From Bodhgaya to the Cuyahoga
Creative and Intellectual Expressions of Spiritual Culture
2011

Articles and Nonfiction

Speculations Concerning Wisdom (with Reference to Socrates and Chuang Tzu) – William A. Welton

Zen Masters At Play and On Play: A Take on Koans and the Koan Tradition, Chapter One – Brian Peshek

Remembrance of Death – Lea Povozhaev

The Iconoclastic Credentials of an Official Zen Person – Brad Warner

Evagrius and the Naked Nous – Michel Vasquez

A Sufi Pluralist Reading of The Great Book of the Universe: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and the Risale-Nur – Tim McCarthy

Poetry

Rick Hilles
Dave Pratt
Brittany Nicols

Book Review

Brother Salvage Poems of Rick Hilles – Tim McCarthy

Art

zen calligraphy – Alan Brenner

Curve Sets [Information Art] – Jayce Renner
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A Welcome From The Editor

“Don't Be Fooled by the Title”

The person versed in geography and religious nomenclature will correctly conclude from this journal’s name that it is the product of Buddhists who live in Northeastern Ohio. After all, Bodhgaya is the place in India where Siddhartha Gautama is said to have come to his complete enlightenment as to the nature of existence, the significance of life, as well as the remedy for the ills that come from being a conditioned creature. From that place his message spread all over the world eventually finding its way to the Cuyahoga valley in the Cleveland area. The Kent Zendo, a Soto Zen Buddhist group in Kent, Ohio of which I am a part, is but one of the results of that transmission. It is that Buddhist organization which has decided to pursue the path of publication. But such facts are deceptive in conveying the intent and purpose of From Bodhgaya to the Cuyahoga (FBC). For that, one must look beyond these particulars to a more essential meaning.

Here, Bodhgaya symbolizes the place where spiritual insight originates. Chinese Buddhists called this place shin, or the mind/heart. This womb of potential awakening is found within each individual. But insight without praxis is a horrible waste. In fact, it could be argued that without praxis there is, in truth, no insight. To be of value, insight must be brought to where people live and put into practice. In my case, that place is the Cuyahoga valley. But with the inception of this journal, it is hoped that “Cuyahoga” will extend everywhere. We also insist that insight need not, and at times even should not, be called “Buddhist,” or “religion.” Even so, language demands that we deal in particulars. Hence, the subtitle, Creative and Intellectual Expressions of Spiritual Culture.

A Multi-Genre Expression of Ultimate Concerns

The life of the mind and spirit, then, joyfully intermediates between the absolute and the particulars that so imperfectly express that truth. It makes use of the full arsenal of written expression, often mixing genres that might, at first glance, seem at odds with each other. Hence, in From Bodhgaya to the Cuyahoga, you will find academic articles alongside memoir, fiction, and poems, all of which share an underlying intent: to both inform and inspire; to stimulate the maturation of the mind and spirit for the purpose of finding ways of serving others; to explore what Paul Tillich famously called “ultimate concern” (7). From this unity of intent comes a diversity of voices, from the humorous to the serious, from the creative to the academic.
Taking Responsibility

Originally, interest in starting this journal came from the Kent Zendo’s own evolving spiritual thought and practice. For example, we found ourselves in agreement with Rita Gross when she writes,

*Buddhism is [often] regarded as a foreign intellectual and spiritual system, to be studied as such but not to be utilized in making decisions about our own direction. Even Westerners who regard themselves as Buddhists and live by its orientation often regard Buddhism as a complete, finished work which they attempt to assimilate rather than as an evolving system whose developments they can influence and for which they are responsible.* (ix-x; emphasis mine)

But this idea can be applied to all religions, and the extent to which one engages in the spiritual life as an evolving process is the extent to which we identify with that person’s “religion.” FBC seeks writing by individuals who take responsibility for their psychospiritual evolution which is capable and worthy of influencing the future of religion and philosophy of the spirit.

Giving Voice to Interfaith Radicals

Paradoxically, to take responsibility for one’s spiritual evolution often seems an act of opposing the religion which gave birth to the process. People who take responsibility for themselves in this regard are in danger of being called radical. Yet, as David Brazier notes,

...people do not see the extent to which Buddhism is radical. It is common for people to think that a little bit of tinkering with the status quo will accommodate Buddhism quite nicely. This is, in turn rooted in the assumption that most of what the status quo consists of is inevitable. Once you can persuade people to believe that something is inevitable, they will generally accept it, no matter how immoral or inappropriate it may be. (64)

As all major world religions take pride in the radical nature of their founder’s original messages during their respective times and cultures, this idea is not unique to Buddhism alone. Religious culture the world over is in need of much more than “a little bit of tinkering.” As such, FBC seeks to give voice to those of the “loyal opposition” of the various religions and spiritual philosophies which do not seek to “oppose” so much as to restore and advance. In others words, we are looking for radicals.

We are also in agreement with Akizuki Ryomin who, as part of a program of renewal within Buddhism suggested, among numerous other things, that Buddhists “enter into
dialogue with other religions and cultivate the ideal of a religion of humanity” (40). Once again, this is not a unique idea. There are movements within each of the major world religions which feel that an appropriate contemporary approach to one’s own religious practice must include dialogue with others as world citizens.

For example, new thinking about theism within Christianity, once a major wall between that religion and Buddhism, is now claimed to present an avenue through which Christianity and Buddhism can find common ground. In fact, John Shelby Spong, author of *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, feels that “Christianity and even the spirituality of the future will require the opening of every life to the exhilarating new humanity that is being born as the theistic God is gradually dying” (59).

**Education for World Citizenship**

Of course, it is naive to immediately assume equivalence between religions because of similarity in certain of their expressions. Even so, the mere act of dialogue is an expression of concern for others and, thus, is a spiritual practice in and of itself. It is, in fact, a manifestation of the golden rule. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who advocates a “world theology” from a Christian standpoint, writes that in order to understand faith “at the deepest, most personal, [and] truest level” one must first “recognize the faith of other men.” But once one has done this, one must also come to realize that “there are no other men” (103). Thus, even while holding to diverse perceptions and ideologies, the responsible religious radical is a world citizen, immersed with everyone in a single spirituality.

**Submit**

 Participating in this unity is to actively contribute. *We actively seek scholarly articles, poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction and visual art* which explore the future of religion and philosophy, as expressed above. Beyond this, FBC seeks expressions of concern for social justice and the religious and philosophical person’s relationship to social justice in general. FBC seeks academic articles which significantly develop understanding about feminism, animals as objects of ethical concern, sexual orientation, the relationship of religion to politics, and mental health care concerns. We seek writing which significantly expands on our understanding of ongoing atrocities committed against the common people of other nations as in Burma and Tibet.

**Guidelines**

**Articles** must follow standard academic citation methods and should be no longer than 10,000 words. We prefer MLA style but will consider other recognized modes of presentation. To submit, please see the Submission page at [http://fbttc.org/submission/](http://fbttc.org/submission/)

**Accepted authors** receive two (2) hard copies of the issue in which their piece appears.
A Note on Our “Affiliation”

As students inspired by the late Kobun Chino, Otokawa, we practice the Soto style of Zen Buddhism in a way that de-emphasizes the institutional, “priest craft,” aspects of that affiliation. In that regard, it might be of use to point out that Soto Zen Buddhism in this country is in the process of being “standardized” by priests who have an allegiance to the Soto organization in Japan. As part of this process, the American Soto Zen Buddhist Association was formed. This is a group of “monastic professionals,” who are forming a Soto Zen Buddhist Training Institute for the presumed purpose of implementing practices expected of the standard Soto Zen Buddhist priest. Defining priest as against layperson and delineating the expectations of the later would naturally follow from this. The first president of the Association is the Olympia Zen Center’s teacher Frances Carney (Eido), roshi. In one of that Zen Center’s News Letters she mentions that

This year [2006] the Soto Zen Buddhist Association’s primary concerns have been to establish guidelines for training priests in North America, to create an Institute for the purpose of providing training opportunities and continuing education for transmitted priests, and to study the implications of lay teacher Dharma transmission and their membership in the SZBZ. (1)

Angie Boissevain, one of Kobun’s lay successors, replied in an open letter to the proposal (which we have not seen) of founding the Soto Zen Buddhist Training Institute. Her answer is an excellent statement of how we at the Kent Zendo approach the practice of Soto Zen Buddhism. Menju means “face to face transmission,” while the word ryo refers to those practices sometimes called “priest craft.”

I know I’m not the only one to see that the Institute Proposal is focused on training priests for an institutional career where learning the “skills of ryo” is indeed a means of conditioning students character and self-understanding. However, for those of us whose training was in small groups outside Zen institutions, and who are continuing to teach in that tradition, this emphasis is not so useful. From my own teacher, Kobun Chino Otokawa roshi, besides zazen I learned two modes of being with students, menju, and ryo. Menju took precedence and was the criteria for all levels of transmission from beginning to end. Ryo as an expression of menju, applied to every action and gesture made in relationship.

He taught ryo mostly by his own example...in the way he handled a single stick of incense, the way he sliced a squid, drove his car, wiped his child’s face. Also, he taught ryo/menju by encouraging anyone who was interested to take on one of the many sesshin jobs during the five week-
long sesshins held each year that were our primary formal training ground.

In our lay sangha where home was as much a training place as the zendo, there was no signing up, no public commitment, no membership, no criteria. The emphasis was on zazen, and included sesshins, dokusan, ango, workshops and classes on nearly every aspect of Zen. One was free to learn any amount of what was on offer. As some of Kobun’s students found themselves willing to take more responsibility, some were eventually ordained, one at a time, in an intimate ceremony particular to each. If a priest wanted further training, Kobun signed them up for practice periods at Tassajara or sent them to Japan to train with his brother at the family temple. There was a number, though, who weren’t interested in teaching Zen and whose further training became pursuit of an art or craft, or helping establish a retreat center (Hokoji in New Mexico and Jikoji in California), or continuing with regular work in schools or industry.

Out of this tradition, a few of Kobun’s students who were further transmitted by him are teaching in his style and tradition of menju/ryo, with most emphasis placed on zazen practice itself, and providing a completely open door policy that anyone can come, can study, can sound the bells, etc. What those of us practicing this way in the lay world could benefit from in the proposal more than “priest craft,” is training in both, individual and group psychology, conflict resolution, and Buddhist history and philosophy. Also, one of Kobun’s unfulfilled dreams was to establish a study center where visiting scholars and teachers from Japan could stay and work with students for 6 months to a year at a time. Something like this would certainly be useful and interesting.

Though I know the institute proposals are not intended to suggest that they be requirements for “authentic” Soto Zen training, the truth is, as way leads on to way, our human tendency is to solidify and commodify our intentions into requirements and leave out what doesn’t fit current criteria. My hope is that great care will be taken to allow as much flexibility as possible to inform this new effort to create “appropriate” Soto Zen training in America, and that institutional training be only one of several possible avenues that we offer to the many beings.
Works Cited


Boundary Waters
by Rick Hilles

* All along the Mediterranean Coast, Night fishermen cast blindly into The Sea, their lit lures neon green And yellow helixes doubling in an Endless, wet black mirror. Another Exit and entrance hovers between Worlds. All Saints’. The night before— All Hallows’— the dinner conversation Revolves on distances, the dead, The creaturely, what passes for Understanding in our world. One friend Speaks of a place off Maui she swam Every day alongside spinner dolphins. Often she could hear their approach— A sound like laughter underwater, Nearing. They always seemed to know To leave—before the tour boats came. Some days you might believe the idea Most beautiful. Someone round the table Says sonar lets sea mammals perceive Things we only glimpse. One dolphin Studied in an isolation tank, echolocating, Homed in on its pregnant researcher— That day in distress—as if trying to heal Both with steady bursts of seismic frequency. *

Like kids who’ll do anything to stay Awake—even scare themselves—we keep Telling each other stories, each one more Unsettling than the next: A friend waking At her mother’s feet in the family station Wagon, asking her parents, “Are we Dead yet?” My first visit home from college. Thanksgiving. The white sheets of Ohio Snow squalls tumbling on the highway, Swirling behind the windshield, before Our eyes then gone, like so many migrating Spirits, when our northbound two door Pitches right, blindsided by a semi, whose Grizzly-snout shoves us the wrong way
Up I-71 for half a mile until we slide
Off, almost effortlessly, into a snowbank.

(Quetico)

First island in the chain of lakes known
As “the boundary waters” (Ojibwe for:
“Spirit that resides in Beauty, wilderness”
And “in places of undisturbed Immensity”)
On the Canadian side the boundary waters
Are protected; only so many travelers
May enter at a time. Days go by before
You’ll find another person, though you’ll
See loons, moose, grouse, snapping turtles,
And beavers, whose dams can overtake
Lakes and streams before the same
Lakes and streams in turn overtake them.
I see my father here, on the protected side,
Camping with the white wolves he never saw,
And still never sees, though they may eye
Him from afar, their gray smoky night breath
Before them then gone, their red-amber gazes
Hot as coals reflecting fire; I see my father here,
While the black bears roam the North woods.
Once he took my brother and me in a canoe
Out on the lake before dawn, and we returned,
Content, dangling the morning’s bright catch
On a stringer, only to find our rented ramshackle
Ransacked—chairs overturned, clothes strewn
In elaborate patterns of disarray. We found
The storm cloud white igloo container
Still reeking of skinned walleye and pike
And slimy to the touch, the ultramarine blue
Fist-thick lid still on, and clamped down tight,
But now with a whole black bear paw print
Pressed deep into the blue top’s broad cheek.
The black bear will return, but only after
My father and brother and I will drive away.

On the American side of Quetico, campers
Leave the carcasses and innards of fish
On the rocks; these meager offerings to
The lower gods ward off birds of prey.
Most gulls observe a pecking order
Unless a rogue gull appears—squawking, 
Feckless, a scavenger, no doubt hunger 
Deranged. Once a large snapping turtle 
Surfaced by my father’s boat, the morning’s 
Fish still on the stringer, unable to escape. 
His canoe-mate paddle-thwacked the turtle 
Onto its back but quickly it righted itself 
And came at him. The men fended off 
The turtle, and the other fishermen carved 
Their catch, tossing the glistening innards 
To the rocks. Then the lead gull swooped 
Down on the fish remains and rose 
Into the sky again, only to have another 
Gull pursue; it dropped the fish back 
Into the water. The turtle, or another, 
Surfaced, took the meat, dove, then 
Resurfaced; yet another gull grabbed 
The fish and ascended, back to the clouds. 
The other gulls now dive-bombed 
The victorious gull so furiously it dropped 
The fish back to the turtle, which choked 
Down the remains whole and disappeared. 
Twenty minutes later, there was no sign 
Of them, or that anything had happened, 
The water still as a figure on a printed page. 
*

Late May in Provincetown. Kicking up 
The fine sand of Hatch’s Harbor. The sun 
Low in the sky, a bright red blood orange, 
Spreading across the waves like wild fire 
And the sand reaching that red shade 
When my wife turns to me from that 
Immensity to ask if we have time to see 
The whales. Yes, I say, when four car lengths 
Off shore, appears—like a baby concert 
Grand—a submerged piano, suddenly 
Dislodged, raw umber brown, veins of 
Salty freshly-uncorked champagne-froth 
Running down its back and sides in silver 
Rivulets, a whale—shiny as a liver— 
The mist of its belched wheeze breezing 
Our hair over our faces—the beachcombers’ 
Kids now screaming: “Do you see it? Do you 
See it?” Will it beach, betrayed by signals
We don’t even know we’re sending? I think.
Running now, we toss back and forth
Plans to save it, all wrong, all late; watch
It surface three more times, each closer to
Shore, before the whale heads out to open sea.
The Mid-March day I learned of a friend’s death
Ended with the strangest sensation. Putting
Out the light, I wondered how I’d get through
The long night. Then my life-long fear of
The dark eased, erased, it seemed—How could
It be? Yet how could it be otherwise?—by you,
My newest friend among the gathering shades.
Speculations Concerning Wisdom (with Reference to Socrates and Chuang Tzu)
by William A. Welton

Wisdom is thought to be something the world needs that seems to be in short supply. Yet the question “What is wisdom?” is a daunting one. It seems to require wisdom even to know how to approach it. For this reason, I wish in this essay to attempt something more modest than a straightforward attempt to answer the question. I will examine certain ideas about wisdom that I associate with Plato’s Socrates in certain of the Platonic dialogues; and then I will suggest some contrasts and comparisons with ideas of wisdom I have drawn from my limited exposure to Eastern Philosophy. Although an adequate treatment of Socratic and Eastern Philosophical versions of wisdom would of course require a much lengthier treatment, my purpose here is only to initiate deeper thought about the possible meanings of the word ‘wisdom’.

‘Human Wisdom’ and the Love of Wisdom

For Socrates, the ‘love of wisdom’ involves an awareness of one’s own ignorance. This awareness is itself called a kind of “human wisdom” in Plato’s Apology, a probably fictive portrayal of Socrates’ defense speech before the Athenian jury. Socrates admits to possessing this ‘human wisdom’:

Listen then. Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that all that I shall say is true. What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom [sophia]. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom [anthrōpinē sophia], perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me.¹

What Socrates may possess is human wisdom. What he does not possess is a wisdom more than human. He ironically suggests that others might possess it, but the irony is clear in that they would have to be more than human, which seems unlikely. The irony also comes out in Socrates’ later recounting of his experiences with his fellow humans,

¹ Apology, 20d-e, G. M.A. Grube translation. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Plato: Complete Works, John Cooper, ed., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997. I follow the standard citation format: dialogue name followed by the marginal (Stephanus) page numbers. For the Greek I consulted the Loeb Classical Library edition of Plato’s works.
for they seem to lack not only divine wisdom, but human wisdom as well. Speaking of the Delphic Oracles’s assertion that “no one was wiser (mēdena sophōteron einai)\(^2\) than he, Socrates says:

> When I heard of this reply I asked myself: “Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise (sophos) at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest (sophōtaton)? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do.” \(^3\)

To test the god’s pronouncement, Socrates interrogates those in the city with a reputation for wisdom, with the result that in each case he concludes more or less as follows:

> I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows [eidenai] anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know. \(^4\)

Here Socrates admits to a kind of wisdom, a relative wisdom, relative to his interlocutor’s lack of awareness. Unlike his interlocutor, Socrates does not think he knows what he does not. His ability not to make this mistake is connected with his being ‘conscious’ [xunoida] that he is not wise. Yet in virtue of this consciousness he does have a kind of greater relative wisdom, and he must really have such a wisdom, or the oracle of Apollo would be simply a lie, and Socrates’ story would lose one of its main points.

> ...many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: “This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.” \(^5\)

Here Socrates’ reputation for wisdom seems to be an illusion, a misapprehension on the part of bystanders who imagine that Socrates knows the answers to the questions he asks others. But Socrates’ human wisdom cannot be simply this illusory ‘reputation for wisdom’—for if it were the oracle would again be merely a lie. But Socrates does say here that ‘god is wise’ and that ‘human wisdom is worth little or nothing’. That part of

\(^2\) Ibid., 20c-21a.
\(^3\) Ibid., 21b.
\(^4\) Ibid., 21b-e.
\(^5\) Ibid., 22e-23b.
what Socrates says would seem to make divine wisdom the only true wisdom, the only wisdom worth having, and would seem to deny the value of Socrates’ human wisdom altogether. Socrates interprets the oracle to say that the wisest human understands the worthlessness of his wisdom. But being wise in that sense is intended to set the human sage apart in a positive sense, and so such wisdom must have worth. Yet, paradoxically, it has worth only as an awareness of its worthlessness.\footnote{There is more to the value of Socratic ignorance in the Apology than can be fully explored here. Suffice it to mention that Socrates attributes his own exemplary bravery, his unwillingness, during his military service, to abandon his post “for fear of death or anything else”, to his awareness of ignorance. For not knowing what happens after death, he has no reason to believe that death is necessarily a bad thing. Apology 29a-c}

What is true of Socrates seems to be true of philosophy as such. In the study of the sciences, one learns many facts, laws, well-established explanations, and generally-agreed upon methods of research; these elements together constitute the body of knowledge that is the science. Although questions and controversies will always remain in the field at its frontiers, there is a reliable core of knowledge mastery of which suffices to make one an expert in the field. It is all very different with philosophy. The heart and soul of philosophy consists of nothing but questions and controversies of the very sort that only remain at the cutting edge of science. Philosophy has a lot of questions, but not a lot of answers—at least not a lot of answers that have found general acceptance. An authority on the subject of philosophy is not someone from whom one can expect to receive authoritative answers to the questions posed by philosophers, but only at best an informed account of the questions themselves and of the various possible answers that have been proposed by the philosophical tradition. Even such an account itself will be controversial among philosophers. For it is difficult to analyze or discuss philosophical thought in a wholly impartial way without taking some stand with respect to one or more of the fundamental issues; and the fundamental issues remain controversial.

Yet perhaps philosophy contributes to self-knowledge by making us aware of the network of perennial questions that are part and parcel of the human condition. We become aware of the questions, the basic possible responses to them, and what can be said for and against them. By becoming intimate in this way with the problems, we acquire a kind of “wisdom”, not by “answering” the questions, but by being familiar with the possible answers and their implications. We also learn to use the problems themselves to help us engage in the kind of intellectual activities that train our minds and constitute the active exercise of intellectual virtue. Thus, we transform ourselves through continual encounter with the questions. Perhaps we are acquiring a kind of self-knowledge, a knowledge of our humanity, in studying the philosophical problems that are characteristic of human existence. If the main problems of philosophy are universal, rooted in the structure of human life, this allows for the possibility of kind of Wisdom born of ignorance: an awareness of the problems.
But since any understanding one attains is itself something questionable, how can one be sure that one is really coming closer to an understanding of humanity through a better understanding of the philosophical problems? Perhaps the most we can say is that relative to one’s own prior understanding one seems to be making progress. Perhaps philosophy seeks a kind of clarity. Perhaps “human wisdom” is clarity about the problems, a thorough familiarity with them. Such wisdom would know the terrain; it would be wisdom that does not escape the labyrinth of existence, but becomes sufficiently familiar with it to feel completely at home there.

If so, it could be that the human good that wisdom understands is the practice of philosophy. If so, then the achievement of the goal of philosophy consists in the proper perfection of its practice.

According to this conception, philosophy is not like a journey that comes to an end when the destination is reached; it is like an activity that is perfected when it is excellently performed. The goal of philosophy is not merely to know the good, but to embody this knowledge in our lives. But that implies that wisdom is not merely something to be found and set down in a book; rather it is something to be mastered and exercised throughout the course of one’s life. If human wisdom consists in the right cultivation of the love of wisdom itself, then this wisdom is an activity, not a mere result. It could have no natural terminus while we live, so that whatever our level of achievement, human wisdom, or the love of wisdom, is something one must practice for life.

Socrates and Chuang Tzu

Stanley Godlovitch suggested that wisdom might consist of really taking to heart and living according to truths that everyone knows but that most of us fail to appreciate or appropriate—truths like the significance of change, death, our limits etc. As an example of this, take Socratic ignorance itself. It seems easy to think: “I could be wiser than I am if only I remember not to think that I know what I don’t know.” But it is very hard to remain mindful of this in a helpful way. The belief in our knowledge forms quite naturally, but the testing of our beliefs takes hard work. It seems a simple point, but it is not enough to say it; we would have to live it, and that is not easy.

The idea of Socratic Ignorance appears again in Plato’s Theaetetus. But the positive value of Socrates’ ‘human wisdom’ appears there through a different metaphor. Rather than the ‘gadfly’ of Athens, as he appears in the Apology, in the Theaetetus Socrates

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9 Apology, 30d-31b.
portrays himself as a midwife, comparing and contrasting his own art of philosophy, as a kind of midwifery, with ordinary midwifery. Rather than assisting women in giving birth to children, Socrates assists young men in their giving birth to ideas. As midwives are women past the child-bearing age, so Socrates is no longer able to give birth to his own ideas; he is a barren midwife. As women suffer the pangs of child birth, Socrates’ young male interlocutors ‘labor’ over their ideas, and suffer the pain of philosophical confusion or aporia. And just as midwives can encourage or discourage the onset of labor, so Socrates can encourage or discourage the onset of this philosophical birth process. Also, just as midwives can best tell whether or not a woman is with child, Socrates has the power to discern who is and who is not spiritually pregnant. As a midwife matchmaker could find a good mate for woman not yet pregnant, Socrates can find the best sophist to ‘impregnate’ the mind of a youth.

In Plato’s Theaetetus, Socrates helps Theaetetus give birth to ideas. But another important function of the philosopher is a testing function; he has the power to examine the ‘offspring’ of his interlocutor to see which of the supposed ‘offspring’ are mere ‘phantoms’ or ‘wind-eggs’, rather than truths. Thus, Socrates helps young Theaetetus elaborate very complex views, and then critiques them. He warns Theaetetus ahead of time that the young man will have to be willing to let go of phantom-children, and he also tells him that many others have not been so willing.

I return later to the broader significance of the midwife image, especially the question of what is conveyed by the metaphor of offspring. But first, I want to consider the meaning of Socrates’ barrenness and his ability to stimulate birth, and to explore what these aspects of the metaphor might reveal about Socratic wisdom. I begin with a contrast between Socratic wisdom and wisdom in the Taoist philosophy of Chuang Tzu.

Socrates’ mode of wisdom, in which a ‘spiritually pregnant’ interlocutor is induced to give birth to ideas some of which may be quite false, seems, on the surface at least, very unlike that of a Taoist sage. The Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu seems to recommend that we not pursue endless thinking about philosophical distinctions:

> We cling to our own point of view as though everything depended on it. And yet our opinions have no permanence: like autumn and winter, they gradually pass away. We are caught in the current and cannot return. We are tied up in knots like an old clogged drain; we are getting closer to

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10 Theaetetus 150b.
11 And perhaps, unlike the midwives, he never was able to do so. Cf. Theaetetus 149b-c with 150c-d.
12 Ibid., 150c.
13 Ibid., 149d, 151a.
14 Ibid., 149c, 150b. Apparently, Socrates can work with the youth only after someone else has impregnated them with ideas; he himself has no generative function. He not only cannot give birth to his own ideas; he also cannot himself sow them in another.
15 Ibid., 150b-c; 151e; 160e-161a.
16 Ibid., 151c-d; 160e-161a.
death with no way to regain our youth. Joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, hope and fear, indecision and strength, humility and willfulness, enthusiasm and insolence, like music sounding from an empty reed or mushrooms rising from the warm dark earth, continually appear before us day and night. No one knows whence they come. Don’t worry about it! Let them be! How can we understand it all in one day! 

