ASCETICISM AND MYSTICAL THEOLOGY
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1. ASCETICISM – INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITION

In classical antiquity the Greek term *askēsis* and its cognates originally referred to the training necessary to acquire a skill. It denotes disciplined exercise and deliberate repetitive practice undertaken for a specific purpose. In the earliest sources *askēsis* often refers to athletic training, but it can also describe any exercise necessary for the development of a profession, artistic skill, or special lifestyle. The later philosophical tradition applied it to the quest for moral excellence, *arēte* or virtue (Kittel 1964 vol. 1: 494-496). For Aristotle the goal of *askēsis* is the constant, delicate maintenance of a "midpoint" or balance with regard to human impulses or drives. Aristotle describes virtue, moral excellence, as a habit acquired by constantly maintaining and fine-tuning the balance between two opposing "vices" or negative tendencies: excess on the one hand; and deficiency on the other (*Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. 2.15, 1107a; Irwin 1999: 25). Appropriate asceticism will thus vary, depending both on the goal towards which one is oriented and on the strength and direction of the impulses to which one is subject.

In the Christian mystical tradition the term "asceticism" encompasses a broad range of practices intended to eliminate vice and inculcate virtue. Christianity inherited from platonic and aristotelian philosophy the conviction that ascetical practice, the *bios praktikos* or *vita activa* is a necessary preparation for contemplation, the *bios theoretikos* or *vita contemplativa*. In the Christian East growth in spiritual maturity came to be envisioned as a tripartite ascent from ascetical practice (*praktikē*) to natural contemplation (*physikē*) and contemplation of the divine nature (*theologikē*). The principal exponent of this model of ascent is the monk Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399) who used it as the basis for his spiritual trilogy of *Praktikos, Gnostikos,* and *Kephalaia Gnostica.* His model is based on a classical pedagogical triad regularly reiterated in the writings of Philo (d.c. 50) and borrowed from the older Sophists, according to which education is based on instruction, nature, and practice (*askēsis*). In Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) and Origen (d. 254) this became a threefold method of interpreting the Scriptures: literal, moral, and mystical (see Smalley 1964: 1-34). For Evagrius this model was both a

method of biblical exegesis and a description of the soul's journey towards God (Evagrius, *Praktikos*, Prol 8, ch. 1-3, 84-89; Sinkewicz 2003: 97, 111-112) . Evagrius' model won favor in the East through its adoption by Maximus Confessor (d. 662); it was adapted and popularized in the West through the *Institutes* and *Conferences* of Evagrius' disciple John Cassian (d.c. 430).

An analogous model of spiritual growth arose somewhat later in the West that depicts asceticism as purgation from sin, leading to "illumination", and eventually culminating in an experience of contemplative union with God. The doctrine of three "ways" of purgation, illumination, and union is often associated with the sixteenth-century Carmelite tradition represented by Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) and John of the Cross (d. 1591). However these categories had long been known in the West through such texts as the *de Triplici Via* by the Franciscan Bonaventure (d.1274) and the *Spiritual Exercises* of the Benedictine Garcia de Cisneros (d.1510). The goal of Christian asceticism thus came to be understood not simply as moral perfection, but rather *theosis*, "divinization" as it was described in the East, and beatific vision and *unio mystica*, mystical union, in the West.

From this perspective asceticism appears in a wholly positive light. It is an essential component of spiritual growth analogous to the athlete's quest to achieve peak physical efficiency. Ascetical practices such as fasting, celibacy and nocturnal vigils are not ends in themselves but are rather tools that help keep in balance physical drives such as hunger, thirst, sleep, and the desire for intimacy. Voluntary dispossession, obedience, and ritual prayer similarly assist in harmonizing more interior intellectual impulses: namely, those concerned with ownership, leadership, personal worth in relationships, and the capacity to maintain inner attentiveness to God.

This positive understanding of *askēsis* as training in moral and spiritual balance has always been present in Christian teaching. In the West it was most definitively expressed in Thomas Aquinas' treatise on habits, virtues, and vices (*Summa theologica* I-II*ae*, q. 49-89; Dominicans 1947 vol. 1: 793-992). However this balanced understanding has often been overshadowed by a more negative approach. Since moral training is always strenuous and sometimes painful, there exists a perennial tendency to shift from the metaphor of athletic or artistic exercise to that of military warfare. In place of Aristotle's complex quest for a mean or midpoint between opposing vices of excess and deficiency, Christian moral teaching has often substituted a simplified schema that focuses on the need to suppress or "mortify" powerful desires that lead to sin. This approach may divert the focus of asceticism from the contemplative goal of union with God towards a potentially unwholesome preoccupation with whatever is most difficult or unpleasant. Ignatius Loyola's (d. 1556) otherwise helpful doctrine of *agere contra* "strive against [temptation]" (*Spiritual Exercises*, Annotation 13, Mullen 1914: 9) can be made to serve a kind of spiritual masochism that undertakes ascetical practices not because they are necessarily therapeutic, but precisely because they are difficult and painful.

Bishop Kallistos Ware has emphasized the importance of distinguishing between natural asceticism and negative asceticism. Natural asceticism has as its goal "the 'refinement' of our physicality, so that we are more accessible to 'the influence of higher forces' and thus approach closer to God." Negative asceticism, on the other hand, emphasizes "the fact of abstaining from this or that…depriving oneself of something by way of punishment." (Ware, 1998: 10-11) By emphasizing the destruction of our instinctive urges negative asceticism can lead to hatred of the body, whereas natural asceticism has as its goal "the reintegration of the body and the transformation of the passions into their true and natural condition…transfiguration rather than mortification." (Ware, 1998: 12-13)

The classical vocabulary of virtue and asceticism is rare in the New Testament, possibly by design. It is difficult to emphasize the value of human striving on the one hand, while at the same time preaching a doctrine of utter dependence on the unmerited grace of God. However, despite apparent reluctance on the part of the biblical authors to employ the traditional vocabulary of classical asceticism, the practices recommended in the New Testament are clearly derived both from Jewish religious practice and the Greco-Roman ascetical-philosophical tradition. The authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke attribute to Jesus particular emphasis on the ascetical practices of unselfconscious fasting, almsgiving, prayer, and dispossession. However, these practices are not, as Richard Finn has noted, "linked to a personal struggle for holiness" (Finn 2009: 100); rather they are presented as the lifestyle expected of disciples who live in eager expectation of the imminent coming of God's kingdom. Early Christian ascetical practice was less a quest for virtue than a preparation for apocalypse (Mt 6.1-34, Lk 12.22-40).

