

## II. Christianity

- Greek and Latin Patristics and Orthodox Churches
- Medieval Times and Reformation Era
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### A. Greek and Latin Patristics and Orthodox Churches

**1. Origins.** The beginnings of Christian mysticism (in the 3rd cent. CE) are rooted in the close connection between Platonism and Christianity. They are particularly noticeable in the field of biblical exegesis, where pioneering foundational approaches to Christian mysticism originated with the Alexandrian theologian Origen (d. 254 CE).

Origen was informed by Middle Platonic thought, and was a contemporary of eminent neoplatonists such as Plotinus (d. 270 CE). The neoplatonists postulated that everything ultimately emanates from “the One.” Above all else, the task of the soul on the path of mysticism entails returning to this One. Accordingly, Origen’s commentary on the Song of Solomon describes, among other things, how such a process of return is not to the “One,” but to God, and is undertaken over the course of many steps.

Origen applied the encounter between the bridegroom and the bride in the Song of Solomon not only allegorically to Christ and the Church, but also to the believing soul and Christ, with whom the soul personally meets, the goal being spiritual marriage. The requirement for this union is a kind of inner preparation which must also be manifest in one's everyday life practices. One can thus see in Origen the triad of the mystical path: a coincidence of external practices and internal disposition enable the adherent to cultivate the type of contemplative prayer which ultimately leads to the union of the soul with the divine Word/Logos (prologue to the Song of Songs 3:22–23). After Origen, this idea is picked up time and again by other Christian mystics.

For Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 333–394 CE), mysticism is not merely an incidental product of his scriptural exegesis. Rather, Gregory was the first to work out a type of mystical system. The core idea therein is the enduring unknowability of God. Nevertheless, Gregory sees that there exist possibilities through which human beings may approach the divine. He emphasized an “ontological” relationship between God and humanity as a requirement for divine knowledge. God is reflected through a human's innermost being, but only as a symbol or a likeness, for human language and rationality are not capable of truly grasping God. Only symbolic language, through its imagery, can offer inexhaustible depth of meaning. Human beings must always reach out toward God (cf. Phil 3:13–14) through the varying stages of asceticism and purification even though they will never actually achieve their goal. Furthermore, the church and its sacraments are indispensable on this journey (see, e.g., *De Vita Moysis; Gregorii Nysseni Opera* VII.1:86.11–87.13).

**2. Monastic Mysticism.** Evagrius Ponticus (ca. 345–399 CE), a disciple of Gregory of Nazianzus, can be considered the first to systematize mysticism within Egyptian monasticism. Through him, the teachings of Origen were adapted to a desert existence.

According to Evagrius's writings *Praktikos* and *Gnostikos*, the spiritual path of the monk is essentially divided into three stages. The first stage is that of *hesychia*, or inner peace. The monk comes to it by being in a lonely place, shielding himself from worldly affairs through asceticism. The second stage is the level of the so-called *praktike*. Here the monk no longer fights against external temptations but instead against those within. These temptations arise in the form of the eight *logismoi*, or the thoughts, reflections, or vices which are summarized for the first time by Evagrius. He includes among them gluttony, prostitution, love of mammon, sorrowfulness, wrath, the so-called *akedia* (inner restlessness), the thirst for glory, and pride. Opposing the vices is the Spirit's path of virtues. Guided

by the Spirit, the monk ascends into a state of fearing God, which encourages strict observance of the divine commandments. Moreover, the monk is shaped by wisdom, austerity, patience, and hope. Hope represents the preliminary stage of a journey that aims toward overcoming self-centeredness and cultivating dispassion. After this is achieved, love opens the way to the third stage of *gnosis*, knowledge. Evagrius labeled this as food for the soul. *Gnosis* unites with the “Holy Powers,” to which the human individual has now become almost equal: the individual is now dispassionate, and therefore liberated from all ideas and concerns. Evagrius calls this state of being *theoria* or even *theologia*.