This passage strikes me as exceedingly powerful. As some self-observant person once remarked: “Over the course of my life all my beliefs have changed, except for one: My belief that my beliefs are true.” When one considers how easily our beliefs may change, and how little is the evidence on which they are often based, it can suddenly seem quite foolish that we spend so much of our time becoming so agitated in their defense, so emotionally invested in them, or even so concerned with fixing them up. There is something quixotic about trying to construct an edifice of belief that will enshrine the absolute truth, even the absolute truth about a very limited place and time. An accurate representation of even a tiny portion of reality—that is a representation that could somehow capture reality as it ‘really is’ apart from any limited human point of view—not only seems impossible to achieve in principle; if one reflects on it, it even seems quite irrelevant. The information we want is the information we think we need, and that is always much more limited than such a ‘god’s eye point of view’ would provide, even if we could obtain it. But if the information we are interested in is dictated by our needs, desire and interests, how can we fail to be governed by subjective points of view?

And yet we treat our beliefs, our questions, our doubts, our intellectual puzzles as if they were the most important things in the world. Getting caught up in worrying about our ‘representations’ of the world in imagination and language, we typically neglect our actual experience, the undeniable fact that “we are getting closer to death with no way to regain our youth” and that “Joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, hope and fear, indecision and strength, humility and willfulness, enthusiasm and insolence …continually appear before us day and night”. We have this experience, but we can no more hope to understand it intellectually that we can understand “music sounding from an empty reed or mushrooms rising from the warm dark earth”. Of course, in a sense we can understand these things, scientifically; but in a certain sense such explanations at best cover over the fundamental mystery of their presence. Why should there be music, why should mushrooms grow at all? We do not know, but we experience their being; and as we might experience their being in detached wonder, Chuang Tzu invites us to step back from our logic-chopping to experience our own flowing mental states with a similar detachment. Suddenly, in the light of his writing, our concern with our belief-systems, as though they would provide a magic key to master the world, seems vain. While searching for this key, we are missing the heart of life that flows on anyway, in spite of us, all around us and inside us.

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I think one has to have some intimation of what is so wonderfully right about what Chuang Tzu is saying before one can really notice how different Socrates’ approach is. Before meeting Socrates, Theaetetus was already concerned with the problem under consideration in the dialogue named after him. Now whereas the counsel of Chuang Tzu seems to be to let go of the problems, what does Socrates do? He identifies Theaetetus as one who is mentally pregnant, and then offers to help him give birth to and test his ideas. Not only that, but Socrates had intensified the young man’s already existing struggle with ideas right from the start by raising the question of the relation of knowledge to wisdom and by asking the young man to define knowledge. Socrates throws gasoline on the fire!

Perhaps one sees something parallel to this Socratic intensification of mental activity in Buddhist Koan training. It would be hasty to suppose that Eastern philosophy never involves prolonged stimulation of conceptual rationality. But even then we would still have to ask if the end in view in both cases was the same.

But who knows if Socrates’ experience as the barren midwife is not somehow similar to the Taoist’s experience? For as the barren midwife who can test the offspring of others, Socrates does not cling to points of view, and is not easily taken in or bowled over by any phantoms or wind-eggs. Is the state of being a barren midwife an achievement on the part of Socrates? Is it a goal for which even his interlocutors are to strive? At first sight there is nothing in the text to suggest either of these things, and yet it is interesting that the Socratic midwife apparently never delivers a child that passes his tests; one after another, the ideas of his interlocutors are exposed as mere phantoms. Moreover, it is the ignorant Socrates, with his human wisdom, who appears as the greatest philosopher in most of the Platonic corpus. Might this fact not suggest that the goal is to become like Socrates?

Yet although Socrates does not give birth to ideas and is not taken in by the ideas of his interlocutors, he is depicted as having strong beliefs to which he is committed. So ‘barrenness’ need not imply an absence of strong beliefs. If that is so, might Socrates still be clinging to belief in a way that Chuang Tzu seems to warn against? Perhaps, and yet Socrates also seems willing to submit any of his beliefs, even his most firmly held, to scrutiny.

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18 Theaetetus, 148e.
19 Ibid., 145d-146a.
20 Certainly in the Theaetetus none of the ideas to which the young man gives birth survive. Much the same is the case for the all the so-called ‘Socratic’ or ‘early’ dialogues of Plato. In this paper I am primarily interested in Socrates insofar as he is Socratically ignorant, whether or not he is always depicted as being so. For here I am speculating about wisdom, and not so much concerned with nailing down Plato. I will, however, subsequently offer some considerations in favor of an at least somewhat ‘Socratic’ Plato.
21 For a particularly illuminating example, see Gorgias 486d-488b. Cf. 508e-509b for the strength of Socrates’ convictions even when accompanied by profession of ignorance.
Still Socrates does spend an awful lot of time concerned with the phantom-children, the false or merely speculative ideas of his interlocutors. He develops them at great length, examining their implications, etc. One can imagine what Socrates might say about the admonition from Chuang Tzu quoted above. He might say: “...we will be better and braver and less lazy by thinking one ought to seek what one doesn’t know, than if we thought that it is not possible to discover what we don’t know nor necessary to seek it”. If the ‘barrenness’ of Socratic self-aware ignorance is really a state in which one no longer clings to views, somehow akin to the state of mind that Chuang Tzu seems to be recommending, in any case it seems to be a state of mind arrived at in a different way.

Chuang Tzu also said: “Those who dispute do not see”. Should we infer that those who do not dispute are those who do see? Not necessarily. For a Taoist is not merely enough to give up disputing at the proper time; something else is required. It would seem that the way of the Taoist involves “observing the way of things”, i.e., harmonizing with all things through a kind of mindful awareness.

Such awareness would not be exactly like scientific observation in the West. It would not issue in collections of facts. It would attempt to go beyond mere facts to the heart of things, but it would not do so by reasoning about concepts or by winnowing linguistic distinctions as Socrates did.

The practices involved in the two modes of ‘wisdom’—Taoism and Socratic Philosophy—are quite different, but they have some similarities. In both, the life of wisdom comes from and is identified with a kind of practice. In both traditions the practice has no result other than the practice itself; it does not issue in facts, propositions, products or anything that can be reduced to concepts. It is for its own sake. It is a kind mental discipline that results in a condition of the mind, but the value of that condition is solely its ability to engage in the practice which gave rise to it and which expresses its nature.

Yet in the case of ‘Socratic wisdom’ the practice involves dabbling in abstract concepts, distinctions and disputes in order to rise (supposedly) from illusions to an insight into the order of things, while in Taoism one eschews such disputes. Instead, the sage engages in a kind of mindful awareness, a kind of attunement or harmonization with the world. For the Taoist sage knows the Tao and observes ‘the way of things’; this “attunement” allows the sage to pick up on something essential. The results of the sage’s practice of observing the Tao are embodied in the language of particular cases or parables, but these are epiphanies, meant to reveal something beyond language. It is not the details in themselves that matter, but what shines through them. This ‘something beyond language’ is not arrived at by reasoning. It seems to be a kind of awareness, a mindfulness that tunes into the way of things, harmonizing with it with one’s whole being. But this “something beyond language” is not something ‘beyond the

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22 Meno 86b-c, my translation.
23 Chuang Tzu, Inner Chapters, p.37.
world'; rather, it is a way of being in the world—perhaps even a way of letting the world be, and in so doing, being the world. This kind of awareness does not seem to have any clear analogy in rationalistic Western philosophy.

Varieties of ‘Wisdom’?

I have noticed that in various philosophical schools of thought one can detect what appears to be a common striving for an experience of life that rises above the vicissitudes of fortune. There may even be something similar about the way various philosophies try to do this, for in many cases it seems to involve reducing enormous variations in circumstance to the same meaning and value.

For example, in Existentialism the big insight is that the universe is inherently meaningless. All meaning comes from us. In Stoicism, on the other hand, the meaning of life is to live it well, which from the Stoic point of view depends only upon us. All other things, all things outside our control, should be a matter of indifference, since they have no power to affect our happiness one way or the other, any apparent power they have deriving only from our judgments about them. But that means that according to the Stoics most things in life are indifferent and in a sense meaningless. Indeed, Stoics often draw attention to the fact that things have a meaning for us that our point of view assigns to them.24 There is a kind of analogy between Existentialism and Stoicism then, in that both realize that we have a role in shaping the meaning of our experience, and therefore we have responsibility for the meaning of our experience. Both recognize that since we do, the various experiences of life, whether apparently good or apparently bad, are in a sense reduced to the same value, for they are all merely potential, merely raw material for us to use in constructing our experience.

There are, of course, important differences between Existentialism and Stoicism. The existentialist believes things are objectively meaningless, with our subjective imputation of meaning lying wholly within our power to control. The Stoic thinks that things are set up so that our happiness, the source of all meaning for us, depends not at all on anything outside our control. In other words, the Stoic believes that it is an objective circumstance that some things are neutral or irrelevant with respect to the genuine source of meaning. Unlike the existentialist, the Stoic does believe in an objective source of value. According to Stoicism, external things may only be subjectively valued by us, but our success or failure with respect to rational virtue and harmony with nature constitute the basis of an objective value we do not simply create from nothing. To a true existentialist, such an attitude would seem to be bad faith, denying that one is oneself the source of all meaning, with absolute freedom and responsibility for assigning all values.25

25 I am thinking here of Sartrean Existentialism, and I am somewhat oversimplifying, but I believe my basic point is unaffected.
If one looks at Pyrrhonian Skepticism, one finds a similar reduction of the variation of our experience to a uniformity: According to the Pyrrhonists, we do not know what anything really means or what is true and what false. Any meaning we assign to things might be wrong. We should suspend our judgments about all things, including our judgments of value. They recommend that we follow a simple set of conventional, practical rules, but they hold that we need never affirm that anything that happens to us is either good or bad, being always aware that such judgments exceed our knowledge.\(^{26}\)

So according to Pyrrhonism, we base indifference on suspension of judgment-- on the fact that we cannot know whether the judgment is true or false; in the cases of Existentialism and Stoicism, we were basing our indifference on a belief or a knowledge-claim. Each of these ‘paths to wisdom’ is associated with a kind of ‘philosophical experience’ in which one achieves some detachment from the flux of fortune through learning to experience all things (or most things) in a specific, unified mode: whether as mysterious, indifferent, or meaningless.

Consider Epicureanism. The Epicureans had a saying: “The gods are not to be feared, death is not to be feared, pleasure is easy to obtain, and it is easy to endure pain.”\(^{27}\) The Epicureans do not counsel a state of utter indifference, but they do counsel putting things in perspective. ‘Putting things in perspective’ includes the idea of ‘not sweating the small stuff’. And since death becomes insignificant if we truly grasp that it is impossible for us to experience it—since it occurs only when we are gone—there is very little that is not ‘small stuff’ from an Epicurean point of view. On the Epicurean path, one trains one’s desires to be so moderate that one is adaptable to almost every possible life-circumstance. Again, the infinite diversity of life is reduced to four categories: the gods, death, pleasure and pain; everything serious can fall under these heads, and supposedly there is nothing in any of them that the true sage cannot handle.

Turning to Eastern philosophy, consider Taoism. It would seem that in this philosophy one’s ordinary valuations are altered by the experience of the necessity of interpenetrating and harmonious opposition. All things are connected, and one cannot have yang without yin. Perhaps there are elements within Taoism of the other philosophical experiences listed above—such as the wise Socratic Ignorance cultivated by Skepticism, or the ability to adapt to changing circumstance cultivated by the other philosophies. But there is something else going on here, and it is hard for me to even begin to grasp it with my Western mind.

It could be that the Western philosophies listed above all attempt to achieve a wisdom that would master life and enable the self to rise triumphant over changing


circumstances. But in the case of Taoism, and also Buddhism, it may be that practice only begins in such an attempt, and becomes something altogether different.

With my very limited experience of Zen meditation, I can hardly safely make pronouncements as to how it works. But perhaps it leads to a state in which there is no longer struggle by the self to master and control anything. Instead, the self dissipates, as the experience of resistance to change fades away. One harmonizes with every situation because the barrier between oneself and the circumstances fades away; one has become part of the flow of life itself. I imagine it would be much like the sense one has being swept up in a dance or in performance of an athletic activity. When one is ‘in the zone’, self-consciousness is replaced by relaxed awareness and the activity in which one is involved becomes everything; it as though one ‘gets out of the way’ and allows the activity to happen ‘of itself’, to flow through one. Perhaps Eastern wisdom, so-called “enlightenment”, is when self goes away, and the world remains otherwise just as it was.

Insofar as all of the Western philosophical disciplines mentioned above try to assimilate whatever life hands one into a certain uniform perspective, they seem to be engaged in dominating and mastering the diverse experiences that come to one and imposing on them the same stamp. But in another sense, one is adapting oneself to every experience by always producing in oneself the same reaction. That is, even in the Western wisdom traditions mentioned above, in every case, one is adjusting oneself to the universe and not the universe to oneself. To that extent, perhaps the successful practice of any of the above disciplines might lead to a moment similar to the ‘egoless’ experience one might achieve in Buddhism. For a good deal of what constitutes the ‘ego’ is a system of diverse evaluations of other things, i.e. likes and dislikes. And it is understood in all these traditions that this system of preferences and aversions is what chains us to the fluctuating circumstances of fortune. It is the ego that wants to ‘control’ because it has preferences. But for the ego to begin controlling itself, i.e., its own preferences, and to negate them (as it begins to do in all the above systems, more or less), is perhaps a way of beginning its cessation. Perhaps all of these approaches overlap in this way.

Both the analogies and the differences in all of these “philosophical experiences” or “ways of wisdom” are interesting to contemplate.

**Wisdom and the Self**

If wisdom were knowing the good, or being aware of one’s own ignorance, or having a mode of consciousness that rises above the vicissitudes of fortune—in any of these cases it might seem that the ‘self’ or the ‘ego’ is still involved.

To take the case of Plato: Plato understands that ‘reason’ is a faculty or power of the human psyche that can be used well or poorly. ‘Wisdom’ for Plato seems to be reason
when it is well-used and well-trained. Plato thinks of reason as a faculty that always aims at the good, whether or not it always is wise enough to identify the true good correctly. But is reason aimed at the good for both oneself and others? Is it rational to desire the good for others purely for their own sake, or does rationality imply the notion of rational self-interest? Is reason inherently egoistic?

For Plato, all human activity is primarily self-interested, not altruistic. When reason is wise, then the self-interest involved is an enlightened self-interest, and that enlightened self-interest implies being concerned with the good of others, the good of the whole community of which one is a part. Nonetheless, it seems that from a Platonic point of view, reason is inherently egoistic whether it is enlightened or not. The desire or eros behind it is always our desire to ‘possess the good forever’; if we cannot find that Good here, we have to seek it in another world.

If Reason is understood as a human faculty, the life of autonomous reason is a life devoted to the principle that I must see and understand things for myself. If that is so, then to overcome egoism from this point of view would mean to surrender autonomy, to trust what is not myself.

On the other hand, Reason can also seem to transcend egoism by being 'impartial'. Such impartiality involves being willing and able to listen to the other person, and to imagine matters from another’s point of view. It involves a willingness to abide by tests the outcome of which one cannot dictate oneself. Thus, one has to put one’s self in abeyance for the sake of something more authoritative than one’s perceived temporary self-interest. Such impartiality thus involves ‘being willing to be refuted’ if that leads one to the truth; in other words, the willingness to admit that one is wrong. The Socratic ideal of the examined life implies a willingness to suffer Socratic refutation. The rational life implies subjecting one’s ideas, behavior, one’s very self to measures that are not merely determined by one’s subjective feelings and whims.

But such self-criticism can still be egoistic; it may be merely the self exerting its own self-overcoming, its own will to power over itself. The attempt to ‘possess’ wisdom, the process of evaluation that is part of the Socratic examined life, could itself be an obstruction to wisdom, as one reflects on the ‘progress’ one has made, compares oneself to others, etc. This effect is somewhat analogous to the way in which a moment of self-consciousness in any skilled activity can spell disaster. The kind of self-consciousness involved here is the kind of self-consciousness associated with the so-

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28 This idea seems to be implied in the definitions of city-wisdom (428a-429a) and psyche-wisdom (441c, e, 442b,c) in the Republic, especially if they are understood in the context of the subsequent discussion of the education of philosopher-rulers (503c-540c).
29 Ibid. 505d-e. For the idea that reason acts for the sake of the good or the best, see also Phaedo 97b-98b.
30 Apology 25c-e.
31 Symposium 206a-b.
32 See Plato’s Gorgias 457c-458b.
called ‘honor-loving’ part of the psyche. It is this part of the psyche that (among other things) is concerned to evaluate our wisdom relative to others and to make satisfying pronouncements upon it.\textsuperscript{33}

Plato’s dialogue \textit{Symposium} offers an interesting perspective on the problem of the self and reason’s relation to the self. (In what follows I am interpreting somewhat freely). In the \textit{Symposium}, creativity in general is discussed in terms of reproduction and the desire for immortality\textsuperscript{34}. According to Socrates’ teacher, the wise woman Diotima, all of one’s creative works are said to be like ‘offspring’, a kind of creative reproduction through which we seek the preservation of ourselves, immortality. The ‘offspring’ that are our creative works constitute images of one’s self; through those offspring one perpetuates one’s self. Such ‘reproduction’, literal and figurative, is the mortal’s version of immortality. Because our ideas are our ‘children’, images of a ‘self’ we believe we possess, we become attached to them. The irony is that this ‘self’, according to Diotima’s teaching, turns out to be nothing more than a stream of such ‘children’, such ‘images’, such attachments.\textsuperscript{35} The only real continuity to the so-called self is the underlying desire or \textit{eros}, defined by Plato’s Socrates as a desire ‘to possess the good forever’.\textsuperscript{36} But this desire is a desire for an object that we essentially lack. This eros, the desire that constitutes one’s only ‘identity’, longs for what it itself is not and can never be; it would be destroyed as such a longing were it somehow to obtain what it desired. Eros is a pure yearning for otherness (specifically, for the Good) that perforates any supposed pure identity of self. That underlying erotic desire renders thoroughly porous any boundaries one might try to draw around the self.

At the same time much of what is taken to be the ‘self’ is constituted by the attachments of the appetites and the spirited sense of ‘honor’ and ‘shame’.\textsuperscript{37} In the \textit{Republic}, Plato’s Socrates treats these elements as lower portions of the psyche. In contrast, it is precisely the so-called \textit{logistikon} element in the psyche (somewhat mistranslated as the ‘rational part’\textsuperscript{38}) that continually questions and opens up these

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{33} On the spirited part of the psyche, see \textit{Republic} 440a-441c. The dramatic aspect of Platonic dialogue often emphasizes the egoistic investment of the characters in their ideas, and their discomfort, shame, or anger in having their views questioned. In the dialogues the agonal or competitive aspect of Greek culture is depicted as it expresses itself in intellectual debate, and Socrates’ conversations with sophists often happen before audiences, of whose reactions the participants in the debate are keenly aware. See especially the \textit{Protagoras}, the \textit{Gorgias}, and the \textit{Euthydemus}.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} \textit{Symposium} 206b-209e.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 207d-208b.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 206a-b.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} I believe that these ideas may be connected with what the Athenian stranger (in Plato’s \textit{Laws}, Book 5, 731e-732a) calls “excessive love of self” (\textit{tēn sphodra heautou philian}). This passage in context comes right after a discussion of correct and incorrect ways of pursuing honor (\textit{timē}) (726 ff.) and the right way of being spirited (\textit{thumoeidēs}) (731b-c), which demonstrates the role of the spirited part of the psyche. Insofar as rightly honoring the psyche involves resisting appetitive pleasures (727c), clearly the appetitive part is involved as well.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} The word ‘rational’ in English suggests an opposition to desire, whereas for Plato the \textit{logistikon} element has its own characteristic desire. (\textit{Republic} 580d) The whole idea of separate parts of the psyche might easily be misunderstood to imply a compartmentalization which is the reverse of what Plato intends. It
\end{itemize}
attachments of the irrational elements, and by bringing the psyche to a state of Socratic aporia or confusion, makes it conscious of its erotic longing and incompleteness. Such an awareness of its ignorance, or erotic incompleteness, frees the psyche from the delusions of opinion and opens it up to the transmissions of impersonal divine knowledge. Because the soul continues to remain ‘erotic’, however, these ‘messages from the divine’ contained in the inspiration of love always present themselves as mere glimpses of what we can never fully grasp.\(^{39}\) The longed-for good remains beyond the self, and the good that can be achieved is gained by continually opening the self up to what it cannot possess.

As discussed above, in the \textit{Theaetetus}, the case of Socrates who is barren is contrasted with the case of Theaetetus, who is characterized as being in a state of spiritual pregnancy. Socrates helps Theaetetus give birth to his ideas, but then tests them, to see which of his supposed ‘offspring’ are mere ‘phantoms’ or ‘wind-eggs’, rather than truths.\(^{40}\) Socrates warns Theaetetus ahead of time that the young man will have to be willing to let go of phantom-children, and he also tells him that many others have not been so willing.\(^{41}\) Thus, here too, as in the \textit{Symposium}, only more explicitly, Plato uses the metaphor of offspring to suggest how we get attached to our ideas as reflections of ourselves. Socrates also warns of those who, believing egoistically that they themselves were the source of wisdom, left Socrates’ company too soon and so lost the ability to distinguish between their true and their false ideas.\(^{42}\) What is this account if not an image of the loss of one’s critical faculties through the seduction of self-aggrandizement? When one is elaborating ideas, it is truly hard, if not impossible, to be fully critical about them \textit{at the same time}. Thus, in the \textit{Theaetetus}, they seem to follow a two stage process: first Socrates helps Theaetetus give birth to an idea or set of ideas, and only then do they test the offspring to see if it is a phantom, which it always proves to be.

Suppose we were to take Socrates as a metaphor for Wisdom. Reading the “barren midwife” image, we might say: Wisdom retains its critical ability no matter what; it is not swept up by the spell of creativity and the human attachment to its offspring that creativity produces. Wisdom would be able to administer the medicine of refutation to

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\(^{40}\) \textit{Theaetetus} 150b-c; 151e; 160e-161a.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 151c-d; 160e-161a. Cf. \textit{Republic} 330a-c, where Plato again uses excessive attachment to one’s children as a metaphor for a businessman’s excessive attachment to self-created wealth.

\(^{42}\) \textit{Theaetetus} 150e-151a.
souls that are too attached to their “own” things and ideas and that are deceived about themselves, in love with false estimates of themselves. Wisdom, while caring for itself as wisdom, is barren; it does not generate images of itself, i.e. attachments.

Yet if wisdom is a Socratic midwife, she helps others, others who have selves, give birth to images of themselves. She does this for an unknown reason. Because it is somehow good?

Socrates seems to speak of his midwifery as a divine vocation; what purpose does it serve? Will humans derive something of benefit from Socrates’ vocation? Consider the possibilities: Is it that some “living child” (as opposed to a “phantom”) might eventually be born to Theaetetus? Or is it that it will benefit Theaetetus eventually to become barren like Socrates? Or is there some third outcome to be desired? And does Socrates derive some benefit from his midwifery?

Perhaps Socrates’ midwifery helps him because it keeps him in a certain constant relation to a Truth that he loves but cannot grasp. It does so by keeping him aware of his own ignorance. Perhaps it helps Theaetetus mainly by bringing him into that same relation. If so, would the goal is not necessarily for Theaetetus to give birth to real children, but rather, through trying and failing to do so, to become a “barren midwife” himself. For it is interesting that the Socratic midwife apparently never delivers a child that passes his tests; one after another, the ideas of his interlocutors are exposed as phantoms. And even in the case of the apparently positive ‘Platonic’ doctrines in the dialogues, there are typically caveats presented, qualifying their affirmation.

The rational element in us that sees some glimpse of ‘the true good’ is something impersonal. The practice of coming to heed these glimpses, clearing away the rubbish of our false belief in our own wisdom, is what Socrates in the Phaedo calls ‘the practice of death’; it is a passing from the personal to the impersonal, from the subjective to the objective. ‘Dying’ here means not just turning away from the sensory world (although that is explicitly discussed), but also letting go of the ‘self’—as least letting go of a kind of false self-composed of sensory attachments. The notion of a ‘practice of death’ means that those elements in the psyche that obscure the vision of the Good are deeply connected to our ‘personality’. The irrational spiritedness in our psyche that finds false

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43 See his many references to god in this connection at Theaetetus 150c-d, 151d.
44 See, for example, Phaedo 107a-b, Republic 504e-505b; 517b-c (These last two passages from the Republic, if taken seriously, would seem to undercut any dogmatic conviction with respect to anything the Platonic Socrates says in the Republic, and perhaps anywhere else in Plato’s works. In them and their contexts, Socrates makes clear that knowledge of the good is necessary for true understanding of anything, and that he also doesn’t believe that he has the knowledge of the good. If he is dogmatic, in the light of these passages he would seem to be dogmatically skeptical, except for the fact that reaffirms his uncertainty about all that he is saying about the knowledge of the good again at 517b). I recognize that there are cases in which definitions are accepted provisionally, for the sake of the discussion, or put forth as approximations (such as the definitions of virtue in the Republic. See Republic 504a-d, especially 504b). 
45 Phaedo 64a.
honor in worldly goods is fed by the internalized voices of society echoing within us; how much of our ‘personality’ consists of just such echoes? 46.

Yet true ‘wisdom’ might not only be ‘impersonal’ and ‘anti-egoistic’; it may be so by being communal and dialogical. Rather than thinking of ‘wisdom’ as some treasure stored up in the mind of the wise person, perhaps we should see a wise person’s wisdom as growing out of their relationships. Perhaps wisdom comes not from ‘inside’ the wise mind, but from a way it has of relating to everything else. Perhaps wisdom is a way of accessing the wisdom in everything else, a way of relating to others that finds the wisdom inside them. For perhaps wisdom ‘already’ resides in a ‘self’ that exists only in and as its relationships to everything else.

But if wisdom involves dialogue, that need not reduce it to a mere conventional agreement. For whether it is an individual or a whole society that holds a given view, we must still ask the questions: “Is it true?” “Is it wise?” Something in us, some impersonal and yet still fallible insight, must respond to that question; but as fallible, that insight remains continually in need of further questioning.

If the self is understood as eros, then the self turns out to less substantial than it seemed. For eros is a yearning for what it is not, a yearning that has no temporal satisfaction. But Plato does not regard this yearning as a deficient mode of being, but as a message from the divine.47 Through our very longing for what we lack, we open up to intimations of wisdom that we can never fully grasp. Perhaps this elusive wisdom with its glimpses of Forms matters less than the opening up of the psyche itself as it reaches for what it cannot possess. Perhaps the quest of the mind for wisdom can break through the bonds of the self.

If there is a connection between the wisdom of Socrates and Eastern wisdom, perhaps it lies in a willingness to open and examine the ‘self’, to continually question it and bring it into relation to what it is not. Socratic self-examination might still involve the danger that it could merely reinforce the self, forging it new weapons and defenses. But if practiced in the right spirit, perhaps such a care of the psyche could teach the humility of true openness to what is other than the self. Perhaps Buddhism somehow moves this process of self-questioning to a level at which the self-other dichotomy is transcended altogether. For if what we are treating as though it were a self is merely a set of ephemeral desires transpiring in the context of a wider experience of reality, then awareness of these desires as such, in this wider context, could allow us to let go of the illusion of the substantive self.