Prominent in the teaching of Jesus and even more so in that of St. Paul is the warning that such a lifestyle will likely result in persecution and suffering, and will thus require the virtue of patient endurance, *hupomonē* (Mt 5.11, 10.23; Lk 11.49; Rom 12.14; 1Th 3.4). As time passed it became increasingly clear to the Christian community that deliberate avoidance of participation in local pagan cults was itself a form of potentially-dangerous asceticism, engendering suspicion and animosity. Such abstinence deprived Christians of the joy of participating with their neighbors in communal celebrations and effectively branded them as outsiders and dissidents.

One result of this was the emergence of a Christian form of apocalyptic mysticism. Already evident in the later Jewish prophets (Ezekiel, Daniel) is an emphasis that becomes even more explicit in the intertestamental Book of Enoch and the Christian Book of Revelation on what in Jewish tradition would later be called *merkabah* ("chariot") mysticism: that is, ascent to the heavenly palace and vision of the throne of God.   In later Judaism the definition of "prophet" increasingly came to mean one who had seen in vision the heavenly court and the divine throne. Within Christianity the personal and social asceticism required of the baptized came to be understood as preparation for, and even as a proleptic participation in the immanently-coming Kingom of Heaven. Thus the asceticism of preparing for the Kingdom could yield, at least for some, the fruit of mystical vision, hinted at by St. Paul (2Cor 12.1-5) and exemplified in the Book of Revelation.

Although moderns tend to disparage everything associated with an apocalyptic outlook, it is possible that early Christian apocalyptic asceticism may still be of value. Much effort is expended today in denying the reality and inevitability of death. Acknowledgement of the nearness of God's

Kingdom (for, indeed, the arrival of that kingdom through death may occur at any time) can help sharpen the individual's awareness of the preciousness and irreplaceable nature of present opportunities and relationships

3. Martyrdom

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of martyrdom for the development of Christian asceticism. Later "professional ascetics", monks and nuns, would be popularly regarded, and would indeed see themselves as successors of the martyrs, as spiritual athletes whose ascetical practices throughout life substituted for the "red martyrdom" of death that characterized the eras of Christian persecution. Origen (d. 254) who was both an exemplar and early Christian theorist of asceticism extolled martyrdom and regretted having escaped it in his youth (Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom,* Greer 1979: 1-41).

On one level the martyrs' willingness to die rather than deny the Christian faith was a vivid, regularly-renewed reenactment of Christ's salvific suffering. Popular early accounts of the martyrs' trials and death were often deliberately modeled on the biblical passion narratives. (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 6, 2; Roberts 1885a: 40) And at a deeper level the martyr was not only a symbol but also an *alter Christus* whose prayers for both the living and the dead were thought to be especially efficacious and were thus particularly sought-after. Moreover, the martyr could be gifted with mystical vision. Just before his death the protomartyr Stephen received a vision of the person of Jesus and the glory of God: "Behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at God's right hand" (Acts 7.55-56). The martyr Polycarp (d.c. 153) was granted a vision that confirmed his imminent death (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5, 2; Roberts 1885a: 40). The martyr was popularly regarded as a powerful intercessor whose self-sacrifice not only guaranteed the martyr a heavenly reward, but which also had the power to atone for the sins of others. Thus the prayers of the martyr Perpetua (d.c. 203) were rewarded with a vision of her deceased brother released from torment in the afterlife; and both she and her companion Saturus were granted visions of their triumph over suffering and of the delights of heaven (*Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity*, 1-4; Wallace 1885: 700-703).

Yet martyrdom has also been an ambivalent ascetical ideal. While one could legitimately aspire to it, and indeed all early Christians were supposed to be prepared for it as a possibility, deliberately provoking authorities or aggressively seeking out martyrdom was regarded with suspicion and often condemned in popular Christian texts (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4; Roberts 1885a: 40). Both the value and the caution that must be exercised with regard to martyrdom are well-summarized in the Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*:

> By martyrdom disciples are transformed (*assimilatur*) into an image of their Master by freely accepting death for the salvation of the world—as well as their conformity to Christ in the shedding of their blood. Though few are presented such an opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before humankind.

> *Lumen Gentium* 42, *Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*; Paul
> VI 1964.

From the perspective of mystical theology the goals of martyrdom include the following. First the martyrs' willingness to suffer and die for a religious belief was itself a powerful, non-verbal form of evangelization, a "witness" (*martyria*) to membership in a transcendent, eschatological community that claimed a higher loyalty than obedience to Roman cultural norms. The example of virgin-martyrs who claimed a mystical relationship with a heavenly bridegroom challenged traditional Roman definitions of "self" in terms of familial and political status and obligation (see Brown 1988: 67-69, 71-73). Second, the martyr's suffering and death made Christ's expiatory sacrifice personal and immediate: to behold the martyr was, in a sense, to contemplate Christ. Third and finally, the martyrs' death was universally regarded among Christians as a guarantee of salvation and sanctity, bestowing the power of intercession and sometimes of prophecy. In an age characterized by increasing anxiety concerning post-baptismal sin, the martyr's heroism and power of intercession was a consoling assurance of the nearness of salvation.

4. CELIBACY *and* SIMPLIFICATION *of* LIFE
MONASTIC ASCETICISM (1):

Two ascetical practices, lifelong celibacy and simplification of life became especially prominent with the rise of Christian monasticism. In Christianity as well as in other world religions the concept of asceticism is so closely associated with the institution of monasticism that the term "ascetic" is often a synonym for "monk." It is thus appropriate to briefly recount the origins and variety of early monastic ascetical practice. The origins of Christian monasticism are obscure. In the early first century BC Philo of Alexandria (d.c. 50) described celibate communities of Jewish men in Palestine, and of both Jewish men and women in Egypt dedicated to moral improvement and meditation on sacred scripture. Communities of Christian women, "widows and virgins" existed in some form by the late first century A.D., and are mentioned in both the Pastoral Epistles and in early patristic texts. Extant texts attest only to their existence, however; the story of their evolution and relationship with the developing Christian church as well as possible influence by pre-Christian precursors is conjectural. What is certain is that communities of nuns (*parthenoi*/virgins) were well-established by the late third and early fourth centuries when their more famous male counterparts, the abbas Antony, Paul, Amoun, and Pachomius began to practice asceticism in the deserts of Egypt. At roughly the same time Syrian "Sons and Daughters of the Covenant" enthusiastically embraced lifelong celibacy and committed themselves to service in the local church, living either in small groups or with their families.

