

# “OBSERVATIONS OF A PASTORAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST ON DISCIPLESHIP”

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Project under the direction of Doctor James Dunkly

This examination of the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of *Thomas*, and the oral traditions of ancient desert Christianity, helps us rediscover thinking and approaches to becoming authentically human that are simultaneously ancient and modern. Science, psychology, and theology are found to complement and supplement one another. Even given the often hostile atmosphere existing between theology and psychology, there are many values that are held in common including the importance of stable interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, an abiding sense of loving and being loved, the capacity for empathy, and a profound respect for the unknown.

Against a background of steady decline in loyalty to specific Christian denominations and even of Christianity itself, people still search for spiritual moorings. What they often find is continuing conflict between science and religion. Scientists avoid questions of ontology while Christians locate their focus and authority on ancient texts and traditions. Yet both are dealing with human beings embedded in a largely unseen creation and this forms the basis for exploration of the considerable common ground between them.

Science contributes valuable concepts like *emergence* and *limerence*, which reveal key patterns, principles, and mechanisms that describe human behavior as well as the creation as a whole. In the still-emerging science of fractals, we are gaining insight and confirmation of the creation as a repetitive, interactive whole. Psychology increasingly gravitates away from theory and towards measurable, technologically-aided methods of understanding human cognition and response.



Observations of a Pastoral Psychotherapist  
on Discipleship

by

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## Introduction

As disciples of Jesus, we share the question of the ruler in Luke 18: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ reply in the canonical Gospel, “Sell all you own and distribute the money to the poor . . . then come follow me,” is a call to action that seems to stand in opposition to the advice attributed to Abba Moses when he tells a student to, “Go sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.”<sup>1</sup> This is but one example of what is a centuries-long conflict in Western Christianity. It illustrates the core of universal arguments between outer and inner, between those concerned with correct form and the value of community, and those who focus on personal transformation; between exoteric religious organizations and esoteric “mystical” paths. To those in helping professions, this is a conflict rooted in the competing demands of living in the context of the world as members of households and communities, and the equally important need to be persons to ourselves. New scientific approaches and findings continue to fundamentally alter our view of who and where we are in creation.<sup>2</sup> Among these discoveries are those technological advancements that have allowed us to peer into the operations of forces and substances previously unknown. Most of these came into common use since 1900.

Increasing acceptance of the idea that we exist in a universe that remains largely unseen to our physical senses is reshaping how we approach how we respond to life.<sup>3</sup> Breaking down

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, (London: Cistercian Publications 1984), 139.

<sup>2</sup> My teacher often remarked that the physical world we know exists within a very small spectrum of creation. “There are worlds above us and worlds below us. We’re in the middle somewhere, but we don’t really know where.”

<sup>3</sup> Infrared, ultraviolet, radio waves and x-rays, though initially discovered in the nineteenth century came to common use in the twentieth. For the purpose of this paper, these discoveries are part of a trend of discoveries that relates to the enormous unseen aspects of life. With this list, I include the unconscious mind that comprises most of the mental processes of all life forms.

traditional barriers between science and religious practices, there is a lively and growing conversation between serious scientists and certain members of religious communities who have reached a mastery of their practice. These practices, like meditation, contemplation and breathing exercises, are rooted in very old texts and oral instruction by teachers. Researchers are studying how specific practices affect the development and outcomes of chronic disease, healing time after surgery, incidence and treatment of depression among college-age students to name a few. Underlying the research is the theory, long-held by some religious, that there is no separation between mental and physical. Rather they exist as inter-related systems, each affecting and responding to the other to produce what we experience as human life.

Christians are largely absent from these conversations, not mainly because of anti-Christian bias on the part of scientists and religious from other traditions, but more importantly, because of difficulties raised by the resistance of some orthodox to the crumbling of the wall separating science and religion. Christianity, ambivalent about what is most important, life in the present or in the hereafter, coupled with an ingrained belief that spirit exists in a realm separate from the sciences often prevents conversations that would lead to the scientific study of correlations between religious principles and practices, and physiological/psychological conditions.

Some clinicians and their counterparts in social psychology detect a profound imbalance at work between the kinds of demands for individuals to mold themselves to accepted public roles, and equally pressing demands for internal development. Part of the nature of each set of demands is to strive to become dominant. Each set of demands is framed in binary terms. We need look no further than the morning news to hear the trumpeting of individualism to the



exclusion of the needs of the group.<sup>4</sup> It is also no surprise to find organizations striving to achieve dominance whether in politics, the economy or in religion. This incessant competition appears to present limited choices for individuals, either to align with the individualist mind, with the communal mind or, like the majority, to be bounced back and forth between them. The impulse to adopt one way or another as the only correct path results in either the impoverishment of the larger community or the neglect of individual development. Among the many left in the middle, those who feel hurled about by competing forces, the result is a sort of reactive semi-consciousness where the main desire is for cessation of pain.

My thesis is that there is a middle way that suggests a radically different solution: that with the strengthening of self-awareness and a great deal of hard work, a way can be found that guides one safely between Charybdis and Scylla. Viewed through a shared religious and psychological lens, polarizing statements from both sides are forged into balance and form a more complete and practical guide for disciples.

How balance is achieved for Christians is illustrated through the words of Jesus spoken to his disciples in the Canonical Gospel of Luke, the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, and the collections of sayings and stories of the desert abbas and ammas. The aim of this study is to find formative insights from ancient texts as seen through the lens of Christian explorers, and findings currently emerging from hard science to move toward a vision that connects outer forms and inner transformation into a rough map pointing to authentic discipleship.

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<sup>4</sup> Individualism's opposite, communism, where the whole purpose of the individual is to serve the needs of the whole was gradually revealed as a failed experiment. The idea is summed up in the phrase, "From each according to his ability to each according to his need."

## Chapter 1

### *Modern Conditions and Influences*

The space between biochemistry and neurology on the one hand and psychology on the other is vanishing with the use of new tools like fMRIs (functional magnetic resonance imaging) that allow researchers to observe the brain in action in real time. “Mind” is glimpsed in clinical psychology, but without any understanding of biochemistry and the interaction of neurons, synapses, and the rest of the brain, behavior will largely remain a mystery. I am not suggesting that God and the brain are identical. I am suggesting that the brain is the principal organ for encountering God in any conscious sense. No brain, no encounter. Without functional physical structures, neither behavior nor states of mind can exist. All religious expression, thought, and sensibilities are rooted in genetic and neurological structures, i.e., they are part of physical makeup and development. This view does not devalue or minimize religion. Rather, it allows us to see the physical foundations of mind as we study human possibilities and conditions. These new technologies also raise important new questions, the answers for which will find their way into the structures of civic life. They will also find their way into religion and enlarge the scope of biblical studies.

Much “hard” scientific research is written in professional languages accessible to few outsiders. Therefore, I rely on translators, “popularizers” who act as go-betweens. Some of these are scientists with enough patience to explain their arcane world. Some are writers whose understanding and work accurately reflects science to lay people, while others, perhaps most, focus on titillating angles that sell in the popular media. It is difficult to sort out all the voices, but there is no alternative but to take seriously the admonition of Teilhard de Chardin to “get

down to work.” If religious people rely only on their own traditional tools they will find themselves increasingly isolated and irrelevant to the lives of listeners whose everyday experiences are shaped by technology and science, and they will find themselves speaking to dwindling audiences while adding to the already substantial split between believers and non-believers.<sup>5</sup>

I begin from a conviction that the principal task of discipleship is to help heal the conflicts that plague us. François Bovon sees a parallel to this characterization of the disciple/apostle in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* (42): “an apostle is a person who gives life to the soul and heals the body.”<sup>6</sup> If this is authentic discipleship, then the temptation to take sides must be rejected. The clinical version of this neutrality was described by Freud as “evenly hovering attention.”<sup>7</sup> Carl Jung framed the attitude of the healer somewhat differently:

If the doctor wants to guide another . . . he must *feel* with that person’s psyche. He never feels it when he passes judgment. Whether he puts his judgments into words, or keeps them to himself, makes not the slightest difference. To take the opposite position, and to agree with the patient offhand, is also of no use, but estranges him as much as condemnation. Feeling comes only through unprejudiced objectivity. . . . It is a human quality, a kind of deep respect for the facts, for the man who suffers from them and for the riddle of such a man’s life.

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<sup>5</sup> Mainline denominations in the United States peaked in membership in the 1950s and have declined steadily in the last half-century. From 1960 to 1988, mainline church membership declined from 31 million to 25 million, then fell to 21 million in 2005. Protestant churches as a whole have held steady in total membership in the last half century, but since the national population has grown they have shrunk from 63% of the population in 1970 to 54% by 2000. The Mainline denominations comprised 55% of all Protestants in 1973, and 46% in 1998.

<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/17-leadership/323-report-examines-the-state-of-mainline-protestant-churches?q=state+mainline+churches>, December 7, 2009. (Accessed September, 2011).

Most of the people I work with are not churched and do not wish to be. While insisting on the need for a relationship with the unseen, they associate “church” and “clergy” with dogmas they perceive to be irrelevant or oppressive, or both. That is, they see a religious establishment that seeks to dominate the thinking and lives of whole populations with speculative theological assertions that cannot be verified and which confer few practical benefits on the everyday lives of individuals, families and communities. If pressed further, they point to power and influence as the primary focus of organized religion. It is a focus that they reject.

<sup>6</sup> François Bovon, “Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11.2 (2003): 165-94, n. 72. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, “Brief Communication: Evenly Hovering Attention,” 69 (2000): 545-549, <http://pep.gvpi.net/document.php?id=paq.069.0545a>

<sup>7</sup> Charles Brenner, an excerpt from Freud in 1912 quoted in “The technique. . . is a very simple one. . . . It consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same ‘evenly-suspended attention’ . . . in the face of all that one hears. . . .”

The truly religious person has this attitude. He knows that God has brought all sorts of strange and inconceivable things to pass and seeks in the most curious ways to enter a man's heart. He therefore senses in everything the presence of divine will.<sup>8</sup>

But healers too are afflicted with their own store of biases and are shaped by their own life experiences. These biases and experiences form the ground of any healer's lifetime of spiritual and singular psychological work. Individually, how this personal challenge is addressed by the healer is a living answer to the question of how to be(come) a human being, one capable of acting with empathy and compassion towards one's self and the rest of creation, even, or perhaps particularly, in the midst of calls to take sides and to become another voice in the polarized masses.

Polarization becomes, for all too many, not only the answer to perceived threats of disintegration and chaos, but also the only option for facing the prospect of an unknown future. Once difficult conversations, but ones hinting at possible solutions, fade toward silence in the face of suspicion and renewed calls for unbending adherence to one doctrine or another. Enduring institutions like organized religions find themselves drawn into the fray, to say nothing of political and economic institutions.

Complicating the situation is the experience of living in a shrinking world. We observe in our fast paced lives, with faster travel, instantaneous communication, and urban living, time and space seem compressed into a rapidly expanding present. With new technologies, we are less and less concerned about someone's physical location at any given time. Unlike the farmer of past generations whose day's work was in a bean field, we work and can be in live

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<sup>8</sup> Carl G Jung, *Psychotherapy or the Clergy*. Psychology West and East. Vol 11. The Collected Works. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. 2nd edition. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975),. Para. 519.

communication with colleagues whether we are at the kitchen table, in our offices, or sitting in a tea house in Bangkok.