46 This phenomenon of internalized social pressure is what is called ‘the Great Beast’ in Simone Weil’s writings. See Simone Weil: An Anthology, Sian Miles, ed., Grove Press. Weil’s notion is inspired by suggestive passages in Plato’s Republic (493a-d; 492a-c).
47 See the characterizations and praises of love given at Symposium 201d-212c and Phaedrus 244a-257b.
Poems by Brittany Nicols

**Poetry in Purgatory**

Cracked door, cracked door,
What do you make me see?
First a giant with a dirty look,
Then two steps to the left and I catch
A jacket on a rusted hook.

Curiosity barges through the door.
And I see...
Well, I saw.
The man of the fiery, deep, dark.

Insomnia stoned by vision.
Standing awake, I am wide asleep.
Standing the same, this crater filled with Revelation.
On my skin, the warmth of his breath sulfuric on my skin
As he spoke.
And he spoke,
“Only through the demons
Can the angels call.”

Raphael intrudes.
He says he’s been fighting this muse all along.
He says the crater is only Adam,
Lucifer with amnesia.

The beginning was a padded cell
Of pear trees and orchids,
Conceived by the lighting of wicks with wings.

But when the pears turned to apples...
The snakes remembered flight.
reACTION began, man’s mistrust spread.
Stretching the dichotomy of sight.
Holy omnipotence misread.

Raphael whispers,
“Life is only his lackluster dream, my lady.
Don’t let the cage trap you in its beauty.”

Then the waters set themselves on fire.
Eternal bloody battle first broke the land.
Arousing even the arch angel’s anger.
Lucifer began,

“THE CAGE IS ENDING.”
He Grabbed Me By the Hair

He grabbed me by the hair.
A heave and a hoe, led me directly to his eyes,
To the dreams that left them long ago.
The twinkle chose to rise.
I scream, I cry, all when he grabs my wrist
And throws me to the floor.
What did I do to deserve this?
I promise to sing with the birds no more.

Once again bombarded by his silent eyes,
Burning holes into my chest.
I guess we could this some sort of real success.
You’ve proved your point,
I’m up against the wall. Naked and powerless,
Seeming un-whole.

My dreams rose to the stars as I broke the earth.
A crater created in my place.
The stars and heaven did adjourn, but
There is no second chance for one of the human race.
So I hold my breath, close my eyes,
Pretend to disappear. Only thirty more seconds
Before I pass out to finally escape from here.

The devil motions to soften my pride.
He is almost ready for the kill.
His face grows large, fed by pure delight,
He is weaving his evil spell.
Teeth marks bruise my inner thighs,
Causing others to express such fright.
Me, I wonder, How do I feel?
About these last markings of the night.
Mildew

Like a sailor’s dream to go down with the ship.  
Smitten with the bones of past lovers.  
The vulnerability gets me every time.  
One prays for the perfect death.  
The perfect crime can be no more.

You see the devil’s aggravation touches the lowest of parts.  
The way a man goes down within minutes.  
You say you’re in love with me.  
That’s easy when I’m the only one.  
Surprising to the least.  
The sun ices over with the secrets shared.  
Could you hold me tonight, just be prepared?  
The moments that lingered tip toe past the few,  
An extreme for the nighttime,  
A shepherd’s flock, pounds of mildew.
The Devil's Empathy

Others beckoned.  
I never answered their calls.  
But for one moment with him,  
I will risk it all.

Fear.  
We must dispose of this ghost.  
I must deliver myself from the uncertainty.  
I must find someone who hears my plea;  
Someone to keep me grounded.  
My heart is filled in jubilation  
and will not be settled.  
While my eyes are filled with unwanted tears  
Of memories I will never own.  
Fuck the boys of the past.  
All I want is the spine tickling tone.

Out the window I realize  
I lost the struggle  
And I'm not the only one.  
Defaulted by demand.  
Because she'd rather sit with him  
Than play the stupid games that boys play.

Well good morning lust.  
Raging breasts.  
Bleeding fire.  
Am I to risk everything for the happiness of my heart;  
Only to have to abide by the fear that it could be torn apart?

My friends.  
My safety blanket.  
My protection.  
My heart.  
My head.  
My sanity.  
I don't think I have a choice.  
This is what I wanted.

And when he said my mother could be looking for us  
As if we should stop gazing up at the moon  
And the periwinkle blue that laid past the dark trees of night,
He never once let me go.

Too bad there's no flow. 
No heart, no story to tell. 
Just visions of hell. 
These visions of hell, 
0ABased off the memory of courage, 
Through working the old diary of scribbles, 
Dreaming these lackluster realities. 

For I blind so quickly at a smile, 
My heart is filled with deer. 
Pouncing, leaping, through the midnight sky, 
Making all other thoughts disappear. 

I squirm, I plunder, I run around. 
Dreaming for one kiss. 
Broken fingers, broken bones, 
The devil's sort of bliss. 
So hunt me down and 
Tell me why the gods concur to wound, 
Allowing mortals to love on sight. 
Time is the lover's gloom. 
So the sun glowed and the moon shined, 
As you looked into her eyes. 
I guess I've found the scariest of things; 
A lover's compromise. 

But in reference to the lust above, 
My insides bleed to shout. 
"The heart's not here," 
Bleaker sounds, 
"You let the damn thing out!"

So you've got mine, 
And I have his, 
While yours is traipsing where? 

All these stupid memories 
Years long before the fall, 
So many lovers deceive themselves, 
Please put me outside them all. 

Now I'm mundanely stuck inside my head.
Your face-sun in, sun out.  
Finding new ways to say hello,  
The days begin to count.

The beast is coming.  
\textit{Pretend it's me you're lusting for.}  
He screams and shouts!  
\textit{Heaven's at the door.}  
Nails scrape against bare skin.  
\textit{Hold me close it's on the line.}  
I'm wanting more than this.  
\textit{Forget-me-nots and daffodils;}  
I became the devil at the door.  
\textit{Pinky promises.}  
Promises pretend.
Tristan's Path

Sun drenched in your lullabies of thoughtless time and nature walks,
Basking in the glory of your figures of speech and your deep brown eyes.
Teach me the ways of not knowing, of sitting behind a desk without complaint.
Sorrow fades when happiness bleeds
And I believe that may be enough.

What am I supposed to do,
Delve into a land of greatness?
Focus on the little beauties?
They've been drifting through the sky for so long,
They must believe I don't see them.

But there they are!
Those unfocused pleasures that highlight the lives of people I may never know
Past the barren trees I see a pathway.
My shoes are old and I've been trying to save them for far too long.
Maybe I've forgotten.
Maybe I've forgotten that the past was always meant to be a brief interlude to greater happiness,
With the soul's forgiveness I'll see the darkness in the glaring light.
The path is beckoning for an encounter,
With only slight adjustments I can live wandering.

Timeless, delicate, complete in the unfinished,
Complete in mistakes.
Take care of me,
I'm jetting off into the unknown.
Zen Masters At Play and On Play: A Take on Koans and the Koan Tradition
by Brian Peshek

Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION AND THE QUESTION “WHAT IS PLAY?”

The most celebrated dialogues of Zen teachers are collected in koans.¹ When encountering these teachings, one may be compelled to ask, “Why do these masters play these games?” If these gentlemen are bearers of truth, then why do they behave so, when dealing with those who come to them in earnest to be taught and thereby saved? To answer this question is the ultimate goal of this paper. There are, however, several questions that must be asked on the way.

First, the question is based on the supposition that they are in fact playing. But, what is play? Rather than construct a concept of play, I will limit myself to looking into the construction that we already have, such that the analysis will not contradict our shared experience of the word and of the phenomena to which we apply it. Rather than making nonsense of the term, the goal is a deeper sense of the meaning of “play.” This is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

Next, I will examine the Zen practices and texts in question by asking, “What are koans and what role do they play in Zen?” in Chapter 2, “The Koan Tradition and Koan Training.” The term koan may now be part of the English language, but it seems that its meaning is in need of some clarification. There are several existing models by which to consider koans, as well as some misconceptions about them. Throughout the paper, those of the Blue Cliff Record shall be the focus.²

¹ My policy regarding terms and names is as follows: (1) In the body of the text I shall use English translations of terms whenever appropriate and commonly accepted ones exist. (2) When they do not, preference shall be given for the Asian term most recognizable to Anglophones somewhat familiar with the tradition. More often than not, this will be a Japanese term: “Zen” instead of “Chan,” for example. (3) Asian terms that have been absorbed into the English language in recent decades shall not be italicized. (4) The Pinyin system of Chinese romanization shall be used rather than the Wade-Giles system. (5) For the sake of consistency, all non-English terms in quotes shall appear in the preferred version even if they do not appear so in my sources, without the use of disruptive brackets. (6) Historical figures will be referred to in the modern version of their own language. This is also done without the use of disruptive brackets. (7) A footnote shall be appended to the first instance of a term or name that will list the Sanskrit version of the term, the Chinese characters for the term (traditional rather than simplified), then the Pinyin and Wade-Giles romanizations of the Chinese pronunciation, and lastly, the romanization of the Japanese pronunciation of that term or name where applicable. Thus for the sentence to which this footnote is appended: Dhyāna (Sk), 極Ch’an (PY), Ch’an (WG), Zen (J); 公案gongan (PY), kung-an (WG), kōan (J).² 恰巖錄Biyanlu (PY); Pi yan lu (WG); Hekiganroku (J). In the text and in the notes, The Blue Cliff Record shall be abbreviated BCR. Unless otherwise noted, all material from BCR will be the translation by Cleary and Cleary, as published in one volume (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992). Thomas Cleary’s Secrets
With fleshed out understandings of both “play” and “koan,” I will ask, “Is koan practice a species of play?” Does the question “Why do these guys play this game?” make sense? Whereas Chapter 1 looks at the label “play” through characteristics that are common to the phenomena to which it is applied, and Chapter 2 looks at koan events, Chapter 3, “Zen Masters at Play in the Koan Tradition,” attempts to construe these events in terms of the characteristics of play, thereby rendering the application of the term to the Zen practice reasonable.

To discover why they play so, I will first discuss some of their beliefs in Chapter 4, “Zen Doctrine.” Finally, in Chapter 5, “Zen Masters on Play,” I will attempt to explain why Zen doctrine allows for, or perhaps even encourages, such playful behavior.

Before proceeding, I must articulate some limits and methodological presuppositions of this study, as well as the biases of its author. First, Zen beliefs are taken up only to the extent that they aid the answering of the guiding question. Rather than being taken up as issues in themselves, they are granted as valid within Zen, the law of their land. That the behavior is inconsistent with the beliefs of any outsider who would entertain the guiding question, is evident in the very fact of its being posed. But the question also expresses a lack of understanding and a desire to resolve it. Should the practice be successfully defended as consistent with the beliefs, then an outsider may be granted some insight into Zen.

Second, this paper revolves around a term. If philosophy’s recent preoccupation with language has taught us anything, it is, perhaps, that precise and concise definition is not an easy thing to accomplish. This is especially so with “play,” a term that has a very diverse range of phenomena to which it is applied. Therefore, I make no claim regarding its essence (if it has one). I have failed to achieve certainty regarding any necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the term, and failed to find an algorithm for definite inclusion or exclusion of a phenomenon in the class of phenomena so named.

Nevertheless, since we all know what it means, one can unpack implications from various senses of “play” in an attempt to find commonalities and semantic centers of gravity under this umbrella term. Hence, in what follows, I offer a spectrum of characteristics of the phenomena to which it is applied. At one end of the spectrum are characteristics which seem to be relatively essential. That is to say that any phenomenon that is labeled so will probably exhibit such characteristics, at least in some sense. In the middle range are characteristics that are less essential, or perhaps, less evident. At the opposite extreme are optional possibilities. For example, play can be

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of the Blue Cliff Record contains all of the koans of BCR with commentary on the cases by Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768) and Tenkei Denson (1648-1735), both eminent masters of Japan. Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record is abbreviated as SBCR, and “Hakuin, SBCR koan 74” should be taken as “Hakuin’s commentary on BCR koan 74, as it appears in Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record.” Koans of the Mumonkan (JPY; Wu-men kuan [WG]; Mumonkan [J]) are also frequently cited. Translations by Cleary, Aitken, Sekida, Kapleau, and Reps are listed in the bibliography.
capricious or serious.

Naturally, the elements which I explore are those that will be of use to me in justifying the intuitive extension of the term “play” to “koan behavior.”

**What is Play?**

Play is *dynamic*, entailing movement and *moves*. Beyond the obvious examples of play that involve movement, we note that to “play the ace” or to “play the pawn” is to literally move it. Whereas singers sing, musical instrumentalists are said to play — and recordings are said to play - because of the physical movements required. When we speak of, say, “the play of light upon waves,” we draw attention to the rapid changes that are inherent to it. Consider also that to “play Hamlet” is to put the character (a dead potential on the page) into motion; to bring him to life. As such, play is an event by which something transpires. To say that “the movie is playing at the theater” is to say that it is happening, that it is taking place.

Fueling the sustenance of the dynamism of the happening is the fact that playing always already is *playing-with*. For every player, there is at least one thing that stands in opposition to it, something with which to be dealt. We speak of “playing with an object,” or with a playmate; of “playing an opponent” or a sonata, or a dramatic role. In order for play to happen, an interchange must take place in which something is played-with, played-along-with, played-against, and/or played-off-of.

Gadamer characterized the alternating motion between elements as the essential “to-and-fro.” Similarly, Piaget spoke of assimilation and accommodation. Taking their cues, we note that, on the one hand, play involves *adapting* to conditions and acting upon the basis of *givens*. Though we often hear of “free play,” it is only relatively so. Fields of play and play spaces have their *limits and rules* which, in contrast to the dynamic elements, are relatively static. They may be explicit, clearly delineated and absolutely binding, or implicit and flexible over time. A ball is “in play” when it is within prescribed physical bounds. To “play fair” or “play the game” is to act in accord with the rules; that is, to

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3 While these adjectives may be used in conjunction with a host of terms other than play, I would suggest that the meaning of any term is, in part, delimited by its possibilities. That is, it is significant that a binary pair of opposites such as vertebrate and invertebrate, for example, cannot easily play a role in a taxonomy of play. I should also note that the order in which I present the elements of play is indicative of a general direction, rather than an exact sequence. These characteristics often hang together, and the proposed spectrum is merely a provisional means of organization for the conceptualization of a complex set of phenomena.


5 The same could be said of, say, Bach, though when we say that one is “playing Bach,” we really mean that one is playing the music of Bach.

conduct oneself in a way that does not ruin the game and disrupt the play-world. That which is played-with is also given. When a child “plays pretend” and proclaims a frisbee to be a steering wheel, they accept, and submit their imagination to, its roundness. When musicians play together, they must listen to each other, spontaneously adjusting their playing. In games, to “play opponent x” is to first heed their playing, and to move according to it. Similarly, “playing down to an audience (or opponent)” is a species of cooperative playing-along. To “play shortstop” or to “play Macbeth” is to submit to the characterizing limits of the role. To “play a sonata” is to execute the production of sound within limits prescribed by the instrument and the composer. To “play dumb,” to “play it smart,” or to “play it cool” is to act in a way already specified by others. Finally, to be a player is to, in part, give oneself over to an event. Accepting the hand dealt, and committing to play it before it is dealt, the player submits to the playing-out. They voluntarily sacrifice some autonomy and control over to the parameters of the particular playing, and over to the play as it unfolds.

Having been thrown by oneself into a play-world, and thereby having subjected oneself to what is there thrown, a player, nevertheless, must personally respond to be so called. To “play a role” (in theater or in anything) is to act. Play requires both deference and friction. In reaction to a situation and within the parameters of possibility, to “make a play” is to do something; to “make a move” is to exercise the freedoms accorded the particular player in the particular play. To “play it safe” is to select a possibility to actualize. In contest, playing-against is exertion on the playing-out, in opposition to certain co-players. It is reacting to what has played-out, in order to influence what will be played-out. To “play with a plaything” is not only to accept it, but also to take what it is lightly, to impose upon it, to act upon it. It is saying, “No. This is not a frisbee. It is a steering wheel.” Likewise, “playing off of” another is not only taking what they give, but also accommodating it to one’s own personal playing, appropriating it as one’s own plaything, often with some degree of dissonance. “Playing someone for a fool,” “playing on their feelings,” “playing politics,” “playing a prank,” “playing up” or “playing down” a situation—these are all exertions of an agent. It is partly because of such willing that we associate play with freedom, and say that for a wheel to move, there must be sufficient “play in the bearings.” Still, play is always free re-action within prescribed limits. To be a player is to be both thrown (at) and to throw; to be both master of, and slave to, the play.

In contrast to purposive labor, however, play has been characterized as lacking a telos, or as being autotelic — done for its own sake. As there is no logical, metaphysical, or biological necessity, play is optional. When we say that someone is “just playing around,” or tell someone to “stop playing and get to work” we allude to the autotelic dimension. Especially within the practical sphere, “play” is synonymous with abstinence from work and purposive behavior. A “playboy” behaves in an irresponsible manner, as do children, who are afforded the luxury of play in high quantities, and do so without a reason. In the adult mind, play is mere amusement, frivolous recreation that is not to be taken seriously, as it has no product, nor purpose, outside of a diversion from
purposiveness. In play, even functional objects may be divorced from their ends and become open-ended, as when a broom is a horse.

To discuss this autotelic component is not to deny that the by-products of play may serve biological, psychological, developmental, financial, and social purposes in the wider sphere. One may play soccer for exercise; another, for money. A six year old may be forced to play Mozart to insure good scores on college entrance exams. I would suggest, however, that the degree to which such people are playing for a goal that is not intrinsic to the particular playing is the degree to which they are not playing, but rather, exercising their body, or their mind, or working as entertainers, for example. To dwell on such external reasons for playing is to abstain from the immediacy of play. In order to truly engage, such concerns must be bracketed, as they have no meaning in the play-sphere. Nothing that happens within the game/play serves any of these peripheral functions. Taken away, the play itself would subsist unchanged. Nevertheless, forms of play do have their particular goals, often quite literally. Still, such targets are only provisional ends that exist within the play-world only as means to give it shape. For example, there is no intrinsic value to putting a ball in a basket. Such an act has significance imparted only within the game of basketball, the direction and definition of which is a matter of convention and somewhat arbitrary. Furthermore, if the point of basketball was to get the ball in the basket, then all parties involved would simply get out a ladder and do it. The goal is to put it in the basket within the unnecessary rules. That is, the game is absurd and impractical in that it makes its own goals more difficult to achieve. Hence, the means – ends framework is of limited application to play. Also falling short is the suggestion that one tries to put a ball in a basket under certain restrictions in order to play basketball. Rather, trying to do so is playing basketball. But aside from any intentions of a playing subject, ultimately, the goal of basketball itself is basketball; the goal of a sonata, a sonata.7

Though the “goal” is clear in such cases, and elements of any athletic or artistic performance are predetermined, as play, there is a certain degree of indeterminacy. Phrases like “playing cards,” “playing the horses,” and “playing the stock market” highlight the uncertainty (and often, concomitant risk) of play. Though the game is defined and determined by its static elements, taken together, they circumscribe a closed but vast infinity of possible ways in which any particular engagement may move and be played-out. Though to “run a play” (as in football) is to perform an established sequence, its choice at that particular time is a surprise, the reaction of one’s opponents remains to be seen, as is whether or not it will in the end be executed. While the playing of a musical piece or of a dramatic role may seem to be free of chance, the actual performance is not solely determined by the marks on the page. Furthermore, as a live event, failure always looms as a possibility. In fact, some music derives much of its energy from the seeming improbability of successful execution. Here a performance is,

7 “[M]usic has . . . no goal. . . . [W]hen it goes somewhere (for example, in sonata-form development) it is not for the sake of getting there but for the sake of the going there” (David Loy, “Indra’s Postmodern Net,” Philosophy East and West 43, no. 3 [July 1993]: 498).
ironically, all the more live for the audience if they thoroughly know the piece beforehand. But beyond the question of whether or not a performance will transpire as prescribed, is the question of exactly how it will do so. Although most of the individual contingent elements may be too numerous, fleeting and subtle for much of an audience to perceive, they do perceive the stream of contingency; that is, the immediacy of the event. Consider also the play of light upon waves – it is unmistakable as such, yet at any given instant, one cannot predict the precise arrangement of the glistening surface in the next instant. Yet even when a sequence of phenomena is absolutely determined, as is the case with a recording, its playing may be utterly live and immediate if the engagement between what is played and those that play it, is open-ended.

Clearly, a realm in which indeterminacy, unnecessary complications, and lack of purpose reign, is a realm not ordinary. All play spaces are “temporary worlds within the ordinary world.” To step into one is to experience a different order, a different nexus of meaning. In certain worlds, a can is not a means to keep food from perishing; it signifies and is something entirely different: something to be kicked. In other worlds, silence may be deafening; movement may be more than a matter of spatial coordinates; words may be something other than conduits of information. To accept and enter into such an extraordinary frame of reference is to be a player. It is for this very reason that these “temporary worlds” are valued “within the ordinary world” – as ordinary conceptions of play make clear, to be a player is to step out of the ordinary role of purposive worker; to indulge in setting aside the necessary for the optional.

Within such worlds, actuality, if not an outright hindrance, may not be so important. Many forms of play involve pretending, or involve taking possibility as if it were actuality. This is so when children “play house,” or “play teacher,” or when an actor “plays a role.” In such cases, something is passed off as something else, as when playing-down, -up, or -as. The “playboy,” or in contemporary urban parlance the “player,” deals in artifice. All illusion (from in-ludere) is a form of playful “as if-ing.” It would be incorrect, however, to suggest that only an audience or opponent is duped. Dramatic performance, for example, “is a dangerous game verging on self-deception-accepted-as-truth.” To “play with possibilities” is to take them up as real and imagine them playing out. In sports, players play as if the goal of the game is the only thing that matters, as if the rules are metaphysical axioms; best friends play as if enemies.

Through such “as if-ing,” the game/play is brought into being, is realized. Prescriptions for play (structures, rules, scripts, scores, etc.) outline regions of possibility, but any play

8 Consider especially the case of a digital recording which literally involves the chopping up of phenomena into bits, measuring it, and representing the information as raw data.
9 See Huizenga, 10.
10 Here, we think of the validity of the phrase, “the kingdom of childhood.”
is actualized only in its being played. Elements of the play come into being as well. We say, “Hamlet is (present) at stage right.” We do not say, “The guy representing Hamlet is at stage right.” A child playing house may say, “I am the mommy;” not, “I am going to pretend that I am the mommy.” For those that forget the degree of seriousness with which such provisional truths are held, or who may suspect that the normal wording is simply more temporally efficient, consider that to “play shortstop” is to be a shortstop; to play second fiddle is to be second fiddle. Hence, in play, there may be a movement between ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’. This is especially true with the play of children that is an open-ended exploration of possibility. “A frisbee. It is round. It is not a frisbee. It is a steering wheel. It is this big. It is not a steering wheel. It is a hat.” Thus, a hat is brought into being. Thus, the physical matter that was a frisbee is seen anew.

For the player “in play,” such things may be taken quite seriously, for the play-world entered truly is their reality. In spite of senses of play as something light and capricious, when one is fully engaged, the implicit “mere” that precedes “play” is dropped and one is “really playing,” or “playing for keeps.” That is, one truly commits to and submits to the play, and puts one’s self completely in its space. Therein, one is fully given over to (or taken up in) the illusion of the play-world: that the provisional objectives matter; that the rules of the play are absolutely binding; that the roles played are essential. Especially children set aside the fact that it is only a game. And while play may be taken seriously, that which is serious (or dull) in the ordinary, wider sphere of “real consequence” may, of course, be taken up playfully; that is, may be approached with extraordinary levity. Aside from a subjective comportment, however, “real consequences” may be intrinsic to some forms of play which are anything but trivial. Consider: “playing for stakes,” “playing with fire,” “playing Russian roulette,” swordplay, gladiator games, or the games of the ancient Maya. In such cases, loss is not limited to the field of play. As one’s very being may literally be on the line, seriousness is insured in these types of play.

If one enters into a play-world and takes what transpires there seriously, they may “really play.” That is, deliberation and exertion, as well as consciousness of self, of other, and of time, may also be set aside in peak engagement, to the effect that such a player not only submits, but is absorbed in the immediacy of play. Again, children are especially prone to play in such a way that blurs the boundaries between player, played-with and play. So too, with those that are extraordinary within the extraordinary realm. Play-worlds may have their elite – those that are not only distinguished from spectators by being “in play,” but are also distinguished from other players by being masters of the game. With sufficient commitment, seriousness and engagement over time, one may be able to spontaneously heed the to-and-fro, while steering the playing-out towards their chosen ends.

To recapitulate, play is a dynamic happening in which something transpires through an interchange between player and played-with. To play involves submitting to and adapting to the givens of the play-world, which include its rules and limits, as well as the
indeterminate playing-out. Nevertheless, a player is one who exerts within the freedoms afforded in the particular game, appropriating what is thrown and responding with a throw. Participation in such extra-ordinary events is optional, and while one may do so for a reason, the play itself is autotelic, done for its own sake, done to be realized. To some degree, all play involves “as if-ing” and a movement between what is and what is not, often with the result that something is seen anew. It may be taken quite seriously and peak engagement may follow, as may mastery.
Remembrance of Death
by Lea Povozhaev

[T]ime is the servant of death. Time began with man’s fall into sin and it will exist only until the end of the history of mortal humanity. By contrast, the spiritual world exists outside these limitations, outside these bonds and measures; it is infinitely wealthy, eternal, and indestructible.¹

I loaded the minivan: diapers, baby food, car seats and blankets, gloves, quarters for coffee and a hot chocolate—my toddler’s and my treat before Babushka’s this first snowy morning. After a run-through at McDonald’s, I turned toward my in-law’s, the mystery of their living in America a subtle feeling, as my toddler’s sing-song blended with the hum of the van.

We arrived at Babushka’s and sat down to breakfast. I swallowed the dark grain cereal she served, grabbing a handful of my son’s raisins, mixing familiar flavor into the casha. I looked down at the kitchen table, mine from college, and listened as Babushka urged my older son to another mouthful of cereal. I felt the past sitting in our present: my mother’s plastic bread with the “Our Father,” my aunt’s fake Christmas tree, wood ornaments my uncle whittled before cancer. New curtains hung behind my mother’s old couch, a symbol of adolescence, of lusty nights with Dima after Friday night football games twelve years before. Many had donated old things: pastel candles, crocheted blankets, china dishes with wispy trees. Such gifts, remembrances of family past and present, transformed the neutral walls of a small house into a home, a place of life and love. A home could be an icon, a living symbol through which the ever-present light of God flowed.

