

Athens and Jerusalem Redux

Monastic Mystical Discourse and the Rule of Faith

Daniel H. Spencer

ABSTRACT In this essay, I evaluate the extent to which some currents in classical Christian mysticism might count as properly “Christian” against the rules of faith and theological methodology of thinkers like Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr. I begin by expounding this methodology as it relates to non-Christian philosophical traditions, and from there explore the rules these thinkers offer, suggesting that the beating heart of these rules is not a string of propositions to affirm so much as it is a commitment to a certain rendition of biblical narrative grammar. After exploring this grammar, I turn to a brief discussion of the foundations of Christian mysticism and the thought of Evagrius Ponticus. The aim here is to illustrate the theoretical foundations of much Christian mysticism, as well as to provide a test case to evaluate how far some prominent elements of this discourse might, or might not, cohere with the biblical narrative grammar elucidated above. I argue that there is ample room to question the legitimacy of Evagrius’s claim to properly Christian theorizing, and suggest this has serious implications for future Christian work in the philosophy of mysticism.

KEYWORDS biblical narrative grammar; Evagrius Ponticus; Irenaeus; Justin Martyr; mysticism; rule of faith; Tertullian

✉ Daniel H. Spencer, St Mary’s College, The School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, Fife, United Kingdom
✉ DSpencer@churchofscotland.org.uk ☎ 0000-0003-1413-2904

©  FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM 28 (2023) no. 1, 99–126
ISSN 1426-1898 E-ISSN 2353-7043

SUBM. 14 December 2022 ACC. 20 February 2023
DOI:10.35765/forphil.2023.2801.06

INTRODUCTION

“What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?” In posing these famous questions in *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, Tertullian sought above all else to discourage the adoption of a Christianity conditioned by the patterns and norms of pagan philosophy, and to encourage instead a Christianity which, though certainly informable by such philosophical paradigms, possesses an authority, coherence, and epistemic base of its own, and ultimately stands in judgement over even the greatest representatives of merely human wisdom. Now, there is much in contemporary analytic Christian philosophy that may be understood as tacit exploration of Tertullian’s question, at least as it relates to particular components of the Christian faith—say, the divine nature, moral theology, or theological anthropology.¹ When the same question is applied to the nature and significance of mystical experience, however, the landscape is decidedly bare; indeed, there is precious little in the way of Christian philosophical engagement with mysticism at all.² Nor, I would suggest, is this merely an academic shortcoming on the part of recent Christian scholarship; as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere (Spencer 2021, 2022), so momentous are the potential ramifications of these debates that this relative non-engagement might well constitute a vocational failure on the part of Christian philosophy.³ Having in the past sufficiently justified Christian philosophical engagement with mysticism, and comparative mysticism in particular, then, I shall here address some of the basic issues raised in this arena against the backdrop of Tertullian’s penetrating question. I aim to show that, should we consider the nature of Christianity in this light, there may be strong *prima facie* reason to question how far some currents in classical Christian mysticism truly merit the designation “Christian.”

1. Providing an exhaustive bibliography is of course impossible here. For some examples, however, see, on the divine nature: (Hasker 1994; Stump 2016; Duby 2022); on moral theology: (Levering 2008; Dunnington 2018); on theological anthropology: (Moreland and Craig 2017, chs. 11–16; Farris 2017; Farris and Taliaferro, eds. 2017).

2. The most notable exception is Michael Stoeber (see, e.g., [1994]); also worthy of mention are Nelson Pike (1992) and William Alston (1993). Helpful discussions of philosophical engagement with mysticism from non-philosophers may be sought in (McGinn 1991, 291–326) and (D’Costa 2010, 342–343).

3. Unless, that is, Pierre Mandonnet was right that “Christian Philosophy” refers to nothing more than “Christians who engage in philosophy,” in which case there would be no vocation to fail. McInerny (2006, 94) is right, though: this is surely a “flat-footed” approach to Christian philosophy.

To reach this conclusion (which, by the way, I may not ultimately agree with), I shall proceed in three stages. First, I shall spell out what I think early Christian philosopher-theologians like Tertullian, Irenaeus, Justin, and others had in mind when they appealed to a *regula fidei* as the standard for authentic Christian designation over against the presumed heterodoxy of their rivals. I want to suggest that the centerpiece of these early *regulae* is doxastic commitment to a very definite understanding of both the historical Jesus and the larger historical-theological narrative the former presupposes, what I call the *dominical micronarrative* (*dmn*) and *biblical metanarrative* (*BMN*), respectively. The propositional content issuing from this narrative grammar, I submit, is approximately what Tertullian understands by “Jerusalem” and “Church” in his question. Next, I shall turn to a brief investigation of the theoretical underpinnings of what may fairly be considered the mainstream of the Christian mystical tradition, followed by a lengthier illustration of how these have played out in the case of one prominent, early Christian mystic (sc. Evagrius Ponticus). My focus here will be on the ways in which *dmn* and *BMN* may be stretched, ignored, reinterpreted, or sometimes downright contradicted when other—particularly Greek—philosophical frames of reference dominate the theoretical horizon in Christian mystical discourse. This will in turn lead to the suggestion that, at least at first glance, there is reason to suspect friction, if not incompatibility, between various aspects of biblical narrative grammar as conceived by the early Fathers and the monastic, contemplative ideal typified by writers like Evagrius.⁴

THE RULE OF FAITH AND BIBLICAL NARRATIVE GRAMMAR

Tertullian

Taken in isolation, one might worry that Tertullian’s Athens/Jerusalem question implies a blanket condemnation of all philosophizing on the part of Christians. As he himself vociferates at the end of the same chapter, “We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquiry after

4. Let me say explicitly that this paper makes no argument for the normativity of the sort of Christianity envisioned by the early apologists; the far more modest claim to be sustained throughout rather takes the form of a conditional: if these thinkers are right about the basic nature of Christianity and its relation to pagan philosophical traditions, then we would have reason to doubt the appropriateness of Christian ascription in the case of various mystical writers (or, indeed, vice versa). Put otherwise, the theological vision of these early apologists and that of a mystic like Evagrius may be incompatible at their very foundations—and this will have implications for how we proceed when Christian philosophers do take up the task of saying what Christian philosophy is.

possessing the gospel. With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our first belief, that there is nothing we should believe besides” (Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 7; henceforth abbreviated *De Prae.*).⁵ Couple this with some admittedly extreme-sounding language elsewhere in the chapter—Christ as confounder of philosophic wisdom, St. Paul as watchdog against philosophical intrusion—and it is little wonder Tertullian has sometimes been seen as rather suspect in Christian philosophy. The wider context of both this chapter and *De Praescriptione* as a whole, however, tells strongly against the sort of ultra-fideistic austerity some might like to ascribe to the African Father (see: Amesbury 2022, intro., 2.1). After spending the first several chapters discussing the scriptural anticipation of heresy and its purpose in the divine economy, Tertullian appeals in chapter six to the etymology of the Greek *hairesis*, used by Paul in 1 Cor. 11:19, Gal. 5:20, and Tit. 3:10, to showcase the essence of his theological program vis-à-vis heterodox varieties of Christian expression: at base, falling into heresy is a matter of self-will, a personal choice to recognize a theological authority other than that handed down from the apostles. This apostolic appeal, I would suggest, is the beating heart of Tertullian’s fulminations against secular philosophy in the succeeding chapter and elsewhere.

Tertullian’s aim, then, is not the proscription of philosophizing *tout court*, but rather the discouragement of adopting a Christianity whose basic narrative contours are decided by any non-apostolic tradition, no matter how profound, influential, or even correct. His point is definitional as much as it is apologetic: insofar as *Stoicum et Platonicum et dialecticum christianismum* begin their formulations from their respective philosophical frames of reference and operate therein, the designation “Christian” is fundamentally misguided. Valentinus, he pronounces, takes Plato as his theological point of departure and Marcion the speculation of the Stoics, while—significantly—he considers denial of the resurrection of the flesh (*carnis*) in Christian theology to be a product of *omnium philosophorum schola*. Jettisoning the teaching of the apostles as the norming norm for basic Christian demarcation, the result is a “mottled Christianity” which, by taking its cue from the “material of the world’s wisdom,” joins the great pagan philosophers in rashly—and mistakenly—interpreting “the nature and the dispensation of God.”⁶

5. *Nobis curiositate opus non est post Christum Iesum nec inquisitione post euangelium. Cum credimus, nihil desideramus ultra credere. Hoc enim prius credimus non esse quod ultra credere debeamus.* For all Latin references in Tertullian I rely on (Tertullian, *Traité*).

