

***A Different Christianity***  
***The Ancient Christian Inner Path to Transformation***  
**by Doyle Young**

**Session 1**

**I. There is “A Different Christianity,” i.e. an ancient Christian inner path**

A. It is “A Different Christianity” because it is inner Christianity. The Christianity most of us have known has been largely *outer Christianity*, i.e. it has dealt with external issues like what must you do to become a member, what should your outward behavior be like, how should the church be organized (bishops? elders? committees?), what is required for someone to be ordained, should the government dictate to citizens about religion, etc.? Most of Christian history is the history of developments, debates, divisions, and even wars about outer Christianity.

While *outer Christianity* is not unimportant, it is secondary. What is primary is Christ’s power to *transform people*. This is inner Christianity. God wants us to change, to become people who are actually *like Christ*. This is different from *imitating Christ*. Thus, I don’t just pretend or act like I am kind and loving, I actually become kind and loving. Further, I become *free*, free from fear and my past experiences. There is a huge difference between outer and inner Christianity.

Many of us have become very frustrated with Christianity because it seemed to focus on externals and to have no power to change us. *Outer Christianity has no power to change anyone*. Inner Christianity does have a method that puts us into contact with God’s power.

This is not a different gospel. It is the ancient gospel. But to modern Westerners, it is a different way of *understanding* the gospel. It is a body of teaching regarding the self, consciousness, and how one changes. It is an ancient method of *spiritual therapy*.

B. There are clear biblical hints of this inner Christianity. Jesus said that the road that leads to life has a narrow gate, the road itself is hard, and few people find it. (Matt. 7:13-14). Paul pleads for Christians to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind [“nous” in Greek],” a pivotal text for inner Christianity. (Rom. 12:1-2). He reminds us that Christians are those who have “crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Gal. 5:24). Paul tells the Christians in Rome that, for Christians, “our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” (Rom. 6:6). He says that we should no longer allow “the passions” to control us. (Rom. 6:12). Paul sees in himself a war between his “inmost self” and his bodily desires. (Rom. 7:22-23).

C. We have extant documents from around A.D. 200 that discuss this spiritual path. This is about 100 years after the death of the last apostle, John. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150- c. 215), head of a “wisdom school” in Alexandria, Egypt, and his

student, Origen (c. 185-254), are two of the early writers whose documents survive. The term “the Royal Road” was being used in the early Christian centuries by writers to describe this method. We have writings from the second century to the present in which Christian spiritual masters have taught this spiritual path.

## II. A Quick Summary

We will discuss the contents of these spiritual teachings in the coming weeks. For now, a quick overview will have to do.

Human beings have a facility or ability to commune with God. This facility is called *the “nous”* (a transliteration of the Greek word). This word is often translated “mind” or “intellect,” but these terms are misleading to Westerners. The nous is not the analytical, logical ability. It is a separate function that knows in a different way that is somewhat difficult to describe. We might say that the nous knows directly (without being mediated through words or thoughts) and intuitively. Noetic knowledge or awareness, then, does not come through the rational, analytic mind. In the modern West, our terms “soul” or “the real me” or “my inner self” roughly correspond to the “nous.” Most of us, as we are now, seldom experience the action of the nous. *Real prayer is the nous communing with God in a wordless, imageless state. The logical, verbal mind cannot commune with God; it can only talk or think about God or address thoughts and words to God.* When we are saying or thinking words addressed to God, this is a very low, immature level of prayer. It is the best that most of us are capable of, as we are now. It is better than not praying at all, but it explains why prayer seems so flat and frustrating to us so much of the time. Because this low level of prayer, in which the logical mind instead of the nous is trying to commune with God, is so frustrating, most of us give up on trying to pray.

As a result of the fall of Adam and Eve, *the nous fell*, i.e. it lost its ability to function. It is now flooded or covered over with *the “passions,”* i.e. sensory stimuli, bodily desires, bodily drives, thoughts that fly through the mind without cease, and a constant barrage of emotional reactions. The nous is constantly disturbed and distracted. It cannot function correctly and cannot pray and know spiritual things.