I rinsed my bowl and accepted the baby from my mother-in-law’s arms. Moloko, she nodded, as I crept up the stairs to nurse the sweet-smelling infant cradled in my arms. Daylight behind russet curtains set the bedroom aglow. The baby was warm against my stomach. Peace filled the still room, and it seemed as though another’s presence were with me. I felt comforted, but wondered if it were only my imagination, only my emotions that easily swayed me. I looked at the three icons on the dresser, two of the Mother of God and Christ, and one ancient icon of the Family Protectors, a depiction of three somber saints with their hands signing blessing. How many families, throughout the world and time, pray through saints? Faith is a whisper, inaudible in the whipping winds of life. And yet, only within the context of living is prayer possible. I was alone in a quiet room because my child needed me.

So often, unbalanced priorities confuse life, and I am not still. As the body responds to life’s myriad distractions, the mind shuffles along, the spirit seemingly stifled. Perpetual concerns distract peace, though I believe it is here, alive, in each day. If light permeates everything created but still the human soul is fearful and selfish, “alienated from this good earth and from each other. [...] habitually distracted,” concrete reminders of God are necessary to reflect the purpose and meaning of life.

People, trees, the sea and sky, all creation allows us an icon of holiness. Life is full of images reflecting God, which I do not see because a hard shell of daily concern keeps my spirit hiding, separated from God. If “any beauty perceived is ultimately due to the presence of Christ” (101), seeking God allows life to become a gift of thanksgiving and joy, even in its manifold sorrows. On the other hand, closed in by ephemeral concerns, darkness blinds me. Feeling resentment and depression, death can seem an ugly, vicious end, something to fear and unnaturally reject. The other extreme might be embracing death as a desperate escape—suicide in extreme cases, but reckless, destructive living more commonly. Death, outside of meaning and purpose, seems separate from life. Ultimately, perceiving existence with a beginning and an end is incomprehensible. Irrationally, immortality is a silent longing we share, I believe, because we are created to believe in a living and ever-present God.

My older son’s laughter drifted upstairs and the baby arched backwards, so eager to experience the world, pulled already by distractions that divide attention. I jiggled him back to me and drifted with my thoughts.

Dima’s father had mentioned that Americans were generous, contrary to the Soviet propaganda that had demanded mutual distrust and dislike of capitalist Americans. They had been told for years we were self-serving and didn’t care for each other. As their small home filled with family gifts, they pushed further and further from old notions. Yet, it seemed easy to give from abundance—Dima and I had also been given much from family and friends—and I wondered about the gifts I felt responsible to offer: my time, attention, my husband, children. Often, I wished instead to give a dresser. Ironically, self-sacrifice becomes a gift returned to me. It feels good to care a little less for myself in the brief moments I can. Christ did not have to be killed, but maybe His death is one that reminds us humility is the way to God.

Of the things they weren’t given, there were few things Dima’s mother was certain she wanted to buy, but she wanted a fence around their pale home. I thought fences cut small yards into plots. My in-laws had lived in a high rise apartment their whole lives without even a small postage-stamp yard as their own, and I could see how a fence might be a symbol of ownership they longed for. Fences offered a hedge of protection,

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too, if only against the distraction of the surrounding world, including neighbors with yellow trucks, loud dogs and children.

Dima’s parents perceive and communicate life through symbols, and I wonder if this is because they are from a culture shaped by Orthodox Christianity. After dinner recently, they shared a story similar to others. A friend had had too much to drink late one night but had no sick time to take off work. In hopes of getting a note from a doctor that might allow him an excuse for the next day at work, he visited the hospital.

As the nurse listened to his heart with a stethoscope, he asked her how long he had to live. She replied she did not know and that she was not a coo-coo bird, whose number of “coo-coos” was thought to tell how many more years a person would live. As they heartily chuckled, I wondered why I did not find humor in their story.

When they arrived in America and settled into our home for the first month, a dirty stuffed goat was set in a basket in my kitchen. Again, something was funny to the family as they pointed to the stuffed animal and called one another “goat” in a heavy accent. When Dima’s father failed a driving test in America, not knowing the word “horn,” his mother explained he felt like a “kettle,” empty-headed.

Allegorical thinking seems essential to understanding for Russian people. If the baby is messy, he is a sweet pig; if a person learns something new, he rolls it in his mustache; a stomach virus requires a stronger spirit, vodka and salt, to free a person from illness. Lately I’ve reconsidered things I thought I knew. Though washing hands keeps germs from spreading, the invisible world contains mystery no matter how much we might “know.”

People often assume I go to “the Russian Orthodox Church,” but we attend an American Orthodox parish because I was adamant about worshipping in a place where I wouldn’t remain an outsider. I needed liturgy in English, and though I hadn’t known it until recently, I also needed an ethnic blend of people who chanted along with the choir. Participation allows the sense that Christ is here now, not only in Russia, Romania, Greece; not only hundreds of years ago or at some unknown time in the future. Yet, even with half the parishioners American, with pews, abbreviated Sunday morning liturgies, and friendly, smiling faces sharing doughnuts and coffee after service, my parents, who joined the Church with Dima and me a couple years earlier, have recently decided to leave. Orthodoxy is for foreigners, they say. It is depressing, too somber, too restricting—why do we have to follow the rules of fasting and praying established by the Eastern Church, and why haven’t these adapted more to life in the West?

The Orthodox Church is for foreigners, and we might consider why the experience seems far away and impenetrable. Jesus of Nazareth was from the East, a Jew, but came to save those who might seem quite unlike Him—gentiles, Westerners, and all who live
with limited attention to the spirit. If the Church becomes who He was, who He is, the East and the West must blend and ultimately dissolve.

We are not the first generation to doubt authority, particularly God’s, as the chief priests, scribes, and elders all doubted, even as Jesus performed miracles. When He asked them if the baptism of John the Forerunner was from heaven or men, they “reasoned” among themselves, answering they did not know. Jesus would not say from where His authority came. If people will not to look beyond the earth, things of the spirit cannot be comprehended. I fear—for my parents, myself, for all of America—the confusion and bitterness we have for organized religion, which diminishes the mystical experience of becoming the Body of Christ, the Church.

Our priest recently compared the Church to a hospital—where every imaginable pain and sorrow is. My parents comment on the depressing way of worship because to our American way of life, full of smiles, glossy lips and cars, fasting from Sunday morning coffee to spend an hour and a half contemplating our sinfulness and praying for repentance seems foreign. Indeed, it is. However, feeling comfortably “in” or awkwardly on the fringe, seeking the eternal, universal God separates us from even our own feelings and thoughts as true unity is emptying of our selves and filling with God. How else can it be: “They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last”?

Dima’s parents asked very simply why my parents left. For many Russian people, if a person is Christian, they are Orthodox. Last Sunday, the first without my parents greeting me in the foyer with open arms to take a baby, after fighting with Dima who stayed home in bed with a mild illness, my heart was ringing with our parting words—hypocrite, he’d called me. So true. I am not “orthodox,” I realize. I will never be “the right way.” Yet holy tradition, maintained by the Church through the ages, offers hope. Icons of holiness transform my life by their divine witness. And miraculously small changes in my own life, despite me, might continue to witness Christ.

My mother-in-law’s fence would be a visible marker around what was in, out, and maybe I never liked fences because I preferred an open expanse that might make one yard appear inclusive, or maybe dissolve into no single yard at all. A fence wouldn’t change the fact that their small backyard had two trees and a sagging garage where my boys might someday run and play. Americans preach unity and equality, but it becomes deception and confusion. Instead of truth setting us free, we fear it traps us. We divide life and death as rationally as a fence separating a yard, forgetting all the while the fluidity of the solid earth beneath, the flowing sky far beyond.

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The baby was almost sleeping against me in the quiet afternoon. I sat where my husband’s parents’ had lain hours earlier. Over half Dima’s life had been spent across the world from them, and in the moment time evaporated, floating through yellowing photographs propped by Russian books in their new home, minutes from ours. Wind stirred a pale sky, and I imagined the frost tickling my garden soil a few blocks over, failing to rouse Dima’s shriveled green tomatoes. I wondered how many more seasons our peeling birch tree could weather. How we teetered between life and death, impatiently passing time, as though swimming toward some finish line. But what if we never lose the responsibility of living—if death has been trampled and immortality is real? How might life be challenged if death is not a release but a timeless, placeless continuation of what we are becoming?

Reflecting on death became necessary recently when my childhood friend died. She would have been twenty-nine this year. She and her newlywed husband had been on vacation in Italy when a tidal wave swept her from the edge of a cliff into the sea. It still seemed impossible, not only because I hadn’t known young people to die, but because death had never before seemed a reality for me.

I had vicariously experienced death before, but age and sickness had processed it first. My husband’s grandmother had been dying when she’d visited three summers earlier. Softly moaning in my childhood bed where she’d rested that long month, I had looked upon death awkwardly. Time had ravaged her body with diabetes and a leg infection had turned her foot into a scaly pink fish. She was in her early sixties with thick eyeglasses, silver hair brushed back in an owl-like puff, and loose skin with the stale smell of age. I had been twenty-seven, my shoulders tan with summer sun, my body agile and easy. If Grandma were a picture of death, I had seemed one of life. Now it seems there might have been less separating our two souls born in separate corners of the world and conditioned through different life wars, mine hardly known at the time. We differed in our flesh as much as possible, but we were not separate on the level of the spirit. If God dwelt in us, we were, are, one. If death removes the constraints of time and place, she becomes a woman with a heart, mind, and soul not so different from my own.

But the flesh is all in America—and the reason we obsess over youth. We highlight gray, moisturize wrinkles, manicure hands and feet, naturally thick and rough with time. It is not natural to defy age as the Oil-of-Olay-woman, gray but beautiful, suggests. Still, our culture cannot admit death. In our competitive, ambitious, never-look-back society, we hope to become only more mature, more able, more alluring, so we hide the ugliness of death. When those dying become uncomfortable to the rest of us who are aspiring to delicate agedness, nursing homes hide death. When a terminal illness is diagnosed, we pour ourselves into positive thinking that makes death a remote, unfathomable consideration. It would be better to admit I will die.
My in-laws have a portrait of Dima’s host family in their bedroom. The picture is from the late eighties, a glaring reminder of past trends: shoulder pads, bold colors, and fifteen fewer years reflecting upon them. My husband’s host father buys exorbitantly priced vitamins from the Far East while traveling for business. He takes ginger root religiously, among other “natural” remedies, and has for many years. A few years back, he had emergency open heart surgery, which shocked us all—especially him. He was quiet for a time. There was no talk of death. Instead, we spoke of how effective the surgery had been, how quickly the body heals, how, in today’s world of medicine, one can—and he will—survive decades with a metal stint in an artery of the heart. I sat in front of his bed, poised on the plastic chair with a face I willed to appear blank—but what about death?

A few years later, my aunt was diagnosed with cancer. I had just learned I was pregnant with my second child. She had been avoiding the doctors probing the small lump in her breast until it had metastasized through her brain, back, bones. As my womb filled with life, she lost her long hair. I gained weight; she shrunk from the stately woman she’d been. We talked about hormone replacement therapy and how well she seemed to be responding to it.

My aunt was over for brunch, hours late because she’d not remembered the time we’d planned. Gray hair framed her plain face, only a small balding spot at her crown. She said she’d like to take my son to the zoo. I doubted her endurance as his two-year-old antics over toast were hushed. She said she hoped to spend more time together. In these next few years, could we make more of an effort to call, to invite. The sense of time was with us, despite the doctor’s favorable prognosis. She gave me a box of Halloween decorations. When she’d left and I’d set out the witches, the pumpkins, it seemed her presence remained with us. As I wondered if memory would be enough to recall her once she died, if I’d smell the Udder Cream on her hands, remember the rough patch of skin below her brow and the way her delicate laugh could reach through those eyes, I was admitting death. Death seems so far away that even when it might be imminent it takes far too long to change my life. Why such fear, such denial of Nature?

For if Christ vanquished death, those that pass from earth are not dead but asleep in the Lord. Icons are symbols of Christ’s victory over death. Though in America today the fear of death is shallow, the Greek word “soteria” connotes physical rescue, as from a fire. For death is an active presence in life. Icons are remembrances of immortality that direct us beyond our own distracting lives.

In venerating icons I am face to face with saints that have passed from this earth. Though I cannot know where they are or locate them in time, they exist as though a dream, alive as breath, sky, breeze. Icons live faith through earthly matter, as did the River Jordan that baptized the Lord, as does a fine bead of living water that trickles down the back of my neck, holy baptism, three years before, alive in my mind now. Though once icons had seemed separation between the living and the dead,
experiencing otherworldly peace in their midst connects me to unexpected understanding. The quiet of a candle-lit sanctuary after liturgy, cradling my infant before the Mother of God; before dinner, reading a Christmas prayer on a small placard of St. Nicholas held in our toddler’s hands; in the pause of afternoon in my in-laws bedroom, marveling that this small sliver of Russia has come into my life. Life, reflected through icons, begins to seem “bridged” with death. My own existence—strangely, but obviously—seems one with others’. Icons, as though gossamer reflecting a brilliant web of light, become a veil through which time and place slip away. From America to Russia, from the time of Christ to 2008, God is with us as I look through holy icons of faith.

In America today, remembrance of death as a counter to depression can seem ironic, but Church Fathers and Christian saints through the ages teach that we cannot deny death all around us and expect to see the fullness of Light. On the other hand, embracing the darkness of sin and despair and protesting life cannot bring peace. Death and life must be seen in relationship to each other. We must strive to embrace life through remembrance of death. Denying death or life ultimately leads to the same path of destruction—one in which our confused steps lead us astray, toward skulls and crossbones.

St. Isaac of Syria once said life is given for repentance; do not waste it in vain pursuits. “Meditation upon one’s own death [. . .] is not something that promotes morbid introspection, but rather the true repentance that leads to the fullness of life and joy”⁴. I have felt peace in yellow leaves against an autumn sky. I have felt love with soft lips on mine. Joy has quickened me when my infant laughs, two teeth poking through new gums. Life is not a temporary, disposable experience. Life is eternal and somehow, I believe, fulfilled when we pass beyond this earth, so full with good things that show us the way to God.

I look to the Mother of God on my in-law’s dresser and pray for my childhood friend Sarah. Where she is now and what she sees on the other side becomes an image of my own faith, important for it has the power to draw us together even now, though she has passed on and I remain in time and place. Does she watch the seasons fade and feel them against her palm? It seems she feels my longing as it draws us along, together, floating on the sea in the dark of night under moonlight.

The Iconoclastic Credentials of an Official Zen Person
by Brad Warner

A couple years ago I did a lecture in St. Paul at which I was asked to respond to a series of prepared questions. One of them was this:

“What is the place of common curriculum and established sequence vs. independent response to an individual student’s development in your approach to priest training?”

Most Western people’s model for how one becomes a priest, pastor or other kind of religious authority figure is this. The religious authority figure to-be goes to a seminary or what-have-you. There they study all the approved books and put in the required hours of whatever training is demanded by the religious institution of their choice. After that they graduate and get some kind of documentation by which the governing body of that organization officially sanctions them to lead a congregation under the name of the organization. The newly minted religious authority figure is then accountable to the institution that vested their authority in him or her.

I think a lot of folks, when they find out I’m a Zen monk in the Soto tradition established by Eihei Dogen in the 13th century, assume I’ve done something like this myself. But I haven’t. Or maybe I have.

These days the same basic model of how one becomes a religious authority figure in the West exists in Japanese Zen Buddhism and, I assume, in other Buddhist sects in other countries. In the case of Soto style Zen Buddhism in Japan, an organization called Soto-shu has been established to keep tabs on these kinds of things. They function more-or-less the same way as similar organizations in the West such as the Roman Catholic Church, Rabbinical Association of Greater Kansas City and the Loyal Order of Water Buffalo.

One can become a Zen Buddhist monk in the Soto tradition by following the Soto-shu’s officially sanctioned training system. But that’s not the only way a person becomes a Zen Buddhist monk in the Soto tradition. Nor should it be the only way.

The other way of becoming a monk in contemporary Soto style Zen Buddhism goes something like this. Everyone who goes through the more standard institutional process for becoming a monk has the authority to choose his or her own successors without necessarily having those successors go through the same process. So you can bypass the institutional stuff and become a monk in our tradition if your teacher decides to perform the ceremony in private. Those who become monks in this way do not necessarily have
to follow the same curriculum their teacher did if the teacher does not deem it necessary. This is how I became a monk. I think my story is fairly common among Western students of Japanese teachers in our tradition.

When it happens this way there usually is training involved. In my own case, I studied with Gudo Nishijima Sensei for about seven years before I was ordained and had studied with another teacher for nearly ten years prior to that. But this isn’t always what happens. I’ve heard stories of people who were ordained the first day they met their teachers, with no training whatsoever.

If monks who have been ordained informally like this want to be recognized by Soto-shu, they have to follow the Soto-shu’s established process for ordination. Depending on how many hoops he (or she, of course, but we’ll assume for now that our example is male) wants to jump through, a monk may be regarded by the institution as a full-fledged master or he may be regarded as one of several levels of priest or priest-trainee. In any case, the requirements are usually not nearly as stringent as those that apply to the more purely institutional way of coming up through the ranks.

But registry with Soto-shu is not a requirement for one to be considered a legitimate teacher in the Soto Zen lineage. There are many fully legitimate Zen teachers out there who are not registered with Soto-shu or any other such institution.

I can understand why this system may sound totally whack-o to a lot of people. I mean, just imagine if your local parish pastor could make anyone he wanted to into a full priest without having to train him or even register his name with the church. No one would tolerate such a lack of basic accountability.

Yet, this system seems to work pretty much OK within Zen Buddhism. Yeah, a few nutjobs have managed to get Dharma Transmission and there have been scandals and abuses. But then again, if you look at what’s happened in some other religious organizations that have a more carefully administrated system, I don’t think you could say Zen is doing any worse overall for allowing things to flow a bit more organically.

The folks in St. Paul, like Buddhists all over the country, are concerned about the future of American Buddhism. They want to set up standards so that anyone who wears the robes and calls himself a Buddhist priest can be counted upon to have mastered a specific body of teachings and to have trained in a particular way which will insure that he maintains the spirit of those teachings. Many people in the US would like to create an organization that would mirror the Japanese Soto-shu to ensure that things don’t go awry. Oh, but if it were only that easy...

The problem is that no matter how carefully you set up your standards you cannot guarantee some dickhead won’t get through anyway and louse up everything. See the recent scandals in the Catholic Church for examples. And even if that doesn’t happen,
there are as many ways to interpret whatever standards you set up as there are people who claim to adhere to those standards. So you’re never gonna satisfy everyone no matter how hard you try. Which isn’t to say you shouldn’t try to establish standards. You just have to know from the outset that you cannot succeed.

I fully understand why some people feel it may be necessary to establish some kind of governing body within American Zen Buddhism. As things stand today in the West, it’s far too easy for just about anyone to pass himself of as a Zen teacher without having the slightest qualification. Yet I do not know if institutionalization is the answer.

I don’t think Zen really lends itself to this kind of institutionalization. I’ll grant that there is a basic Buddhist canon that anyone who calls themselves a Zen teacher ought to be familiar with. I’ll also grant that there are certain common ceremonies that any Zen teacher ought to at least know about if not have memorized. But Zen Buddhism isn’t really about memorizing ancient texts and performing arcane ceremonies. Those aspects are relatively easy to master through simple memorization and repetition. And while I think any Buddhist teacher ought to know this basic stuff, I still wouldn’t want to require that they do. The true core of Zen Buddhism is much more difficult to convey.

Buddhism is an attitude. It’s an approach to life. Those old texts and corny ceremonies were meant to convey and embody that attitude. But they aren’t that attitude itself. You could memorize every sutra and learn every ceremony and still not get the Buddhist attitude. Conversely, you could manifest the Buddhist attitude perfectly without even knowing that some people call that attitude “Buddhism.”

This leaves prospective students of Buddhism in a quandary. If you can’t go by the seal of approval of some institution, how can they be certain a teacher is legit or not? Dogen said you couldn’t judge a teacher according to whether they are male or female, old or young. And I’m certain he would have agreed you couldn’t tell a good teacher from a bad one according to that teacher’s standing in some Buddhist institution. On the other hand, he was adamant that a true teacher should be certified, though not by an institution.

In his Guidelines for Studying the Way, Dogen said, “Regardless of age or experience, a true teacher is simply one who has apprehended the true teaching and attained the authentic teacher’s seal of realization. He does not put texts first or understanding first, but his capacity is outside any framework and his spirit freely penetrates everywhere. He is not concerned with self-views and does not stagnate in emotional feelings. Thus, practice and understanding are in mutual accord.”

Buddhism places a great deal of value on its teachers having had the certification of their own teachers. Lineage is of paramount importance. In traditional Buddhist lineage charts, even Gotama Buddha is said to have had a teacher, a mystical being in some heavenly realm Gotama hung out in before he was born. This teacher in turn is said to
have received the teaching from a master before him. Although these teachers are largely regarded nowadays as fictional creations, the fact that they remain in the official lineage charts anyway says a lot.

But, although we place a great deal of emphasis on the transmission of the Dharma from teacher to student, there is no way to standardize what that means. The Buddhist attitude can manifest itself in as many ways as there are Buddhist teachers. It is vital to the nature of the teaching that this diversity remain. To put it in terms of the question from the folks in St. Paul, in order to maintain the necessary diversity, I think we need to avoid, “common curriculum and established sequence” for the most part and concentrate only on “independent response to an individual student’s development.”

The Buddhism that develops as a result of this approach may be a bit wild and wooly. But it will be more vital and more truly valuable.

Editorial Note

The editors recommend the following sources to the reader interested in further researching the subject matter of this essay

Especially the sections on “What is a Zen priest?” p82-109.

zen calligraphy
by Alan Brenner

A Soto Zen sesshin (an intense meditation retreat) which Alan Brenner attended at Furnace Mountain Zen Retreat Center inspired these drawings.

Each:
Ink brush on paper
9 x 12” each
Evagrius and the Naked Nous
by Michel Vasquez

Who is Evagrius of Ponticus? I asked this question many moons ago while practicing zazen with Kobun Chino in sesshins in Los Gatos and the Santa Cruz Mountains of California. I was one of a number of “zafu jockeys” who assiduously practiced at seven day sesshins at least once a month seeking whatever can be called “enlightenment”. At the same time, I was a graduate student in Christian theology at the GTU, (Graduate Theological Union), on “Holy Hill” in Berkeley. To say that I experienced a dissonance between the concrete, (that means sitzfleisch, sitting buttocks), zendo and the abstract, intellectual atmosphere of graduate school is somewhat an understatement. To cure this dissonance, I sought a connection, if there was any, between zazen and Christianity, and found it in Thomas Merton. In one of his books, “Zen and the Birds of Appetite”, he mentions that the early monastic writer, Evagrius of Ponticus, had much in common with Zen. So off I went to the library.

There, I found a few books and some available articles on the chap. I also found, in the GTU bookstore, an English translation of Evagrius’ major works,” The Prakticos and Chapters on Prayer”, by Dom John Bamberger, a Cistercian abbot and former student of Merton, (the book is still in print through Cistercian Publications). Well, that was enough to get started on what I hoped would be an interesting Master’s thesis.

I did complete a thesis on Evagrius entitled, “The Gnosis of Space and Time in Evagrius of Ponticus: A Preliminary Investigation”. It was a rather long thesis, so long that the GTU henceforth decided on a page limit for a master’s thesis, (mine was 227 pages inclusive).

It’s now nearly thirty years later and Evagrius is no longer an obscure name. In fact he has become, in the words of Fr. Francis Tiso, a “cottage industry”. The same can be said for patristics, the study of the ancient “fathers of the Church”.

In writing my thesis I had access to four major sources by Evagrius, (two in English, two in French), and about ten or so articles. I also used a few other works. The total of sources was 28.

These days, one can find on the Internet a website completely dedicated to Evagrius; http://www.kalvesmaki.com/evagpont/index.htm, where there is a bibliography listing nearly 700 books and articles, the vast majority written after I wrote my thesis. Another site; http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/00a_start.htm has quite a bit of Evagrius’ writings in English translation along with a very good biography.
If I were to start a master’s thesis now, I would not know where to begin...or end!

**Evagrius, Contemplation, and the Nous: A History**

I will focus on one aspect of Evagrius’ conception of the contemplative, spiritual life; that of the “nous” (or as translated mind or intellect). I believe that this aspect has not been sufficiently explored in all its aspects, particular as to what its nature is and how it is linked to prayer, time and space.

Before doing this, however, the reader unfamiliar with Evagrius should have a brief, (and it is quite brief), overview of the Evagrian “system” of monastic, contemplative practice. First, one must know a little bit of what early monasticism in Egypt was like.

Monasticism in Christianity has had a long history. It developed into a formal institution in the early 300’s in Egypt, Palestine and Syria. The roots of monasticism go back to pre-Christian times originating in both Jewish (the Essenes) and Greek pagan practices, (the philosophic schools of Plato, Plotinus, Stoics, Cynics etc.), as well as ascetic practices developed during the periods of persecution by Roman authorities. In Egypt, monasticism developed quite quickly in the early 300’s. The inspiration was the figure of St. Antony of the Desert, (251-356 A.D). His life was described in what could be called a “best-seller”, The Greek Life of Antony by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, written circa 360 A.D., was quickly translated into Latin and inspired many to enter monastic life, including Augustine.

The Life describes the spiritual journey of Antony, from enthusiastic youth to venerable “spiritual elder”, indeed the “Father of Monks”. It describes his various combats against the temptations of demons and his eventual triumph in a vision of Christ as light. St Antony had begun his practice in his village but eventually moved to the desert in Egypt, living in a cave. Many neophyte monks settled near him and established what was to be well-known monastic settlements of cenobites, (those monks who live in community) and anchorites, (those who live alone i.e.; hermits), (Scetis and Nitria for the cenobites and Kellia for anchorites).

Evagrius came to Scetis in 383. He was 38, (born 345, died 399), and had been a deacon participant in the Council of Constantinople of 381. He was born in the region of Pontus, the northern part of what is now Turkey near the Black Sea. He was well educated, the son of an itinerant bishop. He was a student, perhaps an attendant, of St. Gregory Nazianzus, one of the trio of great theologian/ bishops known as the Cappadocian Fathers, (the other two being St. Basil, Gregory’s brother, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, their friend). He had come from Jerusalem, fleeing Constantinople where he had had a disastrous love affair with a wife of an official. There, he had been ordained a monk by Melania, the head of a community of men and women ascetics, and counseled to go to Egypt and live with the monks at Scetis.
Evagrius learned much at Scetis, following the daily monastic practice of daily communal prayer, (mainly the memorization and recitation of the Psalms of the Old Testament), ascetic efforts, (fasting, all-night vigils etc.) and prayer, (private recitation of the psalms and other texts of the Bible and “silent” prayer) as well as the weekly Eucharistic Liturgy which began on Saturday night and lasted until Sunday dawn. One can obtain a rough glimpse of this monastic life from the famous collection, The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, (available in quite a few versions in English). These sayings and stories of the early monastic sages are quite profound and still carry a deep and significant meaning. 