6. All references in this paragraph are taken from (*De Prae.*, 7).

Tertullian does, of course, appeal to a *regula fidei* which is understood to be, in summary form, the assured deposit of authentic Christian teaching. In chapter 13 we are explicitly given this rule; for Tertullian, for something to count as authentic Christianity it must profess, at minimum:

- (1) One God who creates the universe *ex nihilo* through his Word;
- (2) This Word, God's Son, was seen by the patriarchs and heard by the prophets, and was made man, being born as Jesus, the Christ, to the Virgin Mary;⁷
- (3) This Jesus preached a new law and the Kingdom of God, and worked miracles;
- (4) He was crucified, rose from the dead on the third day, and ascended to the right hand of the Father;
- (5) The Holy Spirit was then sent to believers;
- (6) Jesus will come again in glory;
- (7) The saints and wicked alike will be resurrected, the former to everlasting life with Christ, the latter to everlasting fire.

From what we have said, however, it should be clear that it is not the rule itself which commands respect so much as it is the source of this rule. For Tertullian, the legitimacy of insisting on (1)–(7) depends vitally on its apostolic authority. And, as he makes plain throughout *De Praescriptione*, the apostolic witness is itself to be esteemed on the eminently reasonable grounds that its authority derives from the teaching of Jesus himself (see 13, 20, 21, 37). The claim being advanced is therefore an unmistakably historical claim such that it can, at least in theory, be investigated by the historian. But if Tertullian is right that his *regula* may be traced back to the historical Jesus, then this doctrinal procession spells disaster for any nominally Christian theological or philosophical project that is not doxastically committed to his rule. For, in this case, the project in question will fail actually to engage Jesus Christ himself—a serious concern indeed.

Now, were this interplay between a *regula fidei*, apostolic authority, and the consequent elaboration of authentic Christian narrative grammar merely an idiosyncrasy of one comparatively prickly theological figure, it might be easy enough to dismiss. When we survey other prominent early Christian literature, however, we find that Tertullian took a fairly mainstream approach when it comes to the question of defining Christianity,

7. This second point is probably worth underscoring, as it is the only component of this rule which explicitly pertains to what Christians have come to call the Old Testament. In chapter 36, we seem to have an expansion on this tenet of the Christian faith: “the law and the prophets she [the church] unites in one volume with the writings of evangelists and apostles, from which she drinks in her faith” (see: 8).

and, more particularly, distinguishing Christianity from the best pagan philosophy had to offer. The works of Irenaeus and Justin Martyr in particular dovetail nicely with Tertullian's program; we shall begin with Irenaeus.

Irenaeus

While his timeless *Adversus Haereses* (henceforth abbreviated *AH*) deals in the main with gnosticism in its various manifestations, the bishop of Lyons does not disdain the opportunity to revile the pretensions of the great Greek philosophers where appropriate. In his denunciation of Valentinian retrieval of prior philosophical speculation, Irenaeus rather boldly associates philosophers with those who are "ignorant of God," citing by name Thales, Anaximander, and Anaxagoras as three such cases in point (*AH*, II.14.1; see: II.14.4, 7). Contra the boasting of the gnostics, he says, it is Democritus, Epicurus, and Plato himself who are the true inventors of the "imaginary fictions" the Valentinians merely commandeered to become their perverse theological agenda (*AH*, II.14.2). Aristotelian "hairsplitting," too, is implicitly reproached (*AH*, II.14.5), as is Pythagorean theogony (*AH*, II.14.6) and Empedoclean cosmology (*AH*, II.14.4).⁸ It is the Stoics, however, along with "all that are ignorant of God, poets and historians alike," that are subjected to the acme of the bishop's peaceable scorn. And for good reason, for, in diametric opposition to one of the more prominent themes of Irenaean thought, the Stoics opine

that everything of necessity passes away to those things out of which they maintain it was also formed, and that God is the slave of this necessity, so that He cannot impart immortality to what is mortal, or bestow incorruption on what is corruptible, but every one passes into a substance similar in nature to itself... They assert that God himself can do no otherwise. (*AH*, II.14.4)

Nor, it goes without saying, does Irenaeus merely intend to critique the Valentinians for their reappropriation of Greek philosophy. Irenaeus drives home this point with considerable rhetorical effect:

Did all those [philosophers] who have been mentioned, with whom you [Valentinians] have been proved to coincide in expression, know, or not know, the truth? If they knew it, then the descent of the Saviour into this world was superfluous. For why [then] did He descend? Was it that He might bring that

8. Empedocles is here represented, along with Plato and Anaxagoras, as affirming the creation of the world out of pre-existent matter.

truth which was [already] known to the knowledge of those who knew it? If, on the other hand, these men did *not* know it, then how is it that, while you express yourselves in the same terms as do those who knew not the truth, you boast that yourselves alone possess that knowledge which is above all things, although they who are ignorant of God [also] possess it? (*AH*, II.14.7)

This passage makes Irenaeus's thinking about the relationship between Christianity and the best of Greek philosophy abundantly clear, forcing upon the reader a blunt either-or.⁹ Either these philosophical elites have come to know the ultimate truths about God, the cosmos, and human beings, or they have not. If they have, the Christian faith is otiose, at best simply reinforcing what several gifted thinkers have already ascertained for themselves. If they have not, however, then their inquiries into the ultimate nature and meaning of things are fruitless, and the answers to these riddles must be sought elsewhere. For Irenaeus, then, to concede to Greek wisdom the ability to uncover the deepest truths of human (and indeed, cosmic) existence is *ipso facto* to sap Christianity of all its vitality. Conversely, to affirm the uniqueness and finality of the Christian revelation just is to adjudge even the brightest of pagan philosophical lights comparatively dim indeed.¹⁰

To see why this is the case, it is helpful to consider what precisely Irenaeus understands by "Christianity." Like his younger contemporary Tertullian, Irenaeus, too, appeals at several junctures to a *regula fidei* to mark out authentic Christian identity. Slightly different versions of this rule may be found scattered throughout *Adversus Haereses*, as well as at the beginning of his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (henceforth abbreviated *Dem.*).¹¹ In the former, Irenaeus, having turned from exposition and critique

9. Irenaeus will later apply the same reasoning to the case of Jews who deny God's revelation in Jesus: "But the advent of the Lord will appear superfluous and useless," he says, "if He did indeed come intending to tolerate and to preserve each man's idea regarding God rooted in him from of old" (*AH*, III.12.6).

10. The other potentially relevant passages from *Adversus Haereses* are: II.32.2 where the way of Jesus is tacitly deemed incompatible with that of Epicurus and the Cynics; III.4.2 where Christians, though *barbari* according to tongue (i.e., non-Greek), "as regards [a most un-Greek!] doctrine, manner, and tenor of life ... very wise indeed"; III.25.1 where he concedes that "certain of the gentiles, who were less addicted to [sensual] allurements and voluptuousness," may have been moved by providence to approximate some knowledge of God—but even then only slightly; and III.25.5 where Plato is said to be "more religious" than the Marcionites on account of his refusal to divide God in two. Obviously this compliment cannot mean too much given Irenaeus's opinion of Marcion and his followers.

11. Two fragments from his lost writings are also useful in excavating this aspect of Irenaeus's thought. In Fragment 36 he declares with St. Paul that "true knowledge" looks to Christ

of various gnostic doctrines in books one and two, attempts in book three to expose the unbridgeable chasm separating apostolic and biblical teaching from that of the heretics (see esp. pref. to III). The appeal to the apostles is theoretically twofold: there is, on the one hand, the idea of apostolic succession, whereby “that tradition which originates from the apostles ... is preserved by means of the succession of presbyters in the Church” (*AH*, III.2.2; see: III.3; IV.26.2, 5; IV.32.1; V.20.1), and, on the other, the extant writings of those apostles—viz., what we would call (the vast majority of) the New Testament.¹² This secondary invocation of apostolic authority, then, is subsumed under the wider category of biblical teaching, without question Irenaeus’s weapon of choice in his struggle against the gnostics.