Spiritual growth, or the ancient spiritual path, is a *reversing of the effects of the Fall* and restoring to the nous the ability to understand reality and commune with God, i.e. pray. There is a method, involving chronological stages and certain techniques at each stage, that accomplishes this. On this path, a person is transformed into a different person. As one writer has put it, “Holiness is an ontological, not a moral, category.”

There are *three stages on this spiritual path.* The first requires a turning away from one’s external possessions, i.e. the world and the body’s desires and drives. It requires gaining control of the body. The second stage requires a turning away from one’s internal possessions, i.e. desires, thoughts, and emotional reactions that disturb the nous, i.e. turning away from the passions. This stage usually takes years to traverse. Success at this stage leads to “apatheia,” a Greek word meaning “dispassion.” Here, one

is free from slavery to the passions, i.e. to bodily desires, unsolicited thoughts, and destructive emotional reactions. One achieves “hesychia,” a Greek word meaning “stillness.” The nous is now freed of disturbance and is still. Now it can pray and know spiritual things. The third stage requires a turning away from “knowingness.” This means that one sits in silence and the nous prays. One lets go of all thoughts and images and the nous rests in God. There are several stages within this last stage.

*The method* of progressing on this spiritual path is called *ascesis*, from the Greek word “askesis.” It means “training” in the sense of a soldier or athlete training to excel in combat or an athletic event. Ascetic practices include various spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, reading, and meditating. Different ascetic practices are appropriate for different stages. The Tradition emphasizes that spiritual advancement occurs as a result of *synergy*, i.e. we must make efforts, sometimes heroic efforts, to advance, and when we do, God acts in his mercy to help us change. Thus, my effort combines with God’s effort to produce results.

### **III. Why this spiritual wisdom was lost to the West for the past 1,500 years.**

The Roman Empire encompassed the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, extending from Britain to India. In roughly A.D. 300, the Roman emperor divided the Empire into two halves for administrative purposes, each headed by an emperor. The eastern half had its capital at Constantinople, modern Istanbul, Turkey. The western half of the Empire had its capital at Rome, though it was frequently moved. The eastern empire was Greek in culture while the western empire was Roman. The church first appeared in Palestine, i.e. in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Though the Christian movement had spread to Italy and probably southern France by A.D. 100, the center of the Christian movement remained in the eastern empire.

In roughly A.D. 500, the Roman empire in the West fell to the barbarian German invaders. Western Europe then fell into centuries of chaos. Libraries were destroyed and education nearly ceased to exist. In a territory the size of a county, there might be only one person who could even read and write. That person would often be from a powerful family and would serve as warlord or prince of the territory and as bishop of the church in his territory. The Church in the West, headed by the bishop of Rome, formally split from the Church in the eastern empire in 1054. The western church came to be called the Roman Catholic Church; the church in the eastern empire was called The Orthodox Church. The Roman Empire in the East continued to exist, though in smaller form, until it fell to the Moslems in 1453. The result is that the ancient spiritual tradition was largely lost in the West and thus to the Roman Catholic Church. In the eastern empire, due to nearly a thousand more years of political stability, the tradition survived in the monastic tradition of the Orthodox Church. Further, in the Reformation of the sixteenth century in the West, those lands that became Protestant suppressed the Roman Catholic monasteries with the result that what little of the ancient spiritual tradition that had survived there was lost completely.

It is only in recent decades that the church's spiritual tradition, which we could now call the Orthodox monastic spiritual tradition, has begun to be known in the West.

The ancient church's spiritual method has never been attempted in the West except in very, very limited experiments.

## **Session 2 – A Different View of Reality (Cosmology and Epistemology)**

### **1. Introduction**

This “different Christianity,” i.e. inner Christianity, seems unfamiliar and even strange to some of us. One reason is that the way we view the world now is so different from the way our spiritual fathers did. To understand what they are teaching us and to benefit from it, *we have to open our minds to look at reality differently than we have been taught*, i.e. open our minds to a different worldview (or cosmology) and to a different kind of knowledge (or epistemology). That is, we must be humble and open to being taught.