Evagrius progressed in his practice to the point where he too became recognized as an “elder”, a monastic who could impart teaching and wisdom to others. Unlike most of the monks, he was quite literate and he chose to impart his wisdom and observations in writing. Quite a few of his works have survived, often under other names, and are now available in English. Apart from his letters, his writings do not follow the typical discursive essay or even dialogue form followed by Plato.

Instead, the writings follow an unusual, (for us), form of short paragraphs, (called kephalia or chapters), made up of a small number of sentences at the most. This form, known as gnomic sentences, was advantageous for his students; they could easily memorize a chapter and use it as a basis for reflection. They certainly echo the Sayings of the Desert Fathers and could easily have been their inspiration, (some scholars argue that his collection of sayings formed the basis for the later collection). Evagrius composed these sentences into groups of one hundred, known as centuries. What is interesting and unusual is that the sentences follow no particular logical order. They seem random and the reader can read the sentences in any order. However, each sentence is linked, in a kind of holographic way to the other sentences, reflecting all of them. The result is that the reader, to properly understand the sentence, must also keep in mind all the rest. It requires that one practice a type of intuition, rather than logical analysis, in order to properly understand them.

The Anatomy of the Spirit in Evagrius

Evagrius’ writings can be separated into three major groups; those on asceticism, those on prayer, and those on gnosis or knowledge resulting from asceticism and prayer. Indeed, this follows his basic description of the monastic life as a progression, not in a linear but in an elliptical, helical fashion, from asceticism to prayer to gnosis.

This structure also follows the ancient description, based on Plato, of the human person as composed of a unity of material body and an immaterial tri-partite soul. The tri-partite soul was composed of a desiring part (epithumia), an irascible part (thumos), and a reasoning, logical faculty (logistikon). Epithumia and thumos are “energies” of the soul, meant to be governed by the logistikon, (echoing Plato’s description of the soul-body as a chariot driven by reason.).
This ancient description of the human person is still relevant for us today. We all know that we are “emotional creatures”, often beset by such phenomena as depression, anger, lust, greed and so forth. We all desire that these emotions, “rational” and irrational could somehow be a little less tyrannical.

If this is true for us living in the busy, everyday world how much more such a need was felt by the monk-anchorite, isolated living in a desert wasteland.

Evagrius was quite aware of this. In fact, he conceived of the monastic life as an attempt to gain peace from emotional turmoil. This peace he termed “apatheia”, a word originating from Stoic philosophy but with a much richer meaning.

What are these emotions that haunt us? What is their nature? Where do they come from? How do we negotiate with them?

Evagrius, ever the unsystematic, systematic thinker, reduced the emotions to a list of eight basic types which he termed “logismoi”;

“There are eight general and basic categories of thought which are included in every thought. First is that of gluttony, then impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia (often translated as sloth but more akin to deadly boredom), vain-glory, and last of all, pride. It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions.” Praktikos 6.

This list of eight “passions” or thoughts or emotional reasonings is the origin of the famous Seven Deadly Sins from the Middle Ages. Evagrius does not consider the logismoi as “sin” from a juridical point of view. He considers them as emotional disturbances that can be resisted if not eliminated. The origin of these disturbances lies in a false conception of self, “philautia”, self-love. The logismoi originate in all three parts of the soul, (gluttony and lust to desire, sadness and anger to anger, avarice to both desire and anger, and acedia, vainglory and pride to the logistikton, (also called the dianoia or reason). Evagrius, in numerous places, gives excellent and pithy descriptions of these logismoi which form an interlocking causal chain and prevent the monk from the goal of monastic practice, apatheia. I recommend the reader to read Evagrius’ insights on these “passions”. It is quite illuminating.

The “process” by which the logismoi can be resisted is what he terms “praktike” or monastic practice. This consist not only the usual, everyday monastic practice of reading scripture, vigils, prayer, fasting, psalmody, patience, compassion and almsgiving but also the more difficult method of the examination of thoughts. The monk must persevere in the examination of thoughts, requesting Christ to aid him in understanding the origin and nature of thoughts and of distinguishing between them “holy” thoughts
and demonic logismoi. He must also be able to become unattached to sensations whether pleasurable or painful.

Here we must make a remark on a subject that confuses and bewilders us moderns, that of demons, for Evagrius is quite adamant and quite clear that many logismoi have their origins from “outside” the self, that is, from the demonic. While passions of the body can be controlled by continence, those of the soul require the acquisition of spiritual love. Demons are rational immaterial creatures that turn away from contemplating God and seek to turn human beings into their state greed and of cold anger. They cannot know the inner self, (the heart), of the monk but can, like good behaviorists, through observation of the actions and words of the monk, introduce from outside the self, logismoi, suggestions, and distract or even lead the monk to fail in practice. The demonic is a state of being limited to greed and anger. The demons are spiritual forces beyond the ken of reason (dianoia), which only perceives images from the senses or memory or from desire and anger. The reason cannot attain its true state as long as it remains attached to images of desire and anger.

Praktike is the first and basic stage of the anchoritic life. It has as its primary goal the attainment of apatheia and the beginning of contemplation, (gnosis). This is accomplished through asceticism and especially a victory over the logismoi, (given by the grace of Christ, that is, a gift unearned by the seeker), those “normal” everyday thoughts that are actually a blend of emotion and rationality. The nature of the logismoi is easier to comprehend outside of the social world, for this world helps to cover their essence in that social relations with others often have emotional “baggage”. In isolation, the anchorite can truly perceive their nature. The logismoi form a causal chain that arises and disappears in consciousness. They “fill” it with a false sense of time and space, making it perceive time as a succession of past, present, and future desire and making space as a confused disharmony between the body and the visible world. The struggle for apatheia, agape and gnosis is, therefore, the struggle for unity between time and space.

By noticing and receiving understanding from Christ, through an underserved gift, “grace”, the anchorite is able to prevent the logismoi from fully unfolding and receives, as a result, the gift of apatheia. Apatheia is the beginning of freedom, freedom away from the logismoi and towards agape, (charity, love), prayer and gnosis. Apatheia is the waking up of virtue which, as in the life of St. Antony, is the natural state of human beings as originally created. Just as the logismoi are a chain of causation so does virtue form its own chain and replace the former.

**The Significance of Apatheia and its Prayerful Application**

Apatheia literally means “passionlessness” but this can imply that a certain lack of emotion, as if one were a stone, (St. Jerome’s argument). But this is not what Evagrius, or other monastic writers of the Greek East after him, meant. Perhaps the best
definition is “freedom from emotional tyranny”. John Cassian (360-435), a student of Evagrius who eventually settled in Gaul and founded monasteries, defined it in Latin as “purity of heart” (puritas cordis), evading the misunderstanding. It was to become a basic element of Western European monasticism from then on.

Evagrius was quite the psychologist, almost modern in his views. For him, apatheia is not accomplished in one fell swoop. It is an ongoing process, ranging from what is consciously perceived as logismoi all the way to the dream state and memory. He sees the accomplishment of freedom from emotional and sensory tyranny as always going deeper.

Apatheia cannot be attained without the practice of charity, (agape), towards all who the monk encounters in daily life. The links between apatheia and agape are very deep and essential.

In apatheia, which Evagrius regarded as “the health of the soul”, the monk begins, just barely, to perceive his or her true nature by beginning to pray “purely”.

Prayer for Evagrius is, like apatheia, difficult to clearly define. We usually think of prayer as petitions or praise to God. However, there is another aspect of prayer. This is often termed “contemplative prayer” and it is this type of prayer which Evagrius concerns himself with.

Having attained a measure of apatheia and virtue the monk can properly enter the “state”, (katastasis), of prayer which Evagrius first defines as “a continual intercourse, (homilia or communion), of the spirit (intellect or nous), with God”. He also defines it as “an ascent of the spirit, (nous), to God.” Chapters on Prayer no. 35.

Prayer requires the unattachment to every material object or mental or emotional object. This requires constant vigilance (nepsis), constant attention.

If your spirit still looks around at the time of prayer, then it does yet pray as a monk. You are no better than a man of affairs engaged in a kind of landscape gardening or embellishing the tabernacle. (Chapters on Prayer no. 43)

Evagrius gives detailed descriptions of the conditions necessary for pure prayer. The monk must be completely, absolutely, free from all physical and emotional attachments, (he focuses especially on anger, especially towards others, (who else?) which he sees as a main obstacle to apatheia and agape), and from concepts and thoughts, even the most neutral and simple ones. He counsels against any experiences such as visions or auditory hallucinations which are an expression of the passion, (logismoi), of vainglory.
**Listening to Evagrius**

Evagrius gives a little “Beatitude” on pure prayer worth quoting, (after Bamberger’s translation, Chapters on Prayer no. 117-123);

Let me repeat this saying of mine that I once expressed on some other occasion: Happy is the spirit that attains to perfect formlessness at the time of prayer.

Happy is the spirit which, praying without distraction goes on increasing its desire for God.

Happy is the spirit that becomes free of all matter and is stripped of all at the time of prayer.

Happy is the spirit that attains to complete unconsciousness of all sensible experience at the time of prayer.

Happy is the man who thinks himself no better than dirt.

Happy is the monk who views the welfare and progress of all men with as much joy as if it were his own.

Happy is the monk who considers all men as god-after God.

Evagrius gives further descriptions and definitions of prayer in a little work entitled Skemmata, (Reflections);

If one wishes to see the state (katastasis) of the mind (nous), let him deprive himself of all representations (noemata), and then he will see the mind appear similar to sapphire or to the color of the sky. But to do that without being passionless (apatheia) is impossible, for one must have the assistance of God who breathes into him the kindred light. (Skemmata 2).

The nous is intuitive, not rational nor discursive, thinking. It enables us to “know” God in a way that the senses and logical thinking do not. For example, in Kephalia Gnostica, (henceforth K.G.) IV.90 we read “For knowledge of God, one needs not a debater’s soul, but a seer’s soul”.

The nous is the “image of God”. The notion of the “image of God” is a constant throughout Christian theology and spirituality deriving from the creation story of Genesis.
“The mind is the Temple of the Holy Trinity”, (Skemmata 34). It is the “place” where one encounters God. It, “by its very nature, is made to pray”, (Praktikos 49).

Prayer is a state of mind, not an activity. It is not so much what one does as what one is. It is a coming to one’s true state. To pray purely or truly, one must not have any representations of God or of any object, feeling, sensation, memory or emotion.

To be sure, it is not the mind itself, which sees God, but rather the pure mind. ‘Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God’ (Mt 5:8). Note that [Jesus] does not praise purity as blessed but rather the one [who does the] seeing. Purity is passionlessness of the reasonable soul but seeing God is true knowledge of the one essence of the adorable Trinity, which those will see who have perfected their conduct here and through the commandments purified their souls. (Quoted by Harmless, Skemmata, p. 517)

And elsewhere he tells us that

[the state (katastasis) of the mind is an intellectual peak, comparable in color to the sky. Onto it, there comes, at the time of prayer, the light of the Holy Trinity. (Skemmata 4).]

This “light of the Holy Trinity” is not the light of the nous. The light of the nous is lit, as it were, by the light of the Trinity, just as the sun, piercing clouds, lightens a mountain peak.

The metaphor of mountain peak is a favorite of Evagrius;

When the mind-after having stripped off the old man-has been reclothed in the [new] one who comes from grace, then it will see its state, at the moment of prayer, similar to sapphire or the color of the sky. This is what Scripture describes as “the place of God”-what was seen by the ancients on Mt. Sinai. (Peri Logismos - On Thoughts 39).

Evagrius further defines the “place of God”;

From holy David we have clearly learned what the “place of God” is: “His place is established in peace and his dwelling in Zion” (Psalm 75:3). The “place of God” therefore is the rational soul, and his dwelling (is) the illuminated mind, which has renounced the pleasures of the world and has learned to contemplate from afar the (underlying) principles of the earth. (Skemmata 25).
From these passages, we now can piece together Evagrius’s basic view. During pure prayer, the purified mind sees itself, its truest self, its true state. And the self that it sees is luminous. But that luminosity which permits it to see itself is the divine light, God himself. In seeing itself as luminosity, as light like sapphire or sky-blue, the mind discovers its God-likeness. At the same time, it sees and knows by seeing—indirectly, as in a mirror, the uncreated, immaterial light that God is. That is why for Evagrius prayer is at once a moment of self-discovery and an encounter with ultimate Mystery:

Prayer (proseuche) is the state of the mind that comes to be from the single-light of the Holy Trinity. (Skemmata 27).

**Evagrius the Esoteric Heretic**

Thus concludes our treatment of what may be called the “exoteric” Evagrius. What remains is to inquire about the “esoteric” Evagrius.

What do I mean by the “esoteric” Evagrius?

One of the reasons Evagrius is not a well-known personage, (until recently), is that Evagrius was condemned as a heretic by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553, along with Origen of Alexandria, (c.185-254 A.D.), and Didymus the Blind, (c 313-398 A.D). They were condemned for upholding the “pre-existence” of souls, metempsychosis, (transmigration of souls), and the universal salvation of all created rational beings. As a result, the Greek works of these writers vanished from view. Quite a bit of Origen’s writings survived in Latin, including the Peri Archon, (On First Principles), his major attempt at a systematic treatment of theology. Evagrius’s esoteric writings survived in Syriac, in many forms, and were also translated into a number of other languages including Sogdian, (the Sogdian people lived near Samarkand). His exoteric writings were well known in the Greek world, often surviving under the names of other writers, (St. Nilus was often listed as the author of the Chapters on Prayer), and sometimes under his own name, (as in the Philokalia, the compendium of writings compiled in the 18th century and a guide for the hesychast monks of the Eastern Orthodox churches). Some of the writings of Didymus the Blind in Greek have survived and have been recently translated.

This describes a rather tragic history. Three major and influential figures of the early Christian church were made into “unpersons”, were made to disappear from history. We cannot go into why they were made so, only to acknowledge that they were.

Of the three, Origen looms as the great shadow, influencing to a great degree the other two. Origen was the greatest Christian theologian of the early Christian church. He was the first to attempt a coherent description of the nature and purpose of Christianity. He was entirely at home with Greek philosophy as well as other currents of thoughts, (including, perhaps, Buddhism through the mysterious figure of Ammonias Saccas, his
teacher (c172-245 A.D.). His attempt to create an intellectually coherent view of human life through a Christian lens led him to comment on every book of the Bible, saving it from a purely literalistic interpretation and making it a relevant text for living in the world as well as in the desert of Evagrius.

One of Origen’s concerns was an adequate response to Gnosticism which he considered to be an erroneous view of life and contrary to Christianity. In his Peri Archon (On First Principles, a work that has survived mainly in questionable Latin translations along with some Greek fragments), he articulated a “myth” concerning the origin and destiny of humanity, one in distinct contrast to the prevalent Gnostic myths. He did so in order to affirm two basic truths which he saw as integral to the Christian faith as he understood it; first, that all created, rational, creatures were equal in origin and second, that all were equally free to turn to or away from God. It is found in the Peri Archon but, as with all of the Peri Archon which survives in Latin, the nuances of Greek are lost.

This myth became a central guiding “map” of the spiritual life for the Egyptian Desert monks, beginning with St. Antony, (if his “Letters” are genuinely his- which Samuel Rubensen has tried to prove and no one has contradicted).

We quote now, in fact, from St. Antony (Letter 5):

Now therefore understand that, be it the holy heavens or angels or archangels or thrones or dominions or cherubim or seraphim or sun or moon or stars, or patriarchs or prophets or apostles, or devil or Satan or evil spirits or powers of the air, or ( to say no more) be it man, all derived from one- all save only the perfect and blessed Trinity of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. And from the evil conduct of some, it became needful that God should set names upon them according to their works. And to those who made the most progress, He gave more abundant glory.

This is the most simplified version of the “myth”. This myth was never stated outright by anyone. Let us look at the more full myth as reconstructed by Antoine Guillaumont:

In the beginning there existed a single Henad (simple unity) a single undivided integral whole of pure intelligence (Nous), composed of noes, pure spiritual beings created by the “primitive Henad” (God) and united to it in total contemplation. Because of negligence or carelessness, there occurred movement (kinesis) away from the simple intuitive contemplation of the One God. The original and mutual equality and unity of the noes was shattered by this movement. This movement is moral in essence but it has a metaphysical consequence, the necessity of a “second creation.” This second creation, based on a free decree of God named judgment, (krisis), is what we now perceive as the material world. The fate of the individual noes, now fallen from unity, depends upon the
degree of their moral guilt, their movement away and distance from God. According to their guilt they receive the material body and world appropriate to it. Therefore, angels who moved less than the others, receive an invisible body of fire, which is light, subtle and able to move through “thicker” matter. The other noes, who moved more, receive a thicker, more material body which is a result of the thickening of passion-sensuality or desire (epithumia) and anger (thumos). Those who are dominated by the passion of desire are human beings formed from earth, while those who are dominated by anger are the demons who receive a body of air, which being devoid of light, is ice-cold, although subtle.

The second creation results not only in what we perceive as material bodies and worlds but also in what may be called a “degeneration” of the essential nature of the noes into what is called soul or psyche. The psyche is the seat of the passions. Depending on the degree of movement, the psyche will be dominated by intelligence (angels), desire (human beings), or anger (demons). The noes are, therefore, a union of “material” body (soma) and soul (psyche).

A Contemporary Interpretive Approach

All this sounds very peculiar, at least to the “modern mind”. It may have actually sounded peculiar to the ancient mind as well. What is the purpose of this myth or story? Did Evagrius actually believe in its veracity?

I think the answer is both yes and no. Yes, in seeing the myth as a guiding map for the monk but, no, as a literal truth. Hans Jonas, in a perceptive essay, “Myth and Mysticism”: A Study of Objectification in Religious Thought”, argues that without antecedent dogmatics, there is no valid mysticism;

And mysticism, let it be noted, wants to be “valid”, namely, more than a revel of feeling. The true mystic wants to put himself into possession of absolute reality, which already is and about which doctrine tells him. ..Having an objective theory, the mystic goes beyond theory, he wants experience of identity with the object; and he wants to be able to claim such identity. Thus, in order that certain experiences may become possible and even conceivable as valid anticipations of an eschatological future, or as actualizations of metaphysical stages of being, speculation must have set the framework, the way and the goal- long before the subjectivity has learned to walk the way. (Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man p.303).

Myth is only a pointer, one that must be appropriated interiorly, in order to be properly understood. It is not to be held onto but rather abandoned as one undergoes the experience the myth points to.
In looking at the “Origen-Evagrius” myth, one notices that the unity of the “noes” was shattered by movement, “kinesis”. This movement is an act of free will on the part of the noes and while unity is now shattered, the noes can, by free will, regain unity once more.

This aspect of the myth is clearly illustrated in the “esoteric” writing which was to be the source of his later condemnation; the Kephalia Gnostica, which survived only in Syriac.

The Kephalia Gnostica is a collection of 540 gnomic sentences or paragraphs (kephalia), grouped into six “centuries”. At first glance, the sayings have no logical order. Why are these six groups of ninety sentences called centuries when it’s clear there are ten sentences missing? The answer to these perplexities is to be found within the reader, that is, within the reader’s own experience. The complexity and seeming chaos of the work is intentional. It could be said that the myth itself is shattered into fragments, fragments that the monk will re-assemble or better, re-unify in himself or herself. The act of reunification overcomes the original movement or kinesis. As a result, the reader, the practicing monk, no longer experiences time in the ordinary way.

The concept of time, of its experience and perhaps, transcendence or better, full integration is extremely complex. One would need much more than a few pages to properly explore. However, there are some aspects of it that can be pointed to.

First is the nature of time itself. St. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the teachers and friend of Evagrius, in articulating the relationship of God to the created cosmos, pointed out something quite insightful. Using a Stoic definition of time as “diastema”, defined as the interval that measures and accompanies things in space, Gregory states quite clearly that all of created reality, material and intelligible, matter and mind, is diastemic. Eternity, (God), is adiastemic, completely outside the diastemic cosmos. Time is, therefore, the essence of being a creature. Creation is in constant motion or change. Life itself is changed into death. We quote now from Gregory;

Who does not know that human nature resembles a stream, from birth to death ever advancing as by an irresistible movement, and that when that movement ceases, then comes also the end of existence. This movement (kinesis), however, is no mere displacement from one locality to another (for how can the nature go out of itself?), it is, rather, an advance by alteration. And alteration, so long as it is that, can never remain at the same stage (for how can the altered remain the same?). But like the flame on the wick, which appears to remain always the same (for its unbroken continuity gives the impression of being a self-identical unit), but in fact is always wholly passing away and never remains the same (for the moisture which is drawn up by the heat is constantly burned up and transformed into smoke and bursts into flame, effecting the movement of the flame by this altering power, the substratum or fuel transforming itself into smoke-flame), so much so that anyone touching the flame twice does not
both times touch the same flame (so quick is the alteration that it does not remain till the second touch); the flame is ever new and being renewed, it passes away every moment without remaining the same and is generated anew every moment. So is also the situation with the nature of our bodies. The influx of our nature and its efflux through the process of alteration of movement goes on permanently, and when the movement stops, life also ceases. So long as it is alive, there is no stopping. On the one hand, it is being filled, on the other it is breathing out, the combination of the two processes keeps it constantly moving” (On the Soul and the Resurrection V. 462 B to 463 A. as quoted by Paulos Mar Gregorios, “Cosmic Man -The Divine Presence).

There is an aspect to diastema which cannot be overlooked. The “normal” human experience of time is that of a stream flowing composed of past, present and future, with the past in memory, the future in desire and the present as an ever vanishing point between past and future. There is, however, another possible experience of time,” angelic time” Angelic time erases the past through the present and moves from the present to the future as a continuous movement towards the good. Here the future is the true desire for the Good, not the desire based on logismoi. Salvation is the transformation of human time into the present continuously towards the good of angelic time. It is the confrontation of the finite and the infinite, not their metaphysical union or absorption. It is becoming “God in time”, not God in eternity.

Pannikar: A Contemporary Pluralist Voice

An interesting contemporary view of time echoes these insights. Raimundo Pannikar, the Christian-Hindu-Buddhist theologian coined the term “tempiternality” to express what he sees as the ancient Hindu-Buddhist view of time and its relation to the world of “Maya”. He defines tempiternality as:

[t]he fundamental intuition of tempiternality flows from the experience of the present in all its depth, discovering in it not only the past in potency and the future in hope but also what the objectified projection of mankind has called eternity and the subjectified human sensibility has called time (or temporality in out terms). The experience of the present, in fact, pierces as it were the crust of the provisional and the flowing, not to fall into the static, intemporal bed, not to deny time but to relish its kernel...Any profound human experience occurs in time and yet is bound to or by time. (Pannikar, Worship and Secular Man, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New york, 1973 p.45)

For Pannikar, an action that is repeatable is not an authentic action. What is real is authentic and cannot be repeated. A sacramental action, (he is describing the Catholic Liturgy), is “that unique act which is valid throughout the temporal span, because it transcends time. In this now there is something which transcends all the variations of the future.”
One of the conditions to live such intemporal moments is not to want to repeat them, not to desire them nor, in a way, even to plan them. They are incompatible with any anterior concomitant utilitarian thought. They lead nowhere and do not prepare any future. The present is worth more than all the past that has been lived and all the future that remains to be lived. They are intemporal because they pierce the wall of pure temporality. It is a present in which with innocence and candor one lives without knowing it, the intemporal dimension of existence. It is a moment which has transcended time.

Intemporality is not a temporality, nor is it an intemporality foreign to time. It consist in existence itself, discovered in its transtemporal or more exactly tempiternal depth.

Eternity exists neither outside of time, neither in time, if one admits the metaphorical value of these two prepositions. But time does not exist either outside eternity, nor in it.

Tempiternity is the very symbol of reality just as being- which is always a temporal being- is the very symbol of a reality which manifests itself only in being.” (Panikkar, “Le Temps Circulaire: Temporalisation et Temporalite” in Temporalita e Alienazione, Archivio d : Filosofia, Milan 1975 translated by Robert Vachon in Revue Monchanin, No. 68, 1980 p 34).

I have quoted at length from Pannikkar in order to underline the importance of seeing time not as just some external datum of experience but as central to the understanding of what it means to be a human being, that is, a being in time.

Returning to Evagrius, we can now apply these insights to his understanding of what the Nous is. The monk begins his/her practice in what we may call “normal time”, that is, the time experienced by most of us, beset by logismoi that interrupt the true perception of the world and of relations with others. Through asceticism the monk becomes liberated from logismoi and begins to reach apatheia, ”From apatheia flowers agape and gnosis”. This, in turns, results in the true seeing of events, things and people as they really are (diorasis).

This true seeing of events, things and people Evagrius terms “second natural contemplation.” It is contemplation free of desire and anger, free, therefore, of the “normal” time that we commonly experience. The past, unfulfilled desire or continuous anger, no longer colors our present perception and the future, as logimoic desire does not exist.

In apatheia, second natural contemplation is the true perception of the present but it is not a motionless or changeless present. It allows the perception of true human time as past, present and future without any intervention of logismoi. It is the beginning of
Panikkar’s tempiternality. Evagrius quotes an interesting story about St. Antony that illustrates all this;

A certain member of what was then considered the circle of the wise once approached the just Antony and asked him: ‘How do you ever manage to carry on, Father, deprived as you are of the consolation of books?’ His reply: ‘My book, sir philosopher, is the nature of created things, and it is always at hand when I wish to read the work of God’” (Praktikos 92).

Second natural contemplation is the first stage of contemplation. It still requires effort since it is multiple, that is, composed of events, things and people and requires the maintenance of apatheia. There is a deeper level of contemplation, one that is not the result of the monk’s own efforts but is given as gift, as grace.

This is “first natural contemplation”. It is primarily the contemplation of the unity of created noes. As St. Antony stated in one of his letters;

“All since we are all created of the same invisible substance, which has a beginning but no end, we may love one another with a single love. For all who know themselves know that they are of one immortal substance” (Letters p 21).

All “first beings”, that is, the noes at their original creation, are one substance, one immortal Nous, (Mind), in total relation of Agape and Gnosis. The contemplation of the “logikoi”, (another term which Evagrius uses to describe the noes”), is the contemplation of the unity of the One Mind, (Nous), that has a beginning and no end and is pure time and space, that is, tempiternality. It is the time “beyond” human time, that is, angelic time, and is the return movement towards God. Second natural contemplation revealed the temporal activities of God in human time. First natural contemplation reveals the temporal activities of God in the logikoi and the unity of the worlds they inhabit. First natural contemplation reveals the multiple transformations of the logikoi and their worlds in space and in tempiternal time, the present continuously moving towards the future. While second natural contemplation requires apatheia, unattachment from passions, first natural contemplation requires loving attachment to perception.

For Evagrius, natural contemplation, both first and second, compose the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not yet the Kingdom of God. The knowledge attained through contemplation is indirect knowledge, of God’s energies and activities and not of God directly.