We need not determine at present whether it is Irenaeus’s reading of scripture which determines his rule, or his rule which determines the correct interpretation of scripture (see: O’Regan 2001, 161); what is germane for our purposes here is that Irenaeus certainly believes that proper biblical interpretation coincides with the propositional content expressed in his rule, that his rule and the teaching of the historical apostles are one (see: *Dem.*, 3; Fragment 36). Hence, his “sober, literal” (O’Regan 2001, 161), “apostolic” (*AH*, IV.32.1) style of reading scripture will yield his rule, “the foundation of [the faith] and the stability of our conversation” (*Dem.*, 6) which is believed by all the apostolic churches (*AH*, I.10.2):

- (1) There is one God and Father, maker of all things through his Word (the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob);
- (2) This Word, God’s Son, was made man, being born as Jesus, the Christ, to the Virgin Mary;
- (3) He suffered death, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven;
- (4) The Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied, was poured out in a new way to believers;
- (5) Jesus will come again in glory;
- (6) The whole human race will be judged and resurrected in the flesh, some to everlasting life, some to everlasting fire.¹³

crucified—the wisdom of God set forth in scripture and handed down through the apostles. Fragment 52 reads half like the end of a homily, and half like an expansion of the Christological component of a pithier *regula fidei*. Perhaps someday we will have a clearer idea what Irenaeus intends here.

12. In *Adversus Haereses* he fails to quote only the minor books Philem., 2 Pet., 3 John, and Jude, and clearly considers the other 23 to be part of “scripture.”

13. An amalgam of the material found in *AH*, I.3.6; I.10.1; I.22.1; III.1.2; III.4.2; III.11.1; V.20.1 (esp. I.10.1 and III.4.2) and *Dem.*, 3–6.

Why, then, does Irenaeus view Christianity as inherently rivalrous to the leading Greek philosophical traditions? Answer: because the basic narrative structure of Christianity is controlled by a handful of thoroughly Jewish believers in the universal Lordship and divine identity of a crucified man from Nazareth.¹⁴ This is the starting point for all genuinely Christian theological and philosophical thinking. The expected Greco-Roman philosophical response to the doctrinal content implicit in this rule, this “barbaric” story of God, cosmos, and human beings, is captured nicely by the second-century writer Celsus: it can be believed only by “foolish and low individuals, and persons devoid of perception, and slaves, and women, and children” (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III.49).¹⁵ According to Irenaeus, too, then, a Platonic, Stoic, or dialectical Christianity is something of an oxymoron. By all means employ the tools of these philosophers in service of biblical narrative grammar; subordinate the apostolically determined biblical story to the narrative grammar operative in one of these philosophical traditions, however, and the Christian faith itself is forfeited. Whatever plausibility such a “mottled Christianity” might possess is, for Irenaeus, due to a meta-lectic re-rendering of the biblical narrative—an undressing and redressing, deformation and reformation, of apostolic and scriptural teaching.¹⁶ Such a “Christianity” merits not tolerance, clemency, or a celebration of ecclesial diversity, but rather detection and overthrow (see *AH*, I.pref.2).¹⁷

Justin Martyr

The work of Justin Martyr is particularly instructive for our purposes, insofar as Justin presents himself as both philosopher and convert to Christianity from Greek philosophy at one and the same time. The opening

14. The possibility of Luke’s being a gentile does not vitiate the point—clearly Luke’s understanding of Jesus (Luke) and the early church (Acts) takes this narrative grammar for granted. See (Rowe 2016, 112–142); to the objection that the Acts 17 scene at the Areopagus bespeaks an apostolic assimilation to Greek thought, Rowe replies deftly: “Though modern interpreters have long considered the scene in Athens to be a placid philosopher’s dialogue, the ancients would have read it differently... . Paul’s appearance before the court of the Areopagus is a trial. Luke’s Paul is enough of a rhetor to combine a skillful avoidance of the capital charge—bringing in strange deities, as did Socrates—with a comprehensive critique of pagan ‘piety’ as ‘superstitious’ idolatry. Turning to the God who is now newly known in Athens would in fact expose the city as a place ‘full of idols’ rather than of wisdom.” (136–137). In a note (n58, 288) he further observes Luke here “plays on the term *deisidaimonia*, which can mean at once both ‘exceptionally religious/pious’ and ‘exceptionally superstitious.’”

15. See the sneering response to Paul’s oration in Acts 17:32.

16. For more on Valentinian metalepsis, see (O’Regan 2001).

17. This is, of course, the full title of Irenaeus’s work: *On the Detection and Overthrow of the Falsely Called Gnosis* (Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπή τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνῶσεως).

chapters of his *Dialogue with Trypho* (henceforth abbreviated *Dial.*) reveal a number of important components of Justin's self-conception vis-à-vis pagan philosophical traditions. Indeed, the central thrust of Justin's lengthy conversation is articulated in some of the first words he utters: "in what," he asks the Jew Trypho, "would you be profited by [Greek] philosophy so much as by your own lawgiver and the prophets?" When Trypho replies that it is the duty of philosophy to "investigate the Deity," Justin agrees, but observes that the foremost philosophers have either (a) simply not thought deeply about God or (b) thought wrongly about God, providence, the nature of the soul, and judgement (*Dial.*, 1). This verdict, we are given to understand, is established primarily by Justin's commitment to standard Jewish and Christian views about these subjects, as is both presently implied and more fully elaborated in the following chapters.

And Justin speaks as one qualified to pronounce on such matters. In chapter 2 of the *Dialogue* he recounts his sampling of various major philosophical schools, driven by the desire to discover the truth about God: he enrolls first under the tutelage of a certain Stoic and, having been disappointed by the latter's ignorance of and frank disinterest in searching out the divine, elects instead to follow a Peripatetic who himself is found deeply off-putting. After an unsuccessful interview with a renowned Pythagorean, Justin settles finally on the Platonists and—according to his own account anyway—makes considerable progress towards the Platonic goal of "seeing God."¹⁸ And, pre-conversion, he certainly does sound like an informed Platonist: he agrees that philosophy alone is able to generate *eudaimonia*, and defines philosophy as "the knowledge of that which is" (*Dial.*, 3.4).¹⁹ As for God, he is appropriately styled "that which always maintains the same nature, and in the same manner, and is the cause of all other things" (*Dial.*, 3.5), and genuine knowledge—more, beholding—of God is attainable through the exercise of a purified *nous* (*Dial.*, 3.7; 4.1–2; 4.5).²⁰ The soul (*psyche*) itself, Justin affirms, is "divine and immortal" (though merely a "part" of "that royal *nous*") (*Dial.*, 4.2), and when set free from the body may all the more easily see God (*Dial.*, 4.5)—unless, of course, it be judged unworthy, in which case it will transmigrate into the body of a wild animal (*Dial.*, 4.6).

18. ... αὐτίκα κατόψεσθαι τὸν θεόν· τοῦτο γὰρ τέλος τῆς Πλάτωνος φιλοσοφίας ("seeing God—for this is the goal of Plato's philosophy" [*Dial.*, 2.3]). For all Greek references in Justin's *Dialogue* I rely on (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue avec Tryphon*).

19. Φιλοσοφία ... ἐπιστήμη ἐστὶ τοῦ ὄντος.

20. As we shall see, it is precisely this Platonic claim (which Justin renounces) that will prove so central to much in the monastic mystical tradition.

But Justin is promptly disabused of these Platonic convictions.²¹ The old man who occasions Justin's conversion fairly easily persuades him that, emphatically contra Plato, while "souls (*psychai*) cannot in fact see God, they *can* perceive (*noein*) he exists and that "righteousness and piety are honorable" (*Dial.*, 4.7).²² Within no time, the old man has Justin convinced that the Hebrew prophets "alone both saw and announced the truth to men" (*Dial.*, 7.1) and that he who reads them is supremely "helped in his knowledge of the *arche* and *telos* of things" (*Dial.*, 7.2). No longer a Platonist, Justin considers that the ultimate existential truths must come from above and not from within; and since truth itself has come down, first through the prophets and once and for all in the incarnation of God's Son, Justin makes so bold as to declare Christianity to be the one true philosophy over against the philosophy so-called of the Greeks: "This philosophy alone," he proclaims, is "secure and profitable" (*Dial.*, 7.1). In a final flourish bordering on the impertinent he sets his seal: "If you have any concern for yourself ... become acquainted with the Christ of God, and after being initiated, *genomeno eudaimonein*" (*Dial.*, 8.2).²³ In a word, there is now for Justin no true account of the *arche* and *telos* of created things save for that revealed by God and his Christ. "The one who is born again owes no human being anything, but owes [his] divine Teacher everything." These words of Kierkegaard (1985, 19) might have been uttered by Justin himself (see: *1 Apol.*, 23).²⁴

21. The question of whether the old man's arguments are compelling need not detain us here. For Justin they patently are, and one can't help but detect in Justin's presentation of the old man's effortless triumph a strong undertone of (perhaps overconfident) derision. Clearly Justin wishes to underscore the opening words of chapters five and six: "These philosophers know nothing about these things" (*Dial.*, 5.1); "It makes no matter to me whether Plato or Pythagoras, or, in short, any other man held such opinions" (*Dial.*, 6.1). See also: (*Dial.*, 5.6): "Did such [a simple argument] escape the observation of Plato and Pythagoras, those wise men, who have been as a wall and fortress of philosophy to us?"