Yet there is help to be found in a seemingly unlikely place – the remote past. Putting aside our desire to see our modern world as far removed from, and superior to, the past, the pressures for change remain similar to those of the ancient world. Although framed by different advancements in technology and despite developing progress in governance and learning, in transportation and economics, the pressures and challenges we face are similar to those felt by ancient peoples. It is possible to glean important lessons from generations that lived before us, and on whose shoulders we stand.

Modern men and women can find guidance and wisdom in very old texts, and in the narratives about and teachings and acts of men and women who, like their modern counterparts, are in the process of discerning the Way. These ancient men and women did not appear in a vacuum. Each emerged in response to his or her character, family, and context. Eventually, they all found themselves on paths that diverged in important ways from what was expected of them. Each was embedded in the stories and traditions of his or her own people, and used them as points of departure. What remains of their stories and traditions is fragmentary, but what we have continues to show a way forward.<sup>9</sup>

Like a long line of others who have done the same, I find essential value in ancient material like the sayings traditions of Christianity and other traditions. As a clinician, I have often used psychological insights gleaned from the desert fathers and mothers with great success with clients. Practically the only requirement for continuing the process is constant striving to read them anew, applying their wisdom to today's version of human circumstances. It is a world

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<sup>9</sup> John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, Indiana, World Wisdom, 2008), 19-32.

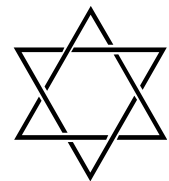
that is economically, politically, technologically, and socially vastly different from the ancient world, but emerging research in genetics, neuroscience, and the human genome is revealing common denominators between ancient and modern, not just physiologically but also in the way human beings take in, process, and respond to information. There, change proceeds much more slowly, evidently also listening to ancient evolutionary roots.

Another key influence was my teacher<sup>10</sup> who, shortly after we began our work together, shared a refrain that never ended as long as he lived: Everything in creation is symbolic and you must learn to think in those terms.<sup>11</sup> Among many figures, he introduced the Star of David and the cross, not as signs designating particular religions, but as wisdom-laden symbols. There were many more, but these two are particularly relevant to this paper.

There are similar currents in the academy. Sandra Schneiders, cited in more detail later, lays a foundation for understanding the ways in which symbols function. She states that symbols cannot be exhausted. If we contemplate them for our whole lives, we will not find their end or definitive meaning.

Because the symbol is always a minuscule “saying” emerging from the vast background of the “unsaid” it is always ambiguous, always concealing infinitely more than it reveals. One consequence of this ambiguity of symbols is that they require interpretation, yet no interpretation is ever complete, exhaustive, or adequate.<sup>12</sup>

The Star of David is often used as a sign designating Judaism and Jewish identity, but as a symbol, it has other associations and observations that expand awareness and take us beyond its common use as a religious signpost. The phrase, “As above, so below,” familiar in mystical communities, outlines the idea that patterns



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<sup>10</sup> Earl W. Blighton.

<sup>11</sup> As an ancient example of someone who thought symbolically, see Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 36.

are interrelated and repeated whether we are looking macrocosmically toward the stars or microscopically towards the very small. Systems repeat themselves in greater and lesser scales. Among other things, this principle is the foundation of the modern study of fractals.

Peter Bearse, an economist in the private sector, has written a short but excellent and well-documented introduction to fractals and their implications for countless fields of research that is available on the internet. He sums up the fundamental theory in three statements:

The basis of the fractal revolution is the principle underlying chaos and other natural patterns, that of "self-similarity." This means that the basic patterns are the same at any scale. They are the same at large "macro" scales as at small "micro" scales.

. . . the "microcosm," that which is smaller or lower-level, is essentially similar to the "macrocosm," that which is larger and/or higher-level; the latter is not somehow superior to the former by virtue of size or level; and,

. . . the dynamics of development are such that the macrocosm springs from and is grounded in the microcosm, not the other way around.<sup>13</sup>

The same holds true whether we are studying the visible physical universe or the invisible architecture of the psyche. Individuals come together to form families and cultures and nations, and all of these manifest the same patterns we find in individuals. As we see mental illness in individuals, we see similar symptoms in families, cultures, and even nations. Developmental challenges faced by every individual are also faced by increasingly larger groups. As some individuals live in a state of fear, so can communities and nations exist in a similar state. Conversely, if individuals progress towards more empathic ways of relating with one another, or states of being that manifest balance and peace, so can larger groups progress towards them.

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Bearse, *The Fractal Revolution*. <http://www.fractal.org/Bewustzijns-Besturings-Model/The%20Fractal%20Revolution.htm>. (not available in print)

For a more accessible discussion of fractals see, James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science*. (London: Viking Penguin, 1987).

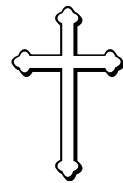
For a more thorough discussion of fractals see, Benoit Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry Of Nature*. San Francisco: H Freeman & Co, 1982).

This principle is fundamental to the organization of religious, social, and political units.<sup>14</sup> Much of what we think of as social and economic progress is framed in terms of rights, but more accurately is the result of new realizations and applications of this principle.

Implicit in this figure are networks of enormously complex systems all nested within, reciprocally dependent upon, and building on one another. Later in the paper I elaborate on the term *emergence* as a way of describing the phenomenon that happens when different elements come together and produce something greater than the sum of its parts - or, to put it differently, the pieces of a system interact, and out of their interaction something entirely new emerges.

The force that both cements these systems together and provides much of the driving force motivating them is described in a section on *limerence*. Limerence is a phenomenon that produces the euphoria of being in love as well as the sense of satisfaction we experience when a mental model we have constructed is found to match reality. It results from the interaction of three chemicals in the brain. When model matches reality, we receive a little reward consisting of a squirt of the happiness producer, the neurotransmitter serotonin.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent symbol for Christians is the cross. It is a place of suffering, dying, and reconciliation. In terms of its shape, the cross is a place where an individual becomes the focus of a clash of opposing forces, so much so that the only alternative to annihilation is transformation. For some Christians, it is Jesus at his, and our, most human.



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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.asone.org/asone/research/article.html?uuid=3e2f9385-ff8f-4802-b2d7-e30ac689cd0f> For example, see Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, (San Francisco: Berret-Koehler, 1999). Also see <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC128561/?tool=pmcentrez>. Beginning with the founding documents of the U.S. is the thinking that as we adopt policies aimed towards the welfare of “the least of these” --whether in the form of education, one man, one vote, or policies promoting economic opportunity-- we also promote the general well-being of society as in the Preamble to the U. S. Constitution.

<sup>15</sup> David Brooks, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement*, (New York: Random House, 2011), 206.



Every person has experiences of being in a place of crucifixion, both as witness and as the one on the cross.<sup>16</sup> Part of the importance of Good Friday is that Jesus' experience gives hope that transformation is possible. The outcome of the clash of forces may find its solution in a new and balanced person, the same one who was nailed to the cross before.

We are parts of families, cultures, religious bodies, and political entities, each making its own demands. We must also be persons to ourselves. Experientially these two sets of demands constantly clash with one another. How are we to arrange our values, thinking, and behavior to achieve at least a semblance of balance between the two? How do we accommodate all that is demanded of us?

Sandra Schneiders's examination of symbols complements Joseph Campbell's description of the function of myths, myths being seen as symbolic retellings of human origins and development.<sup>17</sup> Calling certain writings "myths" conflicts with religious sentiments, but it is still helpful to examine stories in the Old and New Testaments through the lens of mythology. Studies in mythology can give important clues about why we tell the stories we do, generation after generation, and help reveal their impact.<sup>18</sup> Included in those are the stories we consider important enough to call "scriptures," the key writings of a particular group. Clearly, not all myths are of equal value to a particular people. The stories found in the Torah and the Prophets, along with the narratives of the New Testament, are far more important to Christians than those with roots in other cultures.

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<sup>16</sup> This is a view echoed in such diverse works as, e. g., Jung's *Answer to Job*, and Thomas Keating's reflections on Easter in *The Mystery of Christ: Liturgy as Spiritual Experience*, (New York: Continuum, 1994), Chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> A more thorough discussion of Schneiders and Campbell is found in the next chapter. Culture's creation myths include indigenous stories about origins in the Pleiades (from the Muscogee peoples as told to me by the Faith Keeper of the Eastern Branch, Star Clan), as well as the Judeo-Christian account of the creation found in Genesis.

<sup>18</sup> For example, in the United States, the myth of the West supplies hints at how we see ourselves as a people. Images of the lone hero saving those in need, hardy pioneers settling an empty frontier also conflict with the facts. Yet we cannot escape the images, sentiments, and feelings of the stories. They are part of our self-definition as a people.

Nothing in Schneiders's or Campbell's descriptions implies that myths and scriptures are merely quaint folk tales made up by ancient peoples. Far from it! Myths profoundly reveal our origins: who we are, the part we play in the whole, and something about where we are headed. Myths have no set interpretations. I need not accept in some literal sense that the first two people were banished from a garden in Paradise for eating fruit forbidden to them, but remembering my teacher's lessons I have to listen and watch patiently for glimmers of shafts of light that may appear regarding this account. The question is not whether I believe the story literally, but how it might be true in light of what we know today, and how it informs my relationships with people, myself, and God. It also helps to remember that, one or two hundred years from now, dominant interpretations will have changed.

There is another approach to understanding that is notable for the possibility of conflict with more traditional ways of regarding religions and their texts. This approach says that no information, story, or individual holds special status. There are several reasons for this perspective, but principal among them from a clinical point of view is that special status isolates. In clinical work, all information is potentially diagnostic and so must be listened to without prior judgment.<sup>19</sup> Special status may express the values of a people, but it also obscures other valuable contributions that may come from outside traditionally accepted areas.

Every religion spends a great deal of time addressing the external and internal conflicts that human beings experience. In ancient times, they often symbolized those conflicts in terms of demonic attacks. Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. Buddha is attacked by demons shortly before his enlightenment.

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<sup>19</sup> In clinical work, every story a client tells about a relationship, every manner of expression in language, gesture, and affect reveals what the client sees, how it is valued, and something of the client's thought process and inner world.

Consideration of the role of the unconscious is a key here. That there is more to the unseen than the seen is not new. Whether the image of this unseen realm is the place of the gods, heavenly worlds, angels, or demons, ancient peoples were aware that an unseen realm on a conscious level is the home of formative forces for all living creatures. Freud postulated it as shaping our orientation and behavior in the physical world. Jung began unpacking the concept, even proposing some structures and mechanisms operating within the unconscious.

Today, we are beginning to have more than speculation to go on. With the development of advanced analytical technologies, we are beginning to be able to see in real time how the brain functions. One result is a further erosion of the idea of separate spheres -- mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual -- that have long shaped our thinking.<sup>20</sup>

Ours is a time when accelerating and radical changes overshadow every sphere of life -- genetic, political, economic, environmental, and social. Symbiotically accompanying these changes is a transformation in the way we see ourselves and the world around us. Emerging onto the public stage with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962)<sup>21</sup> and followed closely by early publications of Benoit Mandelbrot on the subject and application of fractals (1967),<sup>22</sup> our view of the natural order shifted from simple linear chains of cause and effect to the study of complex systems as they interact. These interactions are *emergent*, that is, the systems working in concert are best understood as producing results greater than the characteristics of their antecedents.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Future Role of functional MRI in Medical Applications*. Program for Imaging and Cognitive Sciences, Columbia University. <http://www.fmri.org/fmri.htm> (accessed February 7, 2012.)