**3. Pseudo-Dionysius The so called Areopagite.** Neoplatonism continued to have a strong impact on mystical concepts. Traces of Neoplatonism can be found as far back as Augustine (354–430 CE), as seen in his *Confessions*. Sophisticated mystical concepts, however, were more likely developed in the Greek East. In the 5th century, the traditional writings transmitted under the pseudonym of Dionysius became central to the further development of mysticism. These succeeded in systematizing previous ideas concerning mysticism and incorporating them logically into the neoplatonic worldview. The starting point in the thinking of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (cf. Acts 17:34) is the neoplatonic opposite of the world of diversity, as reflected in the diversity of human concepts, and the “One” out of which this world ultimately emerged (“emanated”). This condition can be reversed, as it were, by contemplation. The path of contemplation is inevitably a spiritual one: Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite, like Gregory of Nyssa, can thus speak of ascension, for God is the darkness beyond the light. (*De mystica theologia* 1.1; *Corpus Dionysiacum* 2.142.1–2). Hence, for Pseudo-Dionysius, mysticism ultimately leads to a conceptually incomprehensible mystery. The *mysteria* (the Greek term for the church sacraments) thereby enable the achievement of that which language and terminology cannot – they succeed in removing complexity.

Through the sacraments, God becomes tangible in a way that transcends conceptual apprehension: it is therefore appropriate to speak of God as *beyond good, beyond the divine*, etc. (see *De divinis nominibus* 2.3; *Corpus Dionysiacum* 1.125.14–126.2). This is most successfully conveyed in the form of the liturgical hymn. As such, the treatises of Pseudo-Dionysius have something of a prayerful nature, instantiating the return to God that they describe. However, this cannot entirely succeed in a cathartic (or “positive”) sense. On the contrary, to speak about God is to speak in the sense of the *via negativa*. According to Pseudo-Dionysius, by renouncing conceptual understanding through this “negative” mode of speaking, human beings are able to achieve a state of ecstasy. In this ecstatic

state, the soul stands outside the individual, ready and able to instead unify with God (see *De divinis nominibus* 13.3; 4.13; *Corpus Dionysiacum* 1.230.4–5; 1.158.19).

By pointing to the possibility of ecstasy, Pseudo-Dionysius opens up a trans-rational method of knowing God through rational means, in a three-step process that moves from purification (*katharsis*) to enlightenment (*photismos*) culminating in perfection (*teleiosis*) or union (*enosis*). This individual process, intended as a stepladder is supported by the sacraments of the earthly church. Consequently, the distinctiveness of Pseudo-Dionysian thought is found in this marked unity between philosophical system, the church sacraments, and the Bible, all of which come together to open up the mystical encounter with God.

**4. John Climacus.** Formative for the further development of mysticism in the Orthodox Church was the author John Climacus (ca. 525–ca. 603 CE), also called Sinaites, who interpreted the metaphor of the ladder of ascension to God in an extreme way.

Ultimately, Climacus's ladder of ascension is about a return to the original human image. Humanity should become just as it was originally created – the likeness or image of God. In this way, the *mystagogy* plays a central role as a spiritual accompaniment. Another goal of mystical practice for John Climacus is detachment or apathy, which ultimately leads to the love of God. For Climacus, this union with God happens, above all else, in prayer. In prayer, human beings are wholly with God (cf. *scal.* 28.1). Climacus thus developed the first approaches to a prayer practice of inner peace, the *Hesychia* (see *scal.* 28.21), which – among other prayers in Step 28.20 – is very close to the Prayer of the Heart found in the Eastern Church. It found particularly strong reception, characteristic of the Orthodox Churches, in Gregory Palamas's *Hesychasm*.

In the thought of John Climacus, mysticism moves beyond monasticism, and finds life independent of concrete social forms. Even the role of the Spiritual Father (= *mystagogue*), who originally accompanied hermits in particular on their mystical path, can be generally integrated into all life forms. Climacus's *Klimax* has become the most widely-used devotional book in the Eastern Church tradition, alongside the sayings of the Desert Fathers.

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Andreas Müller