can become an up-to-date instrument forming a conceptual apparatus through which one can transcend contextual/cultural prism and witness the divine superposition. In this respect, Orthodox theology can shape contemporary discourse through the reverse perspective and put Christian non-conformity at the service of modern humans.

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Euthanasia: A Dilemma of Faith, Identity, and Community

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the sociological implications of euthanasia as an antisocial behavior that undermines human dignity and spiritual values. It explores the erosion of traditional beliefs surrounding death, the transformation of individual identity, and the consequent effects on familial roles and societal structures. By addressing key issues such as the manipulation of patient consciousness and the broader societal trends towards self-destruction, the article calls into question the ethical dimensions of euthanasia and its impact on community bonds and responsibilities. Ultimately, it posits that the acceptance of euthanasia reflects a profound loss of faith in divine providence and the sacredness of life.

Keywords: Euthanasia, Antisocial Behavior, Christian Values, Societal Responsibility, Ethical Dilemmas

Introduction

Euthanasia occupies a pivotal position in ethical, theological, and sociocultural debates, presenting a multifaceted dilemma that impacts various aspects of human existence[1]. As societies evolve and medical advancements reshape cultural paradigms, the issue of euthanasia raises critical questions about life and death, faith, and community ties. At its core, euthanasia challenges the sanctity of life, rooted in religious beliefs that frame death as a divine mystery. In traditional cultures like Romania, the perception of life and death under God's sovereignty informs collective attitudes toward euthanasia. Endorsing the deliberate ending of life, even amid unbearable suffering, poses complex societal implications that reflect shared values and beliefs.

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1 E. DE VILLIERS, *Euthanasia and assisted suicide: a Christian ethical perspective*, Acta Theologica Supplementum, 3/2002, pp. 35-47.

Furthermore, euthanasia invokes struggles for identity in a rapidly changing world. Individuals frequently navigate the tension between personal autonomy and cultural expectations, causing potential fractures in familial ties and community dynamics. This profound decision extends beyond individual choice, urging society to confront its values about suffering, dignity, and the essence of human experience.

The discussion surrounding euthanasia is not merely theoretical; it reveals the deeper struggles of faith, identity, and community in contemporary society. This article will explore the sociological and ethical ramifications of euthanasia within the Romanian cultural context—a framework enriched by history, religious beliefs, and traditional values. Analyzing euthanasia in this light uncovers the influence of deeply held beliefs on societal norms and individual perspectives, highlighting the strong emotional and ethical reactions it evokes. Additionally, examining euthanasia from a Romanian viewpoint allows for critical assessment of globalization's impact on local customs. The tension between progressive views on euthanasia and traditional values highlights the internal conflicts faced by individuals and implications for community cohesion.

Ultimately, this exploration seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of euthanasia as a deeply human issue that reflects the values and beliefs of a community. By situating this discussion within the Romanian sociocultural context, we aim to contribute meaningfully to the dialogue about life, death, and the intricate ties that connect us all.

Euthanasia as an Assault on Faith

Euthanasia is often perceived as a profound affront to religious beliefs, particularly those that uphold the sanctity of life. Many religious traditions regard life as a precious gift from God, imbued with inherent value and purpose. In this context, the act of intentionally ending one's life, even under the banner of alleviating suffering, is viewed not merely as a personal choice but as a significant breach of divine commandments.[2] It challenges the very foundation of faith, which teaches that life and death are within the domain of God's wisdom and timing.

In Romanian culture, these beliefs are deeply ingrained, reflecting a worldview that acknowledges death as a mysterious event shrouded in divine authority. Traditional Romanian perspectives regard life and death as sacred

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[2] "It is never licit to kill another: even if he should wish it, indeed if he request it because hanging between life and death, he begs for help in freeing the soul struggling against the bonds of the body, nor is it licit even when the sick person is no longer able to live." ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, Book I, Chapter 20.

mysteries, emphasizing that humans do not possess the ultimate authority to decide the duration of their lives. The strong connection with spirituality and the understanding that suffering can serve a higher purpose underscores a reluctance to endorse euthanasia. This view is mirrored in the teachings of Orthodox Christianity, which has historically shaped the moral compass of Romanian society. the end of man is based on the biblical verse that says that "he who endures to the end shall be saved"[3] and the verse "by your patience you shall obtain your souls".[4]

Within this cultural framework, death is not simply an end but is entwined with the belief in eternal life and the divine plan. The faithful cherish the idea that each person's suffering may carry spiritual significance, providing opportunities for personal growth, repentance, and connection with God. In this light, the journey through illness and the acceptance of suffering become integral parts of one's faith and spiritual development rather than circumstances to be avoided at all costs.[5] The belief that enduring hardship can draw individuals closer to God and foster a deeper understanding of life's meaning reinforces resistance to euthanasia. This perception renders the act not just a personal moral failure but an affront to the community's shared faith principles.

As we explore the implications of euthanasia on faith, it becomes evident that this issue is not merely a medical or ethical concern; it is a vital spiritual struggle that challenges the very essence of what it means to live and die with dignity in accordance with deeply held beliefs. The interweaving of faith, identity, and community underscores the complexities surrounding euthanasia and invites a broader reflection on how these values shape our understanding of life's ultimate mysteries.

Identity and the Relativization of Values

Euthanasia profoundly challenges spiritual values, placing individual and collective identities under scrutiny. As society increasingly grapples with the complexities of personal autonomy and the right to choose one's end, the traditional spiritual values that have long guided human actions come into question.[6] In a cultural context heavily influenced by religious teachings, such as that of Romania, the very notion of euthanasia threatens to disrupt the fabric of identity by relativizing the deep-seated beliefs about life, suffering, and the

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[3] Matei 10, 22

[4] Luca 21, 19

[5] See JEAN-CLAUDE LARCHET, *Dieu ne veut pas la souffrance des hommes,* Edition du Cerf, 2008.

[6] For this matter, see: CHARLES TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, 1992; ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press; 3rd edition (March 6, 2007).

human experience. At its core, euthanasia confronts an individual's understanding of self and existence. In cultures where life is viewed as a sacred gift from God, the decision to pursue euthanasia can be seen as an assertion of control over one's existence that undermines the intrinsic value of life. This struggle for autonomy can lead to a disconnect from communal beliefs and an erosion of the values that have historically defined one's identity. Individuals in such a position may encounter a crisis of faith, as they grapple with the implications of choosing death over life, questioning the teachings that once provided comfort and direction.

Collectively, the acceptance of euthanasia can signal a shift in societal values—from prioritizing communal well-being and spiritual guidance to an emphasis on individual rights and personal choice[7]. This shift may lead to fragmentation within communities, as varying beliefs about the morality of euthanasia create divides among individuals and families. The relational aspect of identity—how individuals define themselves in relation to others and their community—becomes challenged when foundational beliefs about life are put to the test.

Religious and cultural beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping personal identities, particularly in the context of difficult choices such as euthanasia. In Romanian society, the intertwining of faith with daily life serves as a stabilizing force, providing individuals with a sense of belonging and purpose. The teachings of the Orthodox Church shape moral frameworks that guide behavior and decision-making, reinforcing the value of life even in the face of suffering. When confronted with euthanasia, individuals may find themselves at a crossroads, where the pressures of modernity conflict with the teachings that underpin their cultural identity.

The relativization of values brought about by the discourse surrounding euthanasia can also lead to existential questions about meaning and purpose. As individuals navigate the complexities of life and death choices, they must contend with how these decisions impact their sense of self, their relationships with others, and their connection to the divine. The tension between the desire for personal freedom and the commitment to traditional values creates a dynamic landscape in which identity is continuously redefined.

Community Bonds and the Erosion of Belonging

Euthanasia has significant ramifications for family and community structures, often leading to a weakening of the bonds that connect individuals to one another. The act of choosing to end one's life, even in the context of suffering, can result in profound emotional fallout for families and communities,

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7 See C.S. Lewis - *The Abolition of Man,* Oxford University Press,1943.

as it challenges the foundational principles of care, love, and mutual support. In cultures like Romania, where family ties are revered and communal relationships are integral to social identity, the implications of euthanasia resonate deeply. When a person opts for euthanasia, it can create a rupture within the family unit. The decision may evoke feelings of guilt, shame, and confusion among family members, who may struggle to understand the motivations behind such a choice. This disconnect can lead to strained relationships, as loved ones grapple with feelings of helplessness and inadequacy in the face of a decision that they perceive as abandoning communal responsibility. The shared experience of illness, traditionally a time for families to come together and support one another, may instead become a source of division, undermining the fabric of familial bonds.

Furthermore, euthanasia can contribute to a broader erosion of community ties, as it introduces a narrative that prioritizes individual autonomy over collective well-being. In Romanian culture, communities have historically centered around shared values, traditions, and mutual support systems. The acceptance of euthanasia can signify a shift towards individualism, where personal choice supersedes the communal bonds that maintain solidarity and mutual care. This shift may create an environment where individuals feel increasingly isolated, leading to a loss of the sense of belonging that is crucial for emotional and psychological well-being. Belonging to one's familial and cultural roots provides individuals with a sense of identity and purpose. In situations where euthanasia is considered, the loss of this connection can be particularly distressing. Individuals may find themselves alienated from their cultural heritage, which emphasizes the importance of enduring suffering and caring for one another as a moral obligation. The abandonment of these values can lead to existential feelings of emptiness and disconnection, as individuals wrestle with the implications of choosing death over a shared journey of struggle and perseverance.

The perceived loss of belonging can reverberate throughout communities, weakening the social fabric that binds people together. When communities begin to accept euthanasia, they may inadvertently signal that certain lives—particularly those marked by illness or suffering—are less valuable or burdensome. This devaluation can foster an environment of fear and isolation among vulnerable individuals who may already be experiencing feelings of worthlessness or despair.

The Role of Suffering in Faith and Tradition

Suffering has long been regarded in many religious traditions as a profound and sometimes necessary part of the human experience. Traditionally, suffering is seen not as a mere affliction to be avoided at all costs, but rather as a divine

tool for personal growth, spiritual development, and ultimate redemption.[8] In this context, each hardship is perceived as an opportunity for individuals to connect more deeply with their faith and to cultivate virtues such as patience, compassion, and resilience.

In Romanian culture, the concept of enduring suffering resonates deeply with the belief that trials serve a higher purpose. Many view suffering as a means to attain spiritual enlightenment or to draw closer to God. This perspective is reinforced by the teachings of the Orthodox Church, which emphasizes that life's challenges can lead to a greater understanding of divine love and a more profound appreciation for the gift of life. The faithful often believe that through suffering, individuals can grow in empathy, learn to rely on God, and ultimately find solace in the promise of eternal life.

Contrastingly, the idea of seeking relief through euthanasia challenges these traditional views. Euthanasia, by its very nature, embodies a desire to eliminate suffering rather than to understand or endure it. This approach can be seen as an attempt to bypass the spiritual lessons that suffering can impart. Rather than viewing pain as a potential catalyst for growth and redemption, euthanasia positions suffering as something to be rejected and eradicated, and in doing so, it raises fundamental questions about the meaning of life and the values we hold dear. The pursuit of euthanasia as a solution to unbearable suffering often reflects a modern inclination toward immediate relief and individual autonomy. In many ways, this perspective diverges sharply from traditional Christian beliefs, which advocate for the acceptance of suffering as part of God's mysterious plan. By choosing euthanasia, individuals may overlook the potential for transformation that can arise from life's hardships, and in the process, they risk losing the opportunity for spiritual growth that suffering can engender.

Moreover, this tension between enduring suffering and seeking relief through euthanasia highlights a broader existential crisis faced by many in contemporary society. As modernity shifts perspectives on life and death,[9] individuals may find themselves wrestling with the contrasting values of traditional teachings and contemporary views centered around personal choice and autonomy. This conflict not only affects personal convictions but also reverberates through families and communities, challenging the collective understanding of suffering and its role in the human experience.

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[8] "La souffrance fait partie de notre condition humaine, mais elle ne doit pas être vécue comme une fatalité. Elle peut être un moyen de nous rapprocher de Dieu et de nos frères en humanité." JEAN-CLAUDE LARCHET, *Dieu ne veut pas la souffrance...*, 59.

[9] See PHILIPPE ARIÈ, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Spiritual Consequences Beyond Mortality

The concept of spiritual death emerges as a critical consideration in discussions about euthanasia, particularly within religious frameworks. Spiritual death refers to a profound disconnection from the divine and an alienation of the soul from its true purpose and potential. In the context of euthanasia, this notion takes on profound significance, as it raises questions about the implications of choosing to end one's life intentionally and the potential consequences for the soul.

In many religious traditions, life is seen as an opportunity for spiritual growth and an essential phase in the soul's journey toward union with the divine[10]. The act of euthanasia, however, may be perceived as an abandonment of this journey. By opting for death as a means to escape suffering, individuals may forfeit their chance for redemption, healing, and transformation. This choice signifies a rejection of the struggle inherent in human existence and, consequently, a potential severing of the soul's connection to God. Spiritual death, then, is not merely the cessation of physical life but a profound departure from the spiritual growth that suffering could have facilitated.

Moreover, the belief in spiritual continuity plays an integral role in understanding the ramifications of euthanasia. In the Orthodox faith, life is viewed as a continuous journey, with earthly existence serving as a preparation for eternal life. This perspective suggests that the experiences and choices made during one's lifetime carry significant weight in determining the condition of the soul beyond physical death. The acceptance of suffering as part of this journey reinforces the notion that every moment holds potential for spiritual development, even within trials and tribulations.

Euthanasia disrupts this belief in spiritual continuity, presenting a dichotomy between the immediate relief sought through death and the long-term implications for the soul's progress. By choosing euthanasia, individuals may inadvertently interrupt the natural course of their spiritual journey, limiting the opportunities for grace that suffering may offer. The perceived finality of death in the context of euthanasia raises essential questions about forgiveness, reconciliation, and the possible spiritual growth that could be cultivated through enduring hardships. This tension highlights a profound moral dilemma confronting both individuals and society at large. The decision to opt for euthanasia may reflect a desire to hasten the end of suffering, but it can simultaneously erase the potential for spiritual fulfillment and connection that comes through perseverance. These choices not only affect the individual but resonate with families and communities, challenging shared beliefs about the sanctity of life, the nature of the soul, and the importance of spiritual continuity.

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[10] See VLADIMIR LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1997.

Transformation of Human Roles and Responsibilities

The discourse surrounding euthanasia signals a significant transformation in how individuals are perceived within society—shifting from a view of humans as "gifted beings" endowed with inherent dignity and purpose to a more utilitarian perspective that positions them as beings driven by necessity. This transformation profoundly impacts not only individual identities but also the roles and responsibilities that individuals, families, and communities fulfill in relation to life's most critical moments, particularly in the context of terminal illness.

Historically, many cultures, including that of Romania, embraced the idea that every human being is a gift, with unique contributions to make and a divine purpose to fulfill. This perspective fosters a sense of connectedness and interdependence, emphasizing that individuals are not merely isolated entities but integral parts of a larger community. The recognition of being created in the image of God imbues life with sacred value, encouraging compassion, care, and responsibility towards one another.

However, the emphasis on euthanasia introduces a paradigm shift that can diminish this view. In a society where euthanasia may be accepted as a viable response to suffering, individuals might increasingly be seen through the lens of their utility or productivity.[11] This shift reduces their identity to their capabilities rather than recognizing the profound worth embedded in their existence. People facing terminal illnesses may feel pressured to consider euthanasia as their worth becomes intertwined with their ability to contribute to society, leading to the troubling notion that their lives are less valuable in the face of chronic suffering.

This changing perception alters familial roles as well. Traditionally, families are viewed as natural caretakers for their loved ones, bound by a sense of duty, love, and compassion to provide support during times of illness. However, the endorsement of euthanasia challenges this dynamic, shifting the emphasis from caregiving to decision-making about life and death. Family members may find themselves in the complex position of navigating these decisions, which can lead to inner conflicts, guilt, and strained relationships. In some cases, caring for the terminally ill may be supplanted by the option of euthanasia, fundamentally altering how families collectively engage with suffering and mortality.

Moreover, the normalization of euthanasia can create a societal expectation that individuals should not only accept but also facilitate the decision to end life. This shift may erode the natural instinct for familial support, as the focus transitions

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[11] See for example: PETER SINGER, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2012; PETER SINGER, KATARZYNA DE LAZARI-RADEK, *Utilitarianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017; John Broome - *Weighing Lives*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

from nurturing and accompanying loved ones through their suffering to hurriedly addressing pain through death. Caregivers may struggle with feelings of inadequacy or helplessness, feeling that their traditional roles of offering comfort and companionship are being overshadowed by the choice of euthanasia.

Ultimately, the transformation of human roles and responsibilities instigated by the acceptance of euthanasia raises profound ethical considerations. It challenges the foundational principles of familial duty, the sanctity of life, and the communal bonds that have traditionally defined relationships during times of crisis. By examining these dynamics through the Romanian cultural lens, we can better understand the significant implications that such a shift entails, urging us to reflect on what it means to carry out our roles as caregivers and community members in a world increasingly positioned to accommodate the finality of death as a viable alternative to enduring life's difficulties. In navigating these changes, it becomes essential to reaffirm the inherent dignity in every life and to restore the value of compassionate caregiving, allowing individuals to explore the depths of their humanity without the looming shadow of euthanasia.

Ethical Considerations and Psychological Impacts

The debate surrounding euthanasia is fraught with ethical dilemmas that challenge the very values that underpin human society. For individuals faced with the decision to pursue euthanasia—whether as patients, family members, or medical professionals—the implications are profound and multifaceted. Each perspective brings its own set of moral questions, conflicting responsibilities, and deeply held beliefs about the sanctity of life, autonomy, and the definition of compassion. At the heart of these ethical dilemmas lies the conflict between the principles of individual autonomy and the sanctity of life.[12] For patients wishing to choose euthanasia, the desire for control over their conditions and outcomes often stems from unbearable suffering. Proponents argue that individuals should have the right to decide when and how they wish to end their lives, especially in situations involving terminal illness and chronic pain. However, this perspective raises significant questions about the moral responsibilities of medical professionals and the potential for societal pressure on vulnerable individuals who may feel they are a burden to their families. The ethical imperative to do "no harm" becomes complicated when considering the relief of suffering at the cost of life itself.

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[12] A defender of euthanasia based on individual autonomy: PETER SINGER, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics*, St. Martin's Griffin; 2nd ed. edition (April 15, 1996).

On the other hand, family members and caregivers face their own ethical quandaries when confronted with a loved one's wish for euthanasia. The inherent instinct to protect and support one's family members can conflict with the desire to respect their autonomy. This duality can lead to significant emotional turmoil, as caregivers grapple with their responsibility to alleviate pain while simultaneously confronting feelings of guilt or failure if they cannot prevent a loved one from choosing death. These dilemmas call for thoughtful reflection on the meaning of compassion, love, and the duties one owes to family, self, and society.