<sup>21</sup> Carson is often credited with introducing the public to ecology, "the branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments, and the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment." <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecology>. (accessed February 10, 2012.)

<sup>22</sup> Mandelbrot's paper entitled, [\*How Long Is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension\*](#), was published in 1967.

This view of complex systems interacting and producing sometimes surprising results is not merely the pipe dream of a handful of utopian visionaries. Increasingly, current research in astronomy, biochemistry, neurology, mathematics, archeology, and the social sciences, some in cooperation with certain religious practitioners, is confirming it. Buddhist monks who are advanced in meditation practices are participating in medical research projects designed to map the brain and demonstrate the effects of their skills on mental and physical health.

Environmental scientists make progress in showing the effects of human activity on the natural world. Mathematicians apply their skills in describing the function and design of huge systems. Religious scholars too are beginning to look to the results of fields other than those traditionally associated with their specialties, and these are raising new questions about beliefs or statements that were widely accepted as markers for adherence to a particular religion. One sign of this transformation came in a 2005 *New York Times* op-ed column when the Dalai Lama stated boldly,

If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change. In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own worldview.<sup>23</sup>

In my own observation, the influence of Christian doctrine and thought on the categories of Western thought is fading under the onslaught of science and as the result of the recent encroachment of non-Christian religions. Newly arrived non-Christian religions and their teachers have been present in the United States for almost a hundred years, but their appeal has made itself felt most strongly since the 1960s.<sup>24</sup> This is not merely a surface phenomenon where

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<sup>23</sup> <http://buddhists.livejournal.com/2497337.html>. This source is only one of three I know of where he repeated this thought, the others being in another *New York Times* op-ed column (published under his title, Tenzin Gyatso, November 12, 2005), and in his book, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*, (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2005).

<sup>24</sup>Two examples: many Japanese Buddhists trace the arrival of the first Zen Master, Soyen Shaku, to the Chicago Exposition in 1893: (see Nyogen Senzaki. *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, (Tokyo: The Zen Studies Society, 1978), 9. At least one student stayed behind after Soyen Shaku returned home, while others were later dispatched to the

people may be seen on the street wearing clothing associated with other religions, or in court cases involving religion in schools. Rather, both science and non-Christian religions are carrying on a cooperative enterprise without considering either the relevance or irrelevance of some long-held Christian views. They are not challenging Christian views; they are proceeding from within the context of their own views, as though they were largely ignorant of Christian views.

Within my own field of pastoral psychotherapy, some therapists sense being called to reconcile two worlds, so that they are perceived as neither ministers nor therapists. This sense of two worlds is echoed in the public's response: some seek a pastoral therapist who will guide them with "biblical principles," i.e., by dispensing doctrinal formulas as specific answers for very real and complex problems. Such expectations assume that Christianity possesses the only correct view of reality and that assent to correct doctrine is the answer to all problems.

Unfortunately, there is some disagreement among Christians about the exact content of "correct doctrine." Furthermore, intellectual assent to formulas is not known to solve many problems.<sup>25</sup>

The majority of people who consult with me are looking for solutions to their suffering, but are wary of any hint of a spiritual aspect. They skip over the "pastoral" portion of our self-description and reply to questions about their spiritual lives with suspicion that it is either irrelevant or that I am peddling spiritual snake oil. Of those who attempt an answer, the most common ones are either agnostic ("I don't know") or doctrinally-correct sound bites.

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United States where they lectured, led meditations, and developed communities that flourish today. Herbert Benson's research into the effects and treatment of stress at Harvard employed subjects trained in Eastern disciplines of meditation to explore the physical effect of meditation on stress. Benson's research contributed to the proliferation of mind-body research centers in medical schools throughout the United States. His first book for a popular audience is *The Relaxation Response*, (New York, Harper Collins, 1975). The influx of Eastern religions roughly coincides with the decline of Christianity, but at most is a remote cause of that decline.

<sup>25</sup> I am reflecting the discussions within the therapeutic community that highlight important differences between "pastoral psychotherapy," which is psycho-dynamically oriented, and "Christian counseling," which focuses on "biblical principles."

Pastoral psychotherapists themselves tend to be far more comfortable describing their clinical orientations or the latest innovation in treatment than anything to do with the life of the spirit. The subject of one's spiritual life has all the allure of stepping on a live third rail, and the result is that many choose to join the majority of clinicians who are decidedly more agnostic or atheistic.

Little wonder then that scientists and Christians continue to be wary as they circle one another, each employing five-hundred-year-old concepts of spheres of expertise that preserve their separation. Meanwhile science proceeds along its way without important reflective input from western Christianity. What input there is, apart from reactions from more religiously conservative circles, seems confined to medical ethicists whose contributions bear some decidedly religious overtones even while wearing the garb of medicine, reason, and rigor.<sup>26</sup>

My challenge is to reconcile the divides in a way that is helpful to others, reasonably satisfying to me, and making sense to those exposed to it. This study draws from diverse fields, but ones sharing themes common between them and with the subjects of my research.

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<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this subject see, David C. Thomasma and Eric H. Loewy, "Exploring the Role of Religion in Medical Ethics," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 5 (1996), 257-268.

## **Chapter 2**

### *Different and Similar World Views*

In order to reap valuable contributions from the past, we need to try to understand how ancient people saw themselves and their place in creation, as well as how we see ourselves in the context of creation today. Understanding ourselves in even a small slice of the day's activities, to say nothing of peoples far removed from us in time, location, and culture, is an exceedingly difficult task, but failing to take into account the range of important differences and similarities practically guarantees significant failures in our efforts to learn from the past. This chapter concerns itself with a few significant changes in the way we moderns perceive the world as opposed to how ancient peoples perceived themselves and their relationship with the world around them.

### *The Unconscious*

Some recent findings are challenging clinicians to adapt to the contributions of new technologies that transform how we see and think about human beings. One example is found in the efforts to tease out a little of the architecture of the brain and mind. As therapists in training, we learned clusters of defenses, behaviors, states of mind, essential aspects of ego orientation, and a thick book of descriptive diagnoses pointing toward dynamics of the mind. As a fundamental principle, I grew up with the idea that the bulk of the processes of our brains are and remain unconscious. In the hands of Freud and Jung, this postulation was little more than an assertion with little empirical backing that offered reasonable explanations as to how and why we do things. While their contributions were revolutionary, Freud (1856-1939) and Jung (1875-

1961) were operating in the dark. Both were physicians (Freud was a neurologist), but they lacked what we think of as rudimentary technology like x-rays, biochemical tests, and even for a time a commonly accepted theory of the origins of disease--a well-supported germ theory rather than the slowly fading theory of *spontaneous generation*, which postulated that living things can arise from non-living things (a violation of basic cell theory).<sup>27</sup>

Like all pioneers, Freud and Jung did what they could. They did a kind of elementary astronomy, peering into the night sky, searching for fuzzy images and reflections that might give them valid information. They built intuitive models supported by repeated observation. Whether or not therapists today can accept chapter and verse of early theoretical models, the fundamental concepts have revolutionized the way we think about being human. The most revolutionary element is the *unconscious*, which is now deemed responsible for the enormous bulk of mental activity operating our physical, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional lives.

The unconscious, its size and sheer power relative to conscious processes, is the first filter I bring to any study of religion, human beings, or civilizations.<sup>28</sup> But the whole collection--the unconscious, defenses, ego, and their attendant roles in an individual's life--belongs, in popular consciousness at least, to a mental/emotional sphere that is separate from the physical and considered by many as not quite real. Meantime, the goal of discovering how connections

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<sup>27</sup> The early years of the twentieth century, when Freud was engaged in the bulk of his work, were a time when the germ theory of disease was just beginning to gain acceptance. A very brief timeline may suffice here. Following the invention of the microscope in the seventeenth century, real advances were made by Ignaz Semmelweis (1840s), who tried and failed to prevent childbirth fever (he was deemed crazy by his colleagues); Louis Pasteur (1860s), investigating food preservation and developing early rabies vaccines; Joseph Lister (1860), who developed antiseptic surgery though it was not used during the Civil War; Robert Koch (1870), who developed methods for identifying specific pathogens like those responsible for anthrax, tuberculosis, and cholera; and Alexander Fleming (1920s), who developed penicillin, the first antibiotic. The use of penicillin has only been common since the 1940s. <http://www.mansfield.ohio-state.edu/~sabedon/biol2007.htm#lister> (Accessed February 18, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> My spiritual teacher put the ratio of seen to unseen at 88:1, similar to the ratio of dark energy or matter existing outside the visible spectrum to the visible spectrum. Others have metaphorically described it as the expanse of the Pacific Ocean to a tiny atoll that, at low tide, appears and at high tide disappears beneath the surface. Some astrophysicists see this seen-unseen ratio approximating the ratio of dark matter/energy to what can be seen – approximately 95:5. Whatever the exact percentages, the ratio is eye-popping.



are made between mental states and physical processes as dynamic microcosms, reflections of the universe in which they exist, is only now beginning to come into view.<sup>29</sup>

While my assertion is that a relatively small number of principles serve accurately to describe the dynamism of huge chunks of creation, evidence is slowly building to back it up. Many years ago in a wonderful Virginia plantation house, I shared the cocktail hour with a neurological researcher. He explained his work of combining newly declassified military hydrophones with computer filters in order to pinpoint aneurysms in the brain. He thought if he could refine the process, he could increase its sensitivity by a factor of a million. The conversation progressed to a discussion of an element of sound being produced by all things. Blood moving through a healthy vessel produces one sound. Blood encountering an aneurysm produces another. I asked if he thought that if given adequate equipment, he could hear the sound of an electron in orbit around a nucleus. “Why yes!” he replied. “Where did you get that idea?” I explained that according to the teachings I had received, all things vibrate and that vibration produces both sound and light. Theoretically, it was possible to hear an electron in orbit around a nucleus.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, popular assumptions about what constitutes reality remain stuck in at least two fallacies. The first is that reality is what we can sense (see, hear, smell, taste, and touch), and that this reality is known and acted upon rationally. The second fallacy is a way of dividing up

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<sup>29</sup> *Brain mapping* is the term describing projects aiming to advance the understanding of the relationship between structure and function in the human brain. Scientists in this field seek to gain knowledge of the physical processes that underlie human sensation, attention awareness and cognition. <http://www.brainmapping.org/> (Accessed February 17, 2012). However, I must take responsibility for the observation that there is a remarkable similarity between the principles guiding the astrophysicist and the psychologist. The concept of *emergence* and the science of *fractals* are tools for describing greater-smaller relationships that stretch across the boundaries of specific sciences.

<sup>30</sup> This morning, just before settling in to edit this section, I happened across an article about the scientist, Lawrence Kraus discussing what we think of as *being*. Are we really some *things* as we so like to think of ourselves, or are we perhaps no *things* (which might conceivably transform us all into Buddhists)? Are we, in Shakespeare’s description, “such stuff as dreams are made of” (The Tempest, Act 4 Scene1), vibrating electromagnetic fields, what? This is a universal question. It is scientific. It is also religious, but whatever the question and whatever answers we may come up with, it is important. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/21/science/space/cosmologists-try-to-explain-a-universe-springing-from-nothing.html?emc=eta1> (Accessed February 21, 2012).

creation by use of a kind of colonialist mentality where large chunks of the globe are divided up among a powerful few countries and labeled “spheres of influence.” The term “spheres of influence” meant that the claimed regions were out of bounds to all but the country that possessed enough power and influence to enforce its rule. This claim included those most directly affected: the indigenous populations. There are also similar spheres of influence governing matters of science and religion, and recognition of these factors deeply permeate our understanding of human beings. We still conceive the world as generally divided among physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual spheres.