The Apostle Paul said, “We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Cor. 4:18). *The Church's spiritual tradition says that there is a different world, an unseen, eternal world, and that it can be known, but only in a different way than how we know ordinary things.* The educated, modern world laughs at this view of reality. The educated world says that there is no unseen world, there are no eternal things.

### **II. The Modern View of Reality**

The way that we have all been taught to view reality has been largely shaped by *the Enlightenment*. This intellectual movement swept Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is hard to overstate its importance in shaping the way Westerners look at reality. Its effects on Western thought, even Western theology, are overwhelming. The basic themes of the Enlightenment are:

1. Reason is the only path to knowledge and thus to truth.
2. Supernatural revelation and authority (i.e. the Bible and the Church) are rejected.
3. Natural law will lead all enlightened persons to truth.
4. People should be freed from the chains of authority and tradition.
5. Progress is inevitable.
6. There is a universal, rational religion, i.e. Deism.

The common, modern, Western view of reality, shaped by the Enlightenment, says:

1. Knowledge, and thus truth, can only be gained through the senses and reason (the scientific method).
2. Inner experience is denigrated as being subjective, unscientific, and unreliable as a guide to what is true.
3. The observable, physical world is all that exists.
4. The universe is a dead machine that just runs according to immutable laws (e.g. gravity) that are natural and cannot be changed by some unseen power such as God.
5. Therefore, there is no living God who can act. In fact, there is no God at all, or the most we can say is that we cannot know if there is a God or not.

The modern Western view of reality has made some huge contributions, such as the rise of science. But this view of reality is incomplete and thus inaccurate.

### **III. The Spiritual Tradition's View of Reality and Knowledge**

#### **A. There is another world or reality besides the physical world we see.**

Most of us have had one or more experiences in which we felt that we had bumped into a different reality, a different level of awareness or consciousness. These experiences support what the spiritual tradition says: "*Reality is not as it appears to the fallen mind,*" i.e. there is a part or dimension of reality that the fallen mind, the senses and reason, cannot see or know. Science supports this view. For example, quantum physics says that the world is very different than it appears to our senses and operates differently than we think it does. Nils Bohr, a father of quantum physics, said "Quantum physics is not stranger than you think, it is stranger than you *can* think."

Thus, there is another, non-physical, spiritual world. It became unknown and invisible to us because of the Fall.

#### **B. So, there is a spiritual world and spiritual knowledge, i.e. spiritual truths, that can be known, but not in the same way that we know ordinary things.**

The Tradition calls this kind of knowledge by the Greek word *gnosis*. The Tradition says that *the senses and reason cannot reach or know this spiritual world and knowledge*. So, to reach this different kind of knowledge, we must adjust our view of reality. *There is a different way of knowing that can put us into contact with this spiritual world.*

The rare, occasional experiences in which we feel as if we have bumped into a different reality seem accidental; we don't know how we touched this reality, how to do it again, or how to lead someone else to it. The Tradition teaches us how to know this world, i.e. we purify the nous so that it can know the spiritual world. *It is the nous, not the senses or reason, that can know spiritual reality.* The nous experiences the eternal directly, without the mediation of thoughts or words or images. So, *gnosis*, i.e. spiritual

knowledge, is not just the fallen reason thinking about different subjects, i.e. religious ones, it is a different kind of knowledge, indeed a different kind of consciousness.

We come into contact with this spiritual world and learn its truth not through the senses or by thinking our way to it, but by inner experience by the nous. Thus, *inner experience is a legitimate source of knowledge of the spiritual world, indeed the only source*. However, *not all “inner experience” is spiritual experience*. So, on the spiritual path, an important step is to develop discrimination or discernment (Greek “diakrisis”), i.e. the ability to tell which influences come from God and which ones do not. The writers emphasize the need for a spiritual director to help guide one in this discrimination. In the modern West, this is often a practical impossibility because there are so few people who know anything about this path.