Beyond these ethical considerations lies the psychological burden placed upon individuals and families navigating euthanasia.[13] The decision-making process can be rife with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, as those involved contend with the finality of death and the ramifications of their choices. Patients facing the prospect of euthanasia may experience a whirlwind of emotions, including despair, relief, anger, and sadness. The very act of contemplating death as a solution to suffering can provoke profound existential questions, leading to a crisis of identity and purpose that can strain psychological resilience.

Family members, too, bear the weight of this burden. The reality of a loved one actively seeking euthanasia can lead to feelings of helplessness, grief, and existential dread. In many cases, they may wrestle with the implications of their support, fearing that their approval or assistance in the decision may be construed as abandonment or betrayal. This emotional turmoil can manifest as strained relationships, increased stress, and even mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. The societal stigma surrounding euthanasia can exacerbate feelings of isolation and shame for both patients and families. Individuals who choose to pursue euthanasia may feel alienated from their communities or faith, leading to additional psychological distress. Families may encounter judgment from others, making it difficult to express their emotions or seek support in navigating this complex situation.

In summary, the ethical considerations and psychological impacts surrounding euthanasia are significant and layered. The decisions involved not only affect the individuals directly involved but also ripple through families and communities, raising vital questions about the nature of compassion, responsibility, and the human experience. By reflecting on these dilemmas through a Romanian cultural lens, we can better appreciate the burden of making such profound

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13 See ELISABETH KUBLER-ROSS, *On Death and Dying. What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families,* Scribner, 2014; GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *Language and Death. The Place of Negativity,* University of Minnesota Press, 2006. LINDA L. EMANUEL AND PAUL J. DORAN, "Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide: Attitudes and Experiences of Patients and Families" in *Archives of Internal Medicine* (1997). For an orthodox perspective of the problem see: H. TRISTRAM ENGELHARDT, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, M & M Scrivener Press, 2000.

decisions and the importance of nurturing open dialogue and support systems that honor the complexities of life, suffering, and the choices that inevitably arise in the face of mortality. Ultimately, fostering an environment that emphasizes understanding, empathy, and respect for diverse beliefs will be crucial in navigating this challenging landscape.

Hospitals: From Healing Centers to Ethical Crossroads

Traditionally, hospitals have been regarded as sanctuaries of healing, where individuals seek medical care and recovery from illness. They symbolize hope, compassion, and the commitment of healthcare professionals to preserve life. However, the increasing acceptance and potential normalization of euthanasia pose significant challenges to this perception, leading to a shift whereby hospitals may come to be viewed not just as places for healing, but also as ethical crossroads associated with death. As discussions about euthanasia gain traction in societal discourse, the implications for hospitals are profound. The introduction of euthanasia as a medically sanctioned practice can alter the fundamental identity of healthcare institutions. Rather than being solely focused on the preservation of life, hospitals may become places where life is deliberately ended, blurring the lines between curative care and life-ending interventions. This shift can lead to a detrimental perception among patients, families, and the public; concerns may arise that seeking medical help could result in discussions about euthanasia, potentially stoking fear and distrust of medical professionals and the healthcare system as a whole.

The potential legitimization of euthanasia in hospital settings raises critical ethical questions regarding the role and responsibilities of healthcare providers. Medical professionals are traditionally guided by the Hippocratic Oath, which establishes a moral obligation to do no harm. However, when euthanasia is authorized as a treatment option, this principle becomes complicated. Healthcare providers may find themselves in ethically fraught situations where they are tasked with balancing the wishes of patients seeking relief from suffering against their commitment to preserving life. This tension can create moral distress, affect job satisfaction, and lead to ethical dilemmas that challenge the core values of medical practice.

Moreover, the implications of legitimizing euthanasia in medical settings extend to societal perceptions of vulnerability and value of life. The acceptance of euthanasia can suggest that the quality of life is measured solely by the absence of suffering, leading to a culture where individuals with chronic illnesses or disabilities may feel pressured to consider euthanasia as a viable option. This mindset can diminish the intrinsic value of life, particularly for those who experience extensive suffering but still find meaning and purpose in their existence.

Additionally, the legitimization of euthanasia can disproportionately affect already vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and those with mental health conditions. Concerns arise that these individuals may feel societal pressure to choose euthanasia to avoid being perceived as burdensome to their families. The normalization of death within healthcare institutions can foster an environment where individuals may not fully explore all available treatment options or receive the comprehensive palliative care needed to address their suffering meaningfully.

In conclusion, the shifting perception of hospitals from places of healing to ethical crossroads underscores the urgent need for thoughtful dialogue on euthanasia within the medical and societal landscape. By critically examining the prospective changes to the role of healthcare institutions, we can appreciate the potential societal and ethical ramifications of integrating euthanasia into medical practice. It is essential to prioritize compassionate care, ensuring that the focus remains on supporting patients and their families through the complexities of illness, rather than offering death as a solution. By fostering a culture of understanding, empathy, and respect for diverse viewpoints, we can navigate the challenges posed by euthanasia, ensuring that the sanctity of life remains at the forefront of healthcare practices.

Collective Responsibility and the Role of Society

Euthanasia serves as a poignant reflection of broader societal trends towards individualism and moral relativism, illuminating the ways in which contemporary values have shifted in response to modern challenges. In increasingly individualistic societies, where personal autonomy and self-determination are championed, the right to choose euthanasia is often framed as a fundamental aspect of personal freedom. This perspective prioritizes individual choice above communal values, presenting the decision to pursue euthanasia as an expression of sovereignty over one's own life and death.

However, this individualistic approach raises critical questions about the implications for collective societal values and responsibilities. As the focus shifts towards personal choice, the shared responsibilities that bind communities—such as care, compassion, and mutual support—may be undermined. The acceptance of euthanasia as a legitimate option can foster a culture where the sanctity of life is perceived to be secondary to individual demands for autonomy. In such an environment, discussions of moral absolutes may be overshadowed by the relativistic view that what is right or wrong depends on personal perspectives rather than collective ethical standards. The consequences of this trend towards moral relativism can be profound, particularly when it comes to vulnerable populations. In societies that embrace euthanasia without a robust evaluation

of its implications, individuals facing illness, disability, or mental health challenges may feel increased pressure to consider ending their lives to avoid being perceived as burdens. This societal pressure threatens to erode the value of human life and diminishes the role of collective support systems. The prioritization of individual choice risks neglecting the importance of fostering a nurturing environment where every member of society is valued and cared for, regardless of their circumstances.

Addressing the complexities of euthanasia requires an acknowledgment of the collective responsibility that society bears in shaping discussions around life, death, and dignity. Citizens, healthcare providers, policymakers, and community leaders must engage in open dialogues that consider not only the rights of individuals but also the implications for community cohesion and shared values. Schools, religious institutions, and community organizations play critical roles in fostering a deeper understanding of the moral and ethical dimensions surrounding euthanasia, encouraging discussions that highlight the importance of life and the dignity it entails. Furthermore, society's responsibility extends to developing comprehensive support systems that prioritize palliative care and mental health resources for those experiencing suffering. By investing in programs that address the holistic needs of individuals—emphasizing care, compassion, and understanding—society can work towards alleviating the conditions that drive individuals to consider euthanasia as a preferable option. Emphasizing collective, rather than solely individual, accountability fosters a culture where empathy and support are foundational components of community life.

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding euthanasia not only reflects societal trends towards individualism and moral relativism but also underscores the critical need for collective responsibility. As we navigate the complexities of life and death decisions, it becomes essential to uphold values that prioritize compassion, support, and the dignity of every individual. By fostering collaborative discussions and equitable resource allocation, society can ensure that alternatives to euthanasia are recognized, promoting an environment where life is celebrated and every member has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of suffering. In doing so, we can reassert the notion that navigating the challenges of mortality is a shared human experience requiring collective engagement and moral integrity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, euthanasia represents a significant ethical and spiritual challenge that is fundamentally unacceptable from a Christian perspective. This exploration has illuminated the profound implications of euthanasia on faith, identity, and community values. Within the Christian tradition, life is viewed as

a sacred gift bestowed by God, imbued with inherent dignity and purpose. The act of ending one's life, even in the face of unbearable suffering, stands in direct opposition to the belief that each moment holds potential for spiritual growth and divine connection.

Euthanasia not only undermines the sanctity of life but also erodes the communal bonds that are integral to societal fabric. As the emphasis shifts from collective responsibility to individual autonomy, we risk fragmenting the very support systems that have traditionally nurtured families and communities through suffering. This individualistic approach can lead to feelings of alienation and despair, particularly among vulnerable populations who may feel pressured to end their lives to alleviate perceived burdens on those they love.

Moreover, the acceptance of euthanasia poses serious ethical dilemmas for healthcare providers, challenging the core tenets of their vocation—to preserve life and provide compassionate care. The potential transformation of healthcare institutions from sanctuaries of healing to venues for ending life further complicates the narrative of care and compassion that has long characterized medical practice.

Ultimately, the call to reject euthanasia stems from a deep commitment to recognizing the value of every human life. It is essential for society to cultivate environments that prioritize compassion, understanding, and overall support amidst suffering. By holding fast to the principles that honor the sanctity of life, we can affirm that all individuals have worth, regardless of their circumstances, and that enduring love and solidarity within communities can provide the strength needed to face life's challenges.

In navigating these complex issues, it is incumbent upon us to engage in meaningful dialogue that honors traditional values while fostering a deeper understanding of the human experience. By doing so, we uphold the dignity of life and reinforce the spiritual and communal dimensions that define our existence, ultimately rejecting euthanasia as a solution to suffering and reaffirming our belief in the transformative power of faith, hope, and love.

Christ and Cancer. Trauma as Hermeneutics

Ioana ACHIM*

ABSTRACT. The medical world approaches cancer as a physical disease, and nothing else. Medicine sees little in Man except anatomy and physiology, a system – albeit complex – of cells, tissues and organs, each with its particular function in maintaining and perpetuating the species. However, any confrontation with illness reminds us that we are much more than the sum of our physical components and abilities.

A terminal illness such as cancer inflicts not only a physical wound but also damages a person's mind, emotions and spirit. A person's reaction to a terminal diagnosis is accompanied by physical symptoms similar to one's reactions to a traumatizing event. Trauma – the body's reaction to a stressor that requires coping mechanisms beyond the victim's strength – is felt by the cancer patient not only at the time of diagnosis, but throughout the entire (long) journey through treatment, remission, evaluation and possible recurrence. Approaching cancer as trauma is essential in order to give back dignity to a patient, but also to change the treatment paradigm. More specifically, medical treatment should be supplemented by interventions that relate to mind, emotions and soul.

Taking the raising of Lazarus as a model, I will look at the way in which biblical characters can accompany the patient and trauma victim in their spiritual and emotional journey through grief. It is my intent to show how reading the Bible through the lens of trauma makes evident the presence of Christ in the life of a terminally ill patient.

Keywords: Trauma hermeneutics, Cancer-related PTSD, terminal diagnosis, grief therapy, treatment paradigm

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Introduction

As a cancer nurse and aspiring theologian, I am part of a multidisciplinary team of people that seek to bring physical and emotional comfort and healing to our patients. Doctors, nurses, social workers, physiotherapists, chaplains and spiritual counselors seek to address the patients' needs holistically. I believe there are two main principles that can help in our attempts to approach patients as embodied emotional and spiritual beings. First, we must recognize that what cancer patients experience is not just a disease of the body, but a trauma. Naming trauma frees the patient to confront it and recover from it, increasing quality of life and inner peace. Second, I believe that we should draw on the resources provided by the Bible to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of patients diagnosed with a terminal illness. Armed with these resources and the knowledge that science backs up the benefits of spiritual care, the church community must enter what psychologist and trauma expert Diane Langberg calls "perhaps the greatest mission field of the twenty-first century," trauma.[1]

1. Trauma

The Greek word τραῦμα (*trauma*) means 'wound.' A traumatizing event is one that "may cause or threaten death, serious injury, or sexual violence to an individual, a close family member, or a friend"[2] and for which the victim doesn't have adequate coping resources. In its most basic sense, trauma is a "wound of the heart."[3]

A stressful event activates the body's survival mode, the fight-flight-freeze-fawn-flop response.[4] Adrenaline, noradrenaline and later cortisol are secreted in large quantities for the purpose of giving us "strength and

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[1] Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores*, Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015, 8.

[2] This is the DSM-V definition (Frank Gieseler, Lynn Gaertner, Elske Thaden, and Werner Theobald, "Cancer Diagnosis: A Trauma for Patients and Doctors Alike," *The Oncologist*, July 2018, 23(7): 752–754, Published online 2018 Feb 22. doi: 10.1634/theoncologist.2017-0478, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6058334/..., 752). Most trauma research, however, has been done using the definition found in the DSM-IV (1994), where a stressor event is one that "involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity." (National Cancer Institute, *Cancer-Related Post-Traumatic Stress*, https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/survivorship/new-normal/ptsd-hp-pdq).
The various definitions of trauma all have in common a stressing (or traumatic) event and a person's inadequate capacity to respond to it.

[3] Trauma Healing Institute, *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help, Facilitator Guide*, American Bible Society, Philadelphia, PA: Trauma Healing Institute, 2021, 23.

[4] Alexiana Fry, *Trauma Talks in the Hebrew Bible: Speech Act Theory and Trauma Hermeneutics*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023, 15.

endurance to respond to extraordinary conditions."[5] Usually, the body calms down after the danger has passed, if the person is within her "window of tolerance" and her coping mechanisms are available and adaptive.[6]

In the case of a traumatic experience, however, our mind and our body are overwhelmed. The continued production of cortisol leads to serious health issues, as the victim of a traumatic event lives "recurrent, tormenting memories of atrocities."[7] He experiences fear, anger, shame, guilt, horror, a racing heart, sweating, shaking, and altered cognitions such as racing thoughts, inability to focus or concentrate, and avoidance.[8] In time, the body breaks down, relationships are destroyed, and so is the capacity to work and study. The victim loses the sense of safety and agency and feels disempowered and disconnected.[9]

2. Approaching cancer as trauma

According to the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for mental health, "the cancer diagnosis meets the criteria for a traumatic event if it threatens the patient's life."[10] An overwhelming majority of cancer patients (94%) describe the illness as "the most traumatic event they have ever faced."[11] One in two cancer patients report experiencing distress. Between 20% and 33% experience subclinical Post-Traumatic Stress symptoms. Cancer-related PTSD is indeed diagnosed in 4-10% of cancer patients.[12] Research shows that someone diagnosed with cancer may manifest the same symptoms as survivors of rape, genocide, natural disasters and military combat.[13]

Increasingly, voices in the medical world are asking for cancer to also

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[5] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, New York, NY: Viking, 2014, 255.

[6] See Fry, 15-16, the Trauma Response Continuum.

[7] Langberg, 5.

[8] Frank Gieseler, Lynn Gaertner, Elske Thaden, and Werner Theobald, "Cancer Diagnosis: A Trauma for Patients and Doctors Alike," *The Oncologist,* July 2018, 23(7): 752–754. Published online 2018 Feb 22. doi: 10.1634/theoncologist.2017-0478, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6058334/, 754.

[9] American Cancer Society [ACS], "Cancer-related Post-traumatic Stress and PTSD," May 22, 2024, https://www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-and-cancer.html.

[10] Gieseler et al., 752.

[11] Suni Petersen, Carolyn Bull, Olivia Propst, Sara Dettinger, Laura Detwiler, "Narrative Therapy to Prevent Illness-Related Stress Disorder," *Journal of Counseling & Development*, Volume 83, Issue 1, 23 December 2011, [41-47].

[12] Gieseler et al., 753; Petersen et al., 41; NCI, "Cancer-Related ..."

[13] NCI, "Cancer-Related ..."

be treated as ongoing trauma. During the entire cancer journey, from diagnosis through treatment, remission, evaluation and possible recurrence, the patient goes through a "cascade of physical, emotional, practical, and social demands."[14] On top of physical and emotional challenges, the patient feels vulnerable, incapable to control anything, chaotic, uncertain, forced into complex decision-making.[15] Diane Langberg describes how a chronically ill person

> will watch his life eroded by the disease as it eats away at his body and his capacities. He will struggle with depression. His grief will be relentless. He will grieve his inability to do what his heart longs to do. He may eventually go from a full-orbed life to a bed. If he takes medication, he will suffer from side effects that will debilitate him in additional ways. His sleep will suffer, he will endure pain, and the daily care of his body will absorb more and more of his energy. This could last for decades.[16]

Some patients become hypervigilant and notice every little change they feel. Others ruminate over their diagnosis, constantly wondering 'why them?' Still others detach themselves from their lives, leaving decisions to their carers. Patients continue to be on high alert for danger even when treatment is over, waiting for the 'shoe to drop' any time.

Therapeutic approaches to stress disorders and to trauma are centered around teaching the patients coping mechanisms, stress-management and relaxation techniques. All these keep patients focused on problems, emotions and meaning.[17] Spiritual practices have been proven to improve the quality of life and the patient's fight with fear and anxiety.[18]

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[14] Matthew J Cordova, Michelle B Riba and David Spiegel, "Post-traumatic stress disorder and cancer," *Lancet Psychiatry*. 2017 Apr; 4(4): 330–338. Published online 2017 Jan 19, 330.
A psychologist describes how the patient "will watch his life eroded by the disease as it eats away at his body and his capacities. He will struggle with depression. His grief will be relentless. He will grieve his inability to do what his heart longs to do. He may eventually [end up in] a bed. If he takes medication, he will suffer from side effects that will debilitate him in additional ways. His sleep will suffer, he will endure pain, and the daily care of his body will absorb more and more of his energy. This could last for decades." (Langberg, 188).

[15] Cordova et al., 330.

[16] Langberg, 188.

[17] National Cancer Institute, "Adjustment to Cancer: Anxiety and Distress," April 12, 2023, https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/feelings/anxiety-distress-hp-pdq.
Recommended non-pharmacological therapies for anxiety, trauma and illness-related trauma are: psychotherapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR), and exposure therapy, along with lifestyle habits, such as mindfulness and meditation, exercise, sleep hygiene and support groups. NCI, "Cancer-Related …;" ACS, "Cancer-related …".

[18] NCI, "Adjustment …".

3. The Bible through the lens of trauma

Scripture has much to say that is relevant to trauma victims today, whether their trauma is a result of illness or of other life events. Although the word 'trauma' itself is not widely used in the Scripture,[19] Scripture is rife with instances of trauma. From Cain killing his brother to Joseph being sold into slavery, from the ten plagues of Egypt to King David's dysfunctional family, from the Babylonian exile to the murder of the Bethlehem children and the crucifixion of Jesus, practically every page of the Bible describes, laments or shows the consequences of trauma.

The field of trauma theology is relatively new, as is the official psychopathological category of trauma (PTSD was first introduced in the DSM in 1980). It was as late as 2013 that the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) began a new unit called "Biblical Literature and the Hermeneutics of Trauma." Increasing numbers of scholars recognize 'trauma hermeneutics' as an interpretive lens, an approach whereby trauma theory can be used to understand Scripture. Bible scholars seek to understand trauma in the particular cultural and historical context of the biblical text.[20] They are interested not just in the situations of trauma but also in the "mechanisms that facilitate survival, recovery, and resilience."[21] The goal of this approach should not be academic alone, but also practical: showing another way in which the Bible is relevant to trauma victims today.