22. By Platonic standards, this judgement must be deemed almost obscenely insufficient. As Justin has already made clear, for Plato *nous* is that by virtue of which the human being is capable of attaining the highest end, viz., beholding God. Not only is the attainment of this end now removed from the sphere of natural human possibility, but the function of *nous* now appears to be reduced to mere propositional beholding. It is in effect a twofold wallop: (1) no one has (can?) ever seen God (see: Jn. 1:18: Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε); (2) the role of *nous* is to understand certain things about God, not to see him. Justin's concession of the old man's statement thus indicates he understands the Platonic quest to be misguided to begin with: "the *telos* of Plato's philosophy" (2.6) is doubly impossible to attain!

23. A transparently intentional snub of Greco-Roman philosophical pretensions: only philosophers are supposed to achieve *eudaimonia* (see 3.4).

24. Some pushback may justifiably come in light of some of Justin's words in his two *Apolo-*
gies. In *1 Apol.*, 46, for instance, he makes the stunning claim that all those who have lived in

Now, Justin does not articulate a *regula fidei* as explicitly and self-consciously as do Tertullian and Irenaeus. Nevertheless, at least twice in his *Dialogue* and once in his *First Apology* we are given something approximating a bona fide rule, that is, a pithy statement of the doxastic concomitants of becoming “acquainted with the Christ of God” (*Dial.*, 8.2). If we take these together, Justin’s (proto-)rule may be represented as follows:

1. Jesus Christ is the Son of the true God, the first-born of every creature;
2. This Jesus became man, being born to the Virgin Mary;
3. He suffered, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died;
4. He rose again in the flesh and ascended into heaven to reign;
5. He will come again to judge all men, bestowing immortality upon believers.²⁵

For Justin, this is bare-bones Christianity, if you like. There is, as we shall see presently, far more at play under the surface of these bald dominical statements, but, at base, affirming (1)–(5) is sufficient for Justin to mark one out as a genuine Christian believer. Adherents of the various Greek philosophical traditions will struggle to affirm these, for to do so would strain the very narrative structure which gives these traditions their coherence. Consequently, according to Justin, one is either a Christian, or else a Platonist, Pythagorean, Stoic, Peripatetic, and so on—a partisan of a merely human (and therefore inherently deficient) philosophical tradition if taken as one’s ultimate theoretical or existential authority. Whatever Christianity is, it is not for Justin reducible to the tenets of another philosophical system, nor is it beholden to such immanently devised narrative grammar as we there encounter. “Our doctrines,” Justin concludes, “are not shameful ... but are indeed more lofty than all human philosophy” (*2 Apol.*, 15).

conformity with the Logos are really Christians; among the Greeks he enumerates Socrates and Heraclitus; similarly in *2 Apol.*, 8 we are told that the *sperma tou Logou* dwelt in such men as (again) Heraclitus and Musonius Rufus. But this should not be taken to undermine the point Justin has laboured to establish in *Dial.*, namely, that Christianity is alone the true philosophy; after all, there is much in pagan philosophy which is compatible with Christian teaching. More to the point, however, the Apology genre should be taken into consideration: Justin writes an appeal as a representative of a persecuted entity to a Greco-Roman audience (viz., the emperor, Antoninus Pius); provocation would hardly suit his purposes! In any case, in both Apologies Justin does endorse essentially the same position as we find in the *Dialogue*: so in *1 Apol.*, 20, “on some points we teach the same things as the poets and philosophers whom you honour, and on other points are fuller and more divine in our teaching,” and in his concluding remarks in *2 Apol.*, 15, “our doctrines are not shameful, according to a sober judgment, but are indeed more lofty than all human philosophy.”

25. A combination of *Dial.*, 85 and 132; *1 Apol.*, 42. This proto-rule could be filled out slightly more were we more confident of the authenticity of *On the Resurrection* (see [1]).

Biblical Narrative Grammar

It would, of course, be very easy simply to note the basic propositional unity across the three *regulae* we have considered. But it would also, I believe, be quite point-missing: as I have argued throughout, Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Justin are patently less concerned with the rules themselves as they are both the source of these rules, as well as the fundamental narrative grammar they presuppose. This is why, again, Tertullian frequently appeals to the communicational relay from God the Father, through Christ the Son to the apostles and apostolic churches; this is why all three emphasize the paramount importance of straightforward Old and New Testament exegesis in orthodox theologizing. And this is (part of) why *Adversus Haereses* and *Dialogue with Trypho* are notoriously tedious reading: their authors painstakingly steer the reader through the minutiae of Old Testament narrative and prophecy with the aim of demonstrating that, unless Christianity is understood as essentially embedded within the Jewish story of creation, covenant, rebellion, and promised renewal, it is not to be understood at all. What unites the three surveyed thinkers at the most fundamental level, then, is not their commitment to certain summary beliefs about God and Jesus (which, of course, they do share), but rather their commitment to a biblical narrative grammar which supplies these beliefs with their basic shape and coherence, and without which they make little sense.

My proposal, then, is this. Behind and, indeed, logically supporting these ancient *regulae* is a more fundamental commitment to a biblical narrative grammar which itself may be separated conceptually into two elemental parts. There is, on the one hand, the propositional content surrounding Jesus of Nazareth qua bedrock of the early Christian movement—that he was born of a Virgin, preached a “new law” and the eschatological Kingdom of God, was God’s messiah, suffered death, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven—we may call this the dominical micronarrative; and there is, on the other hand, the larger Jewish narrative of creation and redemption which this dominical micronarrative theoretically presupposes—call this the biblical metanarrative. As I explain elsewhere (Spencer 2023, 168), for these thinkers

[this dominical micronarrative] itself stands or falls with the general [biblical] metanarrative of which it is the climax. Narrative coherence and believability here cut both ways: without a particular biblical metanarrative which affirms, say, the historical election of Israel by Yahweh and their long-term interactions, the micronarrative consisting of Jesus’ Kingdom proclamation, healing ministry, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension is meaningless;

without this dominical micronarrative, there is little reason to [be concerned] at all with Jesus or any biblical metanarrative of which he is no longer a part.

When, therefore, in Tertullian's famous question we hear "Jerusalem" and "Church," what is meant is not a sociological entity of self-described Christians irrespective of creed, nor even the aggregate mass of professors of a simple rule of faith without qualification; what is meant, rather, is the body of people who take their doxastic (and only then existential) cue from the dominical micronarrative and biblical metanarrative—those, that is, who commit themselves ontologically to biblical narrative grammar, a thoroughly Jewish story of creation and redemption in Christ.²⁶

Once we step behind the rigidity and propositional flatness of the *regulae* and open our horizons to the more foundational biblical narrative grammar operating under the surface, we discover at once the total concurrence of thought between Tertullian, Irenaeus, Justin, and others²⁷ with more primitive streams still of early Christian discourse. Among the apostolic fathers, commitment to the supremacy of biblical narrative grammar is rather explicit and found at every turn. Clement of Rome, whose entire epistle to the Corinthians is essentially a sustained treatment of the moral lessons to be drawn from a literal rendition of biblical redemption history, is merely the most obvious example. The epistles of Ignatius, too, evince deep indebtedness to this narrative grammar, among which we find, incidentally, a number of proto-*regulae* that tally nicely with what we investigated above (see *Eph.*, 6–7; *Mag.*, 11; *Tral.*, 9; *Smyr.*, 1–2),²⁸ and in Polycarp

26. Though, as N.T. Wright urges, the early church's deep, worldview-level continuities with second temple Judaism should not blind us to the radical originality of the dominical proclamation (see 1992, 371–443). This originality, however, consists not in a denial of central elements of mainstream Judaism but rather in the "retelling of the basic Jewish story focused now on Jesus" (1992, 417; emphasis mine).