Slowly, but with increasing momentum, more pieces of this puzzle and their ramifications are being revealed, not just in science but in theology, with the result being that the walls are beginning to be more permeable than they first appeared to be. The physicist Fritjof Capra and the Benedictine monk-psychologist David Steindl-Rast take us part of the way towards proposing a viable and complementary approach to science and religion by outlining five features of a new scientific-theological paradigm in the following schema:<sup>31</sup>

<b><u>New Paradigm Thinking in Science and Theology</u></b>	
<b>In Science</b>	<b>In Theology</b>
The old scientific paradigm may be called Cartesian, Newtonian or Baconian since its main characteristics were formulated by Descartes, Newton and Bacon.	The old theological paradigm may be called rationalistic, manualistic, or Positive-Scholastic since its main characteristics were formulated in theological manuals based on Scholastic proof texts.
The new paradigm may be called holistic, ecological or systematic – but none of these adjectives characterizes it completely.	The new paradigm may be called holistic, ecumenical, or transcendental-Thomistic but none of these adjectives characterizes it completely.

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<sup>31</sup> Fritjof Capra and David Steindl-Rast with Thomas Matus. *Belonging to the Universe: Explorations on the Frontiers of Science and Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), xi-xv.

New paradigm thinking in science includes the following five criteria – the first two refer to our view of nature, the other three to our epistemology	New paradigm thinking in theology includes the following five criteria – the first two refer to our divine revelation, the other three to our theological methodology
<b>1. Shift from the Part to the Whole</b>	<b>1. Shift from God as Revealer of Truth to Reality as God’s Self-revelation</b>
In the old paradigm it was believed that in any complex system the dynamics of the whole could be understood from the properties of the parts.	In the old paradigm it was believed that the sum total of dogmas (all basically of equal importance) added up to revealed truth.
In the new paradigm the relationship between the parts and the whole is reversed. The properties of the parts can be understood only from the dynamics of the whole. Ultimately there are no parts at all. What we call a part is merely a pattern in and inseparable web of relationships.	In the new paradigm the relationship between the parts and the whole is reversed. The meaning of the individual dogmas can be understood only from the dynamics of revelation as a whole. Ultimately revelation as a process is of one piece. Individual dogmas focus on particular moments in God’s self-manifestation in nature, history, and human experience.
<b>2. Shift from Structure to Process</b>	<b>2. Shift from Revelation as Timeless Truth to Revelation as Historical Manifestation</b>
In the old paradigm it was thought that there were fundamental structures and then there were forces and mechanisms through which these interacted thus giving rise to processes.	In the old paradigm it was thought that there was a static set of supernatural truths which God intended to reveal to us, but the historical process by which God revealed them was seen as contingent and therefore of little importance.
In the new paradigm every structure is seen as the manifestation of an underlying process. The entire web of relationships is intrinsically dynamic.	In the new paradigm the dynamic process of salvation history is itself the great truth of God’s self-manifestation. Revelation as such is intrinsically dynamic.
<b>3. Shift from objective science to ‘epistemic science’</b>	<b>3. Shift from theology as an objective science to theology as a process of knowing.</b>
In the old paradigm scientific descriptions were believed to be objective, i.e. independent of the human observer and the process of knowledge	In the old paradigm theological statements were assumed to be objective, i.e. independent of the believing person and the process of knowledge.

In the new paradigm it is believed that epistemology – the understanding of the process of knowledge – is to be included explicitly in the description of natural phenomena.	The new paradigm holds that reflection on non-conceptual ways of knowing – intuitive, affective, mystical – has to be included explicitly in theological discourse.
At this point there is no consensus about what proper epistemology is, but there is an emerging consensus that epistemology will have to be an integral part of every scientific theory.	At this point there is no consensus on the proportion in which conceptual and non-conceptual ways of knowing, but there is an emerging consensus that non-conceptual ways of knowing are integral to theology.
<b>4. Shift from Building to Network as metaphor for knowledge.</b>	<b>4. Shift from Building to Network as metaphor for knowledge</b>
The metaphor of knowledge as building – fundamental laws, fundamental principles, basics building blocks etc. – has been used in Western science and philosophy for thousands of years.	The metaphor of knowledge as building – fundamental laws, fundamental principles, basic building blocks etc – has been used in theology from many centuries.
During paradigm shifts it was felt that the foundations of knowledge were crumbling.	During paradigm shifts it was felt that the foundations of doctrine were crumbling.
In the new paradigm this metaphor is being replaced by that of the network. As we perceive reality as a network of relationships our descriptions, too, form an interconnected network representing the observed phenomena.	In the new paradigm this metaphor is being replaced by that of network. As we perceive reality as a network of relationships our theological statements, too, form and interconnected network of different perspectives on transcendent reality.
In such a network there will be neither hierarchies nor foundations.	In such a network each perspective may yield unique and valid insights into truth.
Shifting from the building to the network also implies abandoning the idea of physics as the ideal against which all other sciences are modeled and judged, and as the main source of metaphors for scientific description.	Shifting for the building to the network also implies abandoning the idea of a monolithic system of theology as binding for all believers and as the sole source for authentic doctrine.
<b>5. Shift from truth to approximate descriptions</b>	<b>5. Shift in focus from theological statements to divine mysteries</b>
The Cartesian paradigm was based on the belief that scientific knowledge could achieve absolute and final certainty.	The manualistic paradigm of theology suggested by its very form as “summa” or compendium that our theological knowledge was exhaustive.

In the new paradigm it is recognized that all concepts, theories and findings are limited and approximately.	The new paradigm, by greatest emphasis on mystery, acknowledges the limited and approximate character of every theological statement.
Science can never provide any complete and definitive understanding of reality.	Theology can never provide a complete and definitive and definitive understanding of divine mysteries.
Scientists do not deal with truth (in the sense of exact correspondence between the description and the described phenomena); they deal with limited and approximate descriptions of reality.	The theologian, like every believer, finds ultimate truth not in the theological statement, but in the reality to which this statement gives a certain true, but limited expression.

Capra and Steindl-Rast are not alone. More recently and independent of Capra and Steindl-Rast, David Brooks has introduced a number of scientific concepts that compel re-orientation of our familiar world view into terms accessible to lay people. Among them are the following:

### *Emergence*

Our usual approach to solving problems is dominated by reductionism. “Reductionism was the driving force behind much of the twentieth century’s scientific research.”<sup>32</sup> We believe we can separate problems into their component elements, and from the examination of those come to an understanding of the whole. Like many boys of a certain age, we think that if we take the clock apart we will understand at least how the mechanism works, or at worst how time interacts with the clock to let us know the time. Complex problems, ones with multiple causes, defy this approach. They say to us, “You have to tackle the whole nest of causes at once in order to address the whole.” Poverty is one example. Racial discrimination, loss of manufacturing jobs, lack of education, globalization, bad policies, bad governments, poor health: the reasons go on and on. No one focused policy directed at alleviating poverty has ever proven to be

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<sup>32</sup> Albert-Laszlo Barabasi, quoted by David Brooks, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement* (New York, Random House, 2011), 108.

successful. A few other examples include marriage, brain development, intelligence, religion, economics, politics, and culture.

The problem with this [reductive] approach is that it has trouble explaining dynamic complexity, the essential feature of a human being, a culture, or society. . . . Emergent systems exist when different elements come together and produce something that is greater than the sum of its parts. Or, to put it differently, the pieces of a system interact, and out of their interaction something entirely new emerges. . . . Emergent systems don't rely on a central controller. Instead, once a pattern of interaction is established, it has a downward influence on the behavior of the components.<sup>33</sup>

### *Limerence*

Limerence is a word coined by Dorothy Tennov around 1977 and used by her to describe the involuntary state we call “being in love.” Tennov’s original concept has since been expanded to explain a far broader range of experiences. Summarizing the findings of Read Montague, Peter Dayan, and Terrence Sejnoski in *The Journal of Neuroscience*, Brooks translates the often obscure scientific language of specialized journals into something more accessible to lay persons.

The mental system is geared more toward predicting rewards than in the rewards themselves. The mind creates models all day long. . . . When one of the models accurately anticipates reality, then the mind experiences a little surge of reward, or at least a reassuring feeling of tranquility. When the model contradicts reality, then there’s tension and concern.<sup>34</sup>

Biochemically, this system involves three main chemicals: dopamine, which can lead to focused attention, exploratory longings, and strong, frantic desire; norepinephrine, a chemical derived from dopamine, which can stimulate feelings of exhilaration, energy, sleeplessness, and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 108-9.

<sup>34</sup> P. Read Montague, Peter Dayan, and Terrence J. Sejnowski in “A Framework for Mesencephalic Dopamine Systems Based on Predictive Hebbian Learning,” *Journal of Neuroscience* 16, (March 1, 1996): 1936-47, as summarized by David Brooks, *The Social Animal*, 207.

loss of appetite; phenylthylamine, a natural amphetamine that produces feelings of sexual excitement and emotional uplift.<sup>35</sup>

Limerence is not only a key ingredient of being in love; it also propels us intellectually and physically. If the internal models we construct accurately reflect reality, we get a surge of satisfaction. Picking the winner of Sunday's football game is more rewarding than the game itself. If a golfer finds herself "in the zone," there occurs a surge of these three chemicals that helps place the shots exactly where she intends. If dancers find themselves transcending the steps and choreography, there is a surge of these same chemicals, not just within them, but those who watch as well. I argue that limerence is also part of the biochemical underpinning of the sense of being intimately connected with God that often accompanies mystical experience. The desire for and seeking of limerence is always operating in human beings, and it is primarily directed towards oneness, whether internally or with others.

Not just a formula for romance, limerence also creates problems that extend considerably beyond the antics of hormonally-driven teens. Social gatherings are often filled with people trying to get one another to see the world as they do. Nations do not clash only over land, wealth, and interests. They fight to compel others to see the world through their eyes. Stalkers go to great lengths to make their targets share their view of love. It is limerence that makes us inspect carefully a long-abandoned childhood home or town for any signs of change, or inspect wistfully what has changed from the old familiar version to the newest translation of the Bible.

Limerence is essential to human life. The death rate in American orphanages during the 1940s approached 40% among babies less than two years old. No physical cause for these deaths could be found. The orphanages were kept meticulously clean, but the children were not routinely held and were even separated from sight of their fellows. The researchers found that

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<sup>35</sup> Brooks, *The Social Animal*, 206.

the children suffered from a lack of stimulation and, as a result, withered psychologically, physically, and intellectually until they died.<sup>36</sup> The lessons: ongoing, intimate connections are as necessary for life as nourishment, and isolation kills.

### *Old and New Together*

The terms *unconscious*, *emergence*, and *limerence* describe very complex and dynamic forces operating in all of us all the time. Given the above description of these three dynamic forces, one may wonder if viewing “scriptures” through lenses that emphasize symbolism provides a focused reflection of these forces at work in the subjects, in the writers, in the stories they tell, in the meanings they reveal, in the cultures and individuals who participate in them. The effects of the reflections expand into artistic expression, liturgy, theology, and lives dedicated to The Way. Theology, artistic expression, liturgy, and even dedicated lives are all very complex, symbolic affairs that rest on a foundation of desire for oneness.