This direct knowledge of God Evagrius calls theology, (theologia), or true gnosis. This is the “knowledge of the Holy Trinity co-extensive with the capacity of the intelligence (nous)”. Gnosis is pure gift, pure grace, and there is, properly speaking, no object of perception and, therefore, no consciousness of something. While in contemplation
ignorance decreases as contemplation and perception increase, in gnosis, ignorance increases as gnosis increases. Here are some sentences of the Kephalia that illustrate this:

He whose knowledge is limited; his ignorance is also limited: and he whose ignorance is unlimited; his knowledge is also unlimited. KG III.63

Blessed is he who has attained infinite ignorance (or knowledge- there are two versions of this particular sentence which illustrates the difficulty of understanding Evagrius correctly). K.G. III.63

All contemplation appears with an underlying object, except for the Blessed Trinity. KG IV.87

Objects are outside of the nous, and the contemplation concerning them is constituted within it. But it is not thus with the holy Trinity, for it is solely essential knowledge. KG IV.77

Without an object, there is no intermediary between the knower and the known. Evagrius uses the simile of light as an illustration of this point;

Just as light, while enabling us to see everything, [itself] needs no light to be seen; so God, while making all things visible, needs no light by which to be known, for he, essentially, is light. (1 John 1:5).

This image of light as the best metaphor for the highest experience of prayer was to become a standard one in Byzantine spirituality. Its scriptural source is the experience of the elders and Moses on Mt. Sinai and the apostles seeing the transfigured Christ on Mt. Tabor.

In order to have this gnosis available in pure prayer, the nous must be totally pure. In order to have natural contemplation one must attain apatheia but in order to attain true gnosis, one must have a “naked nous”, a nous removed from all Evagrius terms matter:

If the perfection of the nous is immaterial knowledge, as it is said, and if immaterial knowledge is solely the Trinity, it is evident that in perfection there will not remain anything of matter. And if that is so, the nous, forevermore naked will come to vision of the Trinity. K.G. III.15

Matter, for Evagrius, is defined as “opposition” against the Good: To the first good there is no opposition, because He is essentially [good]; thus there is no opposition as regards essence. KG I.1
The opposition is in the qualities and the qualities are in the bodies; opposition therefore is in the creatures. KG I.2

The nous, however, is not material for it need not oppose the Good:

All that exists is either susceptible to opposition or is constituted of opposition. But those who are susceptible to opposition are not all yoked to those constituted of opposition KG I.4

Evagrius distinguishes contemplation and gnosis as follows:

Whenever we consider material [things], we come to the memory of their contemplations; and when we receive their contemplation we again distance ourselves from material [things]. But this is not what happens in regard to the Blessed Trinity; because it is solely essential contemplation. KG V.61

The nature of the Trinity is not known through ascents or descents. Indeed, [since] there are no subjacent objects, its nature does not admit analysis: for elucidating the nature of bodies would finally make [that nature] consist of matter and form; and in elucidating the incorporeal natures, one would return it to natural (?) common contemplation and to those substance susceptible of opposition. But it is not possible to know the nature of the Blessed Trinity by this means. KG V.62

Opposition is defined by Evagrius as matter and form, qualities, sensations, perceptions and thoughts (concepts or logoi and logikoi). All of these depend on a distinction between the knower and the known in terms of subject and object. With the Trinity, none of this is possible.

In the following chapter Evagrius points out the relationship between knowledge and time.

Investigation brings us back to the beginning of objects, and properly-measured knowledge renders visible the wisdom of the Creator; but it is not [by] following these signs that we see the Blessed Trinity. For it is without beginning, nor do we say that the wisdom in these objects is God, if these beginnings accord in the contemplation of nature with things of which they are the beginnings. Indeed, such a wisdom is knowledge without substance, which appears only in objects. KG V.63
To know objects, corporeal and incorporeal, requires analyzing the object into matter and form and trace it back to its origin, the wisdom of God. To “know” the Trinity is not susceptible to this type of analysis, having no origin, no beginning in time.

Therefore, the nous must not only go beyond the human state but also the angelic state if it is to perceive the Trinity in its purity without any intermediary.

Evagrius once went with a fellow monk, Ammonios, to inquire from the famous anchorite, John of the Thebaid, what was the nature of the light perceived by the nous at the time of prayer. Was it from the nous itself or did it come from outside the nous? John responded,

No man is capable of deciding this question but, in any case, without the grace of God, the nous will not be illuminated at the time of prayer and delivered from its numerous and fierce enemies. (Translated from Hausher, Les Lecons d’un Contemplatif, Beauchesne et Fils, Paris, 1960 – French translation of Chapters on Prayer p 47)

Evagrius states that the light which the nous sees at the time of prayer is the seeing of the nous’ own self-nature as illuminated by the light of the Trinity.

The nous becomes, as quoted above, a sapphire as clear and bright as the sky. The nous becomes the “locus visionis”, the place of vision, not of the essence of God but the presence of God. The soul, as nous, becomes a mirror reflecting the light of the Tri-Une God.

Now, to be completely stripped of all concepts, perceptions, and attachments is also to become unified.

The image of God is not that which is susceptible of His wisdom, for corporeal nature would thus be the image God. Rather that which has become susceptible of the Unity - this is the Image of God. K.G. III 32

This unity is the unity of the One Mind, the unity given, as grace, through first natural contemplation in pure prayer. It is possible only in loving union with and knowledge of the Trinity.

As John Eudes Bamberger OCSO states in his introduction to his translation of “The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer”,

It is contemplative union with God which is man’s ultimate end, and which establishes man in his full self-realization as the image of God. In this outlook, man is not defined as a rational animal (Aristotle) but rather as a being created to be united with God in loving knowledge. This is, for
our author, in the full sense of the word, a metaphysical statement, not only a mystical and religious statement. (Bamberger, p xcii.)

The exoteric Evagrius, with its emphasis on asceticism and prayer, survived in Greek, with much of it being included in the Philokalia, a compendium of writings by various authors that is a guidebook for Eastern Orthodox monks. One could even argue that the Philokalia is one long footnote to Evagrius just as Western philosophy is one long footnote to Plato. The esoteric Evagrius, however, with its emphasis on the mythic and metaphysical aspects of practice and prayer vanished from the Greek, surviving only in the Syriac monastic tradition, (Syria, at the time of Evagrius’ condemnation in 553 was outside the Byzantine Empire). The reason for the elimination of the esoteric Evagrius is quite understandable. After all, the “pre-existence” of souls, their fall into matter, and their eventual reunification into One Mind does seem to contradict Christian dogmatic thinking.

But, as we have seen, such an opinion does not do justice to Evagrius. It is far too easy to regard the Origen-Evagrius myth with “concrete” eyes seeing it as a true “factual”, metaphysical description of the world rather than as a mytho-poetic attempt to account for the seeming disintegration of the self and the need to reunify it. If seen in this way, the “pre-existence” of souls or noes is not a temporal one but an ontological one. Time (and space), as we experience them, is co-extensive with creation, the coming forth into being. The process of reunifying the self is also a process of reunifying the cosmos. The eventual re-unification of all rational creatures is a hope for the full reunification of the self and cosmos.

I have not described other facets of Evagrius which need exploring, in particular, his Christology. That is a complex subject that would take far more space and, as yet, has not been fully explored by scholars although there has been some preliminary work done. His Christology is foundational for his system. It was also one of the reasons for his condemnation.

An Interfaith Understanding of Evagrius

For those readers coming from a Zen Buddhist perspective, Evagrius may, at first glance, seem to be rather alien. But there are some interesting parallels to Zen and to Buddhism, (as well as advaitic Vedanta). Fr. Francis Tiso has written an interesting article, “Evagrius of Pontus and Buddhist Abhidharma”, (Religion East and West Issue 5, October 2005), where he argues that quite a few of Evagrius’ insights are echoed in the abhidharmic literature. One could also argue that his diagnosis of the logismoi has parallels in Vipassana meditation. David Linge in his article “Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus, (Journal of the Academy of Religion September 2000 Vol.68, No.3 pp. 537-568) also points to parallels with Theravada Buddhism. There are some interesting parallels with Dogen and Zen also. In particular, the notion of the “formless self”, (The Formless Self by Joan
Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, 1999), can be seen as parallel to that of Evagrius’ concept of the Nous. Also, Dogen’s view of time as “being-time” (Uji), has some similarities to Gregory’s and Evagrius’ view of time as diastema and their concept of angelic time.

Each of these parallels needs to be further explored but it would require an in-depth comprehension of the patristic and Buddhist literature and languages to do the correct analysis. Fr. Tiso has made an interesting first step in this regard.

I hope that the reader has been stimulated in further reflection upon the nature and goal of spiritual practice whether this is “just sitting” or “pure prayer”.

**Considering the Sources**

These were the primary sources on Evagrius when I wrote my thesis in 1982:

*The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Bamberger, OCSO. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1978. The first translation into English of these two works by Evagrius with a good introduction and some commentary. This book is still in print and can be bought through Cistercian Publications

*Les Lecon D’un Conyemplatif (Le Traite de l’oraison)*, translated by Irenne Hausherr, S.J. Paris: Beauchesne, 1960. This has an excellent commentary but is, unfortunately, out of print


*Les Six Centuries des “Kephalia Gnostica”*, translated by A. Guillamont. Patrologia Orientalis Tome XXVIII. Fascicule I, Paris, 1958 The translation of the two Syriac versions of Evagrius, the Greek original being lost. The first version is held by Guillamont to have been “doctored” to remove questionable, (heretical), teaching and another to be a fairly accurate translation of the Greek original. The work is out of print.

_Evagriana Syriaca, Textes Inedite du British Museum et de la Vaticane_, translated by J. Myldermans. Biblioteque Museon 31 (Louvain, 1952). Translation of various texts by Evagrius or thought to be by Evagrius.

Current available works by Evagrius;

translated with an introduction by David Brakke, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 2009. This is a brand new work, the first translation of the complete text of the Antirrhetikos, Evagrius’ text on combating the logismoi through the use of Scriptural passages. I have not had the opportunity to read this since it has just been published!

This is an excellent paperback introduction to Evagrius containing translations of some Letters, Treatises, Notes on Scripture and Chapters. A.M. Casiday does a masterful job explaining the context of Evagrius and his relationship to early monastic practice.


The above is the scholarly version of;

The Mind’s Long Journey to the Holy Trinity; The Ad Monachos of Evagrius Ponticus, translated with an introduction by Jeremy Driscoll, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1993. The first is the publication of Father Driscoll’s doctoral thesis with the original Greek and English translation. The second is a small paperback translation of just the text with some commentary. Both are excellent works. The scholarly work explores in depth how Evagrius structures the Ad Monachos and how it reflects his understanding of the monastic way. The paperback is an excellent little book for reflection. The Ad Monachos is a collection of 137 “proverbs” meant to be used by monks for reflection.

Evagre le Pontique, Scholies a l’Ecclesiaste, translated by Paul Gehin. Sources Chretiennes no.397, Edition du Cerf, Paris, 1993 This is a translation of scholiast or notes by Evagrius on the Biblical text of Ecclesiastes. It contains the edited original Greek text with French translation and commentary.


This is a translation of the Gnostikos, Evagrius’ advice to those who have attained enough insight about the monastic way to be able to teach others. It is not a complete translation from the Greek and is considered to be somewhat unreliable. Nevertheless it is a worthy addition to the list of translations.

The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The Skemmata of Evagrius Ponticus, translation and commentary by William Harmless, S.J. and Raymond Fitzgerald, S.J. This is found in the journal, Theological Studies 62 (2001), pp498-529. An introductory essay on Evagrius followed by a translation of the Skemmata,
(Reflections), consisting of 62 chapters, (kephalia). It is thought to be related to the Kephalia Gnostica.

*Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, translated with introduction and commentary by Robert E. Sinkewicz, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford University Press, 2003. This is the most complete collection of all available Greek texts, (except the Gnostikos), that have survived. It includes the Praktikos, Chapters on Prayer, and many other texts that were previously unavailable in good translation. This book, along with Casiday’s are the fullest collection of Evagrius in English.

On the Internet one can find, as stated before, two sites fully dedicated to Evagrius;

http://www.kalvesmaki.com/evagpont/ is run by Koel Kalvesmaki. It contains an excellent biography, listing of Evagrius’ texts in all languages and an extensive bibliography along with some interesting images of Evagrius found in manuscripts.

http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/00a_start.htm. This is an excellent site run by Fr. Luke Dysinger OSB. It contains English translations of the Praktikos, Chapters on Prayer, other texts and the first translation into English of the Kephalia Gnostica. It is an excellent site worth perusing.

Secondary works on Evagrius;

*Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the 4th Century*, by Kevin Corrigan, Ashgate, Burlington Vt, 2009. This is an excellent study of Evagrius and Gregory of Nyssa showing their convergence on how the spiritual life is to be followed. Corrigan gives an excellent on the relationship the two had with previous Greek and pagan thought and highlights their originality.

*Steps to Spiritual Perfection, Studies on Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus*, by Jeremy Driscoll OSB, Newman Press, New York, 2005. This is a fine collection of essays on various topics in Evagrian studies.

*Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, by Luke Dysinger OSB, Oxford, 2005. This is an excellent study of the importance of psalmody, the daily recitation of the Psalms, in early monastic practice and how Evagrius used the Psalms in his various writings.

*Evagrius Ponticus*, by Julia Konstantinovsky, Ashgate, Burlington Vt, 2009. This is another work that explores the intellectual and religious context in which Evagrius found himself. She argues that Evagrius must be examined in context
rather than be subjected to anachronistic categories from later centuries.

I also wish to mention the writings of Fr. Gabriel Bunge, (listed in Kalvesmaki), who has done much research on Evagrius. Unfortunately his writings are mainly in German.

Below are some other works I have found useful.

For my thesis (1982):


Recent articles and books that mention Evagrius or Gregory of Nyssa;


In this essay, the author shows the relationship and link between Evagrius and the later Dionysius the Aeropagite, the famous anonymous author of the “Mystical Theology”.

Tiso, Rev. Canon Francis V. “Evagrius of Pontus and Buddhist Abhidharma.” *Religion East and West*, Issue 5, October 2005. Fr. Tiso is an expert on Tibetan Buddhism having written a book on Milarepa. He argues in this essay that more inquiry needs to be done regarding the possible mutual influence of Evagrius, the Desert Fathers and Buddhism.

On Gregory of Nyssa;

There are many works on Gregory. Among the best is;

Paulos Mar Gregorios. *Cosmic Man; The Divine Presence. The Theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa (ca 330 to 395 A.D).*, Paragon House, New York.1988. This is a very interesting study of St. Gregory by a bishop of the Syrio-Malankar Orthodox Church of India.

On Zen;

I found these works to have echoes in Evagrius;


*Impermanence is Buddha-nature: Dogen’s Understanding of Temporality*, by Joan Stambaugh. U of Hawaii Press, 1990. In this book, Dogen’s views on time are explored. I believe that there are some parallels with Gregory of Nyssa’s views
on diastema.

"This kind of art [conceptual] is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes... The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

- Sol LeWitt, Art Forum, June 1967

My current body of work in the show "Curve Sets [Information Art]" originated from a desire to programmatically make images and an overall interest in how art intersects with technology. The programmatic approach offers several potential advantages over other forms of image-making. Images can be made to scale to any desired size. The process can be intuitive while not consuming materials during rework. And being information-based, all of the art can be stored in a small amount of physical space.

The custom software I wrote to generate the images reads a set of numeric inputs that I create for each image. The numbers define information needed to make the image including one or more Bézier curves, along with the starting position, thickness, and color for each curve, and the rate of change (or delta) for each number. The program reads the initial input and draws the specified line. Then it adds the delta values to the previous numbers, which in turn tell the program how much to move the line and how much to change its shape and color. Then given this new data, it draws another line. Now we have two lines. Repeat this hundreds of times, and the lines form a plane. All of the images spawn entirely from the initial set of numbers. This process is deterministic, meaning that a given set of inputs will always produce the same image.

The show's title contains the term "information art". By this I mean that the information behind the art is more important than the physical art object itself. (This parallels conceptual art, which holds that the idea behind the artwork is more important than its physical realization.) The prints of my images could burn in a fire, but I would be able to recreate them exactly if the information (the inputs) used to create the images was preserved. Note that "information" is broader than digital or computer-based information. Write the inputs on a stone tablet, and that information can be used to make the image (but keeping it on the computer seems so much easier).

My technology career (I'm employed as a technology manager at a marketing agency) gives me further reasons to use programmatic image generation. In the process of creating the custom software used to make the images in Curve Sets, I've learned more about current-generation user interface frameworks. If I can create a symbiosis of my art and technology careers, then both can be nurtured at the same time.

In producing this body of work, I cite three artists as significant influences: Sol LeWitt, John Meada, and Robert Wood of Kent, Ohio. Sol LeWitt used humans to carry out his
instructions on how to implement his art. My current work does something very similar - using a set of instructions to make art - but I hand my directions to a series of programs and machines to make images for me. And I'm like John Meada who made computer-based images - except that he worked before modern image-generation frameworks existed that make my job so much easier. If he could do what he did in the 80's, surely what I'm doing is fairly easy by comparison. And at one point I offered to collaborate with Robert Wood to make custom software to assist him with his practice of digital image file manipulation. The idea of using custom software to make images lives in my work, even if I haven't yet had the opportunity to work with him. Robert Wood's success has demonstrated to me personally the viability of digital image creation as method of art creation.

These artistic influences combined with my personal desire to explore how art and technology relate to each other formed my impetus to produce "Curve Sets [Information Art]". I hope this work further demonstrates the feasibility of the programmatic approach to art making.

- May 27, 2009

Curve Set 14
Jayce Renner, 2009
18 x 24" digital c-print
In the person of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi one finds an extraordinary contemporary example of the most committed of individuals. His importance for Muslims is indicated by the title of “Bediuzzaman” which Serif Mardin, professor at Bogazigi University in Istanbul, translates as “Nonpareil of Our Times” (23). He was dedicated throughout his adult life to the restoration of the Islamic faith in the form intended by the Creator. That is to say, Said Nursi, while respecting all forms of Islam, and of true religion in general as conceived by the Islamic tradition, was adamant that the believer look to the original sources of the Islamic faith for proper guidance. These sources are the Qur’an, or the revealed word of God, the Sunna, or the teachings and practices of Muhammad, God’s chosen prophet and his Companions, and, finally, the Shari’a, or Islamic law. These are, of course, the very fundamentals of the Islamic faith. Because of this, he is at times referred to as a “fundamentalist,” a term which often is used to express an anti-pluralist stance. However, in the case of Said Nursi and, he and others might agree, the true fundamentals of Islam are properly understood to be as inclusive as any religious ideology which opposes the majority of religions called fundamentalist.

Beyond purely religious considerations, Nursi advised that an understanding of the Qur’an become the framework with which to engage the contemporary world in which Westernization was steadily gaining prominence with its perceived materialism and scientism, often with an atheistic slant. Westernization, it could be said, was seen to be synonymous with modernization. It was this modernized world which he felt, as did many others in the Islamic world and many other areas of the globe, was challenging religion to such an extent as to threaten its existence.

It is not difficult to find sociologists who confirm this attitude with statistical studies. Authors often conclude that as modernization proceeds, religiosity recedes (see Inkeles, Karl, and Schnaiberg). In this respect, Nursi, and the historical geographical context in which he worked, would be of interest to the researcher who “interested in establishing the relationship between modernization and religion soon discovers, to his surprise, a virtual absence of empirical evidence that directly relates modernization to religion or vice versa” (Mataragnon 18).

However, it was not Said Nursi’s intention to replace the basic tools of science and philosophy, western or otherwise, with a religious mythos. Rather, it was his contention that one could, and should, reconcile faith with reason, each used to check and modify the other so that both reflect the truth. That is, he thought it was not the case that a
modernizing society should of necessity become less religious. In principle, religion and science as well as other forms of reason, were in no way opposed to each other in the mature thought of Said Nursi. His tendency was to combine the best of both as he saw it. This gave two characteristics to his message, both of which could be called fundamentalist and modern simultaneously. These were his methods of “replacing the instructions of the charismatic leader and the attempt to make the central truths of the Qur’an intelligible to a wide audience.” Oddly, it is not inaccurate to say that this method “paralleled a Western development in making culture more accessible.” One can conclude, then, along with Mardin that “[t]his shows that we should look at Said Nursi as more than a messiah preaching a return to tradition...Bediuzzaman’s message was shaped by the modernizing world into which he was thrust” (Mardin 37).

Commitment, of course, is not effective should the person in question not have intellectual and/ or spiritual power (see Mardin 42-102). These Said Nursi had in abundance as well. With these talents, Said Nursi confronted modern science and philosophy which, it seemed, developed in such ways as to mislead the generation which was being educated in them into atheism, and nihilistic materialism. He achieved a firm insight into the nature and significance of his religion, becoming a teacher, after a long period of spiritual and intellectual development which occurred along side of bitter political struggle.

At present, Nursi’s legacy and its importance for the future of Islam, as well as for the relationship of religion to the state in general and in Turkey in particular, is the subject of intense study. It is appropriate that this is so. As Mardin points out,

> the speed and extent of diffusion of Bediuzzaman’s message is remarkable. To the limited extent that it has thus joined a group of movements of spiritual revitalization—which have recently transcended their local origins and have stepped on to the world stage—Said Nursi’s message may be considered to have entered one stream of modernization. (23)

A study of the history of Islam in Turkey in recent decades is important in forming an understanding of that religion’s ability to evolve in thought and in practice. More importantly, a study of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s undeniable contribution to the restoration and arguably, in some respects, transformation of Islamic thought in Turkey, especially as regards his evaluation of Sufism, is indispensible for those who wish to gain insight into the way in which remarkable individuals in the Islamic tradition form a dialectic between the various manifestations of thought, faith, and political culture for the ultimate benefit of humanity in the context of the post-modern world.
Basic Historical Contexts in Which Nursi’s Thought Developed

The end of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, “the longest ruling dynasty of the Muslim world” (Yalmen 12) was no source of grief for most the Western world. In fact, it was not hard to find such condemnations of the Empire as that several years previously made by the British Prime Minister, D. Lloyd George. On November of 1914, the Prime Minister had said that “[t]he Turks are a human cancer, a creeping agony in the flesh of the lands which they misgovern, rotting every fiber of life...I am glad that the Turk is to be called to a final account for his long record of infamy against humanity” (Temperley 24).

In the Muslim world in general, however, the ending of “[t]he continuity of the seven centuries of rule of the Ottomans”...was the cause of “much pained consternation against this act of the Turkish nationalists” (Yalman 12).

[t]he Indians in particular were greatly disappointed since the resistance of the Turks to the European imperial powers, had given encouragement to the struggles of nationalists in India. Hindu’s and Muslims had worked together in the “caliphate” movement against British rule. The resurrection of the historic institution, the “Caliph” as a universal leader, in Turkey or in Egypt--an idea that was suggested--was not possible. (Yalman 12-13)

Much has changed since those days. Today one finds more praise of the Turkish attempts, stormy as they have been, to acclimate that culture to the contexts of an increasingly global cultural. This perceived favorable trend has not been due to efforts of the political entities within Turkey alone. The predominant religious forces of the country, often at odds with the government, have over the decades helped in the formation of this cultural context. As a result, today it can be said that “the Turkish example of Islamically-oriented political and social movements committed to playing within the legal framework of democratic and pluralistic parameters.” In the opinion of various authors this has make Turkey a “potential model” for other Muslin countries (Hakan vix).

A main source of social motivation in this regard can be traced to the Naksibendi movement whose spiritual leader was Said Nursi (1876-1960). In this movement could be found the basic elements of the various Islamic social and political structures which followed and which represented a modernizing influence. However, this modernization reaffirmed the centrality of Islam and the Qur’an as the “fundamental constructive essence” of the Turkish attempt to respond to thoughts and feelings of the Turkish population in general. This is to say that the Turks, generally speaking, wished to reconnect with an “Anatolian Turkish-Islamic synthesis” (Hakan 116). As this intellectual and spiritual force extended in time to the present, it manifested in “the reconstruction of the Islamic tradition in terms of modern idioms to create a new Turkey that can
become an exemplar of political, economic, and cultural success for Muslims around the world” (Hakan 238).

Other authors are less optimistic about Islam in present-day Turkey noting that the rise of militancy in Islam has the government, whose “secret services are desperately trying to sort out the exotic names of [the various group’s] members” (Yalman 4), constantly on guard. It is well known that in Turkey as elsewhere there are various secret and not so secret mystic brotherhoods for wary governments to keep track of (Yalman 5. Also see Popovic and Sapolyo).

Bernard Lewis also expresses ambivalence concerning Islam absorbing secularist methods of government. It is his opinion that the notion of separating church and state is a decidedly Western and Christian one. The idea, according to Lewis, is totally alien to Islam. In his own words “one must ask...whether Jews and Muslims may perhaps have caught a Christian disease (i.e. secularism) and might therefore consider a Christian remedy” (186). It seems that the Turks do not see this as a disease in need of a Christian remedy. As Professor Nur Yalman notes, “[t]he Turkish parliament has generally interpreted the question of secularism in its Islamic context as a matter of personal liberty, just as in the case of revolutionary France in the 18th century. They have raised far reaching questions.” Specifically,

[should the State use religion as a tool to pry into the affairs of individuals? Can the State be allowed to use the powerful symbols of religion for its own purposes? Should the State become armed with the persuasive powers of religious authorities? Should the State regulate individual behavior with respect to religious observances? All these matters have received careful scrutiny as well as passionate debate in the Turkish parliament. (7)

With the complete secularization of Turkey in 1950 (Howard 4-5), the Kemalist reform movement originally tended to nullify Islam as a political force (Mardin 1). Secularism, or the notion that human reason as opposed to the dictates of divine inspiration or of religious laws, took primary control of the process of legislation in Turkey. This process of secularization began with the writing of the Constitution of the Republic in 1924 (Geyikdagi 55) which, in 1937, was amended in Article 2 to define Turkey as laic, or secular. The article read: “The Turkish State is republican, nationalist, statist, secular, and reformist” (Geyidagi 4). In 1961, the Constitution was made more democratic and liberal (Zurcher 256-7). The Constitution was again revised in 1982 (Geyikdagi 143).

In each case, secularism remained not only in place, but remained a, perhaps the, central concept of the Turkish State. According to Yalman, all of this tends to prove that the Turks, “had learned much from Auguste Comte--‘Ordem et Progresso’-- a tradition which is very much alive among “secular” Turks.” Yet, it is also true that,
[t]he subject is debated by many who take an entire range of theological positions every day in newspapers with circulations in the millions. The feminists too are much in evidence. The “secular” tradition has a long history going back into the 19th century. The “modernizers” in Turkey are watching all this ferment in the Islamic world from their perch in NATO (and their alliance with Israel). Where it will all go is not so certain. (3)

In the proceeding Ottoman Empire, the “legitimating symbol of society” (Mardin 157) was the Islamic community. The standard practice of the Ottoman had been to govern “with a particular form of a fairly ‘liberal’ Sunni interpretation if Islam...’ (Yalman 16). This was true also for “the Safavid or the Qajar Empires in Iran, or the Mogul Empire in India--incidentally, all of them Turkish dynasties.” It was when these dynasties “were in action [that] there might have been some order to ‘official’ Islam. With the break up of these empires all semblance of ‘official’ order that all Muslims would agree on, has disappeared” (Yalman 2).