Spiritual knowledge has its own “scientific method.” *Inner truth can be verified by experience* (Greek “praxis”), *i.e. we put the spiritual teaching into practice and see whether it works*. So, the Fathers say that faith can become knowledge and knowledge can become love. This means that our inner experience confirms what we have believed by faith and put into practice; it is now knowledge, not faith. This knowledge of spiritual reality leads to changes in our being so that we become more loving. Another way to put it is: *to understand the Tradition, one must practice it, not just discuss it*. This rebuts the world’s opinion that spiritual truths are not real because they cannot be verified. They can be verified, but in a different way from the scientific method.

*Personal experience is not the same as personal opinion*. Personal opinion about reality is not reliable. Personal experience is reliable.

So, what is the role of reason in spiritual matters? In a famous debate between Eastern and Western Christianity in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Baarlam of Calabria enunciated the Western church’s view that God can be known by the reason. Gregory of Palamas voiced the Eastern church’s view that the fallen reason cannot know or experience God. However, Palamas said, reason is a path to ideas about God and can thus prepare us for spiritual knowledge. In this paper, for example, we are discussing ideas about God and the spiritual world that may help us to experience that world; but thinking about that world is not the same as experiencing it.

#### **IV. Conclusion – Open Your Mind**

In the modern West, it is not hard to superficially agree with [some or all] Christian doctrines. It is hard to *be* a Christian, to walk this ancient spiritual path, because to do so we must open our minds to a different view of reality and a different view of knowledge.

So, a practical step is: suspend the logical analysis and the automatic skepticism for a while. Practice the spiritual path for a while and see if your experience confirms what the Tradition says is true.

### **Session 3 – The Human Condition**

To make a spiritual journey, we must begin where we are. Well, where are we? What is our condition?

#### **I. The Fall – Why is the world the way it is?**

The Fathers say that we are *fallen*. Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God is called the Fall. Whether you understand the Bible’s description of the Fall to be literal or metaphorical, the Fathers say that all of us have been affected by the Fall; we are all fallen people. We are not now in the state of being for which we were created or intended.

Most of what we have heard about the Fall refers to its *cosmic dimension*: there has been a rebellion in the cosmos and the cosmos has fallen away from God. I find myself on the side of the rebels against God. One result of this cosmic Fall is that I am separated from God and thus deserve his judgment. Another result is that human life and society don’t work very well, e.g. we have wars, social injustice, racial disharmony, etc. We humans are not able to live together with peace and justice, much less love. The Christian faith calls us to work to reverse the cosmic effects of the Fall, i.e. to work to overcome social injustice, etc.

#### **II. The Fall, Part 2 – Why am I the way I am?**

The ancient spiritual tradition, however, focuses on the *personal or inner dimension* of the Fall. Not only has the creation fallen but *I* have fallen from my intended state of being and my fall has created distortions in my being. I am not in harmony and in relationship with God. I do not know and understand spiritual reality. I do not find it natural and easy to follow God’s way. Rather than focusing on the cosmic dimension of the Fall (“I’m a guilty rebel whom God should punish”), the Tradition emphasizes the inner dimension (“I’m a broken, diminished human being who needs healing”). *The emphasis is not on my guilt but on my brokenness.*

The specific inner problem caused by the Fall is that the human ability or faculty to know spiritual reality and God, i.e. *the nous*, has been distorted so that it cannot function properly. The nous is not the logical, analytical ability that humans have. It is another faculty which knows different things (spiritual reality) and knows in a different way (directly, without mediation by thoughts or words, i.e. it is somewhat like intuition). In most of us as we are now, it does not function well or often. In modern Western terms, the nous is analogous to “the soul,” “the heart,” “the real I,” or “my true self.”

The nous’s ability is compromised by its being flooded or covered over by *the passions*. These are strong appetites, impulses, or desires that dominate the nous. They include what we might call “negative thoughts and emotions.” They are often strong feelings of like or dislike. Some arise in the body, some in the mind. They come unbidden, i.e. they are just “there” in us. Some of the Fathers ascribe them to demonic

activity. The most common view in the spiritual tradition is that they are natural impulses that have been distorted by the Fall and that need to be educated and transformed to their original state. For example, sexual attraction is natural but lust is the distorted form of it.