At their best, scriptures raise questions that are answered in some form by everyone. They lay out experiential contexts in which we live and provide some guidance as to how they are to be negotiated.<sup>37</sup> They cannot provide complete answers because those are only found through development and life experience. No matter how accurate, no matter how well said or clear, language must be transformed into flesh before it becomes true or takes on life. In part, becoming flesh entails building neurons and synapses that then manifest themselves in attitudes

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<sup>36</sup> <<http://family.jrank.org/pages/1232/Orphans-Early-Literature-on-Institutionalization.html>>Orphans - Early Literature On Institutionalization</a> (Accessed November 12, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> I am thinking of specific instructions like those given to address conflicts (Matt 18: 15-17)), and more general ones like the summation of the foundation of the law and the prophets given by Jesus (Matt 22:37-40) and those given in the Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha. (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/wheel017.html>). (Accessed February 2, 2012)



and bodily responses to existing conditions. Occasionally this growth seems to happen in a flash, but far more often such manifestations are slowly built up through repetition and practice.

The questions raised by scriptures revolve around the sense of identity and location, the mystery of who we are, where we came from, what we are about, how we are to relate, what happens when a life is finished, and what an individual's life might mean in the larger scheme of things. These questions are not limited to scriptures only. The myths and stories of all peoples who have left a record address them, though not always in something having the designation "scripture." The common denominator seems to lie in how well the myths and stories get at the heart of being in relationship and the attendant difficulties encountered. To this end, social scientists as well as those who focus on mythology have valuable contributions for historians and theologians.

Joseph Campbell builds on some propositions of the early Ludwig Wittgenstein to outline four functions of what he terms "mythology."<sup>38</sup> He defines "mythology" by its effects on individuals and society: "Mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of vocabularies of reason and coercion." Campbell's functions are:

- to reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe as it is: [emphasis Campbell's]
- to render an interpretive total image of the same, as known to contemporary consciousness. It is the revelation to waking consciousness of the powers of its own sustaining source.
- the enforcement of a moral order: the shaping of the individual to the requirements of his geographically and historically conditioned social group.
- The fourth and most vital, most critical function . . . is to foster the centering and unfolding of the individual in integrity in accord with d) himself (the microcosm), c) his culture (the mesocosm), b) the universe (the macrocosm), and a) that awesome ultimate mystery which is both beyond and within himself and all things.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The use of the term "myth" in different senses by different fields is confusing. Campbell's view has clear psychological implications similar to those of Carl Jung. Both use "myth" in similar ways: not as falsehoods, but as something always true through time. Our challenge then is in how to read them. Biblical scholars often use terms like "legend", "epic" and "saga" instead.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God*, (New York Viking Penguin. 1987, 4-6.

The cluster of Wittgenstein's propositions cited by Campbell throughout his book are worth quoting for their possible psychological and neurological insights, important insights into religious functions like sacraments.

Proposition 2.1 "We picture facts to ourselves." (p. 28) 2.12 "A picture is a model of reality." (p. 28) 2.16 "There must be something identical in a picture and what it depicts, to enable the one to be a picture of the other at all." (p. 29) Proposition 3 "A logical picture of facts is a thought. (p. 30)" 3.1 "In a proposition a thought finds an expression that can be perceived by the senses." (p. 34) 3.31 "I call any part of a proposition that characterizes its sense an expression (or a symbol . . . ." (p. 34) 3.32 "A sign is what can be perceived of a symbol." (p. 34) Proposition 4 "A thought is a proposition with sense." (p. 38) 4.0001 "The totality of propositions is language." "The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of natural sciences." (p. 38.) 4.111 "Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. . . ." (p. 44) 4.112 "Philosophy aims at the clarification of thoughts . . . . Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries." (p. 44) 4.1121 "Psychology is no more closely related to philosophy than any other natural science." "Theory of knowledge is the philosophy of psychology. . . ." (p. 44) 4.116 "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly." "Everything that can be put into words can be put clearly." (p. 45) Proposition 6.44 "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists. (p. 89) 6.522 "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical." (p. 90) 6.4311 "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration, but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present." (p. 88)<sup>40</sup>

Campbell's four functions of myth point towards human life as being nested in its own internal (unseen and largely unconscious) system, which is partly manifest in larger communal systems of custom and law, and the system of forces and energies that give rise to and operate

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<sup>40</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, Inc, 1922). <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf> (Accessed February 10, 2012) [note that some of these propositions were rejected by Wittgenstein later in life.]

the universe.<sup>41</sup> He points towards human development that leans in a direction that will enable us to live in harmony in the midst of these forces. This quality, at its best or highest, results from and in limerence, often being initially experienced as something magical or ecstatic or pure. This quality is that indefinable something that happens when the doors of the inner world open to invite us in and to be a part of the solidarity, the uniting love that is the foundation of all creation. This quality says to us, “This is where you belong. This is yours too.”

I use the word “indefinable” to avoid projecting onto this magical, ecstatic, or pure quality an aura of otherworldliness and to point to its sheer complexity. Experience itself is not complex. It is very simple. It is just where we are. In a recent film, *Of Gods and Men*, a small community of Cistercian monks is faced with the leftovers of French colonialism in Algeria, a repressive military government, and opposing Islamic fundamentalist insurrection. They are forced to decide whether to stay among the villagers with whom they have made their lives, risking the possibility of death in the political turmoil of the day. They are neither heroes nor martyrs, nor do their decisions stem from following directives originating from anything other than their sense of identity and work and their own best judgments individually and as a community.

If we did not know that these men are Cistercian monks embedded in a Muslim village, men whose lives are shaped by Benedict’s Rule and contemplation and living of the Psalms and Gospels, that the one scholar among them is trying to reconcile St. Francis with the Koran, we might wonder if they are possibly Buddhists. Their theology and moral structure are revealed not in words so much as in their sense of who they are and what is theirs to do in the present. It does not take much effort to see the similarities between their lives and those advocated in the

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<sup>41</sup> Are we seeing here an expansion of Teilhard de Chardin’s physical science descriptions of the biosphere into the realm of social sciences?

Four Noble Truths<sup>42</sup> and Eightfold Path of the Buddha,<sup>43</sup> a path directed towards ending suffering. Theirs is suffering growing out of attachments to their lives and to their ideas of duty. Their struggles are the stuff of their purification. Their daily work is growing food, cooking for the community, providing a bit of counseling, raising bees for honey, providing medical care and tennis shoes, acting as translators and helping negotiate bureaucracies. Faced with an increasingly violent Islamic insurgency opposed to the military government, they are brought face to face with the effects of the colonial policies of their home country as well as an intractable divide between the powers that be and a disaffected and disempowered populace. They are men who must make a very difficult choice: whether to flee the human fabric in which they have lived, or stay and share the dangers of the people they serve, affecting both the village and themselves, perhaps echoing Abba Antony: “Our life and death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ.”<sup>44</sup> Or perhaps John the Dwarf can be heard whispering in the shadows,

“A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top.” They said to him, “What does this mean?” He said, “The foundation is our neighbor whom we must win, and that is the place to begin. For all the commandments of Christ depend on this one.”<sup>45</sup>

These statements hint that there is little value in a personal identity conceived as somehow separate from the fabric of our relationships. There is also a strong connection between those relationships and a loving relationship with God. But human relationships, to say nothing of those with the infinitely more expansive natural world, are so troubling!

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<sup>42</sup> (1) Life means suffering. (2) The origin of suffering is attachment. (3) The cessation of suffering is attainable. (4) The path to the cessation of suffering is detailed more in the eightfold path below.

<http://thebigview.com/buddhism/fourtruths.html> (Accessed February 23, 2012)

<sup>43</sup>(1) Right view, (2) right intention, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right concentration. <http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/eightfoldpath.html> (Accessed February 23, 2012)

<sup>44</sup> *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1975), 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

We are always faced with the danger of trying to think about this odd thing called “spiritual life” as if it were a matter we could deal with in isolation, and it is always very attractive to attempt this, simply because the facts of human life together are normally so messy, so unpromising and unedifying. Other people in their actual material reality do make things a lot more difficult when what we *think* we want is spirituality – the cultivation of a sensitive and rewarding relationship with eternal truth and love. And this is where the desert monastics have an uncompromising message for us: a relationship with eternal truth and love simply doesn’t happen unless we mend our relations with Tom, Dick and Harriet.<sup>46</sup>

The heart of the conflict for these monks revolves around these concerns. There is no discussion of directives from either Rome or higher levels of their own order. They could leave, relocate, and attempt to reconstitute their work elsewhere. What they do, though, is based on their own best discernment.

Their communal contemplations are given shape by the Rule of Saint Benedict, who wrote,

Whenever any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community and state the matter to be acted upon. Then, having heard the brethren's advice, let him turn the matter over in his own mind and do what he shall judge to be most expedient. The reason we have said that all should be called for counsel.

Let the brethren give their advice and not presume stubbornly to defend their opinions; but let the decision rather depend on the Abbot's judgment, and all submit to whatever he shall decide for their welfare.

However, just as it is proper for the disciples to obey their master, so also it is his function to dispose all things with prudence and justice.<sup>47</sup>

Increasingly, neuroscience and psychology are challenging old categories of thought. First, Darwin successfully refuted the idea that we are creations fundamentally separate from other life forms. But, in popular readings of Darwin, human beings have often been thought of as competitive with one another and with a hostile natural world. “Survival of the fittest,” while

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<sup>46</sup> Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (Oxford: Medio Media, 2003), 23.

<sup>47</sup> The Rule of Benedict, trans. Lawrence J. Doyle, chapter 3, <http://www.osb.org/rb/text/rbejms2.html#3>. (Accessed November 1, 2011). (Contemplation of the Rule is a daily community activity.)

a prominent feature of expansionist dreams of earlier times, is losing ground to the idea that, above all, human beings persist because of their ability to cooperate. This ability, it is argued, has been around sufficiently long and successfully that it is written into DNA and manifests itself through small squirts of oxytocin that flood through the brain whenever close relationships are reaffirmed.

It surges when people are enjoying close social bonds; when a mother is giving birth or suckling her child; after an orgasm, when two people in love gaze into one another's eyes; when friends or relatives hug. Oxytocin gives people a powerful feeling of contentment. In other words, oxytocin is nature's way of weaving people together.<sup>48</sup>

Some scientists--Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Graham, and Brian Nosek among them--have expanded this action of biochemistry into the sphere of shared moral concerns. They have outlined five, which I paraphrase below:

- Fairness/reciprocity, involving issues of equal and unequal treatment.
- Harm/care, which includes things like empathy and concern for the suffering of others.
- Authority/respect. Human societies have their own hierarchies and react with moral outrage when that which they view with reverence (including themselves) is not treated with proper respect.
- Purity/disgust. Originally may have evolved to repel us away from noxious or unsafe food, but has expanded to keep us away from contamination of all sorts.
- In-group/loyalty concern. The most problematic of the list, but based on the way human beings segregate themselves into groups. They feel a visceral loyalty to members of their group and feel a visceral disgust towards those who violate loyalty codes. The time it takes to distinguish those who are in from others is measured in milliseconds.<sup>49</sup>

Though there is no general agreement on the exact elements of this list, something similar does exist. Whether we are talking about Torah, or favorite football teams, or issues of social

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<sup>48</sup> Brooks, *The Social Animal*, 64.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-287.

justice, this “unconscious soulscape is a coliseum of impulses vying for supremacy.”<sup>50</sup>

Paraphrasing Brooks as he sums up the researchers’ conclusions,

- Intuitions are in turn selfish, the deeply social and moral competing with ones that are profoundly asocial.
- Courage and heroism compete with acceptance; competition competes with cooperation.
- “Our virtues do not fit neatly into a complementary or logical system. We have many ways of seeing and they are not ultimately compatible.”<sup>51</sup>

Moral decisions begin with questions directed towards those making them. Which side of the competing values listed above are in ascendancy in the decision-maker now? Does the decision-maker value his or her group over a perceived outsider’s? Are concerns about contamination outweighing the tendency towards empathy and fairness? How are concerns about respect and honor involved?