The use of ancient literature for modern therapy is not without precedent. Recognizing that war stories share commonalities across millennia, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay harnesses the "healing potential" of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in his work with veterans.[22] Caralie Focht and L. Juliana M. Claassens are only two

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[19] The only NT writer who used the noun τραῦμα *trauma* (wound) and the cognate verb τραυματίζω *traumatizo* (to wound) was a doctor – the evangelist Luke. Lk 10:34 talks about the wounds that the Good Samaritan binds up; Lk 20:12 mentions a wounded messenger; in Ac 19:16, the 7 sons of the chief priest in Ephesus, Sciva, get wounded by a possessed man.

[20] Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Fechette (eds.), *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016, 2.

[21] Boase and Fechette, 2. For example, patterns of trauma recovery set forth by psychiatrists (Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*) are used by Bible scholars to lay out the story of Joseph and of Tamar, respectively. Caralie Focht, "The Joseph Story: a Trauma-Informed Biblical Hermeneutic for Pastoral Care Providers", *Pastoral Psychology* 69, 230 May 2020, 209–223 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-020-00901-w, 210; L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)," in Boase and Fechette.

[22] Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017, 59%; See Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Simon & Shuster, 1995; and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming,* Scribner, 2002.

of the many scholars who apply trauma theory to the interpretation of the biblical stories (of Joseph and of Tamar, respectively).[23] Theologian Caralie Focht is convinced that trauma-informed Bible reading can be both "faithful to the narrative while still offering an interpretation that resonates with the experiences of people who read the text today."[24] It is in this spirit of practicality that I approach the biblical text through trauma-informed lens.

In the rest of this paper, I will look at the story of the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11), an account that was called "the Fourth Gospel in miniature" by Leon Morris.[25] For John, this story is a key moment in Jesus' own journey to the cross and to his eventual resurrection.[26] Using trauma-hermeneutics,[27] I will attempt to glean helpful insights for cancer patients dealing with the loss brought on by their disease.

4. A trauma-informed reading of John 11

John begins the story of the raising of Lazarus saying that Lazarus is ill and introduces the readers to him and his sisters. He goes on to recount how the sisters send a messenger to their friend Jesus, to inform him of his beloved friend's sickness. Jesus gets the message but decides to linger for a while, in spite of the love he has for his friends. Later, when he tells his disciples that he is ready to go to his friends, they are worried that he would be caught by his enemies and killed. Jesus encourages them with a meditation about walking in the light, and he explains to them that he wants to wake Lazarus up. The disciples misunderstand, thinking that the sick man is recovering, so Jesus spells out that Lazarus is actually dead and expresses joy at the disciples' opportunity to believe. They leave once Thomas expresses their readiness to face possible death alongside Jesus.

When the entourage reaches their friends' house, Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days, and the sisters have begun the mourning rituals, surrounded by well-connected friends. Martha goes out to welcome Jesus and expresses her regret at his absence and her conviction that if he had been there, her brother would not have died. The two discuss resurrection, and Jesus introduces himself as the Resurrection and the Life. Martha confesses belief in Jesus' identity as Messiah, Son of God and the Coming One. She then calls her

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[23] Focht, 209-223; Claassens, 177-192.

[24] Focht, 223.

[25] Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971, 532.

[26] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony,* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, 29%.

[27] By 'trauma hermeneutics' I understand reading the text 'through the lens of trauma.'

sister Mary, who arrives surrounded by mourners; Mary expresses the same regret. Seeing the grieving party, Jesus experiences very strong emotions, asks to be taken to Lazarus' grave and commands the stone be lifted, against all objections. When they obey, he voices a prayer of thanksgiving to his Father and calls out loudly to the dead man to come out. Lazarus comes out, wrapped in his burial clothes.

Some of the crowd reacts with belief in Jesus, while others take a report to the Jewish leaders, who convene a high-level meeting and express their concern for Roman repercussions. The high priest, in a moment of unintentional prophecy, judges that it is better for Jesus to die for the nation than vice-versa. When they decide to seek the capital punishment for him, Jesus goes into hiding. The end of the story leaves us in suspense, as we are told that the Passover festival is at hand, and spirits are running high wondering if Jesus would show up for the festival.

A trauma-informed reading of John 11 shows that first-century and twenty-first century victims of trauma share similar losses and responses to loss. The loss of health leading to death is the one truly universal and inevitable human characteristic, the greatest enemy of human life and flourishing. From ancient mummification rites to the contemporary transhumanist movement, aging and death are the supreme object of men's fears and preoccupation. Grief and mourning are natural and necessary companions of trauma and loss, but there is a reticence in the post-Enlightenment era to accept and manifest them. Psychiatrist and trauma expert Judith Herman emphasizes that "the descent into mourning is at once the most necessary and the most dreaded task."[28] The tendency is to try to live like we used to, but we cannot, and therefore we must "learn to live with the absence death has brought."[29] Survivors have a tendency to avoid grieving due either to fear or shame; therefore they need reassurance that mourning is an "act of courage rather than humiliation."[30] The inability to grieve cheats the victims from reaching a complete self and healing.[31] I propose that when patients identify with the grief journey of the biblical characters, they can find the coping mechanisms and spiritual resilience needed to handle their illness.

The loss of hope and trust

When health was lost, the sisters appealed to the authority of a Healer. For them the medical solution was Jesus, the powerful physician and miracle-worker. Mary and Martha had seen Jesus heal the sick and raise the dead, even from a distance (ch. 4:46-53). To the sisters, Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of God, who

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[28] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 1992 (3rd ed., 2015), 188.
[29] Langberg, 183.
[30] Herman, 188.
[31] Herman, 189.

is coming into the world" (v. 27), and they expected him to heal their brother either through his touch or from afar, by the power of his prayers (v. 22). Today, we appeal to doctors, whom many sick people perceive as larger-than-life miracle workers. But oftentimes, and especially when it comes to terminal illnesses, doctors fail expectations – as did Jesus, when he did not heal Lazarus.[32]

The loss of safety

In a belligerent, backward province of the Roman Empire, a modicum of safety was provided by family, property and community. With the death of Lazarus, the sisters were left to fend for themselves in a patriarchal society that was not kind to women.[33] Ancient Jewish women bereft of family entered a special underprivileged social category for whom God commanded special provisions. However, these were not always obeyed, subjecting widowed women to oppression.

In spite of advances in medicine and technology, disease still shakes our sense of safety, our at-home-ness in the world and makes us more acutely aware of danger lurking around us. Trauma survivors and the ill feel unsafe in their own bodies and in their relationships. They feel that they lack control over their lives, bodies, emotions and thinking.[34]

The loss of honor

Man's search for meaning has always looked into the 'why' of suffering. Many cultures couple suffering with man's sinfulness, or state of impurity, or his deeds incongruent with the divine order. Traditional shame-and-honor cultures

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[32] There was nothing in Jesus' history to make them expect that he could raise a person dead for four days. The other raisings (the son of the widow in Nain Lk 7, the daughter of Jairus Lk 8/Mk 5) were done on the same day as the death. Jewish tradition at the time said that for the first three days after death, the soul keeps returning to the body, attempting to re-enter it, and finally leaves when the body begins to visibly decompose (George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1989, 189). The attestation of this belief is from the 3rd century AD, but the superstition most probably existed centuries earlier (Morris, 546). This belief is what prompted the custom of visiting the tomb for 3 days after a burial, to make sure the dead person is still dead. This may have been the reason why Jesus lingered when he got the news of Lazarus' illness: to make sure everyone witnessing the miracle would be convinced that Lazarus was really dead and not just awaiting resuscitation (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991, 407, 411). This belief is still held by the modern Jewish community, who is taught that the soul "lingers on for a while" after death, especially around its own house (Maurice Lamm, *Consolation: The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief*, Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004, 47).

[33] Since Scripture does not mention children or spouses, we can assume that all the siblings had were each other.

[34] Herman, 160; van der Kolk, 247.

are quick to link pain to visible or invisible failures, burying the sufferer under the stigma of shame and guilt.[35] In the Bible, the wisdom of the book of Proverbs (do good and you will live well) is counterbalanced by the wisdom of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes (bad things can happen to good people). A sense of shame hovers on chronic patients even today, so they shun the company of others as they wonder what they did to deserve the punishment of illness. When the community around the mourner is judgmental, impatient or disapproving, it ceases to be safe and therefore helpful.[36]

The loss of community

As the community wonders what 'sin' might have brought God's punishment on the sick, especially in cases of an unnatural or unusual way to die, the tendency is to separate from the ill, so as to avoid 'contagion.' It is perhaps a tribute to Lazarus' righteous witness in his community that "many of the Jews" (v. 19) were present to console his sisters. Today the ill are isolated from active society in what Ernest Becker called "the denial of death."[37] For Philippe Aries, a denial of death is when society "refuses to participate in the emotion of the bereaved."[38] A society obsessed by perennial youth and health hides away the aging and the sick in hospitals, hospices and arranged living communities. Chaplain J. S. Park observes that to be unseen in your community is worse than being invisible: it is "a mental and emotional anguish caused by continual relational distress."[39] The ill themselves have a tendency to isolate, either for medical reasons (to avoid complications) or because they feel alone, misunderstood and too tired to give explanations. The world of the suffering is a shrinking one, for the Ancient and the Modern alike.

The loss of dreams

Imagination accompanies us all our lives, from the first time we hear a story until all stories turn to history. We dream of what life could be and we shape our lives accordingly. Death and illness stop our imagination in its tracks

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[35] Although shame is not explicitly mentioned in John 11, we can be sure it was in the palette of feelings that the sisters were feeling, as they and the community surely wondered why Lazarus had had to suffer and why the miracle-worker friend didn't come to heal. Perhaps sickness and death had befallen their family precisely due to their association with the would-be messiah? Martha's "even now" (v. 22) is telling.

[36] Van der Kolk, 286.

[37] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, NY: Macmillan, 1973.

[38] Philippe Aries qtd in Amanda Held Opelt, *A Hole in the World: Finding Hope in Rituals of Grief and Healing*, New York, NY: Hachette, 2022, Kindle loc. 713.

[39] J S Park, *As Long as You Need: Permission to Grieve*, Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2024, 131.

and bring an end to the life that was supposed to be. The "pain of losing what will never be" is called 'intrapsychic grief' and is as painful as losing what was.[40] As grievers see their dreams dissolve, they are "torn between two timelines," the timeline of their dreams and the timeline of their new, painful reality.[41] We can be sure that Mary and Martha imagined themselves living alongside their brother until they were "old and full of years"[42] – as we all do. Martha's confession tells us that they were also expecting to see God's kingdom established on earth "as it is in heaven" then and there, under the kingship of Jesus.[43] When their hopes and dreams are turned to dust, grief brings the sisters to a faith of a different nature.

The loss of faith

People across centuries wonder why a good God (who calls himself a loving friend!) allows suffering. Echoing Job, the OT laments and the disciples for whom Jesus' words were "too much"; hospital chaplain J S Park explains the double loss of faith that his own confrontation with death brought. First to disappear was the easy faith provided by "pocket theology," the spirituality of "clichés and snappy slogans and bless-your-heart remarks."[44] The next to go was the trust in God's character as a Person who answers prayer, eases crises, gives reasons and performs miracles.[45]

Mary and Martha's faith – like ours today – needs to be deconstructed before it will be reconstructed. The "everything happens for a reason," "it's God's will," "heaven got another angel," "look on the bright side" and "it will be OK" ideology must be broken by a "Lord, if only…" and be transformed.

5. Ancient principles for today's grievers

John 11 teaches its readers what it means to grieve well. From the beginning, the author establishes the basis on which the episode is built: Jesus' love for his friends. If we look at the passage through the lens of attachment theory, we note the secure attachment based on love between Jesus and his friends, Lazarus, Mary and Martha.[46] The link between a secure attachment and

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[40] Park, 15.

[41] Ibid., 27.

[42] Gn 25:8 of Abraham, Job 42:17 of Job, 1 Chr 29:28 of David, etc.

[43] Mary's anointing of Jesus in 12:3 may have been her attempt to proclaim him as King, or at least a sign that the people present at the table were ready for the inauguration of Jesus' political regime (Bauckham, 28%).

[44] Park, 39.

[45] Ibid., 47-48 .

[46] When John stresses Jesus' love for the main characters of the story, he doesn't just give them a

grieving well is undeniable. Research has shown that people with insecure attachment styles may be prone to experience complicated grief.[47]

We observe communal aspects of grief starting with John 11:19, where the author describes friends gathering together to comfort the sisters. The Jewish practice of 'sitting shiva' with the bereaved focuses on being together for the first seven (Heb., *sheva*) days after a death/burial.[48] In Talmudic language, what happens at a shiva is a turning from the care for the dead to "concern for the living."[49] Friends sit with the grievers and mirror them: if the grievers cry – they cry, if they laugh – they all laugh, and so on. This tradition is an ancient *mise-en-scène* of what neurologists have discovered about mirror neurons: that when a primary caretaker fails to mirror a baby's emotions, that baby will have attachment issues all his or her life.[50] It is man's fundamental need to have his emotions mirrored by another human. Likewise, the need to be truly seen by God is a basic human need. The psalmists also illustrate this principle when they talk about "seeking God's face."[51]

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generic name, like "his friends" or "Lazarus' family;" he enumerates them and names two of the three, which implies that Jesus loved them both individually and as a family (Morris, 539). The sisters send a message to Jesus using the phrase "he whom you love" – a phrase that appears for the first time here (11:3), to refer to Lazarus. This is a phrase exclusive to John, who tells us that Jesus loved someone in 11:5, 11 ("our friend"), 11:36 ("see how he loved him") and elsewhere talking about "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20-24) (Gary M. Burge, *Commentary on John,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012, 91). For more on the ongoing debate relating to the identity of "the beloved disciple" see R. M. Chennattu, "Lazarus," in Joel B. Green, ed., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013, 516; Marianne Meyer-Thompson, *John: A Commentary,* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, 240.

47 Victoria Russ et al., "The Relationship Between Adult Attachment and Complicated Grief: A Systematic Review," *Omega Journal of Death and Dying*, 29 May 2022, 89 (4), https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222822108311; "Attachment Theory and Grief: Navigating Loss Through the Lens of Relationships," 12 Sep 2024, NeuroLaunch, https://neurolaunch.com/attachment-theory-and-grief/.

48 "Shiva and Other Mourning Observances," *Jewish Practice*, Chabad.org, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/291135/jewish/Shiva-and-Other-Mourning-Observances.htm; "The History and Meaning of Shiva," *Jewish Practice*, Chabad.org, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/281584/jewish/What-Is-Shiva.htm; "*Shiva* (Judaism)," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiva_(Judaism)

49 Lamm, 50.

50 Developmental psychologist Edward Tronick discovered that for a healthy development, infants need their motions to be reflected by their mothers. David Kessler argues that in the same manner in which babies need to see their mother mirror their expressions, adults also "need to feel their grief acknowledged and reflected by others." (David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: the Sixth Stage of Grief*, NY: Scribner, 2019, 12%).

51 Psalmists address "God's face" often (13:1, 34:8, 4:6). Theologian and cancer patient J. Todd Billings says that prayer "is all about God's face shining on us … We bring our whole selves before God, and in that process we are seen by the almighty God and are able to apprehend our new identity in light of his promises." (J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015, 43). Perhaps this desire for mirroring is the reason why people across millennia have found it helpful to pray the psalms (of which more than one third are laments).

The Johannine story exemplifies another 'modern' principle of grief therapy: storytelling. The Greek verb 'to comfort' used in 11:19 and 31 is composed of two words: 'story' (μύθος *mythos*) and 'alongside' (παρά *para*). Translated literally, παραμυθέομαι *paramutheomai* means to 'storytell alongside' someone. What the comforting friends do is to tell stories alongside the sisters about their brother. Storytelling is a powerful and necessary tool in the process of healing from grief. As scholar Juliana Claassens put it, "Trauma victims need trauma narratives in order to become trauma survivors."[52] "Safe storytelling" relieves the disorders and memories caused by trauma and loss.[53] However, to a trauma victim, language may feel inadequate: he or she must "testify to his or her own experience while never possessing adequate language for doing so."[54] Comforters are needed to provide language when the griever has none. A true comforter listens to the story, normalizes the mourners' grief and assures them "that they are not insane, but this is indeed part of grieving."[55]

The individual aspect of grief becomes obvious in the interactions between Jesus and the sisters. In grief, the two sisters remain true to their personalities, as described in Luke 10:38-42.[56] Martha is the active, feisty one who responds to pain by verbalizing a theological dilemma (11:21-27). The way Jesus mirrors her is by engaging her and matching her desire for theological clarity. Mary – the sensitive one, the thinker – is overwhelmed by emotion, and she can barely utter one phrase before she falls (faints?) at his feet, crying, speechless. Jesus mirrors her emotions and starts crying, too.

When we talk of individual grieving, we remember Elizabeth Kuber-Ross' five stages of grief, with a 6th stage added later. These are denial (shock and disbelief that the loss has occurred), anger (that someone we love is no longer here), bargaining (all the what-ifs and regrets), depression (sadness from the loss), acceptance (acknowledging the reality of the loss) and meaning (transforming grief into something "rich and fulfilling," something that makes sense of the loss).[57] Other trauma specialists call these stages "villages" or "neighborhoods" that the grievers walk through:[58] the village of denial and

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[52] Claassens qtd in Fry, 19.

[53] Herman, 183.

[54] David G. Garber, Jr., "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," *Currents in Biblical Research*, 2015, Vol. 14(1) [24 –44], 27.

[55] Langberg, 187.

[56] Peter J. Williams uses the constancy of Mary and Martha's personalities across the two gospels (Lk and Jn) as an example of the "undesigned coincidences" that support the trustworthiness of the gospel accounts (Peter J. Williams, *Putem avea încredere în evanghelii?* [*Can We Trust the Gospels?*], Oradea: Editura Universității Emanuel, 2020, 86-87).

[57] Kessler, 1%.

[58] THI, 40-43.

anger,[59] the village of no hope,[60] and the village of new beginnings.[61] Neither the stages nor the villages are consecutive, and the journey between them goes back and forth. It is most probable that four days after their brother's death, the sisters are in the village of denial and anger, but they could be experiencing a mixture of anger, bargaining and depression. They both express 'wishful thinking': "if only you had been here..."

The sisters' shared regret can surely be considered one of Scripture's shortest laments. Lament is the most common biblical verbal manifestation of grief. Biblical lament is a prayer through which a child of God brings before God his or her feelings of disappointment with God. A basic definition of lament is "asking God why."[62] In Scripture, the people of God do not stoically accept suffering, but rather they challenge God for it.[63] Mary and Martha's grieving community also voices their own disappointment with Jesus: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" Just as in the Hebrew Bible God accepts lament as a valid form of conversation with Man, so Jesus accepts the rebuke of his friends and of the crowd. It does break his heart, however, filling him with very strong emotions that find their way out through tears. Jesus himself grieves.