27. E.g., Aristides, Tatian, Hippolytus, as well as the author of the stunning *Epistle to Diognetus* (this "pupil of the apostles" [11] says: "Before his advent, who among mankind had any notion at all of what God is? Or do you accept the vapid and ludicrous suggestions of your own pretentious philosophers? ... It is He Himself who has given us the revelation of Himself" [8]; "It is not an earthly discovery that is entrusted to [Christians]. The thing they guard so jealously is no product of mortal thinking, and what has been committed to them is the stewardship of no human mysteries" [7]).

28. For Ignatius's most explicit commendation of what we have called the dominical micronarrative and biblical metanarrative, see *Phil.*, 5 and esp. 9: "[Christ] is the doorway to the Father, and it is by Him that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the prophets go in, no less than the Apostles and the whole Church ... Nevertheless, the Gospel has a distinction all its own, in the advent of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and His Passion and Resurrection. We are fond of the prophets, and they did indeed point forward to Him in their preaching; yet it is the Gospel that sets the coping-stone on man's immortality" (but see: too *Smyr.*, 7).

we witness an element of circumspection with regard to Greek philosophy (among other things) on the grounds that it pays insufficient attention to what we have called the dominical micronarrative (see *Phil.*, 2).²⁹ Looking elsewhere, the *Epistle of Barnabas* deals forthrightly with the interplay of the biblical metanarrative and dominical micronarrative (see 5), and the *Didache* implicitly commits itself to these all through, not least in the material concerning baptism, fasting, the eucharist, and the apostles and prophets (7–11). For each of these early writers, it seems clear, all properly Christian speculation, exhortation, reproof, and instruction begins and ends with the (presumed) apostolic testimony surrounding Jesus Christ and the general Hebraic worldview which lends the former its ultimate coherence.

More space would be required to defend the claim that this form of Christian discourse does find its origin in the historical Jesus and the apostles,³⁰ but for our purposes here we may content ourselves once more with the acknowledgement that the above-surveyed writers all firmly believed this to be the case. Put conditionally, then, we can state the matter thus: if all these early Christian writers are correct about the apostolic origins of the dominical micronarrative and attendant biblical metanarrative—and if Christ and the apostles are our ultimate authorities for defining what Christianity is—then any piece of philosophy or theology found inconsistent with these *ipso facto* fails to count as authentically Christian. The remainder of this essay will explore this conditional as it relates to the foundations of much classical Christian mysticism and one early mystical author in particular.

(SOME) CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND EVAGRIUS PONTICUS

We have seen that the dominant current in early Christian discourse understood the relation between pagan philosophy and Christian faith as fundamentally antagonistic, at least as it pertains to the level of basic worldview, overarching narrative sweep, and epistemic starting point. Considered in this light, the case of various prominent strands in the Christian mystical tradition are very interesting indeed. For, as we shall see presently, there is good reason to suspect the controlling narrative grammar in much Christian mysticism—particularly in its monastic, contemplative stream—is not so

29. Polycarp exhorts his hearers to avoid “the vapid discourses and sophistries of the vulgar” and to trust instead “Him who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and gave Him glory and a seat at His own right hand.” Andrew Louth takes these “vapid discourses and sophistries” to include “the philosophical speculations of the pagans” (see 124n2 in 1987 “Epistle of Polycarp”).

30. Though not much more. I myself take this claim to be virtually historically certain.

much “biblical” in the sense envisioned by our second-century interlocutors as it is Platonic, or, more accurately, Neoplatonic. It is, of course, no straightforward task to decide when a given narrative grammar is genuinely controlling as opposed to, say, merely influencing, inspiring, or coloring a more primary grammar; still, I would contend there are at least some important instances of classical Christian mysticism for which the ascription of a controlling non-biblical grammar is simply undeniable. To this end, we shall briefly consider Bernard McGinn’s account of the rise of Christian mysticism, and then select one key voice to serve as an illustration and test case for assessing certain claims to genuinely Christian mystical philosophizing.

Theoretical Foundations

For McGinn, the essential historical underpinnings of (western) Christian mysticism are effectively threefold. Apart from what he calls the “Greek contemplative ideal” (1991, ch. 2), he notes, too, the importance of key developments in second-temple Judaism—such as apocalypticism, the relativizing of the temple cult, and the establishment of a living scriptural canon—as well as the central Christian conviction expressed pre-eminently in an assortment of New Testament texts that, in Jesus, God is made decisively and irrevocably present to human beings. Despite McGinn’s sharp protests to the contrary, however (e.g., 1991, 22, 183), the reader can scarcely fail to detect a certain consciousness on McGinn’s part that these latter two foundations are comparatively inconsequential. True, we can agree, the profusion of visionary and heavenly ascent literature “[provides] a warrant and an example for [later mystics’] own hopes and practices” (McGinn 1991, 14); and, true, there is much in the New Testament canon which, interpreted in a certain way, might lend itself nicely to mystical purposes, but, in these two theoretically crucial chapters, there is surprisingly little in the way of demonstration that such literature and exegetical practices intrinsically ground, or intend, the things that would later become vital to the Christian mystical tradition.³¹ Indeed, McGinn all but concedes this

31. A more recent argument for the primordially of mysticism in Christianity and the importance of its Jewish roots has been advanced by April DeConick (2016). At one level, her treatment does not concern us here, as she explicitly focuses attention away from the “monastic definition of mysticism” we will find in Evagrius presently (2016, 69). At another, however, it forces the concession that, given a very broad definition of mysticism, earliest Christianity might well be considered intrinsically suffused with the mystical. If, with DeConick, mysticism refers to claimed “direct premortem experiences of God” without qualification (2016, 69; see: 2006, 2), then of course we find ample evidence of it in the New Testament: every experience of Christ counts! (see esp. 2016, 71–73) Similarly, baptism and the eucharist are

at various intervals: his conspicuously short chapter on Jewish roots, he says, is “more suggestive than demonstrative” (1991, 22); Paul’s language in 1 Cor. 6:17, a beloved prooftext for later mystics, is not originally intended “in any mystical sense” (1991, 74); the quintessentially monastic distinction between the active and contemplative life is “certainly not in the biblical texts” (1991, 83). Far from straightforwardly grounding key elements of later Christian mysticism in the sense of an intentional provision of sound theory, then, the influence exercised by second-temple Judaism and the earliest Christian writings is largely a matter of retrospective colonization: texts are “mined for mystical interests” (McGinn 1991, 79), “*interpreted* as guides for the mystical life” (7; emphasis mine), “capable of a mystical interpretation in the sense that they could be understood and appropriated” by later mystics (McGinn 1991, 65; see: 75: John’s gospel is “a foundational text for mystical *appropriations* of the Christian message”; emphasis mine). A close reading of McGinn, then, merely confirms what he sets out to dispute: the Jewish and early Christian foundations are, *qua* foundations, perhaps more imagined than real.

In spite of his desire to exonerate Christian mysticism from the charge of being, in the main, a mere continuation of Greek thought, McGinn is categorical about who is doing the theoretical heavy lifting in much early Christian mystical discourse. “One thing is obvious,” he pronounces: “the language involved is not only Greek, but Plato’s Greek, that is, the description of the soul’s return to God through purification (*askēsis*) followed by contemplative vision (*theōria*)” (1991, 23–24). He stresses, of course, that this Platonic retrieval will often involve “profound adjustments and transpositions” on the part of the Christian mystics (1991, 61), but, as a rule, the basic narrative grammar is fixed, presupposed rather than argued for, and goes largely unquestioned. Hence McGinn quotes André-Jean Festugière approvingly: “When the fathers ‘think’ their mysticism, they platonize” (McGinn 1991, 24). Now, it may be suspected that such an assessment overstates things slightly—and it may well. That said, seeing this dynamic

said to be mystical—even to “democratize” the mystical—on the grounds that these sacraments are understood, in some sense, to “reintegrate the person into the being of the divine” (2016, 75). This, I submit, is far too broad a definition of mysticism to be of much practical use. Certainly it is not McGinn’s understanding of mysticism which, though also centering on “direct consciousness of the presence of God” (1991, xvi; see: 101), is heavily qualified: mystical consciousness is “radically different from that found in ordinary consciousness,” thus excluding normal sacramental participation; it takes place on “a level of the personality deeper and more fundamental [than] the usual conscious activities of sensing, knowing, and loving”; the presence of God is “given in a direct or immediate way” (xix). In this sense authentic, intentional Jewish and early Christian mysticism is harder to come by.

in operation in the case of a particular Christian mystic will, I think, help us see why Festugière's comment is not far off the mark, at least when it comes to more contemplative, monastic flavors of mystical expression. Let us turn, therefore, to the thought of Evagrius Ponticus to see just how deep the Platonic narrative grammar might run.