This very messy concoction seems to abandon us to our own devices and motives. It is a recipe for suffering that cannot be relieved by adjusting the external environment. The only cure for the perception of abandonment lies in building self-awareness, but there are so many obstacles preventing self-awareness! The desert monastics are keenly aware of the kinds of things that stand between themselves and their neighbor and Christ. Not only are they aware of the obstacles, but they are aware of the disciplines necessary to overcome them as well.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 3

### *The Gospel of Luke*

How are we to be disciples of Jesus, not in terms of predetermined beliefs, but in relationship and action? Of the materials considered in this paper, Luke is the most complex. It is constructed around a quasi-historical narrative that purports to give an accurate account of the events surrounding the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As in many narratives, plot and character tend to carry the burden and draw most of the attention of its readers, while the meat of its teaching about how we are to become disciples lies like a hidden treasure in the details. In Thomas and the desert fathers, the teachings are the entire focus. Traditional methods of studying biblical texts, through historical inquiry and close examination of the languages employed, continue to refine modern interpretation of the text. Yet, there is a deeper treasure hidden beyond the reach of these methods, a treasure that can be discovered by admitting modern sciences and methods into the mix. Specifically, I am referring to the insights gained from modern neuroscience and psychology as well as those of sociology, anthropology, and the growing array of technologically-enhanced methods being employed today.

Understanding more about how human beings are put together and function might help us understand better Jesus' teachings and the stories that accompany them. What is it about this story, among all the stories we have, that is so successful? It weaves together elements of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that have been told and retold throughout the world for nearly two thousand years. It now has attained the status of sacred scripture and, in Sandra Schneiders's view, sacrament.



Sacred scripture is the sacrament of the word of God. . . . The real referent of the metaphor “word of God “ is the entire mystery of divine revelation, God’s self-gift to us and through such symbols as creation, sacred history, Jesus himself, and the life of the believing community.<sup>52</sup>

If she is correct, that sacred scripture encapsulates “the entire mystery of divine revelation,” then it would seem that adequate study of the material requires that we use all the tools in our box: old, new, traditional, or developing.

Luke states that his purpose is “to write an orderly account [of the events that have been fulfilled among us], so that Theophilus may know the truth . . . .” (Lk 1:1) He is writing history – but history whose interests are “clearly subordinate to his theological vision and pastoral agenda.”<sup>53</sup>

Luke is writing history in the sense that countless historians—from the writers of the Bhagavad-Gita and Old Testament books to contemporary apologists for, for instance, Manifest Destiny—did. They are historians-with-a-purpose, and that purpose skews their view of events towards their conclusion. It can be easily argued that, to some extent, the work of all historians falls into this category. If we agree that all historical narratives are skewed, does it mean that all historical studies are worthless and not to be believed? Does the writer’s bias so distort his view of the past that without an exhaustive examination of his motives and context, we can never arrive at the truth of what happened in the past? Certainly, if the central purpose of history is to bolster a sponsoring state or organization by propagandizing a populace, then we are left either to reject it utterly, or to adopt our own favorite version. Fortunately, there are human beings who can be counted on to investigate and revisit the past almost endlessly, and in doing so call into

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<sup>52</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 41.

<sup>53</sup> From the introduction to the Gospel of Luke in *Harper Collins Study Bible*, ed. Harold Attridge (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1989).

question old assumptions and reveal new information that reshapes our concept of the past and our view of ourselves going forward.

In a short article, Claude Belanger outlines some of the purposes embedded in history:

Key concepts of history are causes, consequences, time/chronology, revolution, civilisation, West, Zeitgeist [the “spirit of the time”], world view, Quiet Revolution, etc. From other disciplines of the Social Sciences, history has borrowed heavily. From sociology: class, society, modernisation, family, etc. From political science: power, state, political system, etc. From anthropology: culture, ethnocentrism, racism, etc. From economics: production, demand, etc. From Geography: region, migration etc. From psychology: personality.<sup>54</sup>

Sandra Schneiders sees two purposes to the New Testament text, information and transformation. The first, information, can be interrogated. “(we can ask who wrote it, when, where and in what language).” We can inquire into its transmission “(are the texts authentic, whether our copies are accurate).” We can raise historical questions “(did the events recounted really happen).” We can try to understand the theological positions it represents and the spirituality and religious practice the texts represent. This is all information we can seek, and to some extent, determine.

The second purpose is transformation. “Here,” she says, “the objective is to go beyond simply discovering what the text says to asking if what it says is true, and if so, in what sense, and what the personal consequences for the reader and others might be.”<sup>55</sup> Schneiders’s view of the purposes of New Testament text is tangent to the psychology field’s analytical and clinical views. Clinicians listen to people and ask questions. Some of the information – How old are you? How many in your family? How much schooling? - can be objectively verified, but soon afterward, history enters murky waters. What are your parents like? What was school like for you? What are your relationships like? Most of the answers to these questions will distort facts to one degree or another, and some may be completely wrong, but through the lens of the

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<sup>54</sup> <http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/quebechistory/events/concepts.htm> (accessed January 20, 2012)

<sup>55</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 14.

clinician all will convey something of the internal reality of the client and will therefore be relevant, and in some sense, true. The question I ask is, “How might these stories be true, and what do they tell us?” Subsequently the question becomes, “Buried in the narrative, where are the nuggets that might reveal a way forward for this client?”

In his narrative, Luke has provided us with elements that can be verified or shown to be inaccurate by historical inquiry, but he has also supplied us a great many more that prompt the question, “How might this be true?” What is more, within the narrative he has given us stories of the spiritual advice Jesus gives to his followers that show a way forward.

Luke presents history that serves his goal of providing a framework for his audience to come into accord with the message and person of Jesus. He begins his Gospel by establishing Jesus’ credentials. His appearance and role as prophet, healer, and holy man is foretold, placing him squarely in accordance with the Jewish prophetic tradition (Lk. 1:26-38, 39-56). Unique aspects of Jesus birth (chap. 2) and upbringing are highlighted (2:21, 41-53). This places Jesus in a position of appearing on the world stage as an already complete package, but there is a deeper and messier story of the human necessity to experience the process of unfolding revelation.

The fit of prophecy with particular persons can be a retrospective enterprise, at least in the human realm. We realize prophetic fulfillment in the rearview mirror where memory must be connected to events currently unfolding, and prudent people take time to weigh the interactions of the two in order to discover whether or not they are true.

Mary in Luke’s narrative exhibits that prudence. The account of the annunciation and months following make the point that revelation needs time and silence in order to unfold in us. Luke Timothy Johnson notes a difference between the disciples’ directly asking for the meaning

of a parable (8:9) and Mary's wondering what sort of greeting Gabriel had given her (1:28-29).<sup>56</sup> The same theme is emphasized when "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). Both Johnson and Fitzmyer illuminate the very human quality of Mary's "pondering," translating the Greek as "tossing them together in her heart" (Fitzmyer)<sup>57</sup> or "thrown together" (Johnson).<sup>58</sup> Johnson further notes the connotations of "discussing, comparing, debating," mental processes all. The implication of the visual image (tossing/thrown together) characterizes not only the messiness of Mary's experience--being jumbled up and disconcerted--but the condition of all who undertake a serious spiritual path. Here Luke and *Thomas* echo one another: "The one who seeks should not cease seeking until he finds. And when he finds he will be disturbed; and when he is disturbed, he will marvel" (*Thom. 2*).<sup>59</sup>

An irony of Luke is that the narrative presents a picture of holiness, of prescience and the seamless unfolding of ancient prophecy. Everything is as it has been known and foretold, but concealed just below the surface are descriptions of what actually happens to human beings, even to those with divine connections we may not share. Part of the task of a seeker is to peel back the layers of narrative in order to reveal the themes and exposition that point the way to progress. This revelation of human elements necessary for negotiating a spiritual path have the comforting effect of placing him in good company and of being known by something greater than himself. The seeker is not alone, or crazy, or terrible, but is in fact proceeding apace in community with others like him.

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<sup>56</sup> Some might note a difference in the ways men and women respond to challenges – characterizing men as seeking plain, direct answers while women are seen as perceiving a wider field which they ponder and resist the temptation to jump to hasty conclusions.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, Anchor Bible 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 413.

<sup>58</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 51.

<sup>59</sup> Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 311.

Luke presents Jesus as an already authenticated teacher. But, teachers do not generally attract students on the basis of a *vita*. Generally, one individual who has encountered a teacher tells another what he has experienced prompting the hearer to go investigate for himself. Assuming the development of a certain amount of maturity on the potential student's part, first meetings are generally restrained and the mood skeptical. The literal translation of the legal term *voir dire*, "to see, to say" or "to speak the truth," may capture something of the atmosphere where much potentially is at stake and the willingness to wait, listen, and question provides the most promising avenue to genuine discernment.<sup>60</sup> A student meets a teacher and may be powerfully attracted by his charisma, but charisma alone proves nothing. The world is full of charismatic people who do not have good intentions. Among authentic teachers, first interchanges with newcomers are generally brief, and in some traditions even abrupt.<sup>61</sup> Teacher-student relationships develop over time, and only gradually is the student's sense of the teacher's authenticity confirmed.

This is where Luke, Thomas, and the desert abbas and ammas meet. Spiritual direction is present in all the documents. The principal difference is that in Luke, the direction is embedded in, surrounded by, or even overshadowed by the narrative, where in the other two it is more direct.

Luke shares important sources and themes with Thomas particularly, but stands in contrast with both Thomas and the desert tradition in style, time, geography, cultural sensibilities, and emphasis. Luke Timothy Johnson describes the purpose of this storyteller's

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<sup>60</sup> [http://www.therightjury.com/publications\\_real\\_purpose.html](http://www.therightjury.com/publications_real_purpose.html). Though an old term in legal proceedings, it is misleading. It implies a search for competent and neutral jurors, but in reality is geared towards finding acceptable jurors who may favor either the prosecution or defense. The same dilemma holds true in early teacher-student exchanges where students are often pressed to find solutions to personal life challenges. Authentic teachers are aware of this and (in psychological terms) refuse to accept projections of infallibility or omnipotence, and the implied expectation that the student will find all his answers quickly with this teacher.