The words used to describe Jesus' reaction to the sight of death are extremely strong. The Greek verb ἐμβριμάομαι *embrimaomai* ("to be greatly agitated,"[64] 33, 38) baffles scholars. The verb indicates hot anger, akin to the agitation displayed by a snorting horse, or a rebuke.[65] Most English translations use "deeply moved," "deeply troubled" or "groaned in the spirit," and one version translates "he became enraged in his spirit and stirred himself up."[66] Another verb used to show Jesus' emotional anguish is ταράσσω *tarasso* (33), meaning "to agitate, trouble, disturb, to be disturbed, terrified, confused; to be

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[59] Immediately after the loss, victims feel: numbness, dissociation, a sense of irreality, they cry or explode in anger, (toward God or people), display wishful thinking ("if only…"), question why, blame someone for the loss, want revenge, may have hallucinations of the dead person.

[60] The darkest place in the process; victim is sad and hopeless, unable to organize life, lonely, guilty (for no reason), avoids pain, possibly suicidal.

[61] Here victims accept the loss and their new identity, ready to experience a full life, find meaning, help others, have different priorities, accept life is different.

[62] N. T. Wright, "Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To," *TIME*, online edition, 29 Mar 2020, https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/.

[63] Billings, 10.

[64] STEP Bible, *embrimaomai.*

[65] Meyer-Thompson, 248, note 300.

[66] BibleGateway.com, https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/John%2011:33. Elsewhere in the gospel, the word is used once by Matthew (9:30) to speak of Jesus "sternly warning" (NASB) the healed blind men not to say anything, and twice by Mark, of Jesus "sternly warning" the healed leper to be quiet (1:43, NASB), and of men "scolding" a woman (14:5, NASB).

stirred up; affected with grief or anxiety."[67] John uses the same verb to describe the troubled soul of Jesus before his Passion (12:27; 13:21). This emotion of horror is Jesus' very own, human terror, which – according to Leon Morris – shows that "Jesus of His own free will entered fully into man's lot, identifying Himself with the griefs of His friends."[68]

John tells us that Jesus wept, using the verb δακρύω *dakruo* (to cry, to shed tears, v. 35).[69] This is a different word from the one used to describe the mourners' crying, κλαίω *klaio* (to weep, shed tears but also to wail, mourn).[70] We could interpret Jesus' crying as mirroring or emotional contagion. Science says women, but also people with higher self-esteem, emotionality and sensitivity to others are more susceptible to emotional contagion, as opposed to self-assertive people and narcissists.[71] Commentators admit that through this "most remarkable unveiling of the heart of Jesus"[72] John wants to emphasize his humanity. "The Word, through whom the worlds were made, weeps like a baby at the grave of his friend," says N.T. Wright – and this chisels our very definition of God.[73]

Much has been written about the spiritual practice of prayer as a helpful tool to deal with loss and trauma. According to research, the sense of a higher power, spiritual belief, attending religious services, prayer and meditation all have positive influences on the grieving process, enabling grievers to form better coping mechanisms and helping them to maintain better overall health.[74] Prayer, of which lament is one form, is demonstrably as helpful to a trauma victim as 'talk-therapy.'[75] In John 11, the sisters request something of Jesus,[76]

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[67] STEP Bible, *tarasso.*

[68] Morris, 557.

[69] STEP Bible, *dakruo.* The substantive form of the word, δάκρυον *dakruon* meaning "tears" appears 10 times. This suggests that Jesus had tears in his eyes but was not wailing, which also supports the contagion issue. N. T. Wright translates this verse "Jesus burst into tears." (John Goldingay and N. T. Wright, *The Bible for Everyone: A New Translation*, London: SPCK, 2018, John 11:35).

[70] STEP Bible, *klaio.* Morris (558) points out that this is the difference between "a loud demonstrative form of mourning, a wailing" which the mourners were demonstrating, and Jesus' "quiet weeping" showing a deep grief.

[71] Sara Angle, "Crying is Contagious – Especially for People With Certain Personality Traits," *well+good magazine*, Nov 27, 2018, https://www.wellandgood.com/emotional-contagion-personality-type/.

[72] Morgan, quoted in Morris, 557, fn. 69.

[73] N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996, 8%.

[74] Alan D. Wolfelt and Kirby J. Duvall, *Healing your grieving body: 100 physical practices for mourners*, Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 2009, 99.

[75] Brent Strawn, "Trauma, Psalmic Disclosure, and Authentic Happiness," in Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth Boase (eds.), *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma,* Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016, [143-160], 148-149.

[76] At the time of their request (11:3), it's most likely that the sisters did not understand Jesus as one with God, but rather as the promised Redeemer King of Israel who would save the nation from political opression and restore Israel to its former glory. Therefore, we do not suggest that they prayed to him as they would to God.

and Jesus himself prays to God (vv. 41-42). Jesus' prayer is a voiced thanksgiving to the Father before a miracle.[77] It reveals to us that the Father had heard the Son[78] and had been moved in the same manner in which Jesus was moved when he saw Mary (v. 33) and heard the grumbling crowd (v. 38).[79] John defines prayer as asking the One with power and authority to be moved in your favor. Jesus adds to this the dimension of the Father's will and glory, which is the key to interpreting his actions (vv. 4, 15).[80] Thus, the way in which Jesus prays is both paradigmatic and unique.[81]

Mirroring, storytelling, displaying grief individually and in community are universal, ancestral practices that have been shown by science to spring from our very humanity and benefit our spiritual and emotional healing after loss. According to John, the pinnacle of the trauma recovery process is Jesus himself. All grief-processes lead to him and find their fulfilment in him, the one who progresses from failed miracle-worker to co-sufferer, to the giver of life everlasting.

We see the sisters moving from an unsafe position to the safety of Jesus' understanding presence; we see them mourning together with Jesus in that safe space; and we see their restored connection with their resurrected brother and with God. These are the steps of the trauma recovery process that psychiatrist and trauma expert Judith Herman enumerates: establishing safety; remembering and mourning; and reconnecting with ordinary life.[82] Progress toward healing, according to Herman and as illustrated in John 11, is the "gradual shift from unpredictable danger to reliable safety, from dissociated trauma to acknowledged

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[77] The verb for "raised his eyes" here is αἴρω *airo* ("to lift up," 41), also used in the passage to refer to the gravestone (39, 41) and to what the Romans will do with the nation (48). Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus' action of lifting his eyes and praying is described with the word εὐλογέω *eulogeō*, translated "to praise," "to bless," also "to give thanks." STEP Bible, *eulogeo*.

[78] Tom Wright believes that Jesus' mention of an answer already given (11:41) references his previous prayers, made during the days in which he lingered beyond the Jordan (N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone*, part 2, London, UK: SPCK, 2002, 10%; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003, 443); Morris (560) agrees that the aorist verb tense can refer to "some past and unrecorded prayer" or the passage might refer to an unmentioned prayer.

[79] The synoptic gospels' accounts of Jesus' Gethsemane prayers give us the full picture of how the Father hears the laments of his Son (even as the Son hears the laments of his best friends). Jesus was so sure of the Father's receptivity that he accepted a negative answer when it confirmed the Father's will.

[80] D. M. Crump, "Prayer," in Green, DJG, 691. Jesus' prayers are in accord with the will of the Father, who wishes that all would believe in the One he has sent (6:29) and that none should perish (6:39). Similarly, John assures us that our requests according to the Father's will will be answered. Jn 14:13-14, 15:7-8, 16:23, 1 Jn 5:14, DJG, 691.

[81] Crump, 691.

[82] Herman, 155.

memory, and from stigmatized isolation to restored social connection."[83] Throughout this grief journey, the sisters' faith has not disappeared – but it has been deconstructed and changed.

The 11th chapter of John's gospel both comforts and challenges the victims of trauma and loss. The story of the raising of Lazarus addresses the importance of our bodies as the locus of God's work; it deals with the idea of suffering as God's punishment for personal sin or failure, showing Jesus' best friends suffering; it addresses death anxiety; it invites faith in God's higher purpose for human suffering; it portrays God himself suffering and grieving; it confirms lament to be an acceptable form of conversation with God; it validates man's need for space and time to tell his story; it reinforces the role of community in the grieving process; it invites the reader to a deeper kind of prayer, not as an exchange of favors but as thankfulness for a gift already given; it demonstrates that an experience of healing and resurrection (be it physical or spiritual) will not necessarily be met with approval; it points to the cost of Jesus' life in exchange for another's; above all, it proclaims Jesus as the ultimate power and authority over life and death.

As a church community we accompany each other in the grief journey, addressing the issues of control and connection with Scripture and spiritual practices.[84] The trauma-healing process takes us to a place of sure hope when it takes us to Jesus. Relinquishing control to a God who loves, a God who grieves, and a God who has power to raise the dead, the cancer patient and the trauma victim can truly live life to the fullest – whether that is for one more week or for one more decade. Grieving in the presence of Jesus is a step towards reconnecting with self, with community, and with God. In other words, Jesus offers to use our grief to help us become fully human, fully alive.

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[83] Herman, 155.
[84] NCI, "Adjustment …".

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Upgraded Humanism: Idea and Ideology (I)[*]

Sorin-Grigore VULCĂNESCU[**] (iD)

ABSTRACT. The desire to conquer the body, disease, and death has not disappeared from human will. Immortality is planted deep within humans. However, the method of knowing it differs in new transhumanist approaches. The general motivation for choosing this subject is based on the breadth of the transhumanist trend of the last period in the following environments: technological, medical, social, academic, religious, and biological. Personal motivation is related to religious affiliation and the perspective of the *transformation* of transhumanism and its extended claims. The method of approaching this subject is the analytical one. What did/is transhumanism propose/proposing? How much is ideology, propaganda movement; how much is scientific truth and a feasible project? Are its proposals ethical just because they aim for an *upgrade*? The *upgraded humanism* that *transhumanist apostles* propose is in direct contrast with the teaching and culture of certain schools of thought, religions, and sometimes with life itself. On one hand, in the case of transhumanism proposals, there is a special seduction, one through which more and more people become followers of a (trans)(neuro)biology and a new relationship to the world, God, the neighbor. It is said that we are only at the beginning of knowing the mystery of our body and brain. But on the other hand, it can also be said that the depth and fullness of biological mechanisms will never be known.

Keywords: transhumanism, (techno)-logy-philosophy-religion, ideology, (neuro)(bio)logy

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[*] The present article is part of a larger study entitled: *Upgraded Humanism: Idea, Ideology, Religion.* In the second article, we will approach: the main similarities and differences between transhumanism and religion. Also, this study develops and extends upon ideas presented in Diac. Dr. Sorin-Grigore Vulcănescu, „*Metamorfoza* utopiei tehnologice – secularizarea și robotizarea vieții", in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, Nr. 5-8/2022, pp. 187-203.

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I.1. Introduction

"A vast New World of uncharted possibilities awaits its Columbus. We need to explore and map the whole realm of human possibility, as the realm of physical geography has been explored and mapped."[1] This is how the urge of the father of the term *transhumanism* towards the apostles of *upgraded humanism* could be resumed. In this study, we start from the question: *What is transhumanism? An idea, an ideology, or a religion?* How much is ideology, propaganda movement; how much is scientific truth and feasible projects? We naturally ask: *Is there really hope for biological immortality*, since scientists tell us that 120 years of age might be the maximum that a human being can reach, given the limited multiplication of cells and the shortening of telomeres?[2] Are the proposals of transhumanism ethical only because they seek an *upgrade*? In this study, first of all, we analyze the terminology for the proposed theme: *idea, ideology, religion,* and *transhumanism*. Secondly, we analyze the journey from *ideology* to *religion* of an *idea*.

I.2. Title motivation

The motivation for choosing this title lies in sharing the idea that transhumanism is "an outgrowth of secular humanism and the Enlightenment,"[3] "an extension of humanism, from which it is partially derived"[4] or an extension of the Enlightenment humanism (of the belief in absolute autonomy and of reason as an instrument of immanent salvation) and because transhumanism

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[1] The article "Transhumanism" of Julian Huxley a Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux published in 1957 in: *New Bottles for New Wine: Essays.* London: Chatto & Windus. For the present paper we use the reproduction of the text from the year 1968. J. Huxley, "Transhumanism", *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 8/1 (1968), 74.

[2] "Cellular division and replication in noncancerous cells can only occur a limited number of times. With each sequence, the telomeres on the DNA of each cell shorten. As the telomeres become shorter, they also become less efficient in replicating themselves. Eventually, the telomeres become so short that they can no longer function at all. This imperfect replication process also grows increasingly susceptible to mutations over time, leading to various diseases and the degeneration associated with aging. Consequently, the quest for personal immortality appears hopeless, for evolution has apparently destined human chromosomes to grow old and die." B. Waters, "Whose salvation? Which eschatology? Transhumanism and Christianity as contending salvific religions", in R. Cole-Turner (Ed.), *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 166.

[3] N. Bostrom, "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity", *Bioethics* 19/3 (2005), 202.

[4] N. Bostrom, *The transhumanist FAQ*, (2003), https://bit.ly/3HtQe5B. (Accessed: 10.12.2024).

"shares the humanist belief that science and technology are the keys to human emancipation and progress."[5]

The term *upgraded* was chosen, because it is used in contemporary corporate language and especially in software programs, an essential tool in the new era of (nano)(bio)technology. Secondly, *upgrading* refers to an addition, attachment, not to a merging as in the case of the transcendent and of improvement. Transhumanists talk about *improvement*, but this new interpretation of the term, which, originally, has broad religious and dogmatic connotations and charges, is totally different from Christian teaching. Finally, even the transhumanists want a *brand* change, referring to *Humanity Plus*. This differentiation that we pointed out is to signal the ontology of transhumanism, not to rewrite it, for identification, not to change the contemporary paradigm and etymology.

I.3. Terminology

I.3.1. GRIN

Biotechnology is the group of genetics, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), nanotechnology — known under the acronym **GRIN** —, and the vision of this new complex area is one of immanence: "The vision of biotechnology is immanent because it promises to deliver bliss in the most material, tangible, corporeal, and measurable way."[6]

I.3.2. Transhumanism

In 1957, Julian Huxley uses the term *transhumanism* for the first time, when he talks about the *new faith*:

> "The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself – not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps *transhumanism* will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature. «I believe in transhumanism»: once there are enough people who can truly say that, the human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence, as different from ours as ours is from that of Pekin man.

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[5] S.A. Benko, A. Hruby, "Critical Transhumanism as a Religious Ethic of Otherness", in C. Mercer and T.J. Trothen (Eds.), *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger 2015), 257.

[6] M. Marangudakis, "Eutopia: the Promise of Biotechnology and the Realignment of Western Axiality", *Zygon* 47/1 (2012), 103.

It will at last be consciously fulfilling its real destiny."[7]

Until now, transhumanism has been seen as: "movement,"[8] an "idea,"[9] an "ideology" and a "belief system,"[10] a "stance,"[11] a "*fin de siècle* fad,"[12] a "religion,"[13] a "secularist faith,"[14] and a "new religious movement."[15] Therefore, a series of phrases and catalogs of transhumanism were given; both transhumanists and non-transhumanists. Each person looks at this current from his or her point of view, because transhumanism remains "a loosely defined movement that has developed gradually over the past decades."[16] On one hand, we can see transhumanism as a syncretistic movement of philosophies and ideologies that promote the idea of human development through technology. Nick Bostrom, founder of World Transhumanist Association, says that *transhumanism* is:

> "(1) The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.
> (2) The study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations, and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies."[17]

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7   J. Huxley, "Transhumanism", *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 8/1 (1968), 76.

8   N. Bostrom, "Transhumanist values", *Journal for Philosophical Research* 30/3-14 (2005), 3. L. Galvagni, "A Digital Spirituality for Digital Humans?", in Giulia Isetti, Elisa Innerhofer, Harald Pechlaner, and Michael de Rachewiltz (Eds.), *Religion in the Age of Digitalization: From New Media to Spiritual Machines*, (New York: Routledge, 2022), 145.

9   F. Fukuyama, "Transhumanism: The world's most dangerous idea", *Foreign Policy* 144 (2004), 42.

10   P.D. Hopkins, "Transcending the animal: How transhumanism and religion are and are not alike", *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 14/2 (2005), 26.

11   R. Ranisch, S.L. Sorgner, "Introducing post- and transhumanism", in R. Ranisch, and S.L. Sorgner (Eds.), *Post- and transhumanism: An introduction*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2014), 7.

12   L. Winner, "Resistance is futile: The posthuman condition and its advocates", in H.W. Baillie & T. Casey (Eds.), *Is human nature obsolete? Genetics, bioengineering, and the future of the human condition*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005), 410.

13   W.J. Smith, "Transhumanism: A religion for postmodern times", *Religion and Liberty* 28/4 (2018), 17.

14   H. Tirosh-Samuelson, "Transhumanism as a secularist faith", *Zygon* 47/4 (2012), 710.

15   R.M. Geraci, "Apocalyptic AI: Visions of heaven in robotics, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality", (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), 13. H. Tirosh-Samuelson, "Religion", in R. Ranisch & S.L. Sorgner (Eds.), *Postand transhumanism: An introduction*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2014), 59.

16   N. Bostrom, "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity", *Bioethics* 19/3 (2005), 202.

17   N. Bostrom, *The transhumanist FAQ*, (2003), https://bit.ly/3HtQe5B. (Accessed: 10.12.2024).

Of course, there are other definitions that discover the goals of the new movement:

> (3) "philosophical and scientific movement that advocates the use of current and emerging technologies — such as genetic engineering, cryonics, artificial intelligence (AI), and nanotechnology — to augment human capabilities and improve the human condition [...] to slow, reverse, or eliminate the aging process, to achieve corresponding increases in human life spans, and to enhance human cognitive and sensory capacities [...] species that transcends humanity — the «posthuman»."[18]

> (4) "an aggregate of cultural and philosophical movements with a general aim of transcending human limitations by technological means."[19]

I.3.3. Idea

> "(1) a plan for action: design; a standard of perfection: ideal; a transcendent entity that is a real pattern of which existing things are imperfect representations [...]

> (2) an entity (such as a thought, concept, sensation, or image) actually or potentially present to consciousness; an indefinite or unformed conception; obsolete: an image recalled by memory."[20]

So, we see how the basic *idea* of transhumanism started from the transcendence of humanity, that is, an improvement of humans, through a series of social and cultural changes. Later, the term was seized by the progressive movements that based the idea of human development on (nano)technology, (bio)engineering etc. Towards the end of the 20th century, the creed of extropianism – overcoming limitations and barriers through technology – became the creed of the transhumanist movement.[21] It refers to overcoming disease, pain, suffering, and death through (nano)(bio)technologies and global problems such as global warming and overpopulation by establishing human colonies on the Moon, Mars, and other planets where human life can survive. Faced with the

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[18] R. Ostberg, "Transhumanism", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://bit.ly/2CGJuj3 (Accessed: 30.11.2024).

[19] A. Pinsent, S. Biggins, "Catholic Perspectives on Human Biotechnological Enhancement", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32/2 (2019), 189. https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946819826769.

[20] Merriam-Webster, "Idea", in *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*, https://tinyurl.com/298aa2wr. (Accessed: 30.11.2024).