Some of the Fathers catalogue dozens of passions. A seminal early spiritual writer, Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399), listed eight major passions, each of which has variations: gluttony, lust, avarice, depression, anger, world-weariness, self-opinionatedness, and pride. In the West, the three common monastic vows indicate Benedict of Nursia's (d. c. 550) view of the three major passions: poverty (to combat avarice or possessiveness), chastity (to combat lust), and obedience (to combat self-will).

As a result of these passions flooding the nous, the nous is constantly disturbed and in turmoil. It cannot function properly. This is the sense in which we are broken: we are swept away by impulses, appetites, thoughts, and emotions. We cannot reach the spiritual reality because we are inundated by the passions.

Parenthetically, modern writers note that one will not see correctly how to reverse the cosmic effects of the Fall (e.g. fighting social injustice) or persevere in that struggle unless one walks the inner journey which generates spiritual awareness and energy.

### **III. The spiritual journey is a process to reverse the effects of the Fall.**

See Session Four.

## **Session Four – The Path to Transformation**

We all know that we want to be better Christians, better people, to know God. But how do we get there? The Church's ancient spiritual tradition provides a path to reverse the effects of the Fall and thus to be transformed.

### **I. Metanoia**

This Greek word is often translated “repentance,” but it is broader than our common view of repentance, i.e. “I’m sorry about my past sins.” The word literally means “*change of the nous*.” It refers to the entire spiritual journey of cleansing and strengthening the nous. In Romans 12:2, Paul urges us to “be transformed by the renewal of your nous.”

### **II. Ascesis**

How does one make this journey of transformation? The method used requires ascesis. This Greek word means “*disciplined endeavor or exercise*” such as that done by an athlete or soldier. As with a weight-lifter in training, a Christian's practice of ascetic acts requires effort but results in an increase in strength and ability. In a *synergy*, one makes this effort and God also works in one's life. The three types of ascetic practices (physical, psychological, and noetic) correspond to the three stages of the spiritual journey.

### **III. Stages of the Spiritual Journey – The Three Renunciations**

The early spiritual Fathers described the spiritual journey as having stages. They are sequential but not exclusively so; they do overlap some. An early model is that of Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) and his three renunciations. To move spiritually, he said, one must renounce or give up something of lesser value in order to obtain something of greater value. In the West, these stages have often been described as purgation (or purification, i.e. of the body), illumination (i.e. of the nous), and union (i.e. with God).

#### **A. The First Renunciation**

This beginning stage requires one to *give up outer possessions*, i.e. to renounce one's belief in the importance of the world and ordinary worldly goals. One orients one's life toward God and becomes detached from worldly possessions, values, and goals (such as success and wealth), i.e. one “seeks first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.” It is a turning away from the world to God, from the ordinary outer world to the inner, spiritual world. The body's drives and desires must be brought under control by ascetic methods such as fasting and disciplining oneself to get out of bed earlier. One must stop overt, obvious sins.

A person never masters this stage completely. The body's drives are so powerful that one must continue physical ascetic practices.

## **B. The Second Renunciation**

Here one must *give up one's inner possessions*, i.e. the conviction that one's view of the world is correct. One must see that the active content of the mind is usually illusory, i.e. it is the result of our distorted thoughts and emotional responses. What we experience as our "inner world" most of the time is the passions or our automatic, unconscious emotional responses to the passions. Our past experiences have shaped the way we view ourselves and reality; that viewpoint is wrong or at best incomplete. So, here one battles to give up habits, habitual ways of reacting, and negative emotions that disturb the nous, as well as habitual desires and dislikes. Thus, one rejects the "false self," which is me being controlled by automatic, unconscious responses to life. This false self is not the "real me," i.e. the "real me" is the soul or nous which is buried under all of these passions and automatic, unconscious responses. This second renunciation is what many people are trying to accomplish in therapy.