   Common to the programs of all these ascetical pioneers was some form of simplicity of life, often taking the form of common ownership of goods or the reduction to an absolute minimum of the availability and use of such goods. Sexual activity ranked highly among these goods. Abstinence from sexual intercourse had frequently been associated with ritual purity in late antiquity, both in Judaism and in some pagan cults (Brown 1988: 67). Christianity assimilated this association with varying emphases during different eras. In some early communities, most notably among the third- and fourth-century Syrian "Sons and Daughters of the Covenant" celibacy was considered a necessary level of spiritual maturity; and among the so-called *enkratites* or "chaste ones" celibacy was considered a prerequisite for baptism. Although this extreme was eventually condemned as heretical, the notion of celibacy as a "higher" calling (*i.e* superior to marriage) persists in both Orthodox and Roman Catholic doctrine today. As Peter Brown has described, the practice of celibacy, together with the more widely-practiced asceticisms of fasting and frequent prayer were believed by the early monks and nuns to have the power to transform, to "spiritualize" the human body. Reducing food, water, and sleep to the absolute minimum necessary for life was thought to facilitate restoration of the original state of the human body before the fall: "the ascetic slowly remade his body … [effecting] the long

return of the human person, body and soul together, to an original, natural and uncorrupted state."
(Brown 1998: 223). Stories of the early abbas and ammas occasionally allude to this mystical
transformation:

> Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said: "Abba, as far as I can, I keep a moderate rule, with a
> little fasting, and prayer, and meditation, and quiet: and as far as I can I try to cleanse my heart of
> evil thoughts. What else should I do?" Then the old man rose, and spread out his hands to
> heaven, and his fingers shone like ten candles: and he said: "If you will, you could become a
> living flame."
>
> > (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Latin Systematic Collection* 12.8; Chadwick
> > 1958:142)

The moral and spiritual transformation wrought by monastic asceticism might thus be manifested in
the ascetic's physical appearance. Athanasius of Alexandria (d.373) wrote that "God became human
so that human beings might be divinized" (*On the Incarnation* 54.3; Thomson 1971: 268-269); and in
his biography of the monk Antony, Athanasius described both the ascetical regime that effects
transformation and the changes that may become visible. In his very popular and widely-disseminated
Life of Antony Athanasius created what undoubtedly became the most influential verbal portrait of the
early Christian ascetic. According to Athanasius, Antony's first teachers and models of virtue were
members of his local Christian community. However after several years of supervised ascetical effort
Antony felt called to protracted solitude in an abandoned fort. (*Life of Antony* 3, 11-13; Gregg 1980:
32, 39-42). He spent twenty years alone, eventually coming forth,

> as if from a shrine, like one initiated in sacred mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God. [...]
> his body had its habitual appearance, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor withered from fasting
> and fighting with demons [...] The state of his soul was pure, neither contracted as if by grief, nor
> relaxed by pleasure, possessed by neither laughter nor dejection. For he was neither troubled
> when he saw the crowd nor ecstatic at being acclaimed by so many. Instead he was wholly
> balanced, as if governed by reason, and established in accordance with nature.
>
> > (Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 14; Gregg 1980: 42, trans. modified)

Athanasius here provides a vivid depiction of the goal of Christian asceticism: a soul restored to its
primordial natural state (*kata fusin*) completely balanced, (*holos isos*), in a body rendered vigorous and
fit through the avoidance of excess. Thus monastic asceticism came to be understood not primarily as
a wholehearted rejection of the present world, as in the earlier apocalyptic asceticism; but rather as a
means of positively transforming or "transfiguring" the body and abilities of the ascetic. Like the
martyr, the ascetic was a living reminder of the world to come, but the transformed ascetic was also a
counselor and teacher, capable of ministering to the spiritual needs of others.

Christian monks and nuns throughout history have experimented with widely-varying forms of community and solitude, testing the respective advantages and disadvantages, the different ascetical opportunities and impediments afforded by each. Even before the birth of Christ, in the writings of Philo (d.c. 50), the hermit had come to exemplify the contemplative life, while those who practice asceticism in community were models of the quest for moral virtue. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, John Cassian (d.c. 430) provided a Christian rationale for this conviction in his *Institutes* and *Conferences*, fortifying his rationale with examples and teachings he attributed to the early founders of monasticism.

Life in community offers abundant opportunities for the practice of obedience, mutual service and fraternal correction, forms of asceticism enjoined throughout the New Testament. The community can serve as a mirror, reflecting back those elements of behavior and personality in needs of change. The importance of objective "others" willing to speak honestly and openly of defects they perceive had already been acknowledged and emphasized by the pagan philosopher-physician Galen, (d.c.200) (*The Diagnosis and Cure of the Soul's Passions.* ch 3-4 / 5.13-5.24; Harkins 1963: 33-44). The monastic legislator Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) echoed Galen and highlighted the value of community in his *Long Rules* stressing both the value of community in discerning one's faults and the opportunities for service afforded by community: "Whose feet, therefore, will you wash? To whom will you minister? In comparison with whom will you be the lowest, if you live alone?" (*Long Rules* 3.6; Wagner 2010: 252).)