[21] R.F. Harle, "Cyborgs, uploading and immortality — Some serious concerns", *SOPHIA* 41/2 (2002), 73-85.

advancement of proposals and plans, critics of transhumanism say that by identifying solutions through the lens of financial primacy, social injustices will be created, violations of human dignity and human rights will occur, soft and software eugenics will be developed, superhumans, superrobots, and bots will be designed, and an agnostic, instrumentalist and functionalist mentality will be advanced.

In brief, transhumanism was the idea that concerned the *desire of the being to know youth without old age and life without death*.

I.3.3.1. Transhumanism. From purpose to company and results

To be able to better understand the main intentions of transhumanists, we need to mention some examples of companies that are currently carrying out activities whose results are becoming visible, because "Scientific breakthroughs — including stem cell therapies, in vitro fertilization, brain chips, animal cloning, exoskeletons (e.g., robotic arms), artificial intelligence, and genomics — have redirected the dialogue between transhumanism's proponents and its critics from the future to the present."[22] Currently, the main ongoing projects that have received a lot of attention from transhumanists are:

a) Space Exploration Technologies Corp
Founder: Elon Musk;
Year: 2002;
Purpose: colonization of planet Mars and the Moon;
Motto: "All Dragon and Starship missions have the ability to conduct scientific research to improve life back on Earth as well as raise awareness to a global audience";[23]

b) Calico Life Sciences LLC
Founder: Bill Maris;
Year: 2013;
Purpose: developing anti-aging therapies with the help of technology;
Motto: "We want to better understand the biology that controls aging and lifespan … and we want to use the knowledge we gain to discover and develop interventions that enable people to live longer and healthier lives";[24]

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[22] R. Ostberg, "Transhumanism", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://bit.ly/2CGJuj3 (Accessed: 30.11.2024).
[23] Spacex, *Human Spaceflight*. https://bit.ly/3VlaCmR. (Accessed: 01.12.2024).
[24] Calicolabs.com, *Think big. Explore broadly. Collaborate constantly*. https://bit.ly/3uidqMt.

c) Neuralink
Founder: Elon Musk;
Year: 2016;
Purpose: the development of implantable brain chips;
Motto: "We are creating the future of brain-computer interfaces: building devices now that have the potential to help people with paralysis and inventing new technologies that could expand our abilities, our community, and our world";[25]

d) Altos Labs
Founders: Richard Klausner, Hans Bishop, Jeff Bezos;
Year: 2022;
Purpose: reversing old age and disease;
Motto: "Our mission is to restore cell health and resilience through cellular rejuvenation programming to reverse disease, injury, and the disabilities that can occur throughout life";[26]

e) Synchron
Founder: Tom Oxley;
Year: 2012;
Purpose: Stentrode[27] – endovascular brain-computer interface;
Facts: July 2022, the first brain chip implanted in an American patient with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, care "to enable severely paralyzed patients to operate digital forms of communication with their thoughts."[28]
Motto: "The brain unlocked. Our vision is to restore lives by deciphering the neural code of the brain. Our mission is to create an endovascular implant that can transfer information from every corner of the brain at scale."[29]

(Accessed: 01.12.2024).

[25] Neuralink.com, *Expanding Our World*. https://bit.ly/3imGvDH. (Accessed: 01.12.2024).

[26] Altoslabs.com, *About us*. https://altoslabs.com/. (Accessed: 01.12.2024).

[27] "The Stentrode is implanted within the motor cortex of the brain via the jugular vein in a minimally-invasive endovascular procedure. Once implanted, it detects and wirelessly transmits motor intent using a proprietary digital language to allow severely paralyzed patients to control personal devices with hands-free point-and-click. The trial will assess the impact of everyday tasks such as texting, emailing, online shopping and accessing telehealth services, and the ability to live independently". Businesswire, *Synchron Announces First Human U.S. Brain-Computer Interface Implant*, (2022, July 19). https://bwnews.pr/3VEy2tV. (Accessed: 01.12.2024).

[28] R. Ostberg, *Transhumanism. Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://bit.ly/2CGJuj3. (Accessed: 30.11.2024).

[29] Synchron.com, *Unlocking the natural highways of the brain*. https://bit.ly/3XOrHOw. (Accessed: 01.12.2024).
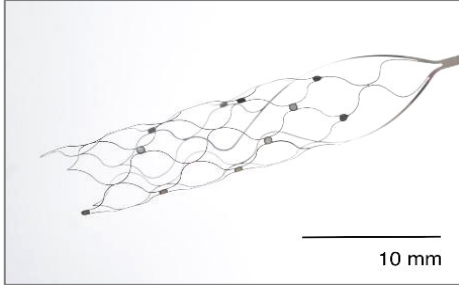
Photo 1   **Photo 2**

Photo 1: The Stentrode™ Endovascular Electrode Array (Photo credit: Synchron)
Photo 2: The Stentrode™ Endovascular Electrode Array and Implantable Receiver
Transmitter Unit (Photo credit: Synchron)

If we have so far outlined the terminology for the main terms and presented the main *idea* of transhumanism, we naturally ask ourselves: *What makes an idea become an ideology? Tangible results? Advancement of new themes?*

I.3.4. Ideology

"(1) visionary theorizing
(2) «science of ideas»; «a systematic body of concepts» especially those of a particular group."[30]

The era of the ideology of transhumanist messianism began with promises and technological advancements.[31] Many of the results in the biomedical field have saved and continue to save human lives. But, in addition to these successes, independently of them, but dependent on their notoriety, problems have crept in. Over time, trust in technological progress and medical successes have become tools of propaganda for certain sterile slogans, speculating a series of other intentions. Transhumanism is said to do *wonders*, with reference to various medical successes. In all this breath of individualistic optimism, one forgets the fact that these successes and therapies are blessed by God through the hard work of scientists and through the tireless hands of doctors.

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[30] Merriam-Webster, "Ideology", *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*, https://tinyurl.com/bdhkjduc. (Accessed: 01.12.2024).

[31] T. Peters, "The Ebullient Transhumanist and the Sober Theologian", *Scientia et Fides* 7/2 (2019), 98.

In brief, transhumanism *is an ideology that promotes the idea, treatments, and interventions of improving the human body through the use of (nano)(bio)technologies.* What makes an ideology become a religion?

Conclusions

The multifaceted nature of transhumanism fluctuates between ideology, scientific progress, and a quasi-religious belief in enhancing humanity through technology. A key insight is that transhumanism is not solely a (pseudo)scientific pursuit but also a cultural and philosophical movement deeply intertwined with the human desire for immortality and perfection. While technological advancements offer medical progress, extended lifespans, and improved cognitive abilities, they also raise concerns about human dignity, identity, and social equity.

The evolution of transhumanism from a theoretical notion to an organized ideology has been driven by breakthroughs in genetics, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience. However, its emergence as a belief system or "secular faith" suggests that it extends beyond neutral scientific inquiry — it embodies a vision of the future that challenges conventional notions of life, death, and human nature. While transhumanist aspirations to overcome suffering and mortality are compelling, they also entail risks. The commodification of the human body, the potential for deepening social inequalities, and the instrumentalization of human existence pose serious ethical challenges. Despite its focus on progress, transhumanism continues to face criticism from religious, philosophical, and even scientific perspectives, questioning whether humanity should pursue enhancement at any cost.

Divine Virtues and Spiritual Conflict: An Exegetical, Patristic, and Contemporary Analysis of Ephesians 6:14–18

Nicolae-Olimpiu BENEA*

ABSTRACT. This study examines Ephesians 6:14–18 through exegetical, patristic, and contemporary lenses, interpreting Paul's "armor of God" as divine virtues essential for Christian ethical and spiritual life. Combining rigorous philological analysis with patristic insights from Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Cyprian, the research highlights each virtue—truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer—as foundational to spiritual resilience. Contemporary contributions by Benjamin L. Merkle, Hans Hübner, Andreas Dettwiler, Gerhard Sellin, Ekaterini Tsalampouni, Ioannis Karavidopoulos, Rainer Kampling, Frank Thielman, Jennifer Strawbridge, and Fredrick J. Long add further theological, rhetorical, and existential depth, emphasizing the ongoing relevance and transformative potential of Paul's metaphor for today's Christian communities.

Keywords: Ephesians 6:14–18, armor of God, patristic exegesis, Pauline spirituality, virtue ethics, spiritual warfare, transformative spirituality.

Introduction

The Pauline metaphor of spiritual armor in Ephesians 6:14–18 has significantly influenced Christian spirituality, ethical teachings, and theological reflection throughout history. At the core of this passage lies Paul's vivid and multifaceted imagery, which integrates military symbolism, biblical traditions, and early Christian theological concerns. Paul's call for believers to "put on the full armor of God" (Eph 6:11) has continually captivated theologians, biblical scholars, ascetics, and spiritual practitioners, bridging the worlds of ancient biblical exegesis and contemporary hermeneutics.

Historically, Paul's spiritual armor draws deeply from Old Testament prophetic imagery, particularly Isaiah 59:17, wherein God is depicted metaphorically donning armor to execute righteousness and justice. This prophetic tradition, enriched by Jewish wisdom literature such as the Wisdom

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of Solomon (5:17–20), provided Paul a robust theological foundation. He creatively adapted these scriptural motifs, transforming them to express a distinctly Christian understanding of ethical responsibility and spiritual conflict. Paul's innovative reinterpretation emphasizes internal virtues and divine empowerment rather than physical prowess, fundamentally redefining spiritual warfare in a Christian context.

The Greco-Roman rhetorical context provided a further layer of resonance for Paul's audience, deeply familiar with Roman military structures and martial symbolism. Paul's strategic use of such recognizable imagery served as a subversive message, challenging believers not to engage in physical conflicts but rather to confront profound spiritual and ethical battles against cosmic and internal evil. This innovative adaptation significantly broadened the metaphor's appeal, transitioning seamlessly between Jewish traditions and the broader Greco-Roman cultural milieu.

Patristic interpretations played a pivotal role in the reception and spiritual application of Paul's metaphor, showcasing its adaptability across diverse theological, pastoral, and ascetic contexts. Origen pioneered allegorical approaches, associating each element of spiritual armor with specific virtues essential for spiritual progress and moral integrity. Similarly, John Chrysostom emphasized pastoral and communal dimensions, advocating unity, mutual accountability, and collective ethical purity among early Christian communities. Augustine contributed profound doctrinal insights, elucidating the intricate relationship between divine grace and human moral responsibility inherent within Paul's metaphorical framework.

Monastic traditions of the early church significantly deepened and expanded these interpretations. Figures such as Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa emphasized the armor metaphor as a guide for ascetic practice, framing spiritual discipline as a rigorous battle against internal passions and demonic influences. These monastic applications underscore the metaphor's enduring spiritual and ethical resonance, providing practical guidance for cultivating virtues like truthfulness, righteousness, and persistent prayer as fundamental elements of monastic life.

Contemporary biblical scholarship further enriches the interpretative tradition. Benjamin L. Merkle provides detailed linguistic and philological analyses, clarifying Paul's original Greek terminology and rhetorical strategies, thus enhancing theological clarity and practical application. Hans Hübner adds an existential dimension, articulating the genuine spiritual crises and existential challenges confronting the Ephesian believers, thereby affirming the profound realism and continued theological relevance of Pauline demonology and spiritual struggle.

Scholars like Ekaterini G. Tsalampouni and Gerhard Sellin complement these perspectives by exploring communal, ethical, and rhetorical implications of Paul's metaphor. Tsalampouni emphasizes the metaphor's communal and inclusive dimensions, advocating for peaceful intercommunal relations and ethical cohesion. Sellin's rhetorical analysis further clarifies Paul's linguistic techniques, highlighting their emotional resonance and reinforcing the urgency of ethical vigilance and communal unity.

Moreover, patristic contributions from figures such as Cyprian of Carthage, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Augustine highlight prayer's integral role as the culmination and sustaining force of spiritual armor. These Fathers underscore prayer as essential for spiritual vigilance, communal cohesion, and ethical resilience, thus providing robust spiritual foundations for believers' ongoing struggle against spiritual and moral adversities.

Integrating these diverse perspectives reveals the theological richness and enduring spiritual significance of Paul's metaphor in Ephesians 6:14–18. This comprehensive synthesis demonstrates how Paul's imagery, deeply rooted in scriptural tradition, Greco-Roman rhetorical context, patristic theology, and contemporary scholarly insights, continues to profoundly shape Christian ethical identity, spiritual practices, and theological reflection. Thus, Paul's metaphorical armor emerges not merely as historical imagery but as a vibrant theological vision, offering valuable resources for contemporary Christian spirituality, ethical discourse, and ecclesial practice.

1. Exegetical Foundations and Terminology in Ephesians 6:14–18

Paul's imagery in Ephesians 6:14–18 vividly employs military metaphors to describe spiritual virtues. The foundational command στῆτε (stand), reiterated throughout the passage, underscores a posture of spiritual resilience. Merkle emphasizes that the imperative στῆτε denotes active spiritual resistance rather than passive endurance, highlighting its rhetorical potency and strategic placement as a fundamental exhortation within Pauline theology (Merkle 2016, 189).

Hans Hübner expands upon this by noting the imperative στῆτε as thematically significant within the context of the passage. Hübner suggests this repeated exhortation reflects historical and existential challenges among the original recipients, potentially indicative of their susceptibility to spiritual instability or wavering faith. Thus, Paul's consistent encouragement to stand firm represents both theological exhortation and pastoral response to genuine spiritual struggles within the Ephesian community (Hübner 1997, 263).

Paul introduces the spiritual armor with the metaphor "belt of truth" (ζώνη ἀληθείας), where the Greek term ζώνη connotes stability and preparedness. Merkle emphasizes the significance of truth (ἀλήθεια) as foundational for spiritual and ethical integrity (Merkle 2016, 189–190). Patristic commentators like Origen identify truth as a primary virtue safeguarding believers against spiritual deception, emphasizing the believer's need for authentic and unwavering commitment to divine revelation (Origen, Contra Celsum, VIII.34). Similarly, Augustine emphasizes truth's foundational role, linking it to genuine faith and moral stability essential for spiritual growth (Augustine, Confessions, CCSL 27:56).

Hübner adds depth to this analysis by highlighting Paul's intertextual reliance on Old Testament scriptures such as Isaiah 11:5 and Jeremiah 1:17, reinforcing truth's significance within Paul's spiritual warfare motif. According to Hübner, Paul's use of ἀλήθεια reflects an intentional allusion to the messianic implications of Isaiah 11, suggesting virtues attributed to the Messiah now belong to Christians, thus elevating their spiritual identity and responsibility (Hübner 1997, 263–264).

The "breastplate of righteousness" (θώραξ τῆς δικαιοσύνης) symbolizes moral integrity and ethical purity. Merkle highlights that righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) encompasses ethical behavior and divine justification, providing believers with spiritual protection (Merkle 2016, 190–191). Chrysostom emphasizes righteousness as a practical virtue vital for moral vigilance and spiritual protection within the Christian community, urging believers to live out their faith ethically and communally (Chrysostom, Homiliae in Epistulam ad Ephesios, PG 62:172).

Hübner further explores the theological implications of righteousness by connecting it explicitly to Pauline understandings of divine justice. Drawing parallels with Wisdom literature, notably Wisdom of Solomon 5:18, Hübner underscores Old Testament conceptions of righteousness as divine empowerment, suggesting Paul deliberately integrates scriptural insights into his portrayal of spiritual armor. Thus, righteousness transcends mere ethical uprightness, reflecting active participation in God's justifying and sanctifying power (Hübner 1997, 263–264).

The phrase "feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace" (ὑποδησάμενοι τοὺς πόδας...εἰρήνης) highlights readiness in proclaiming reconciliation and peace. Augustine and Chrysostom emphasize this virtue's pastoral and communal dimensions, urging believers actively to embody and spread peace as essential spiritual practice. Hübner reinforces this by pointing to Paul's citation of Isaiah 52:7, noting the proclamation of peace intrinsically linked to messianic expectations fulfilled in Christ. Hence, readiness for gospel proclamation becomes an existential imperative reflecting divine mission and communal harmony (Hübner 1997, 265).

The "shield of faith" (θυρεὸς τῆς πίστεως) vividly depicts faith as essential protection against spiritual assaults. Merkle clarifies faith as a comprehensive defensive tool critical for spiritual resilience (Merkle 2016, 191). Hübner enhances this interpretation, suggesting Paul's phrase "ἐν πᾶσιν" (in addition to all) positions faith as an indispensable complement to other virtues. For Hübner, faith is the existential response enabling believers to maintain divine empowerment, emphasizing faith's practical and theological necessity in spiritual warfare (Hübner 1997, 264–265).

Paul also references the "helmet of salvation" (περικεφαλαία τοῦ σωτηρίου) and the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (μάχαιρα τοῦ Πνεύματος, ὅ ἐστιν ῥῆμα Θεοῦ), underscoring salvation's protective power and scripture's proactive role in spiritual defense and offense. Patristic exegesis consistently emphasizes scriptural engagement essential for spiritual discernment and resilience. Hübner accentuates salvation as divine dignity bestowed upon believers, suggesting the helmet metaphor implies royal dignity rather than mere protection. He further highlights Paul's explicit intertextual connections to Isaiah 59:17 and Isaiah 49:2, reinforcing scripture's authority and efficacy as a divine instrument combating spiritual evil (Hübner 1997, 265–266).

Extending further, Rainer Kampling identifies prayer (Ephesians 6:18) as the culmination and sustaining force of spiritual armor. Kampling emphasizes prayer as an existential and pneumatological discipline, essential for ongoing spiritual vigilance and communal solidarity. For Kampling, prayer engages believers actively in spiritual discernment, enabling recognition and resistance of subtle temptations and reinforcing the practical implementation of the virtues delineated by Paul (Kampling 1999, 107–114).

This expanded analysis, integrating the linguistic precision of Merkle, theological insights of Hübner, pastoral perspectives from Chrysostom, and pneumatological dimensions highlighted by Kampling, demonstrates the exegetical foundations underlying Paul's spiritual armor metaphor. By thoroughly examining terminology, rhetorical structures, and scriptural intertextuality, this study elucidates how Pauline virtues collectively foster comprehensive spiritual preparedness, uniting theological depth with practical relevance.

2. Divine Virtues in Patristic Interpretation: Truth and Righteousness (Ephesians 6:14)

Patristic interpretations of the virtues of truth and righteousness in Ephesians 6:14 have significantly shaped Christian ethical and spiritual thought, highlighting the profound theological and moral dimensions of Paul's metaphor. In Ephesians 6:14, Paul instructs believers: "Stand firm therefore, having girded

your waist with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness." This imagery, steeped in military symbolism, provided early Christian theologians with fertile ground for spiritual reflection, inspiring extensive allegorical and practical expositions of these virtues.

Origen, renowned for his allegorical approach, emphasizes truth (ἀλήθεια) as an essential foundation of Christian spirituality and ethical discernment. According to Origen, truth stabilizes the believer in spiritual warfare, grounding the soul firmly against deception and doctrinal errors propagated by spiritual adversaries. In his influential work "Contra Celsum," Origen stresses that truth, embodied by Christ Himself, serves as a defensive virtue, enabling believers to remain steadfast amidst external challenges and internal temptations (Origen, Contra Celsum VIII.34, ANF 4:653). For Origen, truth is intimately tied to spiritual knowledge (γνῶσις), suggesting that authentic spiritual progress necessitates the unwavering pursuit and adherence to doctrinal purity. Thus, truth becomes not merely doctrinal correctness, but a transformative encounter with the divine Logos, integral to the believer's inner moral and spiritual stability.