The foremost ascetic practice at this stage is *nepsis*, i.e. *watchfulness or spiritual alertness*. One must pay constant attention to one's inner state, to one's fantasies, desires, thoughts, and emotions and notice what automatic reactions follow from them. One is no longer unconsciously submerged in them but is able to step out of them and observe them. One develops *diakrisis*, i.e. *discrimination* or the ability to discern whether influences (thoughts, emotions, drives) are from God or not. A second ascetic practice is *guarding the heart*, which is cutting off the negative thoughts and emotions before they can disturb the heart (or nous). These ascetic practices eventually become a spiritual state.

The result of accomplishing this second renunciation is that one achieves, intermittently at first, the state of *apatheia*, i.e. *dispassion*. The passions and one's automatic reactions no longer disturb the nous. Thus, the nous is strengthened and the noetic energy accumulated is not dissipated because the doors through which it is usually dissipated have been closed. Apatheia is a state of great spiritual freedom and calm and allows the nous to reach higher spiritual states, such as *hesychia*, i.e. *stillness*, a state of great inner tranquillity and concentration in which the nous can commune with God without words or images.

(Some modern practitioners think that this second stage should be emphasized first, in that the spiritual energy generated in it allows one to tame the body, which is usually understood as a "Stage One" task.)

## **C. The Third Renunciation**

The third renunciation is difficult to understand. It lies beyond the normal activity of the mind. It requires one to renounce the value of "normal" knowledge in order to attain noetic knowledge. The false self dies and one is a new being who does not assent to the reality of the world. The main ascetic practice is watchfulness coupled with noetic

prayer (i.e. contemplative prayer or meditation). In this stage, the Fathers say, God takes you by the hand and teaches you directly.

## A Glossary

The ancient Christian spiritual fathers mostly lived in the eastern half of the Roman Empire and wrote in Greek. They absorbed or created technical terms to describe the spiritual path. To make clear what we mean, we often use these technical terms.

**Apatheia** – (Greek) *dispassion*. An advanced spiritual state in which the passions no longer disturb the nous. It occurs at the end of the second stage as a result of completing the second renunciation. It is a state of spiritual reintegration and freedom. It is not indifference or not undergoing temptations but the freedom to resist automatic reactions to the passions. Sometimes called “inner separation” by modern writers, meaning that one is now able to perceive without reacting. In this state of elevated spiritual calm and concentration, the higher mystical states can occur because the psychic “noise” and disturbance caused by the passions has been removed. Achieving this state also closes the doors through which spiritual energy is dissipated. In this state, the form of awareness called *diakrisis* or discrimination of impulses becomes a normal part of one’s consciousness. In the West, *apatheia* has been translated as “purity of heart.” It is a gift of God given in response to our effort.

**Ascesis** – (Greek) *disciplined endeavor or exercise*, such as that done by an athlete or soldier. It is action that leads to improved ability and requires great effort. These spiritual disciplines or practices constitute work on oneself in order to overcome the effects of the past and so heal the nous or soul. There are three types of *ascesis* (physical, psychological, and noetic), each corresponding to the three stages of the spiritual journey (the three renunciations). Like a weight-lifter, a Christian builds spiritual strength by practicing these exercises.

**Diakrisis** – (Greek) *discrimination*. A spiritual gift, mentioned in I Corinthians 12:10 and Hebrews 5:14, that permits the nous to discriminate between types of influences (i.e. thoughts and emotions) that enter the mind, assess them accurately, and thus treat them properly. It is the ability to discern whether influences are from God or not. It is an important part of watchfulness and guarding the heart: one pays attention to one’s thoughts and guards the heart from thoughts and emotions that are not from God and are thus harmful. It is, thus, clear perception of the spiritual energies that are affecting us. It is an important spiritual discipline and ability in the second and third stages of the spiritual path.

**Gnosis** – (Greek) *knowledge*. One of several Greek words for knowledge, it refers to the inner, spiritual knowledge that is experienced by the nous, i.e. noetic knowledge. It is not the kind of factual knowledge acquired by the logical, analytical part of the mind. Thus, there is a different *content* of what is known (God, spiritual reality) and a different *way* of knowing (directly, through the nous).