Solitude, exemplified by the prophet Elijah and John the Baptist, came to be regarded as a higher, more spiritual and potentially more dangerous calling, offering both the benefit of leisure for contemplation and the terrifying prospect of direct temptation by demonic powers. On a more positive note the spiritually advanced who undertook this perilous path would become more vividly aware of the soul's weaknesses and perceive with greater clarity the contours of the battlefield of the innermost self. In monastic literature the primordial literary portrait of the hermit-monk was Athanasius' biography of the monk Antony. As has been described, Athanasius (d. 373) portrays Antony's early ascetical training as formed by the liturgical life of his village and by the wise example and teaching of semi-hermit elders living nearby (*Life of Antony* 3; Gregg 1980: 32). In Athanasius' depiction the transformation of Antony has a further goal: the transfigured Antony becomes an abba, a wise elder competent to listen with understanding to the stories and struggles of others. Throughout the rest of

Athanasius' portrayal Antony is a "physician to Egypt"(*Life of Antony* 87; Gregg 1980: 94), able to help others interpret and make sense of their thoughts. Such a spiritual advisor was considered an essential prerequisite to the art of discernment.

Discernment (*diakrisis*) was understood as a skill that requires both dialogue and submission to spiritual authority. It begins with the necessary humiliation of opening one's heart to another in whose judgment one trusts. This revelation of the inner landscape of the soul, including especially the thoughts and temptations with which one is afflicted, permits the spiritual guide, the abba or amma, to diagnose spiritual afflictions and recommend ascetical remedies. As will be described in the next section, this skill can be understood as an application of the art of biblical exegesis to the soul, that is to the salvation history of the disciple, rather than to the sacred text.

The interrelationship between communal and solitary asceticism is perennial in Christianity. It is exemplified in the East by the monastic colony of Mount Athos, founded in the tenth century on a peninsula in northern Greece. Athos, "The Holy Mountain" endures to this day and encompasses a wide spectrum of ascetical observance, ranging from hermit's cells to large, long-established cenobia, and including as well small "lavras" that combine elements of both the eremitic and cenobitic life.   In the West monastic reform movements from at least the tenth century to the present have tried to create an approved context for solitaries. Medieval anchoresses were often ritually established in cells adjoining parish churches, while new orders of men such as the Camaldolese (1072) Carthusians (1084), and Grandmontines (c.1100) strove to incorporate elements of the solitary life into a canonically-approved cenobitic structure.

6. EXEGESIS *of* THE SCRIPTURES *and of* THE SOUL

6.1 *Nepsis*

In the Christian ascetical tradition there is an interrelationship between biblical exegesis and the exercise of *nepsis,* "watchfulness over thoughts." The practice of reciting and meditating Sacred Scripture as a means purifying the soul and shielding it from temptation is common to many religious traditions. Attentive observation of emotional reactions and subjective psychological states had long been a part of the Middle Platonic and Stoic philosophical traditions, whose texts were familiar to successive generations of Christian authors beginning with the philosopher Justin Martyr (d. 165). Ethical treatises and collections of sayings attributed to ancient philosophers served as handbooks for moral progress. Christian authors, however, preferred to find models of virtuous life and solutions to moral dilemmas in the texts of sacred scripture. At the most basic practical level biblical texts were recommended as therapeutic aids to be deployed in circumstances of moral struggle, often experienced as temptations to sin. Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) recommended particular psalms to be recited during specific affective and ethical trials (*Letter to Marcellinus* 15-26; Gregg 1980: 114-123; see Kolbet 2006). The monk Evagrius Ponticus (d.399) wrote detailed spiritual and psychological analyses of this practice in *Praktikos* and *On Thoughts*; and in the treatise *Antirrhetikos* he collected 498 therapeutic bible verses to be used in the struggle against the eight principal *logosmoi¸* or tempting-thoughts of gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, despondency, acedia, vainglory, and pride.

6.2. *Biblical Exegesis*

The inner purity effected by biblical meditation and other ascetical practices was considered a prerequisite to contemplation of the deeper, mystical meanings of the sacred text. Biblical meditation and exegesis were considered both a necessary ascetical practice and a potential opportunity for contemplation, since the bible came to be regarded as both an inspired record of encounters with God and a privileged locus of mystical experience for those who meditated on the text. Christianity had inherited from Middle Platonism, especially Philo of Alexandria (d.c. 50), a conviction that biblical texts contain deeper meanings, *logoi¸* concealed beneath the literal or historical sense of the text. The principal early Christian exponents of this approach were Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) and Origen (d. 254) who believed that beneath the historical "letter" of the text there can be discerned at least three spiritual levels. First is a moral or "tropological" sense that invites inner ethical renewal and external acts of compassion. At a deeper level the mystical or allegorical sense presents Christian doctrine in veiled, symbolic metaphors (see Smalley 1964: 6-13). John Cassian (d. 430) added a fourth heavenly or eschatological level that he called "anagogical", at which the biblical text mysteriously transcends

time and affords a glimpse of the eternal world to come (*Conference* 14, 6.1-11.1; Ramsey 1997: 505-517).

6.3. *Diakrisis*

In the ascetical practice of *diakrisis,* "discernment," the skills acquired through biblical meditation and exegesis are focused inward on the soul. As Peter Brown has written, "The monk's own heart was the new book. What required infinitely skilled exegesis and long spiritual experience were the 'movements of the heart,' and the strategies and snares that the Devil laid within it." (Brown 1988: 229). Athanasius, Evagrius, and John Cassian all wrote extensively on this subject. At its most fundamental level *diakrisis*/discernment is the ascetical project of determining the origin and significance of thoughts and dreams, distinguishing between harmful and helpful subjective experiences. This exercise of differentiating thoughts is not simply an initial rung on a ladder of spiritual progress, but rather a skill that must be practiced daily throughout life, since temptation endures until the moment of death. (Evagrius, *Praktikos* 36; Sinkewicz 2003: 104) In a process analogous to the exercise of biblical exegesis the ascetic develops *prosochē,* attentiveness to the inner world of thoughts, desires, and fantasies, and then learn through *paratērēsis,* thoughtful observation, to distinguish the origins of these experiences. Evagrius Ponticus repeated and developed the insights of Antony and Athanasius, employing a threefold approach that distinguishes between: (1) angelic *noēmata* that educate and console the mind, leading it to God; (2) neutral thoughts that arise from memory and sense-perception; and (3) demonic *logismoi*, tempting thoughts and fantasies that pervert the natural powers of the mind and lead it into error. Angelic *noēmata* are characterized by feelings of peace and "are concerned with the inner nature of things and with searching out their spiritual principles." Human thoughts are characterized by simple images, unclouded by passion. Demonic *logismoi*, in contrast, are disturbing or terrifying and incline the soul towards passion and vice. (Evagrius, *Praktikos* 80, *On Thoughts* 8; Sinkewicz 2003: 110, 158)