John Chrysostom offers a distinctly pastoral interpretation, underscoring righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) as central to ethical conduct within the Christian community. Chrysostom interprets the metaphorical breastplate as protective moral integrity guarding against spiritual and ethical corruption. In his Homilies on Ephesians, Chrysostom frequently returns to the concept of righteousness as personal holiness and social justice, urging believers to cultivate a lifestyle reflective of divine holiness and justice (Chrysostom, Homiliae in Epistulam ad Ephesios, PG 62:165). He emphasizes practical righteousness manifest in charitable acts, communal responsibility, and steadfast resistance to moral compromise. Chrysostom thus expands Paul's metaphor from personal virtue to communal ethical imperative, positioning righteousness as critical for maintaining ecclesiastical unity and spiritual purity.

Augustine further develops this theological reflection, intricately linking truth and righteousness to divine grace. For Augustine, truth encompasses the acknowledgment of human dependence upon divine grace, essential for moral integrity and spiritual authenticity. In his exposition of Ephesians, Augustine highlights the breastplate of righteousness as signifying Christ's righteousness imputed to believers, underscoring that authentic Christian virtue emerges from grace-enabled transformation rather than mere human effort (Augustine, Enchiridion 19, CCSL 46:63). Augustine's theological interpretation integrates truth and righteousness into the broader framework of soteriology, emphasizing the necessity of grace to actualize and sustain moral virtues.

Basil the Great, representative of monastic spiritual tradition, associates these virtues explicitly with ascetic discipline. Basil identifies truthfulness

(ἀλήθεια) and righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) as foundational virtues integral to the monastic life, guiding monks toward spiritual purity and deeper communion with God. His "Asceticon Magnum" provides practical exhortations emphasizing that monks must cultivate truth in speech and righteousness in action, presenting these virtues as direct expressions of interior holiness and divine fellowship (Basil, Asceticon Magnum II, PG 31:1261B). For Basil, the disciplined practice of truth and righteousness creates an effective spiritual defense, safeguarding monastics from internal passions and external temptations.

Gregory of Nyssa further enriches patristic interpretation, exploring righteousness as transformative participation in divine justice. Gregory's theological anthropology presents righteousness as a dynamic virtue essential for spiritual ascent, conforming the human soul progressively into God's likeness. In "On the Making of Man," Gregory emphasizes that righteousness involves active moral participation in divine justice, reflecting God's image within humanity (Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man, PG 44:125). Thus, righteousness transcends mere moral correctness, representing an ongoing spiritual transformation achieved through disciplined ethical practice and contemplative communion with God.

Cyril of Alexandria complements these views, positioning truth within a Christological framework. Cyril emphasizes truth as incarnational reality embodied in Christ, identifying believers' participation in this truth as foundational for spiritual strength and ethical coherence. Cyril argues that truth is not an abstract concept, but the lived reality of Christ's incarnation and teaching, which believers are called to embody in their daily lives. This embodiment of truth reinforces communal unity and doctrinal purity, functioning as a bulwark against spiritual deception and heresy (Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on John 1.14, PG 73:161C).

Ambrose of Milan highlights practical righteousness, grounding ethical behavior in liturgical and communal practice. Ambrose underscores that righteousness must manifest concretely through acts of mercy, justice, and community service, viewing these as essential spiritual disciplines fortifying believers against moral compromise and spiritual apathy. Ambrose situates righteousness as central to ecclesial identity, insisting that the visible expression of justice within Christian communities authenticates their spiritual witness and strengthens collective resilience against internal divisions and external persecutions (Ambrose, De Officiis Ministrorum 1.24, PL 16:50).

Through these diverse yet complementary patristic interpretations, truth and righteousness emerge as central theological virtues shaping Christian spiritual formation and communal ethics. From Origen's allegorical depth to Augustine's doctrinal precision, and from Chrysostom's pastoral practicality to

the monastic discipline of Basil and Gregory, patristic exegesis demonstrates the enduring theological richness and practical applicability of Paul's spiritual armor metaphor. These Church Fathers collectively affirm truth and righteousness as essential virtues that provide spiritual stability, ethical integrity, and profound communion with God, deeply influencing Christian spirituality and moral theology throughout history.

3. Preparation of the Gospel of Peace and Shield of Faith (Ephesians 6:15–16)

In Ephesians 6:15–16, Paul extends his profound imagery of spiritual armor, instructing believers: "and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one." This pivotal passage underscores two vital virtues—peace and faith—deeply explored in patristic exegesis and fundamental to Christian ethical and spiritual preparedness.

The phrase "preparation of the gospel of peace" (ἑτοιμασίᾳ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τῆς εἰρήνης) has attracted considerable exegetical attention. The Greek term ἑτοιμασία connotes both readiness and stability, signifying the believer's preparedness to actively proclaim and embody the peace integral to Christian witness. Benjamin L. Merkle underscores that this readiness involves both spiritual stability and active evangelistic outreach, reflecting a comprehensive commitment to peacemaking as central to Christian identity (Merkle 2016, 190).

Augustine significantly develops this virtue within a theological and ethical framework. For Augustine, genuine peace extends far beyond the mere absence of conflict; it represents the restorative reconciliation accomplished through Christ. In "Enarrationes in Psalmos," he emphasizes that believers must actively embody and promote divine peace, thereby reflecting Christ's reconciliatory work on the cross (Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos, CCSL 39:152–153). Augustine sees peace as intrinsically tied to love (caritas), advocating that authentic Christian life requires active participation in fostering peace, both within oneself and in communal relationships.

Gregory of Nyssa complements this by linking peace with spiritual equilibrium and communal harmony. Gregory argues that the readiness implied by Paul's metaphor indicates the proactive nature of peace—a virtue to be cultivated intentionally within Christian communities. He emphasizes that internal tranquility and external harmony must characterize believers, thereby safeguarding the Church from spiritual divisions and external challenges.

For Gregory, peace serves as a moral imperative necessary for maintaining spiritual clarity and communal solidarity (Gregory of Nyssa, On Virginity, PG 46:373).

John Chrysostom similarly stresses the evangelistic and ethical dimensions of peace. In his homilies on Ephesians, he insists that Christians must not only enjoy inner peace but actively disseminate it, resolving conflicts and promoting harmony in their broader social interactions. Chrysostom highlights peace as foundational for Christian witness, urging believers to be ambassadors of reconciliation, demonstrating practically the transformative power of the Gospel through their lives (Chrysostom, Homiliae in Epistulam ad Ephesios, PG 62:170).

Basil the Great enriches this interpretation by incorporating the virtue of peace within the disciplined framework of ascetic spirituality. Basil views peace as the culmination of a disciplined spiritual life, achieved through rigorous control of passions and diligent pursuit of humility and obedience. His "Asceticon Magnum" specifically advises monastic communities to cultivate peace rigorously, viewing it as a key virtue indicative of genuine spiritual maturity. Peace, for Basil, is both an internal condition of tranquility and an outward expression of communal unity, crucial for sustaining monastic harmony and spiritual progress (Basil, Asceticon Magnum, PG 31:1261B).

In parallel, the metaphor of the "shield of faith" (θυρεὸς τῆς πίστεως) constitutes a critical element in Paul's depiction of spiritual defense. The Greek θυρεός refers explicitly to the large Roman shield providing comprehensive protection, thus vividly symbolizing faith's extensive capacity to guard believers against spiritual threats. Paul's imagery of "fiery darts" (τὰ βέλη τοῦ πονηροῦ τὰ πεπυρωμένα) represents vividly the demonic temptations and trials confronting Christians.

Origen emphasizes faith's defensive and doctrinal significance, interpreting the shield allegorically as a crucial safeguard against heretical influences and moral corruption. For Origen, faith grants spiritual discernment, enabling believers to identify and repel spiritual and doctrinal falsehoods effectively. Faith serves not merely as a passive defense but an active virtue fostering deeper scriptural understanding and moral resilience (Origen, Homilies on Numbers, PG 12:584).

Gregory of Nyssa elaborates further, viewing faith as fundamental confidence in divine providence. Gregory underscores that faith provides believers with enduring spiritual fortitude, enabling them to withstand life's hardships and spiritual attacks without faltering. He highlights that the believer's steadfast trust in God's sovereignty equips them with spiritual resilience, sustaining their perseverance amidst adversity and temptation (Gregory of Nyssa, On the Soul and Resurrection, PG 46:112).

John Chrysostom, with his distinctive pastoral sensitivity, emphasizes faith as a communal virtue, vital for collective spiritual strength and resilience. In his homilies, he argues that robust faith not only protects individuals but also fortifies entire Christian communities, reinforcing collective identity and mutual accountability. Chrysostom strongly advocates cultivating communal faith to resist effectively the moral and spiritual pressures that threaten church unity and doctrinal purity (Chrysostom, Homiliae in Epistulam ad Ephesios, PG 62:172).

Augustine further enriches this theological exploration, closely linking faith with divine grace. Augustine stresses faith as divinely empowered, underscoring that genuine faith is itself a gracious gift, equipping believers to confront and triumph over spiritual challenges. For Augustine, faith is dynamic, providing ongoing spiritual sustenance and growth, facilitating believers' perseverance and spiritual maturity through continuous divine assistance (Augustine, Sermons, CCSL 41:55).

Cyprian of Carthage vividly applies the shield metaphor within contexts of persecution, highlighting faith's role in empowering Christians to withstand severe trials and physical threats courageously. Cyprian describes faith as the essential source of spiritual resilience, enabling believers to endure persecution without compromising their commitment to Christ. For Cyprian, the shield of faith is indispensable for believers under duress, providing them strength, endurance, and unwavering trust in divine promises despite external pressures and suffering (Cyprian, Epistle to Thibaris, ANF 5:350).

Furthermore, modern exegetical insights continue to enrich this patristic foundation. Hans Hübner notably extends the discussion by examining the existential dimensions implicit in Paul's imagery. He suggests Paul's emphasis on the shield of faith reveals an awareness of the tangible spiritual threats confronting the Ephesian community, including potential wavering in belief under external persecution and internal dissension. Hübner asserts that faith serves as both spiritual and psychological armor, crucial for maintaining the believer's integrity amid real-life adversities (Hübner 1997, 264–265).

Similarly, Benjamin L. Merkle's philological analysis reinforces these theological insights, emphasizing that the Greek terminology used by Paul underscores faith as proactive trust rather than passive assent. Merkle clarifies Paul's linguistic choice, demonstrating how the metaphor vividly conveys the active role believers must assume in cultivating and exercising faith to repel spiritual attacks effectively. Thus, faith becomes an intentional and disciplined spiritual practice, essential for sustained spiritual vigilance and resilience (Merkle 2016, 191).

Incorporating patristic interpretations alongside contemporary scholarly analyses thus provides a comprehensive hermeneutical approach, highlighting the enduring theological, ethical, and pastoral relevance of Paul's metaphor. Peace and faith, as illuminated through this integrative scholarship, emerge as robust and transformative virtues indispensable for both personal spirituality and communal integrity, clearly articulating a powerful and timeless vision of Christian discipleship and witness.

4. Salvation and the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17)

In Ephesians 6:17, Paul instructs believers to take up "the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." This succinct yet powerful imagery encapsulates two essential elements of spiritual armor—salvation and the Word of God—each profoundly examined by patristic and contemporary scholarship as central to Christian spirituality and ethical practice.

The "helmet of salvation" (περικεφαλαία τοῦ σωτηρίου) vividly symbolizes the divine protection and assurance provided through salvation. The Greek περικεφαλαία implies comprehensive protection, underscoring salvation as a vital safeguard for the believer's mind and spiritual clarity. Merkle emphasizes that this metaphor accentuates salvation's cognitive and protective dimensions, positioning it as foundational for Christian spiritual resilience (Merkle 2016, 191).

Augustine extensively engages with the theological significance of salvation, connecting it intrinsically with divine grace. He articulates that salvation, as an unmerited gift from God, fortifies believers against spiritual assaults, grounding them firmly in the assurance of divine redemption. Augustine further notes that this protection transcends intellectual acceptance, encompassing the transformative experience of divine grace which renews and sustains the believer's inner life (Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos, CCSL 40:243).

Gregory of Nyssa enriches this perspective by highlighting the transformative power of salvation, associating it closely with spiritual enlightenment and moral renewal. For Gregory, the helmet symbolizes sanctification of the mind, enabling believers to maintain discernment and spiritual vigilance. He views salvation as a dynamic, continuous process of conforming to Christ's likeness, thereby safeguarding believers from spiritual deception and ethical compromise (Gregory of Nyssa, On the Soul and Resurrection, PG 46:112).

John Chrysostom offers a distinctly pastoral dimension, stressing the practical application of salvation within daily ethical conduct and communal life. He emphasizes that believers must actively manifest their salvation through tangible moral actions, demonstrating their secure position in Christ. The helmet metaphor serves as a constant reminder that salvation should actively influence

ethical decisions, relational interactions, and spiritual priorities within the community (Chrysostom, Homiliae in Epistulam ad Ephesios, PG 62:172).

In monastic spirituality, Basil the Great presents salvation as essential to the ascetic journey, arguing it encompasses both deliverance from personal sin and freedom from spiritual ignorance and existential despair. Basil emphasizes salvation as a source of spiritual courage and perseverance, necessary for monks to sustain rigorous ascetic discipline. He underscores salvation as crucial for achieving deeper communion with God and navigating the demanding spiritual challenges characteristic of monastic life (Basil, Asceticon Magnum, PG 31:1261B).

Complementing the helmet of salvation, Paul describes the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (μάχαιρα τοῦ Πνεύματος, ὅ ἐστιν ῥῆμα Θεοῦ). This metaphor underscores scripture's authoritative and dynamic role in spiritual combat. The Greek μάχαιρα typically refers to a short, effective sword, indicating precision and efficacy in spiritual defense and offense. Merkle highlights Paul's strategic identification of scripture as an active, powerful instrument essential for spiritual victory and ethical integrity (Merkle 2016, 191).

Origen delves deeply into the significance of this metaphor, emphasizing the indispensability of extensive scriptural knowledge for spiritual discernment. He advocates consistent meditation and memorization of scripture as practices enabling believers to counteract spiritual deception robustly. Origen's allegorical exegesis underscores scripture's capacity to dismantle false doctrines effectively, fortifying believers in their spiritual engagements (Origen, Homilies on Numbers, PG 12:584).

Cyril of Jerusalem provides a catechetical application, stressing scripture's foundational role in spiritual formation and ethical development. Cyril views proficiency in the Word of God as indispensable for believers to resist temptation, discern heresies, and affirm doctrinal truths confidently. His teachings articulate scripture as both guide and weapon, essential for ongoing spiritual growth and doctrinal stability within Christian communities (Cyril of Jerusalem, Catecheses ad Illuminandos, NPNF[2] 7:150).

Chrysostom reinforces the practical significance of scripture, advocating for frequent communal engagement with the Bible through preaching, teaching, and reflection. He views scriptural literacy as critical for the spiritual fortification and ethical edification of believers, arguing that communities deeply rooted in the Word of God are better equipped to face moral and spiritual challenges effectively (Chrysostom, Homiliae in Epistulam ad Ephesios, PG 62:172).

Augustine further illuminates scripture's transformative potential, describing it as penetrating the human heart and reshaping lives through conviction, encouragement, and instruction. He asserts scripture as divinely inspired revelation,

dynamically engaging believers and profoundly reshaping their moral and spiritual consciousness (Augustine, Sermons, CCSL 41:55).

Theodoret of Cyrus emphasizes the communal dimension of scripture, underscoring its role in preserving doctrinal orthodoxy and ecclesiastical unity. He highlights that communal adherence to scriptural teachings ensures theological coherence, collective spiritual protection against heresies, and moral integrity. Theodoret views scripture as vital for maintaining communal solidarity and spiritual clarity amid external persecution and internal doctrinal tensions (Theodoret, Dialogues, NPNF² 3:190).

Collectively, patristic exegesis reveals salvation and the Word of God as essential virtues, foundational to effective spiritual warfare and ethical Christian living. These interpretations underscore their transformative, protective, and formative capacities, offering profound theological insights that continue to inform and guide contemporary spiritual practice and theological reflection.

5. Prayer as the Supreme Virtue in the Spiritual Armor (Ephesians 6:18)

In Ephesians 6:18, Paul concludes his exposition of spiritual armor by emphasizing prayer as integral to the believer's spiritual defense: "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints." This verse highlights prayer not merely as an additional element but as the culmination and sustaining force within the spiritual armor.

Patristic interpretations consistently underscore the supreme importance of prayer within the believer's spiritual life. Augustine notably frames prayer as the lifeblood of Christian spirituality, emphasizing its continual necessity in sustaining the believer's relationship with God. For Augustine, prayer is the practical realization of dependence upon divine grace, enabling believers to remain steadfast and vigilant amid spiritual trials. He insists that prayer transcends mere ritual or habit; it is an essential act of faith and love toward God, fostering intimacy and trust in divine providence (Augustine, Confessions, CCSL 27:56).

John Chrysostom particularly emphasizes prayer's communal dimension, arguing that prayerful solidarity strengthens collective spiritual defenses. He encourages constant, fervent intercession within Christian communities, asserting that communal prayer fortifies unity and mutual support in facing spiritual and ethical challenges. Chrysostom frequently highlights the transformative power of prayer, not only in personal spiritual growth but also in communal moral

renewal and doctrinal integrity (Chrysostom, Homiliae in Epistulam ad Ephesios, PG 62:172).

Origen's theological and exegetical reflections present prayer as a potent spiritual discipline that directly engages and repels spiritual adversaries. He underscores that persistent prayer cultivates spiritual discernment, empowering believers to recognize and resist subtle temptations and doctrinal falsehoods. For Origen, prayer functions dynamically, simultaneously fortifying believers spiritually and offensively countering demonic influences through scripturally informed intercession (Origen, On Prayer, PG 11:410).

Basil the Great's monastic writings emphasize prayer's central role in ascetic discipline. He portrays prayer as fundamental to ascetic spiritual warfare, enabling monks to withstand internal passions and external temptations. Basil asserts that disciplined, continual prayer facilitates spiritual purification and sanctification, guiding monks toward deeper contemplative communion with God. He particularly highlights communal prayer within monastic settings as essential for collective spiritual strength and moral accountability (Basil, Asceticon Magnum, PG 31:1261B).

Gregory of Nyssa further expands upon prayer's contemplative and transformative dimensions. Gregory argues that prayer transcends verbal petitions, encompassing profound spiritual communion with God, which progressively transforms the believer's heart and mind. He describes prayer as a journey of spiritual ascent, progressively conforming believers to divine likeness and enabling them to experience divine illumination and moral transformation. Gregory stresses prayer's continual and vigilant nature, essential for spiritual advancement and sustained moral purity (Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses, PG 44:392).