<sup>61</sup> Among stories about teacher-seeker interactions, Zen teachers are famously abrupt. In Christian traditions, Jesus' encounter with the rich, young man (Lk. 18:18-23) falls into this category.

weaving of Jesus story into “one coherent and interconnected narrative” as “a historical source and theological resource.”<sup>62</sup>

Thomas and the desert fathers were not trying to write systematic theology, nor did they craft a historical narrative. What we have in those works does not hint at a unifying narrative geared toward any purpose. Luke has an audience, likely Gentile, already Christian, and perhaps culturally Greek.<sup>63</sup> His is a story that aims toward reaching a wide audience, unlike the anecdotal character of individual and small-group instruction found in *Thomas* and the desert literature.<sup>64</sup> Luke is the earliest of the documents considered in this paper (late first century), compared to *Thomas* (probably second century), and the sayings of the desert fathers (fourth century and later).<sup>65</sup>

While ancient teachers and writers did not consider psychology from any sort of modern perspective, they had ideas about how human beings were structured mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. These ideas were mostly assumptions formed from experience and are found embedded in their teaching and writing. This is not unlike the ancient views of astronomy where there were stories that reflected their assumptions about the sun, moon, planets, stars, and constellations. Our modern astronomy is very different from theirs, but that ancient system was accurate enough for navigational purposes, and it opens windows to understanding their world. The old stories also preserve something of the ancients’ sense of unseen forces at work in the mysterious vastness of the universe. They knew without doubt that unseen forces existed and that those forces had an immediate impact on their everyday lives. Even as they used

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<sup>62</sup> Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, .3

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> General estimates for the composition of Luke is 80-130 AD, and Thomas, 50-140 AD.

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/index.html> (Accessed February 28, 2012). The desert tradition is conveniently dated from Antony (circa 250-356). There is no firm ending date. The purpose of this general dating is to convey some sense of where they exist in relation to one another, not to make a case for precise dates.

stars to navigate through lands and seas devoid of signposts, they saw figures in the constellations that reflected their worldviews. Today, an astronomer points his sophisticated apparatus towards a portion of the sky long considered empty and discovers hundreds of thousands of galaxies in the darkness. Modern psychology was founded on speculation about unseen forces and is slowly progressing toward being able to see those forces in action in ways similar to those of modern astronomy.

It is difficult to understand why there is such resistance from the psychological and religious sides to probing religious texts through psychological lenses. Psychologists often avoid the subject as much as possible, professing either ignorance or lack of interest. Those who are interested find substantial tension in conversations with religious professionals. Partly the tension is rooted in the way psychology considers religious texts and figures, approaches perceived as heterodox, disrespectful of traditional tools and methods, or perhaps border incursions into theology's territory.<sup>66</sup>

But psychologists are not the only border scofflaws. Among orthodox Christians, there has been a steady drumbeat of demands that the findings of psychology and the treatment goals of therapists conform to established doctrines of the church, insisting, for instance, that fidelity to their doctrines of marriage be the hallmark of all marital counseling. On the positive side, but still without invitation, religion has often reminded scientists of the necessity of humane and respectful treatment for even the sickest among us, a steady reminder needed in all segments of society.

In a strategy aimed towards coexistence, some on both sides have attempted to construct a wall separating psychology and religion into spheres of influence similar to the wall erected

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<sup>66</sup> Examples include Jung's meditation on the Book of Job (*Answer to Job*) and essays like *Transformation Symbolism in the Mass*.

between religion and science during the Reformation. Carl Jung, the son of a Lutheran clergyman, was one example of a leading figure who postulated a wall, writing in

*Psychoanalysis and the Cure of Souls* (1928),

The question of the relations between psychoanalysis and pastoral cure of souls is not easy to answer, because the two are concerned with essentially different things. The cure of souls as practiced by the clergyman or priest is a religious influence based on a Christian confession of faith. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is a medical intervention, a psychological technique whose purpose it is to lay bare the contents of the unconscious and integrate them into the conscious mind.<sup>67</sup>

Jung's statement is conciliatory when compared to Freud and aimed toward establishing a modicum of peaceful coexistence. Freud's experience as a Jew in a predominately Christian and hostile culture, combined with a rather dark view of the unconscious, would not have enabled him to share Jung's views. About the closest he comes is this:

If one wishes to form a true estimate of the full grandeur of religion, one must keep in mind what it undertakes to do for men. It gives them information about the source and origin of the universe, it assures them of protection and final happiness amid the changing vicissitudes of life, and it guides their thoughts and motions by means of precepts which are backed by the whole force of its authority.<sup>68</sup>

But, this attempt at resolving interdisciplinary tension and turf wars sounds half-hearted when juxtaposed with another of his statements from the same lectures: "Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires."<sup>69</sup>

The wall that Jung and Freud helped erect began to crumble even as it was being built. Chaplains have been circulating among the populations of hospitalized patients for at least the last sixty years emphasizing pastoral ministry regardless of denominational ties. Today, there

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<sup>67</sup> Carl Jung. *Psychoanalysis and the Cure of Souls*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 11 (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1958), para. 539.

<sup>68</sup> Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, [http://www.notable-quotes.com/f/freud\\_sigmund.html](http://www.notable-quotes.com/f/freud_sigmund.html) (Accessed January 21, 2012) [fix hyper-link]

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.



are pastoral psychotherapists who are both theologically and clinically trained. Still, it is common to hear perfectly bright and respectable people refer to this wall as if it is a factual reality.

Stephen Jay Gould was a serious scientist who maintained that there is no conflict between science and religion because they occupy different “nonoverlapping magisteria,” “science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives.”<sup>70</sup> The problem with Gould’s delineation is that the idea of a wall separating science and religion sounds appealing, but in the end it defines each too narrowly and promotes division between the scientific and pastoral aspects. For clergy who are also serious scientists, acceptance of the wall guarantees that they are relegated to liminal status, belonging neither to the scientific camp nor the religious one.<sup>71</sup> For those whose ministry is primarily pastoral, the wall poses questions that test both their loyalties and personal integrity.

As a teenager, I spent several summers working in a hospital on a floor that would now be a critical-care unit. Reporting for duty one day, the head nurse asked if I had ever seen anyone die? “No,” I replied. “Well,” she announced in her brusque, seen it all, been through WWII way, “we don’t have many patients today and there is a woman in 306 who probably won’t live through the shift. She has a private-duty nurse who will be glad to show you the physical processes. Go talk to her.” So off I went. During the evening, the private-duty nurse patiently showed me the inevitable progress of dying in an elderly stroke victim, a Catholic. During my last visit, the chaplain and several nuns entered the room and, before I could leave, began to say last rites. I was stuck. At a certain place in the rite, the instruction was for the dying person to cross herself if possible. The woman, who had not responded to family or pain

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<sup>70</sup> Stephen Jay Gould. “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” *Natural History* 106 (March 1997):16-22. [http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould\\_noma.html](http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould_noma.html) (Accessed January 10, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> One example is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

stimulus for three days, sat up in bed, crossed herself, lay back down, and died. This flabbergasted seventeen-year-old was impressed for life.

What just happened? Something about the interaction of the rite and the consciousness of the woman had produced an utterly remarkable effect. What was that? What just happened that she responded in so remarkable a fashion? What operates in sacraments that could reach that deeply into a person?

A few days later, I met the chaplain in the hall and asked what he thought about the phenomenon. “Oh son,” he replied, “There are places in human beings we know nothing about.” And off he went. From the elderly chaplain’s point of view, that was answer enough, but the question posed to me continues. How can we find out a little more about the deepest physical and spiritual interactions in human beings?

Sandra Schneiders is another who accepts the view that the two fields do not belong together.

An even more recent development in the field of biblical studies is the use of human sciences, especially psychology and sociology, for the investigation of scripture. These approaches differ substantially from historical and literary approaches, which probably accounts for the fact that, generally speaking, they have met with greater resistance from the biblical academy than literary approaches. Because the biblical text is essentially . . . an historical document and because it is a literary composition, the application of historical and literary methods arises from the nature of the text. It cannot be argued, however that the biblical texts are psychological or sociological in the same way or to the same extent. Rather, because the texts are about and are addressed to human beings in community, some researchers have surmised that the models through which human beings as individuals and societies are studied might be validly applied to the biblical texts and might reveal data not available through other kinds of research.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 117.

Schneiders defines both Freudian and Jungian methodologies as focusing on the interpretation of the reader by the text, then states, “Psychoanalytic methods attend to unconscious dynamics that are manifested in the text or the reader.”<sup>73</sup>

She believes the “attraction of psychological methods lies in the relevance of such methods to contemporary interests in personal transformation and in the depth comprehension of personal agents.” However, “human and personality sciences are modern developments that were unknown to the biblical authors.” She accurately states that “No theory of personality hold[s] unquestioned priority in the field of psychology [and] none . . . can claim even relatively unchallenged validity for its theories or therapeutic techniques.” She concludes that “psychological and psychoanalytic methods, *because they focus on individuals* [emphasis mine] can be applied only to certain texts (those concerned with individual personality dynamics) and/or to the individual reader.”<sup>74</sup>

From a clinical point of view, all information about an individual--appearance and use of language, close relationships, cultural background, experiences, beliefs and formation, meanings formed, the times in which he lives, what one produces, the information one gathers and how, one’s personal, and economic and social circumstances--are grist for the therapeutic mill. This breadth of information essential to know the individual is echoed in Schneiders’s contention that sacred scripture involves the “entirety of divine revelation.” To limit the scope of inquiry or to make hasty assumptions about the facts of a client’s life is to invite grievous therapeutic errors that reveal more about the therapist than the client. To limit our inquiry into scripture to traditional but relatively narrow fields tends to produce a fairly standardized product but also limits its effectiveness and application.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 117

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 118. I have omitted her assessment of sociology.

There is wide interest today in personal transformation, but it is not a modern invention. In the texts considered in this paper, both *Thomas* and the desert tradition are *primarily* concerned with personal transformation. This focus on transformation over information is a difference that has greater implications than might be first imagined. It goes to the core of how we see vocation and ourselves in community. It involves different values, seemingly divergent points of view, and different descriptive language. Luke, while addressed to a much larger audience than *Thomas* or the desert teachers, preserves many of the concerns with personal transformation, the Sermon on the Plain standing as a prime example.

Human and personality sciences as they exist today and the languages they employ were unknown to the biblical authors. The same may be said about current worldviews, every science, and almost the entire database of information commonly accessed today, even the English language in which Schneiders writes. But, ancient people were not ignorant of the intricacies of human and personality dynamics. The descriptive languages they employed, though they used different images, methods, and words, have the capacity to astound a discerning modern reader.

I once attended a large psychological conference where a prominent research psychiatrist was asked, “Sometimes very sick patients or those approaching death will have visions, some fearful, some very comforting. What would you do? Would you medicate these patients or not in order to stop the visions?” (The underlying question probed the doctor’s view of visions as a symptom of pathology.) The psychiatrist, assuming that the visions were the product of aberrant chemical processes in the brain, answered that he would medicate even though he claimed ignorance about whether or not some visions might be authentic rather than pathological. During a break he and I had a short conversation in which I told him about St. Antony’s (fourth century) way of deciding whether particular visions were authentic or not. From a psychiatric point of

view, Antony's answer was simple and empirical and applicable. If the vision produces a state of peace in the individual, it is from God and the individual should be left in peace. Antony used the example of the shepherds' vision of Gabriel announcing Jesus' birth. "Do not be afraid," was the first thing said to them (Lk. 2:9-10). Their initial terror was put to rest. According to Antony, their peace was a sign that the vision was authentic. The psychiatrist paused for a moment. "Who said this? When did he live?" he asked in amazement. I repeated, "Antony of Egypt, fourth century." As he took the podium to resume his lecture, he announced this information to the entire room adding, "This can work. It's practical and knowable and doesn't depend on our personal ideas about what does and does not exist."<sup>75</sup>

Schneiders is correct in her assertion about no single psychological theory or method holding priority in the field, and none being able to claim unchallenged validity for its theories or techniques. In defense of the field, I can say that it is a new field of inquiry, scarcely more than a hundred years old. It is founded on the assertion that there exists an enormous quantity of non-rational, unconscious data, energy, processes, and structures that are just now slowly being uncovered. The field itself is expanding in quantum jumps, particularly as new technology becomes available and scientists learn how to apply it by asking questions that can realistically be answered. No theory holds sway because psychology is expanding far too rapidly to coalesce around a single theory or method. No theory holds sway in psychology in the same way that there is no unified field theory in physics or uniform approach in medicine--and precious little agreement about Christian doctrine. I like to think that psychologists, like astrophysicists, find revolutionary discoveries in portions of the sky that have until now appeared empty. No two

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<sup>75</sup> I find the desert stories and sayings in particular packed with almost endless and subtle insights into human processes and behavior, and as I become more fluent in their use of descriptions and terms, I find them useful on an almost daily basis in working with clients, whether religious or not. See Chapter 5 for more detail.

therapists and no two clients are alike. Different approaches are required by individual therapists to meet the need of each client. Simply, complexity trumps our ability to describe or prescribe.