6.4. *Spiritual Exercise*

Closely related to the disciplines of discernment and biblical meditation is the practice of "spiritual exercise." Its antecedents lie in the classical genres of ethical treatises and moral-philosophical wisdom sayings or *gnomai,* such as the Stoic *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, the Neo-Pythagorean *chreia* of Clitarchus and the *Pythagorean Sentences*. These collections served as handbooks for the acquisition of virtue and were sometimes arranged in intriguing thematic clusters intended to stimulate intellectual reflection and guide moral improvement. (Cribiore 2005: 167, 201-204; Cribiore 1996: 316). Such texts were evidently of interest to early Christians who rearranged and expanded them, adding Christian proverbs and succinct exegetical reflections to the pagan *gnomai*, creating treatises intended to lead the reader to specifically Christian insights or affective experiences. The second-

century *Sentences of Sextus* and the third-century *Stromata* of Clement of Alexandria are among the earliest Christian collections of this type, although similar chains of ethical and exegetical *gnomai* may be found in earlier catechetical texts such as the *Didache* and the *Letter of Barnabas*. Evagrius Ponticus produced numerous collections of pedagogically-arranged chains of proverbs and exegetical sentences intended to sequentially lead the reader from ethical improvement to contemplation of God in creation and history, and finally to contemplation of the divine nature. Maximus Confessor (d. 662) developed the genre further in his *Centuries*, compilations of one hundred carefully-structured, brief meditations that guide the reader and reinterpret earlier Christian collections.

These early forms of spiritual exercise had as their goal both moral improvement and contemplative experience. In the Christian East the rituals and texts of the eucharistic celebration came to be regarded as a constantly-repeated spiritual exercise that was explained in guides and commentaries that remain popular today, as will be described. In the medieval West spiritual exercises increasingly focused on the life of Christ, particularly his passion and death; and guided meditations by Bernard (d. 1153), Aelred (d. 1167), and Bonaventure (d. 1274) popularized this approach. A more personal element was introduced by Gertrude of Helfta (d.c. 1302) who wrote the first treatise to bear the title *Spiritual Exercises,* in which she invited her readers to prayerfully reflect on solemn religious events in their own past, such as baptism and monastic profession, in order discover new meanings in them. The *Spiritual Exercises* of Abbot García de Cisneros of Montserrat (d.1510) anticipated and inspired the more famous *Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556) who was briefly a retreatant at Montserrat. Cisneros' exercises invite the ascetic practitioner to punctuate the monastic timetable with specific prayers and meditations intended to raise the soul over a four-week period from ethical purification to the contemplation of God in creation, and finally to a sense of mystical union. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, in contrast, are guidelines for the director of a retreat wholly oriented towards discernment. For Ignatius the discernment of spirits described above is not the principal goal, but is rather the means to a higher end: namely, the discovery of clear direction in the form of God's will with regard to an important vocational choice. Ignatius' month-long *Exercises* are intended to enable the soul to discern "Christ's banner" hovering over an important life choice, and then to form a clear resolution to follow it. (*Spiritual Exercises*, Week 2, Day 4; Mullan 1914: 73-76)

7.1. *Psalmody*

The practice of ritual prayer three times each day including the Lord's Prayer is attested in Christian texts of the late first century (*Didache* 8; Roberts 1886: 379). In the second and third centuries Tertullian (d.225) and Cyprian of Carthage (d.258) increased the goal to five or more times a day, although the form and content of these prayers, aside from the use of the Lord's Prayer, is uncertain. In the fourth century psalmody, sung or cantillated recitation of the Psalter, became prominent in Christian worship, probably through the increasing influence of the growing monastic movement (McKinnon 1994: 505-507). Psalmody was both a form of prayer and an ascetical practice insofar as the chanting of psalms was considered an aid to attaining and maintaining the inner balance or harmony of the soul. Such power had long been attributed to music, and the philosopher-physician Galen (d.c. 200) recommended a kind of "music therapy" consisting of certain modes or types of music to be used in specific emotional or psychological states to help calm and restore the inner *krasis* or "attunement" of body and soul (Galen, *Doctrines*, V, 6.19-20; DeLacy 1978: 329-330). As has been described, Athanasius of Alexandria (d.373) recommended specific psalms to be used in a way similar to Galen's prescriptions; and both Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian emphasized the healing power of psalmody interspersed with periods of silent prayer.

Throughout the fourth century the popularity of the Book of Psalms increased, and frequent, prolonged psalmody became common among the ascetics of Egypt, whose excesses in this regard Cassian tried to curb (*Institutes* 2.5.4-5; Ramsey 2000: 40). Nevertheless, in Coptic monasticism the practice of reciting the entire psalter in a single day acquired a preeminence that it retains to the present day. In the West the Rule of Benedict introduced a more moderate regime by distributing the psalms over a single week, dividing individual psalms or portions of longer psalms among the eight daily canonical offices of Vigils (Matins), Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline (Benedict, *Rule* 8-18; Fry 1981: 203-215). Additional daily psalmody in the Office of the Dead and the Office of the Blessed Virgin became the norm in western medieval monasteries; and occasional zealous monastic reformers such as Peter Damian (d.1072) attempted with only limited success to add one or more daily-recited psalters to the Benedictine regime. This emphasis on the quantity rather than the quality of daily psalmody led to the disappearance in the liturgy of silent intervals between psalms, which had originally served to facilitate prayer and meditation on the meaning of the sacred text (Cassian, *Institutes* 2.11.1; Ramsey 2000: 44). Despite commentaries stressing the poetic beauty and hidden mystical meanings of the psalms, psalmody tended to become ether a *pensum,* an allotted work and religious obligation of monks, nuns, and clerics, or an ascetical exercise thought to expiate sins.