Theodoret of Cyrus accentuates prayer's doctrinal and pastoral significance. He emphasizes prayerful intercession as vital for preserving ecclesiastical unity and doctrinal fidelity, arguing that collective prayer guards against heretical influences and moral fragmentation. Theodoret views prayer as instrumental in fostering ecclesiastical cohesion and mutual spiritual support, equipping Christian communities to withstand external persecutions and internal spiritual challenges effectively (Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History, PG 82:1220).

Cyprian of Carthage vividly highlights prayer's vital role amidst persecution, illustrating its critical importance in providing spiritual courage and resilience to suffering Christians. He portrays prayer as an act of profound spiritual resistance and solidarity, sustaining persecuted believers through trials and enabling them to remain steadfast and courageous. Cyprian stresses the necessity of persistent prayer in maintaining spiritual vigilance and fidelity to Christ during periods of intense adversity and persecution (Cyprian, Treatises, ANF 5:450).

Integrating the ascetic insights of St. John Cassian, as found in the Philokalia, further deepens the understanding of prayer within the spiritual armor. Cassian identifies persistent prayer, particularly the invocation of Jesus Christ's name, as the essential tool in resisting evil thoughts (logismoi), which he describes metaphorically as "fiery darts" (Cassian, "On the Eight Thoughts of Evil," Philokalia, vol. 1, 82-99). For Cassian, prayer is the ultimate spiritual discipline, a vigilant watch over the heart and mind, protecting the believer from spiritual assaults by continuously calling upon divine assistance. His nuanced understanding of prayer includes both active resistance to temptation and the transformative purification of the inner self. Cassian stresses that continual prayer is fundamental in maintaining spiritual purity and integrity, acting as a safeguard against internal passions and external spiritual threats (Cassian, Philokalia, vol. 1, 143).

Cassian emphasizes prayer as an inner spiritual struggle rather than mere external observance. He argues that through constant vigilance and prayerful invocation of Christ, believers actively repel evil thoughts before they fully manifest in sinful actions. This prayerful vigilance aligns closely with Paul's instruction to "be watchful" and persevere in prayerful intercession (Ephesians 6:18), reinforcing the notion of prayer as both a defensive and offensive spiritual strategy.

Collectively, these patristic and ascetic reflections underscore prayer as the pinnacle and sustaining force of Christian spiritual armor. Through continual, disciplined, and spiritually informed prayer, believers are equipped to maintain spiritual vigilance, foster communal unity, experience divine communion, and effectively counter spiritual threats. The Church Fathers consistently affirm that prayer is not merely complementary but foundational, sustaining and completing the believer's spiritual preparedness and ethical integrity.

6. The Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10–20): A Comprehensive Exegetical and Theological Analysis

The theological complexity and rhetorical depth of Ephesians 6:10–20 have inspired a multifaceted dialogue among patristic tradition, contemporary biblical scholarship, and modern exegetical insights. The synthesis of contributions from Benjamin L. Merkle, Hans Hübner, Andreas Dettwiler, Gerhard Sellin, Ekaterini Tsalampouni, Rainer Kampling, Ioannis Karavidopoulos, Fredrick J. Long, Jennifer Strawbridge, and Frank Thielman provides a comprehensive scholarly landscape for this pivotal Pauline text.

Benjamin L. Merkle emphasizes philological precision, explicating key Greek terms such as ἀλήθεια (truth), δικαιοσύνη (righteousness), πίστις (faith), and σωτήριον (salvation). He clarifies the ethical and rhetorical implications of

Paul's armor metaphor, demonstrating its rootedness in Hellenistic military imagery and biblical tradition, particularly Isaiah's depiction of divine armor (Merkle 2016, 189–192).

Hans Hübner complements this linguistic approach by introducing an existential and theological dimension. He argues that Paul's imperative στῆτε (stand firm) reflects genuine spiritual threats confronting the Ephesian community, suggesting a tension deeper than mere ethical concerns. Hübner views Paul's demonology as indicative of structural and existential evil embedded within human experience and community dynamics, thereby challenging purely rationalistic interpretations (Hübner 1997, 263–268).

Gerhard Sellin further enriches the exegetical framework by providing rhetorical analysis, highlighting how Paul's peroratio functions rhetorically to amplify emotional engagement (amplificatio) and recap earlier themes (recapitulatio). Sellin observes the linguistic techniques of parechesis and homoioteleuton, noting how they foster a deep emotional resonance, reinforcing the urgency and immediacy of Paul's exhortations. He also elaborates on the Christological reinterpretation of Isaiah's divine warrior imagery within the early Christian context (Sellin 2008, 472–483).

Andreas Dettwiler introduces ecclesiological and eschatological dimensions, arguing that the metaphor of spiritual warfare in Ephesians addresses broader concerns about church unity, ethical identity, and communal integrity. Dettwiler emphasizes that the spiritual warfare motif functions not merely as ethical guidance but as theological reassurance of Christ's cosmic authority and presence within the Church (Dettwiler 2000, 286–291). He also underscores the realized eschatology evident in Ephesians, distinguishing it clearly from the tension-filled "already/not yet" perspective characteristic of authentic Pauline letters (Dettwiler 2000, 290–291).

Ekaterini Tsalampouni enriches this dialogue by examining Pauline metaphors within communal and ethical frameworks. She suggests Paul's language actively engages intra-community tensions, promoting a Christological unity transcending ethnic and social divisions. This approach resonates deeply with patristic exegesis, especially that of John Chrysostom, who similarly stresses communal ethical responsibility (Tsalampouni 2012, 14-26).

Rainer Kampling deepens these insights by exploring the mystical and pneumatological dimensions inherent in the Pauline tradition as expressed in Ephesians. Kampling describes the text as deliberately enigmatic, utilizing mystery (μυστήριον) as both content and rhetorical device. He highlights how Paul's pneumatic theology serves as the foundation for community identity and ethical action, emphasizing the experiential reality of spiritual transformation as foundational to Pauline ecclesiology. For Kampling, the text's "timelessness"

is not indicative of detachment but an expression of enduring theological truth (Kampling 1999, 107–114).

Ioannis Karavidopoulos further emphasizes the integrated ethical, existential, and spiritual dimensions of Paul's imagery. He meticulously explores how Paul deliberately uses the metaphor of armor not only for defense against external threats but as active ethical preparation for the proclamation of peace. Karavidopoulos stresses the proactive nature of the metaphor, identifying the gospel of peace (εὐαγγέλιον τῆς εἰρήνης) as central to Paul's concept of Christian identity and mission. Moreover, he underscores prayer as a crucial spiritual strategy, linking the armor metaphor explicitly to the continual practice of vigilant prayer and intercession within the Christian community (Karavidopoulos 2011, 233–239).

Fredrick J. Long further contextualizes Paul's armor metaphor within the Greco-Roman rhetorical environment. He argues that Paul's deliberate employment of military rhetoric resonated deeply with his audience's daily experiences, vividly illustrating essential spiritual discipline and unity within the early Christian community's socio-political milieu (Long 2019, 215–218).

Jennifer Strawbridge complements Long's perspective by emphasizing patristic interpretations, particularly John Chrysostom's communal-ethical approach. She underscores how early interpretations viewed the armor metaphor as essential for communal holiness and ethical integrity, advocating mutual support and corporate prayer (Strawbridge 2013, 85–88).

Frank Thielman's meticulous lexical analysis adds yet another layer to this multifaceted discussion. He carefully investigates key terms, connecting righteousness explicitly with ethical behavior and salvation with eschatological certainty. This examination reinforces how ethical living is inseparable from spiritual readiness, clarifying the depth of Paul's theological language (Thielman 2010, 420–425).

Integrating these extensive scholarly insights creates a comprehensive theological tapestry, affirming Ephesians 6:10–20 as a profound call to ethical responsibility, spiritual vigilance, and communal unity. This passage emerges clearly not merely as individual spiritual guidance but as a holistic ecclesial imperative, binding individual conduct firmly to communal identity under Christ's cosmic lordship. Thus, Paul's spiritual warfare imagery remains profoundly relevant, providing both theological depth and practical wisdom for contemporary Christian identity, ethics, and mission.

Conclusions

This comprehensive analysis of Ephesians 6:14–18 has revealed profound theological, existential, rhetorical, and ecclesiological dimensions embedded in Paul's metaphor of spiritual armor, through a meticulous integration of patristic tradition, medieval reflections, and contemporary scholarly insights. The synthesis of interpretations from significant patristic figures—Origen, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa—establishes a foundational layer, emphasizing the embodiment of Christian virtues as both spiritual armor and ethical conduct crucial for individual and communal resilience.

Patristic interpretations, with their profound spiritual and ethical emphasis, affirm that Paul's metaphor is deeply rooted in lived experience, underscoring the daily enactment of virtues such as truth, righteousness, faith, and peace as essential components for spiritual survival and moral growth. Their writings persistently highlight the necessity of practical spirituality and moral vigilance as defensive and proactive engagements against existential threats and internal moral failings.

Contemporary scholarly contributions further enrich these foundational insights. Benjamin L. Merkle's rigorous philological analysis illuminates the nuanced Greek terminology employed by Paul, clarifying the complex interplay between spiritual metaphor and practical ethical guidance. Merkle's linguistic precision underscores the rhetorical effectiveness of Paul's metaphorical framework, demonstrating its enduring appeal and coherence.

Hans Hübner complements this textual precision by exploring deeper existential and theological dimensions. He emphasizes the genuine spiritual struggles faced by the Ephesian community, framing Paul's exhortation within broader existential and structural challenges. Hübner's reflections invite contemporary readers to recognize the ongoing reality of spiritual warfare embedded in systemic and societal structures, thereby enhancing the existential relevance of Paul's teachings.

Ekaterini G. Tsalampouni's contributions significantly expand the communal and ecclesial dimensions of Paul's theology, stressing the metaphor's potential to foster unity, inclusivity, and peace-oriented communal identity. By examining Paul's emphasis on overcoming ethnic and social divisions through Christological unity, Tsalampouni provides valuable insights into contemporary ecclesial dynamics, particularly within interreligious and intercultural contexts.

Gerhard Sellin's rhetorical insights highlight Paul's sophisticated use of rhetorical techniques such as parechesis and homoioteleuton, reinforcing the emotional and persuasive impact of his exhortations. Sellin clarifies how Paul's linguistic artistry enhances emotional resonance, thus urging deeper personal and communal commitment to ethical vigilance and spiritual readiness.

Further enriching this discourse, Andreas Dettwiler's ecclesiological and eschatological perspectives emphasize the broader communal identity fostered through Paul's spiritual warfare motif. Dettwiler argues convincingly for a present-oriented eschatology within Ephesians, positioning ethical and spiritual engagement as immediate and cosmic responsibilities deeply rooted in Christ's universal lordship.

Rainer Kampling introduces a mystical and pneumatological dimension, framing Paul's language as deliberately enigmatic, thereby reflecting the mystery (μυστήριον) inherent in Christian experience. Kampling's insights highlight the transformative potential of pneumatic theology within communal practice, reinforcing the text's timeless and enduring theological relevance.

Finally, Ioannis Karavidopoulos' careful exegesis underscores the proactive ethical imperative central to Paul's imagery. He connects the spiritual armor explicitly to prayerful vigilance and proactive ethical action, thereby illustrating the indispensable role of continual spiritual practices within Christian communities facing spiritual and ethical challenges.

Collectively, these diverse scholarly interpretations illuminate the continuing transformative potential and profound relevance of Paul's teachings in Ephesians 6:14–18. Future scholarship will benefit significantly from further interdisciplinary explorations, examining the implications of Pauline theology for contemporary spiritual formation, ethical integrity, communal cohesion, and intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives.

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Wounds of the Soul: Spirituality and Paths to Healing.
A Look at Luke 8:26-39 in the Light of Isaiah 43:1
and John 4:10 ff.

Dieter H.W. BRANDES* iD

Agenda
1   Luke 8, 26-39
2.   A man possessed by inner demons lives among the tombs
3   Identity and Healing
4   The sending of the demons into the sea
5   The mission back to the original world of identity
6.   The connection between spirituality and the healing of wounds of the soul

My name is Dieter Brandes. I am a Lutheran pastor and was responsible for Healing of Memories processes for about a decade, first in Eastern Europe and later in Central Africa on behalf of the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.

At least in the processes in Central Africa, it became clear to me in processes in Rwanda, Burundi and DR Congo, for example, that by working in for Healing of Memories processes, a confrontation with traumatic wounds cannot be ignored.

Dear colleagues, today I am talking about Wounds of the Soul and the profound connection between spirituality and ways to heal Wounds of the Soul. Exegetically, I am referring to the story of the healing of the possessed man according to Luke 8:26-39 with an expanded context of Isaiah 43:1 and John 4:10 ff (-30)

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1. Luke 8, 26-39

The story of the healing of the possessed man is also reported by Matthew (8:1-34) and Mark (5:1-20). I will concentrate on the Luke version

I will briefly read some parts from Luke 8:26-39:

26 They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes,[b] which is across the lake from Galilee. 27 When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" 29 For Jesus had commanded the impure spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

30 Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"
"Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him. 31
And they begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.
32 A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission. 33 When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

38 The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

2. A man possessed by inner demons lives among the tombs

We meet a man from Gerasa who is possessed by demons. He has his dwelling 'in the tombs'. (Luke 8:27, Mark 5:3) The fact that 'he dwells among the tombs indicates that he is closer to the dead than to the living'[1], as cemeteries are unclean according to Jewish opinion, the possessed man leads an 'existence without God that has become inhuman'[2].

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[1] François Bovon *Das Evangelium nach Lukas Bd. 1Lk 1,1-9,50*, EKK, Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (EKK) 3,1, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1989, p. 434.
[2] Ibid.

However, it is not only his personal decision to keep his distance from other people, but 'it is obviously his violent states of excitement and uncontrolled outbursts of emotion that drive him into isolation'[3].

This remains completely incomprehensible to his fellow human beings. They try to calm him down with coercive measures - 'bound with shackles and chains' (Mark 5,4 / Luke 8,29), 'but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert (Luke 8,29).

But the possessed man alone cannot free himself from this world of self-isolation; he has become homeless.

To understand this story, it is important to respect that the demons are not simply external forces that torment the man but have also become part of his identity. But these demons have taken away his humanity, his community and his self-image.

Jesus now meets him with a radical love, respects him as he is and addresses the demons as part of the possessed man's identity in which he is trapped.

3. Identity and Healing

According to Drewermann, the following question posed by Jesus about the name of the possessing spirits could be seen as a psychotherapeutic process.

With his illness, the possessed person has formed a system of cycles and mechanisms that stabilises [his mental illness] and stands in the way of its resolution'[4].

Jesus now interrupts this cycle by not marginalising the world of the possessed person, which is filled with foreign images, as other people have done, but by taking it seriously and asking 'What is your name?'

Perhaps for the first time in a long time, with Jesus someone has come who does not marginalise him, but is interested in his person as he is

'What's your name?' means something like 'Please, tell me how you are. How do you feel? ... How did it come about that you feel this way? ... Who were your parents, how did they try to bring you up?'[5]

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[3] Eugen Drewermann *Das Lukasevangelium Bd.1, Lukas 1,1-12,1*,Patmos Verlag Düsseldorf 2009, p. 560.

[4] Eugen Drewermann op.cit. p. 563.

[5] Eugen Drewermann op.cit. p. 564.

This brings Isaiah 43:1 into focus:

'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name'.

These words remind us that our true identity does not lie in our wounds or in what holds us captive, but in being carried by God - as a full member of the community of people in God's creation.

By being unconditionally embedded in the human community and God's creation, the possessed man experiences a *first spiritual healing step* on the path to a new human freedom - back to an identity as a beloved child of God.

4 The sending of the demons into the sea

It is remarkable that the demons ask Jesus 'not to command them to depart into the αβγσσ'. (Luke 8:31) The αβγσσ is the realm of the dead or the place of oblivion.

Drewermann again argues as a psychologist: 'It is impossible to dissolve the inner turmoil of this person into nothing, so to speak.' [6] This is because the reference to the underworld (αβγσσ) refers to the place where 'the enemies of God are held'[7] according to Jewish apocalypticism.

However, this would lock them away in darkness. But 'no therapy can avoid expecting the client to deal with all the contents of the repressed, split-off and projected'[8]. Instead, they should be recognised and respected as part of one's own identity, because they belong to God's comprehensive creation, just like the world of the so-called rational.

A central moment in the story is the moment when Jesus sends the demons into the herd of pigs that fall into the sea. This action is more than just a spectacular act. On the one hand, it symbolises the man's liberation from the dark parts of his identity. On the other hand, although the sea is often seen as a symbol of chaos and disorder in the biblical tradition, here the incriminating aspects of the possessed man are sent into the water, which 'in the Jewish and Christian tradition [also] points to the origin of creation'[9] according to Genesis 1.

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[6] Eugen Drewermann op.cit. p. 566.
[7] François Bovon op.cit. p. 436.
[8] Eugen Drewermann op.cit. p. 563.
[9] Keyword *Wasser*, in Gerd Heinz-Mohr *Lexikon der Symbole – Bilder und Zeichen der christlichen Kunst*, Eugen Diederichs Verlag 4. Aufl. Duesseldorf-Köln 1976,s.299.

In this way, the possessed man experiences *a further spiritual healing step*.

His burdening wounds of the soul are not simply negated. Then for this would erase a part of his identity. They are relegated to a place where they are available as acquired experience and, if necessary, can be retrieved to strengthen other burdened people.

I am thinking, for example, of the Blue Cross and Alcoholics Anonymous with their sharing of their own experiences of addiction.

Step 2 of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous is called :

'We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity'.

Step 12 means: 'After experiencing a spiritual awakening through these steps, we tried to pass this message on to other sufferers'.

The forwarding into the water also points to another outstanding importance of water. Because 'Water is life. Water is the source of life, it points to God himself.' [10] In John 4:10ff, Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the fountain and offers her living water. Like the possessed man, she is freed from his demons, the Samaritan woman also experiences liberation. The living water, that Jesus gives, frees her from her loneliness and shame. It brings her into a new relationship with God and with her human community.

5. The mission back to the original world of identity

At the request of the man 'from whom the demons had gone out ... to go with him', Jesus sent him away, saying: 'Return home and tell how much God has done for you.' (Luke 8:38f)

For 'as long as someone avoids a certain contact, flees a certain bond, he has not yet completely resolved the underlying conflict'[11].

By being sent back to his original world, the man experiences a *third healing step*: he confronts the origins of his identity and can begin to understand the paths of his negative changes.

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[10] Heinrich Bedford-Strohm *Predigt: Wasser - Lebensdurst und Lebensquelle (Offenbarung 21,6),* Sonntagsblatt 1.Januar 2018, Evangelischer Presseverband für Bayern e.V. (EPV), München; https://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/glaube/predigt-wasser-lebensdurst-und-lebensquelle-offenbarung-216.

[11] Eugen Drewermann op. cit. p. 568.

6. The connection between spirituality and the healing of wounds of the soul

Both stories show us that healing of wounds of the soul does not happen simply by removing negative influences. Jesus shows us a way to restore an identity, borne by God that accepts people without exclusion.