The new Republic replaced this,

with a new creation myth which sought the roots of modern Turkey in the achievements of the Turks of Central Asia, and a new social propellant, namely the idea that the future of Turkey consisted in the elaboration of a modern society taking its cues from Western solidarism and positivism. (Mardin 157)

It could be expected that the religious communities in Turkey would feel uneasy about this change to say the least. In fact, Yavuz Hakan claims that the nationalistic reforms of the 1920s-40s simply “alienated large segments of society,” and that as such “the state’s hostility to religion became clear...Islam thus became a political tool in the hands of marginalized segments, which made up the bulk of Turkish society” (54).

However, the State took pains to grant religious freedom in its legislative documents. Article 24 of the Constitution grants freedom of religion, conviction, and conscience, which is “qualified only by a limitation on the abuse of the fundamental rights and freedoms of other people” (Oktem 386). No one is to compel others to worship, or to participate in religious observances. No religion is recognized as an official state religion.

There were, of course, those who viewed this trend, not as a positive attempt towards modernization and a western style separation of church and state, but in many ways as a virtual suppression of Islam. In fact, there were what had been interpreted as clear instances of suppression by the state.
The Importance of the Brotherhoods

This is especially true of the Islamic brotherhoods, or tarikats, which “have always occupied an important place in the social, economic, and political life in Turkey, from the old Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic of today” (Oktem 388. For an excellent general review of the brotherhoods in Islam, see Triminham). These were heterodox in contrast to the Sunni orthodoxy as a result of their origins in Sufism in particular and of mysticism in general. These brotherhoods represent the surging of emotion, of love and devotion in the direction of God. They range from the elite brotherhoods much given to classical music and poetry...to the popular and ritualistic, enthusiastic groups......Some are very strict in their interpretations of the ‘traditions’ and others quite lax in what they will permit their followers. (Yalman 8).

The popular appeal of the brotherhoods stems, in part, from its use of poetry and hymns which can be said to transcend the scholasticism of less personal social structures. Rumi, one of the most celebrated of the mystic poets in Islam, is well known throughout the world. He is perhaps the best example of the wide use of poetry in expressing the love of Human creature for the creator in all of religious literature (Andrews, Schimmel 1992, and 1993).

The love of God expressed through poetry in general and in Rumi’s verse in particular extends throughout the Islamic world. Rumi seems especially influential in Islamic India (See Currie, Qureshi, and Troll). In fact, it has been said that “[t]he flowering of Sufi literature, especially mystical love poetry, represents a golden age among the Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu languages” (Doniger 1035). Those persons whose primary language is English and are unfamiliar with the emotional appeal of Islam can easily find it in the numerous English translations of Rumi.

Today, Islamic Brotherhoods of this kind are not only important in Turkey, but in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt as well. Each of these countries “have their own versions of autocratic states with various approaches to ‘official’ Islam.” But the more popular trend in these countries also seems to be “[unofficial, quietest, more individualized ‘brotherhoods’ of Sufi Islam.” This is because,

[t]here is a strong current of interest in a more “personal” faith, less political, more spiritual and private. Some speak of it as a “protestant” Islam. “The door of interpretation--closed since al-Ghazzali (d. 111)-must be opened,” it is said. So there is much talk of a “reform” in Islam especially in Turkey, and Turkish speaking countries in Central Asia, and other places. (Yalman 2-3)
Sufism, or the mystic expression of Islam, manifests in practices and beliefs which aim at a direct experience of the love of the Divine and of a deep ineffable knowledge of the nature and reality of God. Sufism, then, “consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designated to ascertain divine love and wisdom in the world” (Doniger 1035). The word itself is from the Arabic “suf” or “wool,” referring, more than likely to the woolen garments worn by the ascetics first identified as members of this movement.

The movement arose in reaction to the materialism of the early Umayyad period (661-750 CE) and is characterized by a yearning for “a personal union with God.” However, the Sufi pursued this often apart from the Shari’a, thus drawing opposition from the orthodox Islamic community. The mainstream of the Sufi movement, however, did strive,

to remain in the bounds of belief and practice of the majority and declared that the observance of the Shari’a was indispensable; indeed, from the early period they had attempted to develop a scheme of partly antithetical and partly complementary categories (e.g., annihilation and restoration, intoxication and sobriety) to achieve a synthesis of the external and internal. (Donigal 1035)

Despite their popularity, as elements of the political powers in Turkey moved towards an open secularized society, the brotherhoods were seen as an obstacle. They were seen as “fundamentalist” and contrary to the ideals of a secular state. Therefore, “[a]fter the Kemalist Revolution and the founding of the Republic in 1923, the state sequestered the funds of the brotherhoods and suppressed their institutions.”

During the era of one party rule between 1923-1946, a law which forbade both the dervish monasteries, or tekkes, as well as the Sufi mosques or zawiyas was enacted. This effectively outlawed the tarikat which then operated secretly as a base for Islamic activities. It wasn’t until the period between 1950-60 during the rule of the Democratic Party and the constitutional provisions which granted freedom of speech and association that these secular measures were moderated. During this period the tarikat approached a semi legal status despite the fact that the laws against them were yet to be lifted.

There was, apparently, reason for distrusting the brotherhoods. Despite the guarantee of religious freedom in the secular state “[t]he state felt justified in its actions because most of the brotherhoods supported the Ottoman dynasty during the War of Independence and remained potential centers of unrest” (Oktem 388). It was thought that remembrance of this history might inspire more cynicism than compliance in the Muslim population.

That the state would seek to modify or suppress an historically valued group of Islamic communities is significant when one considers that out of the estimated sixty-five
million persons living in Turkey today, about ninety-nine percent are at least nominally Muslim (Howard 4, 5-6; Shankland 136). Despite the benevolence of expression and intent of the modern Turkish government, it has become clear to many that a variety of Muslim practices and beliefs conflict with the very idea of a secular nation in which there is a clear Muslim majority (see Cotran, 2000, 1999, Mayer, Lampre).

As such, a variety of individuals and groups sought to loosen the grip of Kemalist secularism and, as time progressed, “Islamic fundamentalism found new ways of expressing itself.” Yet, although identified as fundamentalist, a term often used as a pejorative indicating an intolerance to sociological advancement, these counter movements were often “products of modernization rather than remnants of an older social order.” Evidence of this can be seen in that the proliferation of these groups, usually drew their support from groups in society whose lives had been significantly altered by the process of modernization but who felt that they were not participating in the benefits of such development. In many cases, this element was reinforced by a sense that personal and cultural identity was being destroyed without an effective new identity being created. (Voll 1985, p202)

As the Republic advanced its program of modernization, several elements of neglect became apparent to those who cherished the “personalistic element” inherent in Islam. In other words, “Kemalist ideology was long on views concerning the virtues of Turks, the benefit of secular republicanism for personality expansion, and the contribution of universal education to progress” (Mardin 170).

Those who advanced the cause of secularism could cite the West as a precedent for such a state being eminently beneficial to the individual as well as to society as a whole. Yet, the Republic was not being fashioned out of the context(s), historical or cultural, that the nations of the West had been. Because of this, Kemalist ideology “was short on methods that would enable individuals to tackle issues arising in the family circle.” As such,

[i]t did not answer queries relating to the authority of the father, or as to what the new place of women in society would be after republican secularization and the adoption of the Swiss Civil Code in anything approaching the detail of the most commonplace Islamic “catechism” with rural diffusion. Neither did the Kemalists have a view of rituals that would give meaning to life-stations such as birth, adolescence, marriage and death. (Mardin 170)

Obviously, a failure to address such primal concerns would create and enormous psychological vacuum. It is easy to understand, then, why a variety of social religious entities would come into being in opposition to these secularist trends (see Howe).
While the tarikats struggled to maintain their traditional practices new organizations called the *Cemaats* appeared. These had ties with the tarikats from which they derived their basic features of practice and theology. One of these, the *Suleymanci*, named after its founder Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan, preserved the entirety of the teachings of the *Naksibedî Tarikat*, the most widespread monastic order in the Ottoman Empire, as its own. Out of the Suleymand emerged two new brotherhoods, the *Kantri* and the *Mevlevi*.

As mentioned above, one of the oldest and best known of these groups was led by Said Nursi who had been a follower of İttihad-i Muhammadi during the Young Turk Revolution. The followers of this new movement, centered on Nursi’s teachings on Islam, was called the *Followers of Nur*, or *Nurju*, or *Followers of Light (Risale-i Nur)*. Through this movement, Nursi originally “called for the reestablishment of an Islamic state that would be based on Islamic Law and ruled by the ulama.” (Voll 1985, p202). This movement identifies with the *Kantri Cemaat* mentioned above. Still, it can be said that the Nur movement, objectively analyzed, has carved its own, idiosyncratic niche in the broad, ill-defined and somewhat ambiguous process which has been labeled modernization, would nevertheless be strongly contested by the present day Turkish Marxist, Kemalist or “liberal” intelligentsia.

However, the situation is more intense than what the phrase “strongly contested” would seem to indicate. In fact, “[a]ll of these groups have combated the Nur as one of the most dangerous forms of reaction and obscurantism encountered in the Turkish republic, a characterization the Nur shares with the Naksibendi religious order” (Voll 1985, p203).

It is interesting to note that although this view of the Nur as dangerous is slightly dated, it does, in fact, reappear as an issue in the late 90s (see Beki, and Narli). These contemporary debates center around clarifying the Nur’s status as a separate tarikat, a Sufi order, or other form of Islamic community.

Be that as it may, Nursi became a symbol of religious opposition to the state in the early Kemalist efforts towards secularization. He found himself harassed by personale in the military and the police. He was declared a heroic by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi).

Interestingly, one of the charges against Nursi was that he taught a tarikat, identified with teaching sufism, which was band. This he denied stating that he had no intention of “training in Sufism (tarikat), but instruction in the direct way to reality (hakikat)” (Vahide 240). This statement was made to the court at Eskisehir which acquitted him of the charge (Mardin 96). Later, he was to be acquitted of the same complaint at the courts of
Denizli and Afyon (Mardin 96-102). Noting this, Nursi wrote that the courts recognized that instead of teaching sufism, his Risale-e Nur taught “certain, verified belief and the reality of the Qur’an.” He also claimed that not one person has said: “Said gave me instruction in sufism.” Also, a way to which the majority of the forefathers of the nation have to be bound may not be made something for which the nation is answerable. Also, secret dissemblers attach the name of sufi order to the reality of Islam: those who might well reply successfully to their attacks on this nation’s religion may not be accused of belonging to sufi orders. (Nursi 1992, p325)

The harassing actions were endorsed by the top legal authorities. Eventually, Nursi was tried for violation of the Constitution and of the Penal Code which forbade religious opposition to the Republic.

There are credible reasons why this antagonistic view is so vehemently held. The first and most obvious is that the secularism of the Kemalist republic by definition excludes a movement which aims to give a religious foundation to social life--and possibly--to political systems. Secondly, the Nur movement attacks materialism and to that extent undermines the positivistic philosophical bases of Kemalism. (Mardin 41)

From the 1980s “Turkish Muslims have begun to feel that the worst period of Kemalist oppression has passed and that their state could and should represent their Ottoman-Islamic culture and identity” (Hakan 79). Today “Turkey has succeeded in incorporating Islamists into the political system, and this in turn has softened and restructured Islamic demands and voices” (Hakan 237). In fact, “the idea of a parliamentary democracy with Islam is now embraced by all the parties” (Yalman 17). Also “[t]here are numerous Islamic writers in Turkey who have embraced this position” (18).

The debate between religion and politics in Turkey continues. However, writers such as Atay and Ozturk have argued that as long as the free will of the Islamic community is expressed in proper elections, the parliament so constituted must be seen as legitimate in Islamic terms as well. With the ascent to power of the Ak Party in Turkey, the electorate have given their agreement.

At present, it seems as if most authors believe that Turkey has at last achieved the status of a free and open society. As an Islamic nation it is possible that the situation in Turkey is predictive of the future of the Muslim world. For,
if Islam is already contained within a free society and an open regime, if Islam and a modern community must be associated with freedom of conscience, liberty for the individual and his spirit according to his own lights, then, it is possible that there are still more important implications to be drawn from the profound political experiences of Turkish secularism in the last hundred years by the rest of the Islamic world. (Yalman 20)

Of course, only time will tell if “modernization will solve more ills than those it unleashes.” As the post-modern world evaluates this legacy of modernization it must still become “reconciled to some of the symbols and myths that have for years provided a comfortable structure of meaning for individuals in a culture.” It is to be hoped that the state in Turkey will continue to observe how the “[b]reakdown in cherished symbols and myths leave a people bereft of guideposts for coping and rules for living” (Mataragnon 26). In this regard, Said Nursi was instrumental in reawakening the fundamentals of his society’s past and, thus, creating an avenue for the emotional life of the Turkish Muslim to manifest.

The Popular Attraction of Sufism and Said Nursi

It can be said that of the more popular source of symbols and myths for the common Turkish Muslim Sufism is the most prominent. In the midst of the tumultuous change which has characterized Turkey in the past century, it is no wonder that persons of deep religious sentiment have found themselves attracted to this vital religious entity. Its appeal stems, first of all, from the fact that it is one of the expressions of Islam. Concerning this it can be said that,

the ineffable powers of religious spiritual experience to provide men and women with meaning, purpose and direction in their lives must always be recognized--even by ardent secularists--to provide for moral fiber in societies. In this respect, Islam is a religion is second to none. (Yalman 18).

Yalman notes, as well in this regard, that it also seems evident that a major characteristic of the 21st Century is that of individualism. Because of this, “the most promising aspect of Islam...is the Sufi mystical tradition” (18-19). Sufism tends to transcend the divisive elements one finds in religion of the Platonic variety which seeks to evaluate one’s standing as a true member of that religious ideology. In contrast to this “Sufism, with its intense individuality, its fervent passion for individual spiritual liberation, must be seen as a metaphor for human freedom.” Within the fold of the various Sufi movements the individual is typically left to his or her own conscience as regards a variety of spiritual matters. As such “[o]ne cannot know who is or is not a Muslim; furthermore, one should not take it upon oneself to find out. Such sentiments are frequent in the writings of the Sufis” (19).
There is mounting evidence that this expression of Islam speaks to a variety of spiritual seekers. Yalman relates that, “[i]n those intimate tariqats, individuals in small groups come together for prayer and celebration in innumerable forms.” That membership in these groups is, and has been, keenly valued by those involved can be gleaned by the fact that “[t]hese groups have survived all kinds of oppression in one totalitarian state or other. They are still going strong almost everywhere from Bosnia to Indonesia, from Russia to China, up and down Africa and across the Sahara” (19).

It can be said that, strictly speaking, Nursi was somewhat antagonistic towards the mystic tradition in which he himself had been trained. In fact, he decided not to establish a tarikat himself for the purpose of teaching. Instead, Nusi formed a religious society which became decentralized and more concerned with the individual. Mardin tells us that “[w]hat he was interested in was the perpetuation of the message which he offered to his followers.” This interest manifested in a tool of modernization. Thus,

The printed word, i.e., Said’s Risale, thus took over from the traditional pattern of a charismatic leader selecting another charismatic leader to succeed him. Since the Risale-i was to carry this charisma, his followers and their successors, using his book as a guide, were to work for themselves instead of concentrating on the Master. (Mardin 181)

He felt that it was more important to reestablish the fundamental faith in the truth of the Qur’an than “subtle arguments about the ways in which the divine showed itself” (Mardin 176). Even so, his debt to those traditions is clear in his style of interpretation of the Qur’an which has a great emotional appeal equaling that of the tariqats. This is apparent especially in his focus on the metaphorical suras in the Qur’an through which he seeks to unravel secrets of spirituality. In style, this resembled the mysticism of the brotherhoods.

But there were more parallels to be made between the popular style of the tariqats and that of Said Nursi. It is significant that Nursi’s original language was Kurdish and that he did not become fluid in Turkish until after the age of twenty. Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, was Nursi’s second language, proceeding Turkish. This appeals because traces of Arabic style in Nursi “can be seen in his rich arabicized vocabulary which gives a special ring to his Turkish phrases; there is even something evocative of the Qur’an in his rhetoric.”

This approach appealed to a variety of popular past presidents.

Anatolia...was a land where the theosophical speculations of the mystics were transmitted to the masses by learned Ottoman Muslims. A much wider appeal was that of the ineffable meaning which mysticism was
considered to conceal. The power of Bediuzzaman over the lower-class followers has to be understood at this second level. (Mardin 177)

All of this has an appeal for the individual in that “allusive and metaphorical rhetoric has a direct impact upon people’s hearts which classical theology cannot match.” This creates a circle of confirmation for the believer as “the quality of the Qur’an that confers hermeneutic freedom on the exegete is the same which appeals to the heart of the believer” (Mardin 176).

Nursi was careful not to advocate a particular sect, or sects, of Islam as more authentically Islamic than others. Islam expresses itself in each of these in various ways, each of which speak to a different kind of person. In this sense, as well as others to be discussed below, Nursi is surprisingly pluralistic.

It is evident that Sufism has a special place in the hearts and minds of the Turkish people and that Nursi’s writing and teaching style was in no way divorced from Sufism’s positive aspects. In fact, it could be argued that Nursi’s teachings barrow much inspiration from Sufism although this is presented with Nursi’s unique spirit. As such, a study of Sufism as an influence on Nursi, and of Nursi’s religious teaching as an influence on Sufism, would be a value for the general study of Islam. However, it might be best to express the relationship of Sufism and Nursi as a religious environmental context from which a unique synthesis has emerged, and that this unique spiritual force may well represent a major trend in Islam as a global spiritual entity.

**Pluralism in Said Nursi**

From time to time, one reads of Said Nursi as an Islamic “fundamentalist” (Mardin 23-41). As the term is often used in contemporary nomenclature as a pejorative, this can be unfortunate. There is evidence, in fact, that in general “Turkish Islam” today “rooted in Sufism, particularly Naksibendi Sufi orders, and punctuated by frontier conditions of Turkey, is pluralistic and liberal” (Hakan 54). As a major influence on Turkish Islam, especially on the variety described above, it can be said that Nursi is responsible for this characterization in some measure.

Also, in the sense that fundamentalism, popularly conceived, is not pluralistic, it cannot be said that Nursi is, in this sense, fundamentalist. It is true that he emphasizes the “fundamentals” of the Qur’an and the centrality of the Prophet and the Shari’a, but by doing so he seems to take authority away from institutions and personalities which might assert a fundamentalist grip on their Islamic adherents. Perhaps it is this quality that Mardin refers to when he writes that the “religious idiom that [Nursi] inherited, and the ways in which he stated problems in this idiom, show a strong Muslim medieval imprint.” However, it is critical to realize that “[t]he external forces impinging upon him which impelled him to modify this idiom...are thoroughly contemporary: they were part
of the process by which new communications media were penetrating the globe and reducing its dimension” (26).

According to Nursi, the way of the sufis, in which one becomes both purified and illuminated, is only one of four basic paths (to be described below) by which the sincere Muslim may approach the divine. In attempting to show a common legitimacy underlying each of these four ways, including that of the Shi’a, and of the sufi, Nursi exhibits a modern style pluralism which drew, and continues to draw, the interest of contemporary scholars in the field of religious studies (Horkuc 80).

John Vollis is one of several authors who insist that Nursi, despite the fact that some authors attach the label of fundamentalist to him, must be seen as essentially pluralistic. He notes that “[i]n terms of Qur’anic commentary, Said Nursi argues that the verses of the Qur’an reflect the vastness of God’s message and depths of meanings” (1985, p255). After all, Nursi himself wrote in The Letters that, “w]hen you know your way and opinions to be true, you have the right to say, ‘My way is right and the best.’ But you do not have the right to say, ‘Only my way is right.’” This is due to the fact that,

According to the sense of “The eye of contentment is too dim to perceive faults; it is the eye of anger that exhibits all vice,” your unjust view and distorted opinion cannot be the all-decisive judge and cannot condemn the belief of another as invalid. (Nursi, 2000, p314)

This is hardly the view of a fundamentalist as the term is often used.

Still, the recognition that the Qur’an is central to Islam may be the main reason that certain authors have referred to Nursi as fundamentalist. He arrived at his strict adherence to the Qur’an through an insight he gained after hearing his teacher say that one should follow only one master, or “[m]ake your qibla one.” Nursi told his followers that “[s]aying, ‘the true master is the Qur’an; making [my] qibla one will be by means of this master,’ both his heart and his spirit began to journey spiritually in truly strange fashion through the guidance of that sacred master.” This conversion started a process of inner transformation. Nursi continues telling his readers,

And his evil-commanding soul began an intellectual and spiritual struggle with him through doubts and skepticism. He journeyed not with the eyes closed, but with the eyes of the heart, spirit, and mind open...Endless thanks be to Almighty God, through the instruction and guidance of the Qur’an, he found a way to reality, and entered upon it. So too he demonstrated it through the Risale-i Nur, which manifests the truth of “And in everything are signs indicating that He is One. (Nursi 1980, p6-7)

However, Nursi himself once again seems to put any accusation of being a fundamentalist to rest when he tells us that,”[a]s the Qur’an of Miraculous Exposition
expresses truths through its explicit, clear meanings and senses, so it expresses many allusive meanings through its styles and forms. Each of its verses contains numerous levels of meanings.” Far from encouraging a narrow mode of thought and action the Qur’an opens a broad vista. For,

[s]ince the Qur’an proceeds from all-encompassing knowledge, all its meanings may be intended. It cannot be restricted to one or two meanings like man’s speech, the product of his limited mind and individual will. It is because of this that in numerable truths contained in the Qur’an’s verses have been expounded by Qur’anic commentators, and there are many more which have not been expounded by them. (Voll 1985, p255-56)

As this makes obvious, Nursi’s “openness to many different levels of understanding reflects a pluralism that is not a relativist position, but rather emphasizes the importance of the role of the individual in the interpretation” (Voll 1985, p256). God provides ample opportunity for individual taste and temperament to find an entrance to a viable path to Him. As Nursi says, “[t]he ways leading to God are truly numerous.” Yet, it is true that the ways are to be distinguished from one another in various respects. Therefore,

While all true ways are taken from the Qur’an, some are shorter, safer, and more general than others. Of these ways taken from the Qur’an is that of impotence, poverty, compassion, and reflection, from which, with my defective understanding, I have benefited...This path consists not [of the principles of the fundamentals of the sufi orders] employing silent recollection...but of Four Steps...It is Shari’a. (Nursi 1992, p491).

Michel points out that such an openness naturally implies tolerance towards non-Muslims. He notes that in the years of 1910-1911, Nursi was challenged with the question of relationships with non-Muslims as he had written and spoken at some length about the possibility of friendship with Christians and Jews. Those who made this challenge would often cite the Qur’an which says in 5:51, “O you who believe! Do not take Jews and Christians for your friends and protectors.” His answer to this is of great interest. Nursi claims that the Qur’an’s prescription can be restricted in that

[t]ime is a great interpreter; if it determines its limits, it cannot be gainsaid. That is, when a matter becomes clear in the course of time, one cannot object to it. Moreover, if the judgment is based on derived evidence, the source of the derivation shows the reason for the judgment. (Michel 332)

In the Qur’anic verses mentioned above, the terms Jew and Christian were being used to describe certain undesirable features in a person. In this respect, it can be claimed that
“Just as not all of the characteristics of an individual Muslim necessarily reflect the teaching of Islam, so also, not all of the qualities of individual Jews or Christians reflect unbelief” (Michel 325). Nursi reminds his Muslim readers that it is permitted for a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman and that it would be absurd if he did so and did not love her. This being the case, it is apparent that the Qur’an does not preclude love between the various People of the Book, be they Jew, Christian, or Muslim.

It is instructive that one often finds Nursi speaking, not of categories of person with abstract titles such as Christian or European, but of specific states of mind and of spirituality. For example, when condemning traits of the modern world which were more often than not identified with “European,” we find Nursi making important qualifications.

Europe is two. One follows the sciences which serve justice and right and activities beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration it has received from true Christianity. This first Europe I am not addressing. Rather, I am addressing the second, corrupt Europe which, through darkness of the philosophy of naturalism that considered the evils of civilization to be its virtues, has driven humankind to vice and misguidance. (Michael 160).

There are more specific reasons why friendships may be formed between the Muslim and Jews and Christians. All three of these monotheistic religions have the common enemy of atheism. To fight against this all of the People of the Book may, without reservation, join together (Voll 1999, p255-56). In this regard Nursi states that,

[i]t is even recorded in authentic traditions of the Prophet that, at the end of time, the truly pious among the Christians will unite with the People of the Qur’an and fight their common enemy: irreligion. And at this time, too, the people of religion and truth need to unite sincerely not only with their own brothers and fellow believers, but also with the truly pious and spiritual ones among the Christians, temporarily [disengaging] from the discussion and debate of points of difference in order to combat their joint enemy--aggressive atheism. (Nursi 2000, p203, fn 7).

The sufi accomplishes the goal of purity of the heart through a process of worship, recitation of holy formulas, as well as the exercise of removing from the mind any word, concept, or image which does not relate to, and therefore remind one of, God. The goal of illumination, on the other hand, comes through inspiration and from the “uncovering” of holy mysteries. Dhikr-i Ilahi, or the remembrance of God is “the feet of the heart” which undergoes this journey. Nursi identifies three principle representatives of this approach in the persons of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, also called Imam-i Rabbani (971/1563-1034/1624), as well as Abd al-Qadir Gilani, and Bayezid al-Bistami. “[T]he final goal of all the sufi paths,” says Imam-i Rabbani, “is the clarification and unfolding of
the truths of belief” (Nursi, 1928-32, 40). He is further cited by Nursi as classifying sufism as *walayat-i sughra*, that is, a “lesser sainthood;” a classification with which Nursi is in agreement.

The second of these ways is that of the scholars, or *kalam*. Here the principles of *contingency* and *createdness*, by which the proofs of God are made known, are advanced to defend and preserve Islam’s basic tenets. Nursi cites three leaders of this path: the Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, the Taftazani, and the Imam Ghazzali. Both this path and the way of the sufis find their inspiration in the Qur’an. However, Nursi points out several dangers in these paths in his *Nine Allusions* (*Telvisat-i Tis’a*). In general, it can be said that these paths found themselves being shaped through non-Islamic molds. Because of this they became too lengthy and difficult for the common life of the spirit.

Islamic philosophy forms the third path to God. Nursi identifies this path with two basic groups. One includes Ibn Sina, Farabi, and Kindi, or the Peripatetics, persons who took as a basic feature of their approach the reasoning processes found in Aristotle. In contrast to this are those philosophers who find inspiration and intuition as the basis of their spiritual endeavor. These are the illuminists and include the Suhrawardi’s and the Ibn Tufayl’s. (Nursi 1992, p565).