**Hesychia** – (Greek) *stillness*. A state of inner tranquillity or mental quiet and concentration that is attained by *ascesis*; it follows *apatheia* and is related to it. In this

state, the nous is able to be open to God and to commune with God without words or images.

**Metanoia** – (Greek) *change of the nous*. Often translated “repentance,” the term is broader than we might first think. It includes not only sorrow and regret about the current state of one’s life but a turning of one’s entire life to God. Thus, it is the entire spiritual journey of purifying the nous. It is thus not an instantaneous change, though there will be an initial point at which one begins the process.

**Nepsis** – (Greek) *watchfulness*. A state of spiritual alertness and sobriety. It means paying attention to, i.e. being aware of, one’s thoughts, emotions, fantasies, desires, etc. Recognizing these and the automatic reactions that follow them, one cuts them off so as to guard the nous (or the heart) from these destructive influences and to prevent the dissipation of collected spiritual energy. Thus, the nous is able to pray and open itself to higher powers. Nepsis is an ascetic method that becomes a state. It results in an accumulation of noetic energy that opens one to higher states.

**Nous** – (Greek) *the human faculty through which one knows God and spiritual things*. The word is often translated “mind” or “intellect,” but these English words are misleading to Westerners because we think they mean “the rational or analytical ability of the human person.” The nous, however, refers to the human’s highest faculty or ability through which one can know God and spiritual reality by direct and immediate experience or “simple knowing.” It is sometimes said to dwell in the depths of the soul or to be the innermost part of the heart. In modern Western terms, it is analogous to “soul” or perhaps “the real I” or “my true self.” As a result of the Fall, it is dominated by the passions and, thus disturbed by thoughts and emotions, cannot function. Once it is purified by asceticism at the first two stages of the spiritual path (the first two renunciations), it achieves *apatheia* (dispassion) and *hesychia* (stillness). It can then function properly, i.e. at this point one can know God, can truly pray (which is communing with God in a wordless, imageless state), and can know spiritual reality.

**Passions** – An appetite or impulse, such as anger, desire, or jealousy, that violently dominates the nous. A modern term might be “negative emotions.” They are often remembered emotions, i.e. they are strong thoughts and feelings that often arise from negative past experiences when someone “pushes my button.” They are often strong thoughts and feelings of like or dislike. Some of the spiritual fathers thought of the passions as evils that must be eradicated. The more common view saw them as natural impulses that were distorted or disordered by the Fall and which must now be educated and transfigured. An important early spiritual father, Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399), listed *eight major passions*: gluttony, lust, avarice, depression (sadness), anger, acedia (world-weariness, wanting to give up the spiritual struggle), vainglory (seeking praise), and pride. Some passions arise from the body; others arise in the mind.

**Synergy** – (from Greek) *work together*. Spiritual progress requires one to work together with God, i.e. one makes efforts to progress and God helps or works with one. One does

not make spiritual progress by one's unaided efforts or by passively waiting for God to miraculously move one along.

**The Three Renunciations** – from one of the Desert Fathers, Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399), a description of the three progressive stages of the spiritual life. At each stage, there is a renunciation that must be made in order to obtain something of greater value. At each level, there is a type of asceticism that is to be practiced to effect the renunciation. The *first renunciation* is a renunciation of belief in ordinary worldly goals; it results in a change in the aim or direction of one's life. It requires a turning away from the body and the "world," i.e. a renunciation of or detachment from external possessions. It involves an intellectual commitment to follow God's way and a turning away from the desires of the senses and worldly goals (e.g. for things, wealth, success, prestige, fame). It is a turning away from the outer world toward the inner world. In this first stage, the body's drives and desires must be brought under control by ascetic methods. Monastics literally renounce the world and all possessions. For non-monastics, this will be an inner renunciation though it will have an effect on one's relationship to possessions. The *second renunciation* involves renouncing the belief that one's view of the world is correct, i.e. one renounces the belief that the active content of the mind (thoughts and emotions) is one's true nature. One rejects one's interpretation of one's past and the effect of that interpretation on one's present reactions. Thus, here is where the battle occurs to give up habits, habitual ways of reacting, and negative emotions, i.e. one renounces and escapes the habitual desires and dislikes that disturb the emotions and thus the nous. It is, then, a renouncing of the false self, i.e. the automatic, unconscious responses to life. This is what many people are trying to do in therapy. Success at this stage results in *apatheia* (dispassion). The *third renunciation* is beyond the normal activity of the mind. It is very difficult to describe and is so foreign to most of us that we cannot understand the descriptions that do exist. It is a new kind of knowledge. One's nous is clear, so one now recognizes the limits of the knowledge that we deal with daily. One knows eternal reality in a contemplative way, i.e. without words or images. The "real I" that is the nous is awakened; the "false I" dies. We go beyond what we can see and control. In Western Christianity, the three analogous stages are purification (purification), illumination, and union.