Evagrius Ponticus

The work of Evagrius serves as an ideal test case for several closely related reasons. There is, in the first place, the tremendous respect and authority he commanded among later generations of Christian mystical theorists. Evagrius, Balthasar pronounces, is "*Herrscher* of all Syrian and Byzantine mysticism" (1939, 31) and, especially through the mediation of his disciple John Cassian, in many ways defined western monastic theology's terms of engagement (see: McGinn 1991, 144). This means, secondly, that Evagrius is very early as far as Christian mystics go, and so can offer us a comparatively clear glimpse of the theoretical origins of Christianity's monastic mystical tradition. But more is needed than antiquity; we need a carefully elaborated system, too, and in Evagrius we doubtless witness a stellar systematician, even if he is heavily dependent on the thought of Origen. And, finally, it is on account of his highly intelligent systematization that across all his major works we encounter considerable self-consistency, laying bare the heart of the theological and philosophical ideas which would go on to enjoy such a distinguished career in the history of Christian mysticism. As far as test cases go, then, we would be hard pressed to find a more suitable candidate than Evagrius.

Now there are, to be sure, times when Evagrius presents less like a mystical doctor and looks rather more like an early champion of credal orthodoxy. In the first fifteen chapters of his *Epistola Fidei*, for instance, his commitment to orthodox Trinitarianism is on full display—he even bids the reader beware of those (presumably the Arians) who “mar the harmony of the truth by heathen philosophy” (4)—and the unflinching Christocentrism evident throughout all his works is something even the most unsympathetic reader will count to Evagrius's credit. There is, in sum, ample reason to consider Evagrius a deeply Christian thinker, quite apart from considerations of self-identification and later reception. He is certainly operating (at least in part) from within a Christian tradition, both intellectually and practically—and often enough this goes well beyond mere adherence to various linguistic or doctrinal norms. Even so, I would submit that these elements, important though they are, are more sideshow than main event, and that to focus inordinately on these unmistakably “orthodox” components of

Evagrian teaching results in a serious distortion of his overall project, the centerpiece of which is a thoroughly Greek story of the fall of *nous* into materiality and consequent return back to *theoria*. This is without question the controlling motif of Evagrius's thought, and my strong suspicion is that it threatens to fall afoul of *BMN* and *dmn* in various important respects.

To understand why I think this to be the case, a brief survey of Evagrius's thought is in order. Locating an apt starting point for this endeavor is scarcely the most difficult of tasks; Evagrius fairly defines Christianity for us in the opening chapter of his celebrated trilogy: "Christianity," he says, "is the teaching of our Savior Christ consisting of ascetical practice, the [contemplation of] nature, and theology" (Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 1, henceforth abbreviated *Prak.*). The following two chapters indicate what he understands by these latter two elements, supplying the reader with the program of his trilogy, each book dealing with one of these three components of Evagrian Christianity. The Kingdom of Heaven, we are told, is *apatheia psyches* and true *gnosis* of beings (*Prak.*, 2), and the Kingdom of God is "knowledge of the Holy Trinity exercised according to the capacity of *nous*" (*Prak.*, 3; see: *Kephalaia Gnostika*, 4.22, henceforth abbreviated *KG*).³² In the first three chapters of *Praktikos*, then, we have the bare bones of Evagrius's theological system in summary form: ascetical practice paves the way for dispassion of soul and true knowledge of beings, which in turn leads the monk onward to the higher contemplations (*theorias*) of what he calls "theology," that is, "essential knowledge" (*gnosis ousiodes*) of the Trinity and of nothing else besides (*KG*, 2.47; 4.77, 87; 5.56; 6.19; etc.). Nor is this general program limited only to the *Praktikos-Gnostikos-Kephalaia Gnostika* trilogy; on the contrary, it is apparent throughout the Evagrian corpus (e.g., *Letter on Faith* 15, 21, 23, 37, 38, henceforth abbreviated *Ep. Fi.*; *The Great Letter to Melania*, *passim*, henceforth abbreviated *Ad Mel.*; *De Oratione*, *passim*, henceforth abbreviated *De Orat.*).

So far so good. But what exactly does Evagrius mean by the true knowledge of beings and the "essential knowledge" of the Trinity? For surely, the thought might run, these cannot be totally alien to the New Testament admonition to strive after knowledge of God. The answer to this question brings the monk's entire theological system into relief. For Evagrius, the

32. Greek references in Evagrius may be found in the margins of the works cited in the bibliography. On the side, it should go without saying that the biblical writers know nothing of a distinction in referent between "Kingdom of Heaven" and "Kingdom of God"; they are one and the same. This apparently trivial point highlights a key question touched on above, one which I think deserves to be asked of any theological (or Christian philosophical) project: who gets to decide which readings of scripture and its terms are the right (wrong) ones? And why?

main problem with human existence, the ultimate enemy to be overcome, is ignorance. This ignorance finds its genesis in the declension of *nous* from the aboriginal “contemplation of the Oneness and Unity” (*Ep. Fid.*, 21; *KG*, 3.28)³³ as a result of which *nous* becomes enmeshed in the realm of soul (*psyche*) and body (*soma*) (*Ad Mel.*, 26). This frankly Origenistic fall doctrine of pre-existent *nous* into materiality, into the world of birth and death, suffering and decay, serves as the backstory to Evagrius’s theological narrative (*Ad Mel.*, 56, 58). With the *exitus* of our true, noetic nature from our original enjoyment of *gnosis ousiodes*, ignorance now overtakes us; we know neither our true nature (*nous*), the knowledge proper to that nature (*gnosis ousiodes*), nor the *logikoi*—the eternal, inner essence and meaning—of created things. Imprisoned in this corporeal world of unknowing, then, the only appropriate solution is to escape it, to “return to [our] original harmony with the transcendent Source,” in the words of David Linge (2000, 543).

It is, of course, by following the Evagrian curriculum that a prisoner may hope to break free. The first step away from ignorance is ascetical practice: “To the extent that we lack the taste of knowledge,” Evagrius instructs, “we should eagerly engage in the ascetical life, showing our aim to God, namely that we are doing everything for the sake of knowledge of him” (*Prak.*, 32). The immediate aim of ascetical practice, however, the prelude to knowledge of the *logikoi* and of the Trinity, is the attainment of “perfect *apatheia*” (*Prak.*, 60). This setting right of the mind—this purification of intellect through the quenching of deluding passions—alone is able to “reveal the truth hidden in all beings” (i.e., the *logikoi*), the second major step in the return of *nous* to essential knowledge (*Gnostikos* 49, henceforth abbreviated *Gnost.*). As indicated above, by *logikoi*, Evagrius means, roughly, the true and inner nature of created things—but even this is misleading. As Evagrius makes plain, the *logikoi*, too, pre-exist the material creation—indeed, pre-exist duality (*KG*, 2.19)—such that the material world of flesh and blood serves at best as a “Plan B” mode of disclosing the *logikoi* to those rational natures sufficiently trained to perceive them (*KG*, 2.20–21). But were it not for the primordial transgression and fall from incorporeal Oneness, no such didactic mechanism would be needed, for formerly God himself was the “teacher of immaterial intellections” (*KG*, 3.55).³⁴ The first stage of the Evagrian flight from ignorance, then, involves an intellectual

33. *Ep. Fid.*, 21: την θεωρίαν της ενότητος και της μονότητος.

34. It should therefore be stressed that Evagrius stops short of maintaining, with the gnostics, that the material world is evil. This he manages by defining evil as a willful departure

apprehension of entities, or ideas, which dwell outside of, and in no way depend on, space, time, and matter; the affinities with Plato's world of Forms should be apparent. This, as we have said, Evagrius identifies with the New Testament's "Kingdom of Heaven"—and in this kingdom no bodies are welcome (*KG*, 4.86; see: *KG*, 5.12).