7.2. *The Eucharist*

From the fourth century in the Christian East and to a somewhat lesser extent also in the West, the celebration of the Eucharist was regarded as a foretaste of heaven, an opportunity to participate in transforming rituals that healed, even divinized, the participant and refocused the contemplative's gaze on eschatological mysteries. This understanding was encouraged in commentaries such as *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchies* by (Pseudo-) Dionysius the Aereopagite (fl.c.500), *The Church's Mystagogy* by Maximus Confessor (d. 662), and *On the Divine Liturgy* by Germanus of Constantinople (d.c. 733). These commentaries depict the eucharistic liturgy as a spiritual exercise in which the soul may be mysteriously transfigured and reconsecrated to God. Strict rules requiring abstinence from sexual intercourse for various intervals before presiding at the liturgy meant that in the East where married priests became the norm, the Eucharist was seldom celebrated daily outside of monasteries. In the West, however, where priestly celibacy was at least theoretically mandated, the possibility arose of daily or even more frequent celebrations of mass.

The homilies of Gregory the Great (d.604) bear witness to a growing popular conviction that the frequent celebration of mass appeases the wrath of "God the dread Lord" and that stipended masses (i.e. masses for which a donation was made) can lessen or obviate the pain of the souls in purgatory (Gregory, *Homily 37 on the Gospels*; Hurst 1990: 332-338). During the middle ages in the West a new cadre of priests arose who were often incompetent to preach or validly celebrate any sacraments other than the eucharist, and whose sole function was the ascetical exercise of celebrating as many expiatory, stipended masses as possible. The late medieval *Golden Legend* provides fanciful allegories of every part of the western eucharistic liturgy upon which the laity, who seldom received communion, were invited to meditate during mass.

The western doctrine of transubstantiation that stresses the essential presence of Christ under the forms of bread and wine led to a desire to behold the consecrated elements during the liturgy as a kind of visual communion. This in turn led to the prolongation of those portions of the liturgy where the elements are elevated for veneration, and to liturgies that focus primarily on the exposed Eucharistic wafer. These uniquely western innovations remain popular today among modern Roman Catholics and some Anglicans, for whom these liturgical exercises are considered both ascetical and mystical.

7.3. *Monologistic Prayer*

The very ancient practice of monologistic prayer, the frequent or continuous recitation of a brief prayer-phrase, became increasingly prominent in the Christian East and West from the fourteenth century, although in the East it has generally been more common in monasteries than among the laity. It has often been encouraged as a substitution for the psalter of the divine office, especially among the illiterate, and as a penitential exercise offered in reparation for particular sins or failings, or as a

suffrage (expiatory sacrifice) for the dead. The Egyptian desert fathers of the fourth century knew and seem to have occasionally engaged in some form of monologistic prayer; and in the early fifth century Cassian described the practice in detail (*Conference* 10; Ramsey 1997: 365-393). The formula Cassian recommends, "God come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me," although frequently encountered in liturgical prayer, did not become a popular formula for private monologistic prayer. In the West repetitions of the Lord's prayer, the Our Father or *Pater Noster* were widely-practiced during the early middle ages, and strings of beads called *paternosters* could be purchased as an aid to keeping track of the number of times the prayer was repeated. From the thirteenth century the *paternoster* was supplemented with varying forms of the *Ave Mar*ia, a combination of Gabriel's and Elizabeth's salutations in Luke 1.28 and 1.42. In the fifteenth century the *aves* and *paternosters* were linked to meditation on a fixed series of events in the lives of Jesus and Mary, producing the Rosary that remains popular today among Roman Catholics. In the eastern monastic tradition preference was given to brief prayers containing the name of Jesus, most commonly the formula, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." The theologian Gregory Palamas (d.1359) felt compelled by opponents of the "Jesus Prayer" to provide a theological justification and defense of its practice. Unlike the western rosary, the Jesus Prayer does not entail meditation on any specific religious concepts or events: it is intentionally non-iconic. The goal is to allow the constant invocation of the name of Jesus through the prayer to "draw the mind into the heart" in a spirit of *penthos,* sorrow for sins (Ware 1986: 175-6, 182-3).

8. PENITENTIAL ASCETICISM

8.1 *Excommunication*

The disappointing discovery that Christians remain capable of serious sin even after baptism necessitated the creation in the early church of a formal process of penance and restoration of which there are hints in the New Testament (1 Cor. 5.5). At first such formal repentance after a serious lapse was permitted only once (*Shepherd of Hermas* 2.1 / 29.8; Crombie 1885: 21-22) following serious sins such as murder, apostasy, and adultery. It entailed an extended period of excommunication lasting a variable number of years, depending on the judgment of the bishop who imposed the sentence according the seriousness and circumstances of the offense. The formal process included public acknowledgement of the sin followed by ritual exclusion from the most sacred parts of the Sunday liturgy, together with abstinence from holy communion for the duration of the sentence. In the fourth century Basil of Caesarea codified this practice in a series of canonical letters that list offenses and prescribe a corresponding period of excommunication (Basil, *Letters* 188, 199, 217; Jackson 1895: 223-228; 236-240, 255-259). These canonical letters are still revered and applied in some eastern churches today.

8.2. *Substituted Penances*

   The relatively passive, if humiliating, practice of excommunication slowly gave way to a more active approach, influenced by the monastic custom of confession to a revered elder who would recommend a healing remedy. Also influential in the West were models of justice drawn from Celtic and Germanic legal practice. These permitted "tariffed" or fixed but negotiable penalties. Instead of a protracted period of excommunication, arduous ascetical tasks could be undertaken by the penitent, or even performed by a community or person who agreed to shoulder some part of the penitent's burden. Penitential manuals of the fifth through the eighth centuries compiled and standardized substitutions for specific intervals of excommunication. The ascetical practices enjoined in these earliest handbooks are often severe and appear masochistic to modern sensibilities. They include long fasts, exposure to freezing weather, immersion in cold water for long periods, and spending nights on painful surfaces or in repugnant settings such as graves or tombs. These substituted penances also entailed protracted prayers, such as multiple recitations of the whole psalter and extended prayer in exaggerated, uncomfortable postures. Such extreme practices had been prefigured in the fifth and sixth century Syriac monastic asceticism of the stylites (pillar-dwellers) dendrites (tree-dwellers) and wandering "grazers" (Knowles 1969: 21; Chitty 1966:16,76). In the medieval West this tendency towards extreme penances often took the form of private or public flagellation, encouraged especially by the monastic reformer Peter Damien (d.1073).