The formerly possessed man experiences that his own existence is not isolated but part of God's comprehensive creation. This is a central aspect in the healing process of emotional wounds.

The demons, holding the man captive, had become part of his identity. Jesus refers them with love and power to regions of the 'water of life'. The healing process leads the man back to his true self as a person loved by God.

Jesus invites those suffering from emotional wounds to grow on paths of spirituality and to send the dark parts of their own lives into 'God's sea of creation' in order to live in his love and truth.

Thank you for your attention!

Book Review:

EDWARDS Mark, PALLIS Dimitrios and STEIRIS Georgios (eds.), *The Orthodox Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, (xiii + 737 pages), ISBN 978-0-19-881079-7

There have been a number of sustained efforts in the last decades by researchers to decipher the identity of the author of the Dionysian Corpus (*CD*), to determine the purpose of his writings and to evaluate the impact he had on Christian philosophy, theology, art and literature, politics and so on. Recent collective volumes from symposia,[1] articles in dictionaries and encyclopedias,[2] and books have proposed new avenues of research or updated what is known on this subject, reinvigorating debate and interest in this field.[3]

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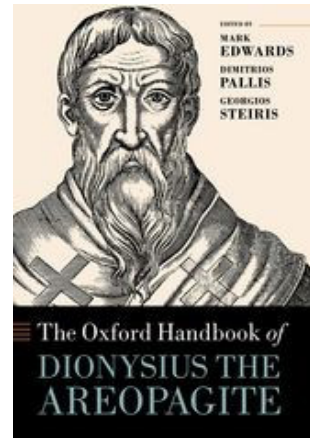
[1] Tzotcho BOIADJIEV, Georgi KAPRIEV, Andreas SPEER (eds.), *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter Internationales Kolloquium in Sofia vom 8. bis 11. April 1999*, col. "Encounters of Medieval Philosophy", 9, Turnhout: Brepols, 2000; Georgi KAPRIEV (ed.), *The Dionysian Traditions. 24th Annual Colloquium of the S.I.E.P.M., September 9-11, 2019, Varna, Bulgaria*, col. "Encounters of Medieval Philosophy", 23, Turnhout: Brepols, 2021. It is also worth mentioning here Andrei A. ORLOV (ed.), *Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism. Studies in Honor of Alexander Golitzin*, col. "Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae", 160, Leiden: Brill, 2020.

[2] Ken PARRY (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015.

[3] Alexander GOLITZIN, *Et introibo ad altare Dei. The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita with special reference to its predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition*, Thessaloniki: Πατριαρχικόν Ἴδρυμα Πατερικῶν Μελετῶν, 1994; Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI, *Dietro "Dionigi l'Areopagita". La genesi e gli scopi del Corpus Dionysiacum*, Roma: Città Nuova, 2018; Vladimir KHARLAMOV, *The Authorship of the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus: A Deliberate Forgery or Clever Literary Ploy?*, London: Routledge, 2020.

The *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* fulfils a considerable gap in scholarly research. This project originated from a workshop held in Oxford.[4] The volume editors, however, have created a more complex working tool for the study of the "Dionysian universe", which includes many more contributions on various aspects of the *CD*'s antecedents, content, and reception.

The studies in this volume begin with the historical conjuncture and the precedents of the *CD* and give to the readers the necessary knowledge about the *CD* itself. While different points of view are seen in the volume, careful ordering of the papers by the editors ensures continuity. The editors also made the creative editorial decision to allow for a wide range of perspectives, dialogue, and occasionally debate between the participants in the project, as is reflected more or less in every section of the volume.

Following the editors' introduction, there are four lengthy sections in the volume, each of them containing between nine and eleven chapters. These sections deal with the background and content of the *CD*, its influence in the Latin West, in the Greek and oriental East, and also in modern thought. The editors' decision to use the name "Dionysius the Areopagite" in the title of the volume without the prefix "pseudo-" is justified for at least four reasons: the first reason was suggested in 1993 by the respected theologian and translator of the *CD* into Romanian, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, who argued that this is a form of respect for the author's own choice of name; the second reason is the lack of any work written by the disciple of St. Paul; the third reason is to recognize the merit of the person who was able to produce the *CD*, which is of relevance to subsequent Christian thought and was often received in a favorable manner; the fourth reason is the need to minimize suspicion regarding the author of the *CD*, which is implied by the prefix "pseudo-".

Section I of the volume serves to initiate the reader into the historical and cultural framework in which the *CD* is believed to have originated. The content of the treatises and letters of the *CD* are presented in detail and attention is also given to the biblical, patristic, and philosophical sources that were used by Dionysius.

In the first chapter B.R. Suchla presents the "intangible" structure of the *CD*, outlining the conclusions of her research into a large number of manuscripts. On the one hand, she shows how widespread the *CD* was and, on the other hand, gives us information about the chronology of the possible archetype of the *CD*. Suchla also argues that the author of the *CD* might have lived in Caesarea Maritima due to his obscure language, his description of an Antiochian rite, and the rich sources he used.

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[4] Deirdre CARABINE and Dimitrios PALLIS, "Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum: Ancient and Modern Readers", *Sobornost*, 38:2 (2016), 61-67.

T. Riggs' chapter "Content of the Dionysian Corpus" begins with a question relating to the philosophical character of the *CD*. Riggs seems to leave that open to discussion, but his general view is that Dionysius was versed in Neoplatonic philosophy and used it to discuss the divine revelation of Christianity. This choice could have its origins in his conviction that the salvation of humanity can be achieved through Christ's imitation and life, which is not in contradiction with the inner and cosmic order of Proclean thought.

M. Constas invites the readers in his chapter ("Dionysius the Areopagite and the New Testament") to a novel reading, which pays attention to the biblical side of the *CD*. Constas concludes that in many respects the *CD* develops themes rooted in the heritage of St. Paul, which is a fact not stressed by much of last century's research.

M. Edwards offers us a historical study in "Christian Apophaticism before Dionysius", which does not overlook the role of the Platonic tradition for Christian thought. He shows that apophaticism was not a concept uncommon to the Jewish and Christian literature before Dionysius and that, even if Dionysius relied on Neoplatonism, he developed this concept in a distinct way.

B. Bucur, in his study "Philo and Clement of Alexandria", moves a step forward to the Christian sources of Dionysius and argues that there are many other concepts shared between Dionysius and his Jewish and Christian predecessors. Bucur explores divine transcendence and immanence, the theology of the logos, the celestial hierarchy, the theme of theosis, and other concepts, showing that the *CD* is part of a long tradition in ancient literature.

I. Ramelli studies Dionysius' debt to Origen and Evagrius and stresses that Dionysius (like Origen) conflates Plato and Scripture, while still remaining a Christian Platonist or rather an "Origenian" author. Dionysius' "Origenian" heritage means that he followed Origen's exegetical methodology and system of thought (including "apokatastasis") and understood it as the true Christian philosophy. Further to this, Ramelli argues that Dionysius' thought needs to be separated from the "Origenistic" doctrines that were condemned by the Council of 553.

"Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa" is the title of M. Motia's chapter, which focuses on three Nyssean issues that became central for Dionysius the Areopagite: the concept of theological language, the role of God in human knowledge and the relationship between God and man. Motia discusses these aspects and clarifies that Gregory was an invaluable source for the author of the *CD*.

C.M. Stang points out in "Dionysius, Iamblichus, and Proclus" two major "borrowings" of Dionysius from Iamblichus of Chalcis and Proclus Diadochus. Dionysius borrows from Iamblichus the term "theurgy" and its cognates, but he redefines their meaning. The "divine work" comes to mean Christ's Incarnation and the texts and traditions that refer to the Incarnation. When Dionysius

borrows Proclus' language of "beyond being", his use is similar to that of the philosopher. Dionysius did little to conceal his debt to him, but that can be justified if the *CD* is seen as a summa of theology and philosophy.

"God in Dionysius and the later Neoplatonists" is the title of a chapter by M. Edwards and J. Dillon, which sheds new light on Dionysius' philosophical sources and their influence on his theology and philosophy. The study starts with the recognition that there is a clear dependence of the *CD* on Greek philosophy and there are no longer scholars who maintain the genuine content of the *CD*. Nevertheless, as a Christian author, Dionysius made an important shift and led that knowledge beyond its origins.

Section II of the handbook examines how the *CD* has been edited, translated, and received in the Syriac and Greek-speaking world between the sixth and fifteenth centuries.

E. Fiori's chapter "Dionysius the Areopagite in Syriac" surveys the philological and doctrinal features of the *CD's* first Syrian translation. He suggests that there might not be a strong divergence between the Syriac translation and the Greek text as we read it, and that the view of the translation as "Origenistic" should be treated with caution.

I. Perczel deals with a similar area but offers a different perspective from Fiori and Suchla. Perczel argues that the original Greek text of the *CD* differs from the text used for the first Syriac translation of the *CD*. He also argues that the translation was initially used by an esoteric group of followers of Origenism. After the colloquium of Constantinople in 532 and in the course of the second Origenist controversy, John of Scythopolis attempted to "de-Origenize" the *CD* and to align it with the Orthodoxy of the Council of Chalcedon.

B.R. Suchla examines the editorial work of John of Scythopolis and presents her philological research on John's commentary to the *CD*. Suchla notes the value of that commentary but also the presence of various other comments added by other authors. Of particular interest are her insights on how the comments by John and Maximus the Confessor shaped the subsequent reception of the *CD* in the Greek and Latin tradition.

M. Constas focuses on Maximus the Confessor and his reception of the *CD*. This chapter is supplementary to the previous one since it helps the readers understand that John and Maximus were distinct users of the *CD*, though often with similar views on the beliefs of Dionysius. Interestingly, Constas states that Maximus developed positions that he believed were already represented in the *CD* in a seminal form.

The next chapter by M. Edwards and D. Pallis deals with the reception of Dionysius in John of Damascus, examining both passages where Dionysius' name appears in John's writings and passages where the *CD* is used but

Dionysius is not mentioned. In this light, they offer a view of John as a "Dionysian" theologian and note how John mediated the theology of the *CD* both in the Greek East and the Latin West.

The next chapter by G. Arabatzis regards the use of the *CD* in the thought of Theodore the Studite and the second phase of Iconoclasm. Arabatzis explains how Theodore's reception of Dionysius and his iconophile plan differed from the iconoclastic theory of iconicity and divine transcendence. He outlines the role of Theodore's monastic milieu for the development of the Dionysian tradition in Byzantine theology and he argues that fuller understanding of that topic requires study of its philosophical background and mostly of the Platonic tradition.

A. Rigo's wide-ranging chapter demonstrates the considerable influence of the *CD* on later Byzantine theology. Rigo focuses on Nicetas Stethatos, Gregory the Sinaite, and Gregory Palamas, as well as on other authors, and argues that Dionysius' writings frequently shaped eastern Orthodox ascetical and dogmatic theology. The Dionysian influence is seen in the ascetical language and the interpretation of eastern Orthodox religious life.

T.T. Tollefsen's paper approaches Gregory Palamas' reading of the *CD* from a philosophical standpoint. Tollefsen argues that Palamas adapted Dionysius to his own purposes and compares Maximus and Palamas on the issue of the essence–energies distinction. His paper serves to show some paths that the Dionysian tradition followed in Byzantine theological thought.

The last chapter of this section, written by G. Steiris, focuses on the possible philosophical link between Pletho and Dionysius. According to Steiris, Dionysian influence needs to be identified not just in theology but also in other types of thought, including political philosophy in late Byzantium. Steiris argues that Pletho created a complex system of thought that had room for various philosophical ideas, including the heritage of the *CD*'s Christianized Platonic philosophy.

Section III of the volume contains various types of reception of the *CD* in the Latin religious tradition. It begins from the first translations into Latin and ends with the study of significant trends of the Renaissance era.

The first chapter of Section II, contributed by D. Carabine, deals with the work of John Scotus Eriugena as both translator and interpreter of the *CD* and focuses especially on his theology and epistemology. Carabine's approach also shows also some of the differences between Dionysius and Eriugena. This chapter deals with an author who played a key role in the later reception of the *CD* in Latin theology.

In the next chapter M. Edwards examines another translation of the *CD* into Latin by John Sarracenus and points out its role in the diffusion of the Dionysian tradition in the Latin West. An interesting aspect of Edwards' study is his remarks on this translation in comparison to that of Eriugena and on the historical role of John Sarracenus' translation.

D. Lawell's chapter examines Robert Grosseteste's work as a translator and interpreter of the *CD*. Lawell discusses various theoretical aspects of Grosseteste's work and some differences from earlier attempts to translate or interpret Dionysius by Latin theologians.

M. Tobon's chapter discusses the Latin appropriation of the *CD* in Bonaventure's theological work. Tobon's study contains the necessary information so that the reader can understand the Dionysian influence on Bonaventure. According to Tobon, Bonaventure used different types of sources and combined theological trends in his reception of Dionysius and that makes his work distinctive.

P. Rorem examines Hugh of St. Victor and his relationship with the Dionysian tradition. As Rorem argues, although Hugh prepared a commentary on the Dionysian celestial hierarchy that was remarkable for the Latin tradition, it seems that he did not make a similar or even any use of the *CD* in his other writings, and that is an aspect that needs to be studied carefully by scholars. Hugh connected Dionysius with other theological trends and enriched the Dionysian tradition.

The study on Hugh of St. Victor is followed by D. Lawell's examination of Thomas Gallus' reception of the *CD*. Thomas Gallus, in Lawell's reading, used many Dionysian texts and occasionally reshaped Dionysius' thought in his works. He used texts from the *CD* relating to angels, simplicity, and the knowledge of and union with the divine, but also other aspects.

W.J. Hankey provides a nuanced story of the *CD*'s reception in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, pointing out the complexities of the reception of Dionysius in that framework. According to Hankey, these men also used other sources in their readings of Dionysius and had a developing focus on the *CD* that influenced western thought and promoted the Christian Platonic tradition.

It would have been an omission if the volume did not contain a chapter on Dante's reception of the *CD.* That topic is covered by M. Edwards. The Italian poet was influenced by Dionysian elements, which were mediated to him by different Latin sources and in this way he further developed the Dionysian tradition.

Another interesting aspect of the Latin history of the *CD* is examined by P. Tyler, who studies the Carthusians and the so-called *Cloud of Unknowing*. As Tyler shows, both of these used the Latin translation of John Sarracenus and the affective interpretation of the *CD*; in this way, these diffused a particular type of Dionysian tradition towards various directions.

The volume also contains a chapter by T. Kobusch on Nicholas of Cusa's reception of Dionysius. Kobusch argues that there are three important doctrines in Nicholas of Cusa's work—the *Complicatio et explicatio*, the *Docta ignorantia* and the *Non aliud*—which can be interpreted against the backdrop of Dionysian thought. This chapter helps the reader to understand one more path of the Christian Platonic heritage in the Western Christian tradition.

M. Edwards is the contributor of one more chapter, this time in collaboration with M. Allen, which discusses the use of the *CD* by Marsilio Ficino. Ficino was a contemporary with humanists and referred to Dionysius as an ancient Christian man and forerunner of the Platonists. According to Edwards and Allen, Ficino had a plan to reconcile philosophical and Christian knowledge. The remarks in this chapter on the critical use of Greek philosophy by Ficino and his devotion to the Christian faith are useful for that to be understood.

Section IV, entitled "Dionysius after the Western European Reformation", traces the influence exerted by the *CD* on many trends of philosophy and theology in modern Europe.

This section begins with D. Robichaud's study, entitled "Valla and Erasmus on the Dionysian Question". This chapter examines historical aspects of the study of the Dionysian question and how the pseudonymity of the *CD* was shown and established by the humanists. It makes clear how the uses of the *CD* as a source changed from the medieval to the modern period.

Another interesting aspect of the modern reception of the *CD*, namely, Luther's approach to Dionysius and the Dionysian tradition, is studied by J. Zachhuber. Zachhuber makes clear that, despite Luther's rebuke of Dionysius, his stance was a reaction to some Catholic uses of Dionysius. He also presents evidence that some of Luther's writings reveal an interest in the mystical side of Dionysian thought.

Zachhuber complements this approach with a second chapter, where he deals with the reception of the *CD* in the later Lutheran tradition. He studies five German authors and points out different kinds of reception of the Dionysian tradition, arguing that, despite hostility to him in that tradition, Dionysius' heritage survived from the beginnings to the more recent stages of the Lutheran tradition.

In the following chapter, A. Louth surveys the reception of the *CD* in the English-speaking world. His survey begins from the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the use of the *CD* in English poetry and ends with readings of the *CD* in the early twentieth century. An interesting aspect of Louth's paper is his discussion of the modern English approach to mysticism as a cultural phenomenon.

The chapter by C. Schäfer, which examines the new stage for modern research paved by Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr, is a shift to the study of more recent reception. These two scholars demonstrated that Dionysius had copied Proclus' work and not the opposite. Despite the fact that their studies led to criticism of the author of the *CD*, this imagery has changed over the past decades and a friendlier view of this author and his use of philosophy has been promoted by many scholars.

Subsequently, in a study entitled "Three Theologians: Dean Inge, Vladimir Lossky, and Von Balthasar", M. Edwards compares three approaches to the *CD* by theologians from different confessions. Dean Inge read the *CD* as a classicist and Anglican theologian, whereas Lossky gave a pivotal position to Dionysius in his attempt to realize a neo-patristic Orthodox theology. Von Balthasar proposed a positive reading of the *CD* through his theological perspective and trends of the Catholic tradition.

"The Reception of Dionysius in Modern Greek Theology and Scholarship" is the title of the chapter by D. Pallis. His study offers a historical and critical overview of the socio-political premises, historical context, and intercultural exchanges that determined and fashioned the development of Greek Dionysian theology and scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth century with particular focus on three modern Greek theologians.

The fourth section of the volume also contains a chapter on the reception of the *CD* in post-modern philosophy, written by T. Knepper. This chapter deals with the French philosophers J. Derrida and J.-L. Marion. Knepper tries to show not only their affinities but also their differences as readers of the *CD*, one of them being Marion's evaluation of the concept of Dionysian hierarchy.

A chapter on Dionysius' "mysticism" by Y. de Andia focuses on many themes of the *CD* that could justify the title "mystic" for Dionysius. She offers insights on the references that Dionysius made to figures such as Hierotheus, Moses, and Paul, but she also discusses how these related to themes of the *CD* such as deification, mystical knowledge of God, and the hierarchical traditions.

This section concludes with a chapter by G. Geréby on Dionysius as a "political theologian". This chapter discusses themes of the *CD* such as eschatology, the divine plan for the nations, and political thought. Geréby shows that Dionysius' use of biblical themes is not secondary in the *CD* and that his philosophy complements these theological themes in a way that could be seen as political and as a theology of history.

In conclusion, *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* is truly useful not only as a working tool for Dionysian scholars but also as a book for a wider readership. It enriches our knowledge of ancient patristic thought and its role in the development of medieval and modern European religious thought and culture. This comprehensive volume will also be useful to scholars who are interested in the history of philosophy and in various theological disciplines.

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