But what of the final stage of ascent, that aspect of the Christian faith Evagrius calls simply "theology"? It is here that Evagrius the mystic comes out in full force. In the *theoria* of other incorporeals, there is, Evagrius tells us, always an underlying object; there is a sense in which subject-object structure remains as the monk contemplates the *logikoi* (*KG*, 4.77; 4.87). This is not so, however, for the "essential knowledge" that is contemplation of the Trinity (*De Orat.*, 58); once the monk has attained to the loftiest heights of *pneumatikes theorias*, all multiplicity melts away into the Oneness and Unity of the Trinity, an ultimate identification of seen and seer.³⁵ "Do not be amazed that I have said that the rational beings will, through their uniting with God the Father, become one nature with the three hypostases without any expansion or change," we are told. Just as diverse rivers coalesce into an undifferentiated unity once they reach the sea, so, too, will God "transform into his own nature and color and taste all the intellects that turn back to him."³⁶ Lest we wish to interpret this dualistically, Evagrius concludes: "From then on they will be one in his unity without end and without distinction" (*Ad Mel.*, 27 [emphasis mine]).³⁷

from *gnosis* to ignorance: since corporeal nature cannot be receptive of knowledge, "none of the bodies can therefore properly be said to be bad" (*KG*, 3.53).

35. The irony of this statement has not been lost on commentators. Balthasar gets things exactly right: "Certainly [Evagrius] knows the Trinity—but it becomes practically an almost unlimited supremacy of the Unity over the Trinity" (1939, 39). Consider, for instance, *Ad Mel.*, 22: "there will come a time when the names and numbers will be removed from within the Father and His Son and His Spirit [on the one hand] and His rational creation [on the other], which truly is His 'body', in accordance with the [word]: 'So that God may be all in all.'"

36. Anyone familiar with the comparative mystical literature will at once hear resounding echoes of the Indian Upanishads (*Mundaka* 3.2.8; *Chandogya* 6.10).

37. Evagrius doubles down on this frankly monistic interpretation in the following chapter (*Ad Mel.*, 28). As Linge points out, though (546n16), Evagrius does seem anxious not to go the whole nine yards with his monism: in *Ad Mel.*, 30 he insists created intellects have a beginning, and in this at least are distinct from God. This is true, but the end need not be like the beginning and, as McGinn rightly observes, what's left in the final analysis is just one thing (1991, 154). Modulating Evagrius's claims here also risks neglecting the key distinction between metaphysical and phenomenological monism. As I have insisted elsewhere, even if metaphysically discrete entities remain—which is far from clear in the present case—practically the distinction makes no difference (see [Spencer 2021, 1036–1037]). Further evidence he may well intend metaphysical monism may be sought in *Ad Mel.*, 22.

At the contemplative climax, then, we have a fairly clear case of what Bernard McGinn (2012, 202) calls “union of indistinction,” the (at least phenomenological) dissolution of all that is not God into the divine plenitude. Now, Balthasar (1939, 38) is no doubt correct when he observes that without Evagrius’s *Ad Melania* more ambiguity about this final mystical teaching would remain. But once all confusion is cleared in the latter, it is difficult not to see monism strongly implied elsewhere. In *Ep. Fi.*, 25, for instance, the High Priestly Prayer of John 17 is given a monistic gloss: “When God, who is one, is in each, he makes all out; and number is lost in the indwelling of Unity”; so again in the already cited chapter 58 of *De Oratione*, where a non-monist reading of the “perfect place of God” apparently beyond multiformity is unnatural to say the very least. And finally, though admittedly far from explicit, Evagrius’s repeated injunctions to strive after the supreme, naked knowledge of the “Unity” in *Kephalaia Gnostika* lends itself very favorably indeed to a monistic interpretation of his thought as a whole (e.g., 1.71; 3.22; 3.72; 4.89; 5.84, etc.), as does his interpretation of “resurrection” as a blessed contemplation of “Oneness and Unity” in chapter 23 of *Ep. Fi.* Taken together, then, it is very difficult to resist the conclusion that, for Evagrius, essential knowledge of the Trinity, the “end of natural knowledge” (*KG*, 1.71) and final goal of Christianity (*KG*, 3.72), just is a non-dual identification of *nous* with God. This is the “breast of Christ” on which St. John reclined, the “treasure of wisdom and knowledge” of Colossians 2 (*Ad Mel.*, 67). As Balthasar aptly sums up Evagrius’s teaching, the “goal of the corporal world is its dissolution into Spirit; the goal of Spirit is its ... dissolution into God” (1939, 37).³⁸

Such is the theological/philosophical vision of Evagrius. The only remaining question for our purposes is, To what extent might this count as a genuine instance of Christian theology or philosophy as understood by early Christian thinkers like Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Justin? Note, first, that merely consulting the *regulae* will be of limited utility; surely it would be easy enough for Evagrius to affirm, say, that the historical man Jesus was born of a virgin, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in some sense rose again—and that we, too, will be resurrected in turn. Indeed, we have already seen Evagrius does place considerable weight on “resurrection,” at least when understood as the ascent of *nous* to spiritual contemplation. What we need to know, rather, is the extent to which Evagrius’s teaching may or may not be compatible with the dominical micronarrative and wider

38. See also the conclusion of McGinn (1991, 156): “[Evagrius’s] goal was always the freeing of *nous* from its fallenness and its absorption in the intelligible sea of divinity.”

biblical metanarrative—for this, it was argued, is what the ancient *regulae* are really anxious to safeguard.

Once the question is posed thus, however, it should not be terribly controversial to express skepticism about characterizing Evagrius as a primarily Christian thinker in this sense. It may be debated whether, say, he evidences similarities with Buddhism or other mystical philosophical systems (e.g., Balthasar 1939, 38–39; Linge 2000, 540–543), but what is not, I don't think, is the almost comically low value he ascribes to the Jewish narrative of creation and redemption which is the lynchpin of biblical narrative grammar as developed above. Throughout his writings there is at best the sense of lip service paid to this tradition, but more often only a straightforward appropriation of biblical events, ideas, and characters to fit the basically Platonic-Origenistic scheme of a largely ahistorical, existential *exitus* from and *reditus* to an incorporeal, divine realm. We have already seen this to be the case, what with Evagrius's language of the "Kingdom of Heaven," "Kingdom of God," "resurrection," "Trinity," and so on, all figured around this fundamental grammar of noetic exit and return. Scripture is certainly of appreciable nominal importance to Evagrius, but exegetically he is beholden to a Platonic, we may say proto-monastic interpretive framework which, in the end, is perhaps more in line with the opponents of our apostolic interlocutors than anything. The "hundredfold" of the Parable of the Sower, for instance, is taken as a cryptic reference to the contemplation of beings (KG, 4.42), and in *Kephalaia Gnostika* 5.28–46 we are given a whole slew of dubious appeals to scripture, each of which, *mirabile dictu*, substantiate some of the finer details of the Evagrian system. But this is not how the apostolic fathers and the early philosopher-theologians surveyed above understood scripture and its manifold terms. Indeed, and as we have seen at length, they expressly rebuked those who sought to accommodate biblical language and ideas to non-Jewish systems of thought.³⁹

But, beyond this basic methodological consideration, is there friction, or incompatibility, between Evagrius's thought and *dmn/BMN*? I believe so. Three points will suffice here. First, there is little room in the Evagrian system to affirm the goodness and value of the material world. Far from an intentional creation willed from the beginning, it is, in the main, an afterthought, a prison for fallen spirits whose sole positive usefulness is reserved for only the most gifted among us. This is a far cry from the mainstream Jewish view which categorically declares the intrinsic worth

39. See again note 32 above.

of God's material creation.⁴⁰ Related to this point is the origin and salvific destiny of the physical body. For all the Christian writers discussed above, salvation meant salvation for the whole man, body, soul, and spirit alike; the corruptible, mortal body, given by God, itself would partake in incorruption (e.g., Irenaeus, *AH*, V.6–9).⁴¹ Once again, this could scarcely be more at odds with Evagrius's broadly escapist soteriology and his general detestation for all material bodies—and it is, moreover, a possibility Evagrius explicitly disallows (see again *KG*, 4.86, *KG*, 5.12; see: Linge 2000, 545). Finally, it would be well to underscore the importance of history and election to the standard Jewish and early Christian renditions of the biblical metanarrative. For these, the election of one race, at a certain point in time, uniquely to carry forth the purposes of the creator God is central and indispensable. The interactions of this people with their God as they moved through history are understood to ground the identity and coherence of the movement in the present. This is why, again, Justin and Irenaeus go to such lengths to expound Old Testament material, and why the latter inveighs so forcefully against unhinged allegorizing in biblical exegesis. But for Evagrius this historical particularity is point-missing at best and probably even blasphemous, as to fixate on the contingent, material order is necessarily to be enslaved to its illusions and to remain alienated from God. Time and again, then, the Evagrian system is found opposing biblical narrative grammar at the level of basic worldview—a fairly clear-cut case of what Tertullian would call a “mottled Christianity,” the apostles made to bow before “the material of the world's wisdom.”