8.3. *A Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation*

Although initially reluctant to delegate their office to "bind and loose" from sin (Mt 16.19), bishops in both East and West gradually accorded their priests the faculty of absolving penitents in a repeatable sacrament of penance and reconciliation. In the medieval West new handbooks appeared that encouraged milder penances adapted to the particular circumstances of the penitent. By 1214 annual confession to one's parish priest had become mandatory. Western theologians struggled to explain how the Pauline doctrine of unmerited grace and salvation could coexist with the developing tradition of the penitent's ascetical expiation of sin. Distinctions were made between original and actual sin, between temporal and eternal punishment, variously applying the merits of Christ, the saints, and the penitent's own ascetical efforts to one category or the other. The practice of indulgences, criticized by some even from its inception, invited the penitent to rely on the prayers and merits of the whole Communion of Saints rather than one one's own efforts. This had the positive effect of highlighting the role of the whole Christian community, living and dead, in the ascetical enterprise of expiating sin. However the protestant reformers of the sixteenth century at first questioned then vehemently rejected the whole concept of indulgences and substituted penances, insisting that sincere repentance and faith in Christ are sufficient for full forgiveness, leaving no residue that needs to be dispelled through ascetical effort.

While theologically understandable, this dismantling of the penitential system necessarily resulted in a devaluation of the human effort involved in repentance and change. It neglects a truth embedded within the ascetical tradition: namely that just as vice is acquired through repeated choices and actions that destabilize inner balance and freedom, so virtue or spiritual healing requires both the grace of God and the deliberate choices and repeated actions of the penitent.

Pilgrimage to sites associated with religious founders and teachers is a tradition Christianity shares with other world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Judaism, too, once emphasized pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem; but the destruction of the Temple in 70, the transformation of Jerusalem into the Roman City of Aelia Capitolina, and restriction of Jewish presence in the city following the Bar-Kokhba revolt of 132-136 rendered Jewish pilgrimage to the Holy City impossible. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 313, his building programs at the presumed site of Jesus' burial, and the example of his pious and energetic Christian mother, Helena, gave impetus to Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and other sites associated with Jesus and his apostles. Around 333 a pilgrim from Bordeaux wrote brief descriptions of sites he visited in Jerusalem and its environs, together with a more extensive list of stages in his route from Gaul to Palestine (see *The Bordeaux Pilgrim*; Stewart 1887). About fifty years later the Spanish nun Egeria wrote a more detailed travel-diary that attests to the popularity of Christian pilgrimage not only to sites associated with Jesus, but also to monasteries where monks offered spiritual counsel, a practice described in detail by John Cassian and Palladius.   Egeria's diary also reveals the popularity of sites associated with Christian martyrs and their relics (see *Egeria*, *Diary of a Pilgrimage;* Gingras 1970).   Rome which boasted the tombs of Peter and Paul was a popular destination for pilgrims, as was Edessa in Syria, where Egeria was shown the *Letter to Abgar,* allegedly written by Jesus himself, and where several decades later a miraculous portrait of Jesus' face, the *Mandylion*, would be exhibited for the veneration of pilgrims.

Christian veneration of martyrs and their relics is described as early as the mid to late second century (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18; Roberts 1885a: 43)*.* The transfer or *translation* of relics or portions of relics from the site of the original martyrdom to other churches facilitated the creation of pilgrimage sites throughout the Christian Roman Empire, including the imperial city of Constantinople. During the Middle Ages Compostela in Spain came to be revered as the site of St. James' relics, while in Germany the Apostle Matthias and the robe of Christ were venerated in Trier, and all three Magi were claimed by the cathedral in Cologne. The martyrdom of Thomas Becket in 1170 established Canterbury as an international pilgrimage site until the Reformation; and modern apparitions of the Virgin Mary have resulted in regular organized pilgrimages to cities in Portugal (Fatima), France (Lourdes), Egypt (Zaitoun, Cairo), and indeed throughout the world.

Christian pilgrimage has thus been popular almost from the beginning and remains so today; however the significance of pilgrimage as an ascetical practice has varied over the centuries. During the fifth and sixth centuries, especially in the Celtic monastic tradition, the concept of pilgrimage took

on a penitential quality through association with the ominous penalty of exile. Missionary activity was envisioned as a voluntary, heroic pilgrimage for Christ whereby one abandoned the safety of clan and culture to travel dangerous roads for the sake of the gospel. The tradition of pilgrimage was combined with the ideals of martyrdom and the Old Testament concept of holy warfare in the proclamation of the First Crusade by Pope Urban II (d. 1099).

Fascination with sites imbued with a sense of sacred history has perennially been coupled with an expectation of supernatural manifestations, such as prophecy and miraculous healings. But from at least the fourth century Christian pilgrimage to sacred sites has also been associated with the desire for personal transformation mediated by sacred relics, living spiritual guides, or some other aspect of God's presence unique to the holy place. An important mystical goal of pilgrimage has always been the hope for a deepened sense of communion with God by means of physical contact with a place rendered holy by the Christ or the saints. The need to prepare oneself spiritually for such an encounter has always been taken for granted, and opportunities for extended prayers and sacramental celebrations are often available at the site. The fact that travel to a distant locale was often arduous and dangerous in the past, and that it also entailed prolonged separation from family and friends added an ascetic and often penitential aspect to the experience. For those unable to travel, pilgrimage to the Jerusalem *via dolorosa*¸ was domesticated in the medieval West through pictorial "stations of the cross" that remain an important feature of Roman Catholic churches today. "Making the Stations" in a slow, penitential progress around the church remains a very popular form of western ascetical practice. Veneration of successive icons in Orthodox churches serves an analogous purpose; however the icon is not necessarily a focus for penitential meditation, but serves rather a kind of sacred window into the presence of the saint or sacred event depicted.