## A Preliminary Reading List

There is no shortage of books and seminars about “spirituality” today. Indeed, that is part of the problem: everyone has an idea (and a book) about prayer, “letting go,” walking a labyrinth, cultivating silence, etc. How does one know which teachings to believe and follow?

What is lacking is a *coherent context* for understanding all these ideas. The ancient Christian spiritual tradition provides such a context. There is a place for fasting, meditating, reading Scripture, “letting go,” cultivating silence, but there is a *reason* for doing these things and there is a *place on the spiritual journey* where each is appropriate and indeed crucial. In other words, these various spiritual practices, when understood properly, fit into a coherent whole. The fact that there are so many books and seminars on spirituality containing snippets of information reinforces the contention that the ancient Christian spiritual path has been largely lost in the West; what remains are vague, disconnected snippets.

Listed below are a very few books that are in the “coherent context” tradition. I suggest reading them in the order listed.

1. *The Illumined Heart*, by Frederica Mathewes-Green. This short book is a brief overview of the ancient Christian path, written at a popular level by an American from a middle-class, educated, Protestant background. She and her husband graduated from an Episcopal seminary in the 1970s. Her husband served as an Episcopal pastor for several years. Their dissatisfaction with the sterility of the Episcopal Church eventually led them into the Orthodox Church, where her husband now serves as an Orthodox priest. In the Orthodox tradition, they discovered this ancient Christian spiritual path.
2. *The Illness and Cure of the Soul in the Orthodox Tradition*, by Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos. Written by a contemporary monastic leader in Greece, it is either poorly translated or stylistically kind of hokey (or both). But it is a pretty good summary of the ancient path. It is cast in the literary form of a series of conversations between a pastor and some lay persons about the spiritual life.
3. *Standing in God’s Holy Fire*, by John Anthony McGuckin. Written by an Orthodox priest who is a professor of early church history at Union Theological Seminary and an adjunct professor of religion at Columbia University, it is a little stiff. Some chapters are more relevant than others.
4. *A Different Christianity*, by Robin Amis. An Englishman, Amis spent ten years researching this book, both academically and through intensive spiritual practice of the teachings. Published in 1995 by SUNY Press, it is a gold mine which will become less available as the years roll on. He is the head of the Praxis Research Institute, which has a web site and publishes other books.

5. *The Philokalia*, 5 vols., translated and edited by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. This is a collection of spiritual writings by masters of the Orthodox Christian tradition from the fourth through the fifteenth centuries. It was compiled in the eighteenth century by two Greek monks. The first volume of the English translation appeared only in 1979, with later volumes appearing in the mid-1990s. These are, then, some of the original written sources on the ancient spiritual path.

6. *Gnosis*, 3 vols., by Boris Mouravieff. This attempt at a modern restatement of the Tradition, as preserved in the Orthodox Church, by a Russian émigré in the mid-twentieth century is for heavy hitters only. It contains more practical, “inside” information about the spiritual journey than any other book I have found. Parts of it, however, are very dense, difficult to understand, speculative, and occasionally out of step with traditional Christian doctrine. I suggest that one focus on the practical parts that explain how to walk the Christian path and not worry about the parts that seem theologically foreign.

Copyright 2004, 2006 by Doyle L. Young  
All Rights Reserved