There is, no doubt, much more that may be said. This, however, will have to suffice as a preliminary witness to the tension I think plainly exists between the thought of Evagrius (and his disciples) and the *dmn/BMN* matrix which early Christianity takes for granted. But it is possible that our evaluation of Evagrius against this matrix would apply also to similar Christian mystical authors. I shall not argue this here, of course, but it is worth pointing out, too, that if McGinn is correct about the largely Platonic foundations of Christian mysticism, all such discourse at least *risks* compromising on what Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Justin take to be the first and most fundamental Christian philosophical move, namely, jettisoning what we think we know about God, the cosmos, and human beings, and allowing God's own account of these matters to be the primary shaper of

40. But see also note 34 above.

41. And this is, of course, because it is the view subscribed to by the New Testament writers as well (see, e.g., [Ware 2014]).

our philosophical and theological discussions. Insofar as a given Christian mystic spurns this methodological starting point, then, the extent to which their thought may count as a genuine instance of Christian theology or philosophy is, for our apostolic interlocutors at any rate, very much open to question.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued it is plausible to think various aspects of monastic/contemplative Christian mystical discourse sit uncomfortably at best with the methodological outlook of some of Christianity's earliest philosophers and theologians. This I attempted to show first by surveying the thought of Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr as it relates to pagan philosophical influence in Christian theology; it was suggested that this basically antagonistic relationship was due primarily to a staunch commitment to the epistemic ascendancy of a definite rendition of biblical narrative grammar, what I have called the biblical metanarrative and dominical micro-narrative. With this in hand, we turned to McGinn's account of the origins of Christian mysticism and utilized the system of Evagrius of Pontus as a test case and illustration for how non-biblical narrative grammar has and can inform mystical approaches to the Christian faith. It was demonstrated that, should we take our methodological cue from the early apologists, significant doubts might well be raised about the ascription "Christian" to this and similar styles of mystical discourse. Athens may indeed have its place in Christian philosophy, but out of Zion goes forth the Law; this word is needed perhaps nowhere more desperately than in our budding discussions in the philosophy of mysticism.⁴²

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amesbury, Richard. 2022. "Fideism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/fideism/>.
- Alston, William. 1993. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. 1939. "Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Pontikus." *Zeitschrift für Askese und Mystik* 14: 31-47.
- D'Costa, Gavin. 2010. "Pluralist Arguments: Prominent Tendencies and Methods." In *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, edited by Karl Josef Becker and Ilaria Morali, 329-344. New York: Orbis.

42. With thanks to those participants at the 2022 Christian Philosophy Conference in Krakow who offered feedback on an earlier draft of this paper, as well as to two anonymous referees whose comments and criticisms helped improve its overall quality.

- DeConick, April D. 2006. "What Is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?" In *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, edited by April D. DeConick, 1–24. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- . 2016. "Early Christian Mysticism." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, edited by Glenn Alexander Magee, 69–80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Didache*. In *Early Christian Writings*, edited by Andrew Louth, 185–199. London: Penguin, 1987.
- Duby, Steven J. 2022. *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Dunnington, Kent. 2018. *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- The Epistle of Barnabas*. In *Early Christian Writings*, edited by Andrew Louth, 153–184. London: Penguin, 1987.
- The Epistle to Diognetus*. In *Early Christian Writings*, edited by Andrew Louth, 137–152. London: Penguin, 1987.
- Evagrius Ponticus. *Gnostikos*. Translated by Luke Dysinger. Edited by Joel Kalvesmaki. 2022. <https://evagriusponticus.net/cpg2431/cpg2431-full-for-reading.html>
- . *The Great Letter to Melania*. Translated by Luke Dysinger. 2001. http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/11_Letters/00a_start.htm
- . *Kephalaia Gnostika*. Translated by Luke Dysinger. Edited by Joel Kalvesmaki. 2022. <https://evagriusponticus.net/cpg2432/cpg2432-full-for-reading.html>
- . *Letter on Faith*. Translated by Jackson. Edited by Joel Kalvesmaki. 2022. <https://evagriusponticus.net/cpg2439/cpg2439-full-for-reading.html>
- . *Praktikos*. Translated by Luke Dysinger. Edited by Joel Kalvesmaki. 2022. <https://evagriusponticus.net/cpg2430/cpg2430-full-for-search.html>
- . *On Prayer*. Translated by Luke Dysinger. 1997. http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/03_Prayer/00a_start.htm.
- Farris, Joshua R. 2017. *The Soul of Theological Anthropology: A Cartesian Exploration*. London: Routledge.
- Farris, Joshua R. and Charles Taliaferro, eds. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*. London: Routledge.
- Hasker, William. 1994. "A Philosophical Perspective." In *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, edited by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, 126–154. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Ignatius of Antioch. "The Epistles of Ignatius." In *Early Christian Writings*, edited by Andrew Louth, 53–112. London: Penguin, 1987.
- Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. Translated by Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885.
- . *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. Translated by Armitage Robinson. London: SPCK, 1920.
- . *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus*. Translated by Alexander Roberts. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.

- Justin Martyr. *Dialogue with Trypho*. Translated by Marcus Dods and George Reith. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.
- . *Dialogue avec Tryphon*. Edited by Georges Archambault. Paris: Librairie Alphones Picard, 1909. <https://scaife.perseus.org/library/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0645.tlg003/>
- . *On the Resurrection*. Translated by Marcus Dods. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.
- . *The First Apology*. Translated by Marcus Dods and George Reith. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.
- . *The Second Apology*. Translated by Marcus Dods and George Reith. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1985. *Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Levering, Matthew. 2008. *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Linge, David E. 2000. "Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius of Pontus." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (3): 537–568. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/68.3.537>.
- McGinn, Bernard. 1991. *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*. New York: Crossroad.
- . 2012. "Unio Mystica/Mystical Union." In *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, edited by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, 200–210. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McInerny, Ralph. 2006. *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers*. Washington, D.C.: CUA Press.
- Moreland, J. P., and William Lane Craig. 2017. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- O'Regan, Cyril. 2001. *Gnostic Return in Modernity*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Origen. *Contra Celsum*. Translated by Frederick Crombie. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.
- Pike, Nelson. 1992. *Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Polycarp. "The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp." In *Early Christian Writings*, edited by Andrew Louth, 113–136. London: Penguin, 1987.
- Rowe, C. Kavin. 2016. *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Spencer, Daniel. 2021. "The Challenge of Mysticism: A Primer from a Christian Perspective." *Sophia* 60: 1027–1045. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-020-00822-4>.
- . 2022. "Mysticism Monistic and Theistic: A Probing Argument and Pike's Case for Phenomenological Distinction." *Philosophia Christi* 24 (1): 65–84. <https://doi.org/10.5840/pc20222418>.
- . 2023. *Forsaking the Fall: Original Sin and the Possibility of a Nonlapsarian Christianity*. New York: Routledge.

- Stoeber, Michael. 1994. *Theo-Monistic Mysticism: A Hindu-Christian Comparison*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stump, Eleonore. 2016. *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.
- Tertullian. *Prescription Against Heretics*. Translated by Peter Holmes. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.
- . *Traité de la Prescription Contre les Hérétiques*. Translated by Pierre de Labriolle. In *Sources Chrétiennes* 46, edited by François Refoulé. Paris: Éditiones du Cerf, 1957.
- Ware, James P. 2014. "Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36–54." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133 (4): 809–835. <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbibllite.133.4.809>.
- Wright, N. T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*. London: SPCK.