Beginning in the thirteenth century Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) and his followers carried the asceticism of dispossession to a new extreme through their efforts to imitate the lifestyle of Christ as closely as possible and devote themselves to "lady poverty". They sought to negate as far as possible the concept of personal or corporate ownership, whether of property or the necessities of daily life. Abandoning as well the monastic tradition of stable communities in fixed locations, Francis' "brothers" or *fratres* ("friars") adopted a lifestyle of peripatetic begging, deliberately rendering themselves dependent for their survival on the charity of others. This mendicant lifestyle had long been prefigured by wandering ascetics in the Eastern churches; however with Francis' followers it acquired in the West formal approval by the hierarchy and it offered the possibility of participation or imitation of that lifestyle by laypersons eager to follow the friars' example.

With the passing of time Francis' followers were compelled by necessity to establish organized communities on property ostensibly owned by others, but they maintained a mode of Christian asceticism that refused to be defined by the older Benedictine model of stability to a place or particular community. Their stability and loyalty was to the concept of the whole Order, divided into regional provinces within which personnel could be shuffled as needed for the sake of work or communal harmony. In contrast to abbeys, traditionally built in remote locales, the friars' mendicant existence necessitated their settling in towns and cities, where they soon felt called to minister to the poor with whom they lived in solidarity. Their lifestyle was partially adopted by Dominic de Guzmán (d.1221) whose Dominicans ("Order of Preachers") represent a second form of friars, who quickly embraced both the ministry of preaching to the laity and of teaching in the newly-founded universities of Europe.

The ideal of extreme dispossession that frees the ascetic practitioner for the noble works of education, teaching and service of the poor won adherents among clergy and laity alike, who were able to formally identify with both Franciscan and Dominican ideals through membership in "third orders" affiliated to the friars. Such lay affiliates also served as living reminders that many significant aspects of extreme poverty are unattainable by those who take vows in religious orders. While members of religious orders in both East and West make a point of doing without certain conveniences and luxuries, they remain insulated by the support of their communities from the social and psychological torments that continually haunt the truly poor, such as daily uncertainty concerning shelter, food, and livelihood.

The asceticism of radical dispossession as a means of identifying with the poor and of serving the spiritual and educational needs of others continues to have relevance today. The need for a nearly-universal restructuring of human lifestyle in order to safeguard natural resources is becoming daily

more evident. The limiting of wasteful human activity may be necessary for the survival of the human species. It is possible that, if more widely embraced, the asceticism of the friars may help serve not only the mystical goal of serving and seeing the other as Christ, but also of helping safeguard nature and the terrestrial environment and thus preserving these goods for future generations.

The concept of labor or gainful employment as an ascetical exercise is alluded to in the New Testament (Eph 4.28; 2Th 3.11; Col.3.23) and is more clearly expressed in early Christian monastic rules. The earliest cenobitic communities founded by Pachomius (d. 346) engaged in agriculture and fishing, and the Rule of Benedict (c. 540) mandates manual labor as part of the monk's ascetical regime. Desert Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries recommended that psalmody or monologistic prayer should accompany the *askēsis* of manual labor. (*Alphabetical Sayings*, Antony 1; Ward (1975): 1; Barsanuphius, *Letter* 143; Chryssavgis 2006: 165-167). The Rule of Benedict similarly assigned spiritual value to mundane tasks, giving them a quasi-contemplative character, (Benedict, *Rule* 31; Fry 1981: 226-229) and provided a schedule of psalms arranged in such a way that the shortest and easiest to memorize could be recited in the fields while engaging in seasonal agricultural labor or other work (Benedict, *Rule* 48; Fry 1981: 248-253). Initially such labor interspersed with prayer was regarded as a means of keeping the mind focused on God during work; later sources came to see it as a means of consecrating the tasks themselves, of intentionally offering labor and service as a gift to God.

Service of others, especially the poor and defenseless, has also taken on the character of an ascetical practice in Christianity. From the beginning Christians have been expected to implement Jesus' ethical precepts of compassion towards all. Early patristic texts attest to particular concern for the state of those most vulnerable and unable to defend themselves, including especially the poor, widows, infants and the unborn (*Didache* 2; Roberts 1886: 377-378; *Epistle of Barnabas* 19-20; Roberts 1885b: 148-149). Over time the expression of this charity has increasingly taken on institutional forms. In the early church the clerical order of deacons was chiefly responsible for caring for the poor and vulnerable. In the Christian East, Basil of Caesarea (d.379) entrusted the care of the sick to monks. Throughout the middle ages religious orders and lay societies arose that specialized in particular forms of social service, such as vocational and liberal education, nursing, and care of the poor. The Mercedarian Order was founded in 1218 for the ransom of Christian slaves. Camillus de Lellis (d.1614) founded an order for the care of the sick, especially victims of plague. Vincent de Paul (d.1660) founded an order of priests and an order of nuns to educate and care for the poor. In the nineteenth century Florence Nightingale (d. 1910), an English Protestant, adapted the training methods and practices of a German Lutheran nursing order to effectively create the secular profession of nursing. Other modern examples include: Eastern Orthodox religious communities devoted to the care of the sick and poor; Albert Schweizer (d.1965), a Protestant biblical scholar and missionary physician in Gabon, Africa; and Mother Teresa of Calcutta (d.1997), foundress of the Missionary Daughters and Missionary Brothers of Charity, two religious orders dedicated to the care of the homeless and the

dying. The organizations founded or inspired by these individuals often provide a variety of means by which those who wish to affiliate themselves to their work may share to some extent in their asceticism of service.

In this chapter the terms asceticism and *askēsis* have been interpreted in the sense according to which they were understood in the earliest Christian sources that regularly employ them: namely, Athanasius' *Life of Antony* and the writings of Evagrius Ponticus. In these sources asceticism comprises the whole realm of practices or exercises that Christians undertake as part of the *praktikē,* the quest for moral virtue and spiritual freedom that prepares the soul for both contemplation of God in creation (*physikē* / natural contemplation) and for the ineffable contemplation of God beyond words and images (*theologikē* / contemplation of the divine nature). Asceticism, thus understood, comprises a wide range of spiritual practices that must be constantly assessed and employed as needed in the maintenance of spiritual balance. Asceticism is not an end in itself, but is rather a means of cooperating with God in a process of ongoing transformation whereby the grace of Christ is received, incorporated into a Christian lifestyle, and then shared with others.

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