Finally, there is the path which Nursi himself advocates through his teachings in the *Risale-i Nur*. This is the path of the Qur’an itself, God’s revealed word to humankind. It is the path of reality (Nursi 1980, p229). By distinguishing between these paths, Nursi is not necessarily trying to drive a wedge between them and his own approach. Nor is he claiming that the other paths are divorced from the Qur’an. It is simply that these other paths are shaped through non-Islamic molds. Because of this they became too lengthy and difficult for the common life of the spirit.

The Risale-i Nur does not teach only with the feet and eye of the reason like the works of other scholars, nor does it only move with the illuminations and inspirations of the heart like the saints, it rather flies to the loftiest peaks by progressing with the feet of the uniting and combining of the reason and heart, and assistance of the spirit and other subtle faculties. It rises to places that not the feet, but the eye of aggressive philosophy cannot reach, and demonstrates the truths of belief to eyes that are blind even. (Nursi 1960, p152).

This path as described in Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur* consists of four parts. These four progressive steps developed out of His contemplation of the four principles of renunciation of the Naqshbandi order. There are, according to this system, four things that one must renounce. These are the world, the Hereafter (*ukba*), existence (*hesti*), and the very act of renunciation (*terk-i terk*). These are mystical efforts which are difficult to comprehend at best let alone to accomplish. The practical mind of Said Nursi translated these into highly understandable and approachable steps. Nursi’s four principles are those of absolute poverty (*fakr-i mutlak*), absolute inability (*acz-i mutlak*), absolute gratitude or gratefulness (*sukr-u mutlak*), and finally, absolute longing (*sevk-i mutlak*), (Nursi 1993, p20). These in turn derive from the Qur’an which is the only
source for Nursi of any true religious principle. It is easy to see that each of these principles naturally leads one to the other.

In the first step one contemplates the Qur’anic verse 52:32, “do not justify yourself.” This involves the contemplation of one’s numerous weaknesses based on the desire for self glorification. Through this process one comes to see that it is human nature to tend towards self-worship and of replacing God with oneself. To those who do this the Qur’an says “Did you such a one who takes his god his own passion or his own vain desire” (25:43)?

Elsewhere (59:19) the Qur’an states “And be not like those who forget God, and He therefore makes them forget their own selves.” This verse represents the second step identified by Nursi. Here the requirement is to maintain a fixed awareness of God in one’s mind and heart. To an extent, the forgetfulness of God relates to one’s forgetfulness of one’s own soul. It seems obvious here that a constant fixing of the attention resembles the mysticism of Buddhist and Hindu meditation.

In the third step one sees one’s own imperfection as compared to the perfect being of the Creator. As this occurs one naturally tends towards actions which contrast with the desires of the “evil commanding soul.” Also, it is seen that any good qualities that one might exhibit are to be attributed to God alone. One cannot claim to be the author of good. As the Qur’an says of this step in 4:79, “Whatever good (O man!) happens to you, (happens to you from) God; but whatever evil happens to you is from your (own) soul (from yourself).” At this stage one cannot help but feel enormous gratitude and humility towards God.

The fourth step is expressed in verse 28:88 which states that “Everything (that exists) will perish except His (own) Face (or Countenance).” This step displays an interesting metaphysics which, once again, invites comparison with certain aspects of Hinduism (Advita), Buddhism (Madhyamika) Christianity (Apaphata), and Judaism (Kabbala). Here Nursi relates that the deeper teachings of this verse include an evaluation of the notion of existence as regards created things. There is a rich history of theories pertinent to this study.

Nursi tells the reader that there are two aspects of a thing. One is the aspect in relation to the thing itself (mana-yi ismi), and the other is in regard to that thing’s Creator (mana-yi harfi). In the first aspect the created thing must be seen as transient (fani), absent (mefkud), temporal (hadis), and nonexistent (ma’dum). With regard to the second aspect, however, the created thing is seen to be a reflection of the Divine Names of God giving it true existence from the source of being. Bilar Kuspinar points out that this concept can be found in Ghazali’s Mishkat al-Anwar (see Kuspinar; Ghazali 55-6).
Sufism in the Risale-i Nur

This last step is part of the Sufi study of form. William Chittick describes this concept in the Sufi tradition by writing that “[t]he Sufis understand ‘form’ (surah) to signify the means whereby unseen realities (haqiqiyah)–which are disengaged (mufarrad) from and transcend physical reality–can be understood.” One is tempted to think of Plato’s theory of form and ideation. However, a further explication reveals an important distinction.

In other words, the Form of a transcendent reality--perhaps symbol would be a better translation--in the means whereby that reality (haqiqah) or the meaning (ma’na, the term employed in contradistinction to surah) manifests itself in the physical world. The form is ontologically connected to its own meaning. Hence man as the form of Allah is ontologically the manifestation of Allah and the means whereby He is known in the physical world. Without man the name “Allah” would have no single locus of manifestation. (145)

Ibn ‘Arabi is another representative of this theory of identity between the created and the transcendent. He regards man as “the very principle of the manifestation of God in the universe.” As such it must be said that “man, the vice-regent of God, all-encompassing reality, is transient (hadith) in his form, and eternal (azali) in his essence” (Austin 51fn).

However, there is a danger inbedded in this theory. As in much of Nursi’s teachings a kind of philosophical moderation is called for. Nursi cites the Vahdet-i Vucud school which advises one to perceive the universe as mere non-existence since nothing can be called existent except for God Himself. This, he tells us is too extreme, as is the Vahdet-i Suhud which proclaims that the universe is in such utter oblivion that one must conclude that “there is nothing witnessed but He.” Both of these contradict the Qur’an which states that the universe is, in fact, a real entity and that everything within the universe is real. This is true even though all things function as mirrors for God’s Names and Attributes (Nursi 1993, p461).

The psychological danger of denying the reality of one’s daily experience is a common complaint against mysticism in general, although in the case of Vahdet-i Vucud the theory was held by “[m]any of the most sophisticated pious believers (Rahman 145). In this respect Nursi held with the orthodox ‘ulema which often attacked the doctrine (Mardin 186). Mardin writes that “[t]o Bediuzzaman, those who believe in this theory are threatened by the danger of appraising the phenomenal world as the projected shadow of the divine essence, which to them becomes the sole reality.” Believers in the theory would not object to this description. However, they would ask why it is objected to. The answer is that “[t]hey thus radically undermine one’s relation to worldly matters.
But faith cannot be built on shadows and demands that the world be taken as real. Followers of this extreme stance can only cause the weakening of Islam” (187).

Nursi does not deny that practitioners of Vahdat-i Vucud enter mystical states which are profound and important for the spiritual development of a limited number of persons. But besides being deficient in its denial of Qur’anic teachings of the reality of all things, it is sometimes perilous (Nursi 1993, p449). Certain persons, for example, would rise to a high state of mystical realization and not wish to leave it. They falsely see their state as the highest and remain absorbed in it.

As Nursi tells his readers, such persons cannot interpret their visions unless they come to the stage of Asfiya in which one is sober and in control. For Islam to be viable, it also had to be practical (Nursi 1992, p83). Although the term literally means “the purified people,” Nursi seems to use it to refer to those Sufis who find more value in remaining in the state of sobriety (sahv) than they do in intoxication (suhr). The topic and its debate can be traced to Hallaj (d. 922) and Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 874), who sided with intoxication, and to Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 910) who preferred to sober state. In Kashf al-Mahjub there is an anecdote narrated by al-Hujwiri who, in speaking to Hallaj, said “You are in error concerning sobriety and intoxication. The former denotes soundness of one’s spiritual state in relation to God, while the latter denotes excess of longing and extremity of love, and neither of them can be acquired by human effort...” (Nicholson 189).

Ultimately, it can be said that Said Nursi is concerned with what is essential to religion. To him it is important not to be sidetracked by any aspect of religion which might attract but which might divert one from what is necessary. As long as this does not happen, the aspirant may find a multitude of expressions in religion which can be pursued without danger. As regards Sufism in this context, Nursi points out that Islam is like the basic sustenance without which one cannot live. On the other hand, Sufism is like fruit with which one may dispense should there be other forms of nourishment available. It is not possible to enter Paradise without faith. Innumerable people can go there without Sufism. In as much as Sufism is an expression of Islam it has what is essential for the believer. However, true Islam may appear without being Sufism per se (Nursi 1993, p23).

In the rich language of Nursi’s culture several words which convey the notion of the sufi path, each with its own special significance, are used commonly in a variety of ways. Of these terms, Nursi notes especially those of Sufism (Tasavvuf), Sufi order (tarikat), sainthood (velayet) and spiritual journey on the sufi path (seyr u suluk). Each of these Nursi seeks to disentangle by way of interpretation for those who might be confused and mislead in their attempts to approach truth as offered by the Qur’an. While his own language might be said to be mystical in that it is poetic, that is, it advances with the “feet of the heart,” it aims at establishing the Sufi firmly in the fundamentals of the Qur’an and the prophet.
For this purpose Nursi defines Sufism, as well as Sufi path or order as a “sublime human mystery,” and a “human perfection,” whose goal is to achieve true knowledge or gnosis (marife). This occurs only through a disclosure of the realities of the truths of faith which are acquired intuitively and/or directly through an understanding of the Qur’an. That is to say that the Sufi travels a prolonged spiritual path ultimately arriving at the truths contained in the Qur’an whose truths are the truths of faith. For the Sufi the path is a mystical one which involves contemplation (tefekkur) as well as the remembrance of God. The spiritual aspirant comes to understand and to directly perceive that s/he is not alone as God is everywhere and that without God, life has no meaning (Nursi 1993, p443).

Whereas the Sufi concentrates on the notion of sainthood, which in the Naksibendi order is the “pivot of all spiritual realization (Chodkiewicz 23), Nursi points out that this notion must be seen as complementary to that of Prophethood. That is, just as the Qur’an is central to all of Islam, and that any practice, mystical or other, must derive from it, so must the Prophet be seen as central to those who look to the Qur’an for guidance. Therefore, “sainthood is a proof of the Prophethood, so is the Sufi path for the Shari’s” (Nursi 1993, p444). As this is the case, any path called Sufi which does not prove the Qur’an and Prophethood, or is not itself proved by these in turn, is not true Islam.

But sainthood is not only subordinate to Prophethood but to the station of the Companions as well. Nursi reminds his readers that the Orthodox state that the Companions are to be seen as superior to all members of the human race after the Prophet himself. The Prophet has a unique office as God’s messenger and his personality is supreme. But besides the Qur’an itself, this is proved by the Companions. As this is true, the station of the Companions, using Sufi nomenclature, can be compared to an elixir. And since it is “just like an elixir...whosoever experiences it even for a minute, attains to the illuminations of the reality, equivalent to years of mystical journey.” Despite the exalted level of sainthood “the greatest saints cannot reach the level of the Companions” (Nursi 1992, p489).

The notion of sainthood here is a complex one (Mardin 184-7). Within the Islamic framework,

The more sociological problems to be resolved [as regards sainthood] concern the way in which a saint was able to act as a magnetic pole in relation to his disciples. This involves questions relating to the quality of leadership, to collective representations, to charisma, social networks and the psychological needs of persons who were drawn to the saint. (Mardin 183)
There were a variety of stations of sainthood taught in the various tarikats. This fact helps to explain much of the political tension related to the state’s scrutiny of these organizations. This tension existed since the Ottoman Empire.

The close links Ottoman tarikat had with the Ottoman state induced the leaders of these fraternities to carefully weigh their options as local leaders and keep the countervailing power of the state in mind at all times. Since with few exceptions intellectual creativity in the tarikat was of a high level, this quality elicited a certain deference among the bureaucracy, many of whose members had multiple tarikat affiliations. Ottoman tarikat bore the imprint of these contradictory statuses. (Mardin 184)

Nursi himself was given the status of saint at the age of forty, an age which placed him “in the image of the Prophet Muhammad.” It was around this time that he had come to “acquire a large number of followers who may be described as disciples” (Mardin 183-4). However, Nursi had come to believe, against the teachings of Mevlana Halid, one of his own earlier masters, that it was best if one were “to disassociate oneself from such personal bonds” (Mardin 183).

Nursi felt the need to address two types of sainthood. Both of these had a substantial history of development through the Ottoman Empire and continued to have a pronounced influence in Nursi’s day. These two stations were the veli, or “the elect of God,” and the mahdi, or a “millenarian figure [who] would rise up in times of trouble to save Islam...” (Mardin 184-5). How a person became a saint in the Sufi traditions was a matter of mystery and of revelation (Trimingham 133-140). The mahdi “was a figure who was much talked of among the populace but whose conditions of emergence was interpreted with utmost caution by the ‘ulema” (Mardin 186). It was thought that

[s]ome men could acquire esoteric knowledge by a method of “spiritual progression” ...achieved through the intercession of a chain of elect masters, or by direct inspiration from God. Some men, however, had special gifts which gave them an unmediated mystical understanding of life without intercession or ascetic discipline. (Mardin 185)

There were several theories as to how knowledge was obtained and the status of sainthood achieved. Be that as it may, Nursi found the notion of “uniquely privileged mystical knowledge” (Raman161) suspect. In this respect he was in agreement with the orthodox community of believers.

Persons who feel inspired often take this to be a sign of having been chosen as a veli. In many cases they are simply deluded. Bediuzzaman adds that he had seen many people who had thought of themselves as
mahdi but simply deceived themselves and did great harm to Islam. (Mardin 187).

Sufism, then, is seen by Nursi to be a viable path if, and only if, it is an expression of Islam as are any and all true paths derived from the Qur’an and as identified through the Shari’aa. To the extent that a particular group or spiritual method adheres to this principle, it meets with Nursi’s approval. However, the over dependence on the charismatic teacher often diverted one from the truths of the faith and therefore was a divergence from Islam.

Yet, while Nursi cautions against certain dangers involved in Sufism, there are a variety of negative attitudes displayed towards Sufism which Nursi feels are not in service to Islam and must be addressed. He identifies two groups in particular which attack Sufism. One which he calls “certain devious sects” (firak-i dalle) he seems to give little credence to at all. But more important to Nursi than a variety of separate sects which deny Sufism is “the most regrettable group” comprised of people within the Orthodox Islamic Community (Ehl-i Sunnet ve’l Cemaat). It is this group of persons which can do the most damage to a spiritual path through its fallacious critique.

Within the Orthodox Community Nursi further identifies two separate groups. One is comprised of literalists or externalist scholars (zahiri ulema) while the other includes politicians who are ignorant of the full situation. Both segments of the Orthodox Community note faults in the various Tarikats, often manifested through uninitiated or incompetent members of those Tarikats (Nursi 1993, p445).

It is interesting to note that such attacks on the Tarikats continue to this day using the same excuses. Isolated instances of abuses of power and privilege level scrutiny against an entire category of religion. In relation to this, Mardin feels that there is a paradox manifest in the fact that, in Turkey, “[r]eligion has received a new uplift from the privatizing wave; private religious instruction, Islamic fashion in clothes, manufacturing and music, Islamic learned journals...” The paradox comes from the fact that while all of these are “aspects of private life” they have “made Islam pervasive in a modern sense in Turkish society, and have worked against religion becoming a private belief” (229).

The effect of this is that Turkish society is conflicted concerning its past brotherhoods and those orders which bare a resemblance to them as does the Naksibendi, the Nurculuk, and any other group which might trace itself back to the teachings of Said Nursi and the Risale-i Nur. Mardin continues describing this conflict in Turkish society by pointing out how “Turkish newspapers today write about the continuing influence of Turkish Sufi orders. The Naksibendi order--the root organization from which Nurculuk emerged--is taken to task most frequently by them because of its preeminence in Turkish history” (229-30).
It is not difficult to find evidence that this is true. In January 23 of 1997, for example, the Turkish Daily News reported that

> due to a sex scandal involving the leader of a well-known Aezimendi order and one of his young, attractive followers, an old debate has flared up again, that of whether such Islamic religious orders are civil, societal institutions, such as an ordinary nongovernmental organizations, or unauthorized sects. (Beki)

In particular, the author of this article says that not only Tarikats are being reexamined for their relative value or danger in the secular State of Turkey, but that Nursi’s legacy itself in its entirety is, once again, on trial. This particular scandal, says Beki, “has started anew serious debate on the Nur movement, started by Said-Nursi (1873-1960), which has become one of the more controversial of the recent past.”

The next day, the Turkish Daily News produced an article by Nilufer Narli, generated by the same issue, in which a few of the suspected groups are examined. These include The Iskender, Pasha Convent, Kotku’s doctrines, and Fethullah Hoca. But it is most significant that there is prominent mention in the article of the Nurcus which “among the camaats...are the more established” and whose members as followers of the Risala-i Nur “is said to have at least one million followers all over Turkey.”

Out of this movement a powerful leader emerged by the name of Fethullah Gulen who “was formerly a well-known Nur-disciple.” But, although he was closely connected to Nursi through his teachings Fethullah Gulen “avoids being identified with the teachings of Said-i Nursi who founded the school.” Instead, “whenever he refers to the teachings of Said-i Nursi, Gulen does not pronounce the name of Nursi. His reluctance lies in the fact that the name Said-i Nursi recalls radicalism and the Kurdish cause” (Narli). If Nursi were alive he would have continued cause for regret that such guilt by association would deprive sincere spiritual aspirants of a rich opportunity for growth in the path of Islam.

Nursi himself warns that the Sufi path is not for the common person. It is encumbered with difficulties which may not be suitable for any but a small number of people, even if it is attractive to many. Those who take up the path and are not prepared or who are not suited to it, Nursi warns, may mislead and become harmful to others. In this respect Nursi sided with orthodox Muslim teachers represented by Ibn Taimiyya (1263-1328) who stood against such mystical statements as “[h]e who witnessed the Will of God feels no longer bound by the command of God” (Rahman 113). Therefore, further analysis is needed for Nursi’s readers to comprehend what is at stake.

For this purpose, then, Nursi relies on the doctrines of respected Sufi Shaykhs in their description of the psychological journey of the spiritual aspirant. Generally speaking, Nursi tells his readers, there two forms of the Sufi’s mystical journey. These are the
“journey via the inner self,” also called the vertical journey (seyr-i enfusi), and the “journey via the cosmos,” or the horizontal journey (seyr-i afaki).

The vertical journey begins from the self or the soul of the person undergoing the journey. As this is an inner journey the practitioner removes his or her attention from the external world of sensory stimulation. Instead, one rests one’s attention in the heart which is not clearly perceived unless egoism is destroyed. Within the purified heart the Sufi finds reality and returns to the external world to find it now luminous. The soul having finished this path now sees that the world is a larger scale of what is perceived in one’s own spiritual depths. Nursi says that this path can be summed up in three phrases. These are “to break the egoism, renounce the worldly passions, and kill the rebellious soul (the evil-commanding soul) (Nursi 1993, p446).

This path, which relies entirely on the Qur’an is described by Nursi as shorter, broader, safer, and more universal than the Sufi paths that were well known during his day. It is shorter because it is comprised of only four steps. It is said to be safer in that it does not necessarily produce the “shocking utterances of the soul.” These are sudden shocking states of illumination through intuition which can produce no small amount of psychological damage due to their severity. Also, it is a more ethical path in that the person being mindful of his or her short comings through knowledge of that person’s incompetency, poverty and deficiency, will not go beyond those limits set for the humanbeing (Nursi 1993, p460).

It is clear that a person with a disposition to the practices of Sufism would not necessarily be precluded from those practices if s/he were to study and practice the Risale-i Nur as well. That is to say that these practices and beliefs are not necessarily opposed if Sufism is not opposed to Islam in its fundamental form.

This is a form which is inclusive, popular conceptions of Islam in the West as overly exclusive notwithstanding. For, in the final analysis, the Risale-i Nur, as described by its founder, is

a circle bound with a luminous chain stretching from east to west, and from north to south....The point is unity of this community and what binds it is Divine Unity. Its oath and its promise are belief in God. Its members are all believers, belonging from the time of God’s covenant with men. Its register is the Preserved Tablet. Its means of communication are all Islamic books. Its daily newspapers, all religious newspapers whose aim is “upholding the Word of God.” Its clubs and councils are the mosques, religious schools, and sufi meeting-houses. Its centre is the two sacred cities [Mecca and Medina]. Its head, the Glory of the World [the Prophet Muhammad] (PBUH). Its way is the struggle of each person with his own soul; that is, the struggle to assume the morality of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), to give new vigor to his
practices, and to cultivate love for others and, if it is not harmful, offer them advice.

The regulations of this community are the Practices of the Prophet, and its code of laws, the injunctions and prohibitions of the Shari’a. Its swords are clear proofs, for the civilized are to be conquered through persuasion, not compulsion. Investigating the truth is with love, while enmity is for savagery and bigotry. Its aim and purpose is “Upholding the Word of God.” (Nursi 1991, p66-7)

In an age in which the compulsion of entire populations has been confused with the will of God in both East and West, such words provide instruction and solace. The notion of Jihad, or struggle toward the good, is shown to properly be directed inwardly where war and peace originate. As each page of the book of the universe is turned by Christian, Jew, and Muslim alike, one’s spiritual eye reads of wisdom, peace, and of love for the other.
Works Cited


Poems by Dave Pratt

“You cannot imagine the quiet.”
- Louis Johnson, on leaving the basement after a tornado flattened Newton Falls, Ohio

Where sunfalls washed through the hickories and spilled on the ferns.
By the snaking creek and its chocolate cake earth.
In my dark bedroom, metal army men spread across the floor,
Like booby traps set to shred enemy feet.

I liked to imagine Big Foot- and me with a sword to make him bleed.
Lots of trees are really sorry I was so mad.
Thirty years later, I’d still sometimes reach to open a door and fear your fist on the other side.
Each door I opened revealed only another room, or a sky.

You have grown up and work for Homeland Security.
The angry fellow you once were has gone.
Back then you’d be rigid meat, vomit-voiced, a jaw tight enough to crack your own teeth,
"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU LOOKING AT, LITTLE MAN?"

Gouging, knuckles, the floor, my little body gasping,
Your fist tearing through a glass of water.
You were on fire with not knowing how to navigate having landed in a body
On this earth, in this house, in this family.

I enjoy having dinner with you now.
Your kids are beautiful and shining.
When I open doors, there is only me.
The Little “NotYet”

That wishes for something else
Sometimes builds a nest in your hara.
You bring it nothing but the warm hands of
“You are welcome here,”
just as a bird warms her body
on a bed of eggs.

I Keep

Meeting Buddhas
Who lose car keys
And sometimes say,
“I forget why I came in here.”

Football Practice, 1987

One day, purple and spitting,
“Godammit, what did you guys do with my helmet?”

Laughter and pointing and,
“Tony, you’re wearing it.”

To Be Honest

Split papaya loaded with black juicepearls,
plantable caviar, puckered skate eggs, plump capers...
or, to be honest, loaded with papaya seeds.
Review of *Brother Salvage* – Poems of Rick Hilles


by Tim McCarthy

It seems obvious that the intended audience of *Brother Salvage* is not merely the seasoned reader of prize winning contemporary poetry in the English language but those persons of that category who also aspire to world citizenship. The reader unfamiliar with a broad range of predominantly Jewish and other world-cultural themes may find that this volume of new poems demands too much research for them to understand or to enjoy. On the other hand, for those who see the value of poetry to be diminished when the personal is divorced from the historical, *Brother Salvage* is an enriching confirmation of significant humanistic values. The reader looking for a celebration of petty bourgeois concerns must look elsewhere.

Early on in the volume the Jewish idea of the *genizah* becomes a metaphor for the overlap of personal and historical discoveries. Here, before the start of the third poem which bares the volume’s name as well as the word in question for its title, we are supplied with the definition of *genizah* from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The great potential of this idea to illumine human nature through a poetic context is immediately apparent. It is a Hebrew word meaning “hiding place.” The various manifestations of this hiding place and what it reveals about the nature of the individual human spirit is the central controlling metaphor of the entire book.

That which is hidden has a complex dual nature and the purpose for which items are hidden is not a simple one. This is because “*Genizot* serve the twin purpose of protecting what they contain and preventing their more dangerous contents from causing harm.” It is a unique entrance into a time honored idea and its exploration. The basic dualities of the sacred and the profane, the conscious and the unconscious, as well as the personal and the universal are seen sometimes at odds with each other yet overlapping if not in agreement at other times.

The poem “Brother Salvage: a genizah,” tells a story of a man who learns of his brother’s fate in the Holocaust through the discovery of text and letters which have been kept secret. He is, as it were, salvaging his brother. The emotionality of this discovery is expressed with great delicacy. However, this delicacy is not a sign that one has become numb to the horror of the past:

There are whole weeks when life
is little more than the quandary of being a man
dressed in flames who must keep running to put
himself out.

Here, as in the vast majority of the other poems in *Brother Salvage*, the author avoids the pitfalls of diluting sentimentality and of heavy handed preaching. Even so, in each poem, the nature and the significance of the subject matter is given its due consistently. Another remarkable passage in which the avoidance of sentimentality and preaching is not an obstacle to a full report of the horror of the holocaust can be seen in “Yom Hashoah.” This poem documents the transportation of a man named Tadeus Stabholz to a death camp. A segment of that passage reads:

In seawind,
[mosses] become prayer shawls
salted with dust,
grief threads of every kind
of human hair...

Here one sees the whole of the Holocaust symbolized in a simple image of Spanish moss. The individual is on his way to be absorbed into one horrible mass of suffering and death.

Due to the ambiguous nature of the dualities which this book explores, it is more often than not, symbolized in Hilles’ poems by twilight. Yet, there is equally as often the mention of radiance as the hope for clarity, or of reality too brilliant to comprehend.

I stand before this landscape at dusk
jacklighted, caught in the highbeams,
shocked into stillness, rapt, incapable
of flight before the evening’s radiance.

If there is a fault in *Brother Salvage* perhaps it is that parts 3 and 4 seem to diverge too suddenly from the first half of the book in certain matters of style and content. Perhaps the dichotomy between the two halves of the book represents those dualities to be found in the hiding place in general. In any case, it is difficult to come up with a plan to make them cohere better other than the one implemented by Hilles.

In the second half of this collection of poems Hilles pursues clarity through vision, perhaps more properly expressed as *mystical* vision. This is as it should be for, as world citizens know, it is the mystical in life that reconciles seeming contradictions between opposites. The author refers to this mystical insight as “something luminous,” and brings forth as its representatives a multitude of historical voices. Among these visionaries are Swedenborg, Eisenbach, and Novalis.

But the most energy in this second half of the volume comes from the voice of Catherine Blake whose famous mystic husband she describes with the words,
He always boasted of what he call’d
Our visitations. I should have had them! He show’d me
Where to look for them!

It might be that Catherine stands for the reader of this volume and that the author is showing us where to look for our own mystical “visitations” of insight and reconciliation.
Contributors

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