The fact of different approaches and varied methods does not mean that there are no common assumptions at work. But psychology is founded on a scientific model, and progress often happens in fits and starts amid a great deal of noise and squabbling among those who practice it. Definitive answers hide way down the road and over the horizon that we can see. To the last of Sandra Schneiders's points--that psychological and psychoanalytic methods are focused on individuals--I suggest that the basic building blocks of all groups, whether families, cultures, societies, nation-states, Christianity, or humanity as a whole are individuals. By focusing on individuals we learn crucial fundamental information about the dynamics of not only individuals but larger groups as well. Peering just below the surface, Luke does focus on individuals and small groups in a manner not unlike Thomas. His larger focus may be on reaching a wider audience, but the list of instances where individuals or small groups are specifically addressed is extensive.<sup>76</sup>

In three chapters, Luke moves through Jesus' birth and childhood, presenting us with a thirty year old who is beginning his work (3:23). The very first element of his teaching career is Jesus' trial in the desert (Lk 4:1-13). Luke's narrative presents the temptations as a kind of heroic tale in which he affirms Jesus' divine connections. But if the narrative is read as a heroic tale it is easy to miss a description of ordeals and their necessity in shaping all human beings. If the temptations section is read as a universal human experience, then the distance between Jesus and other human beings is lessened and the possibility is raised that the ordeals each person experiences is an important part of becoming a full member of the race.

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Luke 1:8, 26; 2:8; 5:4, 12; 7:36; 8:9, 19, 22; 9:1, 18, 49, 57; 10:16, 23, 38, to list a few.

There would be no teacher called Jesus without the wilderness trial and temptations that follow the descent of the Spirit at the Jordan. Teachers are authentic not just because they have had a mystical vision or experience, but because the gap between vision/experience and embodiment has been bridged.<sup>77</sup> Visions and experiences are tested and the gap filled through ordeals, often in a physical and/or psychological wilderness. These tests are not capricious acts of God. Malina and Rohrbaugh maintain that temptations primarily address “covenant loyalty” citing Deut 8:2: “Remember the long way that YHVH your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what is in your heart.” They maintain that it is a test of Jesus’ heart, of his on-going intimate relationship with God.<sup>78</sup>

The desert ordeal may be a test of intimate relationship with God, especially in regard to Luke’s purposes, but the concept of testing heroes is one that is most often applied by outside observers. Rarely do individuals who have performed well in tough situations think of themselves as heroes, and seldom do they think in terms of being tested. Far more likely, designated heroes see themselves as having responded as best they could to a need that was thrust upon them. They express puzzlement when their spur-of-the-moment response is labeled as a test that makes them a hero.

Ordeals also perform an essential psychological function. They expose strengths and weaknesses, as well as the degree of integration in the psyche (wholeness of identity, person, and action). One condition of the test lies in the immediacy of the experience. Something happens.

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<sup>77</sup> This is one major difference between authentic spiritual experience and false or psychotic visions. False visions or experiences occur in isolation, i.e., entirely within the individual. There is no confirmation from the outside world. Psychology calls false visions *delusions* or *hallucinations*, both of which result in psychic disturbance. According to Athanasius, Antony defined the difference between authentic experience and that of the demons by the end result. Using Matt 12:19 and Is 42:2 as well as the words of Gabriel with the shepherds in Lk 2:8-12 (“Do not be afraid”), Antony concludes that if the experience leaves the person at peace, it is authentic (*Life of Antony*, 58-59).

<sup>78</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 240.

The person acts in response. He or she did not create the event and they may very well not think about what they do or why. They simply act spontaneously and may have no idea where their actions originate. This spontaneity provides a glimpse into the vast invisible realm of the unconscious, and the results may be interpreted correctly, though partially, in myriad ways. Malina and Rohrbaugh see Jesus' experience as proving his intimate relationship with God. A soldier who has rescued his fellows may be impressed with the fact that he did not know he was capable of performing as he did. Nothing in his previous experience prepared him for it. If he thinks about it, the fact of his actions may increase his awareness of possibilities existing not only in himself but also in many others. The inner world in which he lives may expand exponentially.

Few people receive perfect scores during times of trial, and the exposure of fissures becomes the focus of future development, but that is a modern view. Malina and Rohrbaugh frame the temptations in culturally-accurate honor/shame terms. However, later in the same section, they say, "his honor is what he is in himself."<sup>79</sup> Perhaps these commentators and modern psychology are on the same track. There is an essential and direct connection between the inner spiritual/psychological condition of the teacher or prophet and his or her effectiveness. These periods of hardship also function as ways to bridge the gap from right thinking or an ideal into flesh and blood, into self-knowledge and into the mind, heart, and character of the person. From having passed through these ordeals, authority flows as a manifestation of a particular charisma. Those with the eyes and ears to see and hear--serious students--respond and are marked by their contact with an authentic teacher.

Without Jesus' enduring the universal temptations to misuse power and to switch one's focus from God to the world, reality to illusion, he would be useless as a model for a whole

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 240.



redeemed humanity, which also experiences this kind of distraction. As a result of banishing the opposition, even temporarily as is implied (4:13), Jesus gains the authority to say, “Follow me,” a phrase used twenty-five times in the four Gospels, seven of which instances are in Luke. It is significant that nowhere in the Synoptics does Jesus use the phrase before the temptations.

From the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus establishes his credentials by healing and connects his teaching and preaching with the authentic Jewish prophetic tradition, particularly that of Moses and Elijah (Ex 34:28; Deut 9:9, 18; 1 Kings 19:8; Is 61:1-2). Even when Jesus begins to call disciples (Lk 5:1), the emphasis is still on establishing his foundation as prophet/healer/holy man. Disciples are evidently with him, but as observers, not students. It is easy to become caught up in the pace of the narrative and miss points like these.

The focus on healings continues as further demonstrations of his authenticity – the demoniac (4:33), Peter’s mother-in-law (4:38-39), the sick healed at evening (4:40-41), the leper (5:12-16), the paralytic (5:17-26), the man with the withered hand (6:6-11), and multitudes by the sea (6:17-19). Then Luke (6:20-42) presents the core of a primer for disciples. Fitzmyer asserts that the Sermon on the Plain is addressed to the disciples.<sup>80</sup> Like instructions for most beginning students, depth or the meat of the matter is lacking. Initially these sound like ethical teachings, and they are meant to be just that for beginners. Fitzmyer outlines some of the ways the teachings were considered over time, but whether the “epitome of Christian ethics” or “interim ethics,” the common denominator is ethics.<sup>81</sup>

The meat of the matter is reflected in desert traditions about transformed human beings, not just ethical persons. But transformation into what? Some, like Evagrius (circa 345-99), saw the result as a dynamic state of grace called *apatheia*, which Bamberger characterizes as an

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<sup>80</sup> Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke*, 627.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 629.

“absence of disordered emotion” and “freedom from passion” in situations and events that tend to stimulate passion.<sup>82</sup> Note that this is not the same as an absence of feeling or a psychological state of flat affect. It is the exact opposite. It is the epitome of a radical internal and external hospitality from the heart. Much admired and advocated by the monks of the desert, *apatheia* is seen as leading to *agape*.<sup>83</sup> It is a state of fearlessness or, conversely, a realization of the oft-repeated words, “do not be afraid.” (e.g., Lk 2:10) so that whatever conditions or events may occur, one is left calm and peaceful. It is the promised kingdom of heaven, which is the vision of God.<sup>84</sup> Lastly, while *apatheia* must be worked toward through prayer, it is grace and the power of Jesus Christ that ushers one into it.<sup>85</sup>

Implicit in this primer for discipleship are teachings that lead to fulfillment of the two highest teachings, the commands to love God and neighbor (Matt 22:37; Mk 12:30, 33; Lk 10:27) and the promise of fulfilling those commands in John 14:23, “those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” Before this can happen, the disciples must awaken and be able to watch and listen with Jesus. Just as Peter, James, and John struggle with sleep on the mountain of transfiguration (Lk 9:28-36) and on the Mount of Olives (22:39-46), they also struggle to awaken to the depths of the simple-sounding sayings Jesus has given them in this sermon. What does it mean to be poor spiritually? How does one become poor? What does it mean to become poor in a way that results in gaining the kingdom of God? What does it mean to be hungry? What does it mean to have weeping come to an end, and be replaced by laughter?

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<sup>82</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktos: Chapters on Prayer*, trans. by John Eudes Bamberger, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), lxxxvi-vii.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., lxxxvii

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., lxxxvi.

Yet Jesus is addressing the disciples. They must be among the poor and hungry and weeping and hated and denounced in some way. But how? Deeper teachings remain elusive. What does it mean when Jesus says, “And what you wish that people would do to you, do so to them.” (6: 31) The difficulty of this saying echoes later in the exchange with the lawyer concerning the identity of the neighbor (10:25-37). But just because this exchange has taken place with a lawyer does not mean that Jesus’ disciples have really heard the teaching and applied it fully to themselves. In the chapter immediately preceding, the Sons of Thunder have asked whether to call down fire on a Samaritan village (9:54), and even late in Jesus’ time with them the disciples appear ready to arm themselves against the opposition (22:36-38).

It is a long and difficult road to travel to get from the ethical wisdom of treating other people as you would like to be treated to discovering that some of the neighbors to be loved are Samaritans and Romans and Gentiles and lepers, not only externally but within as well. Jesus has said not to look for the kingdom of God externally, because it is within (17:20-22). The line is addressed to a Pharisee, but there were undoubtedly disciples present who could use hearing it yet again.

The block necessitating having to hear something over and over and the resistance to transformation is described by Jung as the *shadow*, the unlived, unrealized parts of our personal and collective lives, with which we must be reconciled in order to become more fully human.<sup>86</sup> These are perhaps the “forces” Paul refers to when he says: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15-17) Paul attributes it to the presence of sin embedded in flesh, and in some sense he is correct.

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<sup>86</sup> “By shadow, I mean the ‘negative’ side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and contents of the personal unconscious.” Carl Jung, *The Personal and the Collective (or Transpersonal) Unconscious in The Collected Works*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), para. 103n.

But the solution to this flesh-based sin does not lie in ridding one's self of the flesh, hoping for a day in which the problem is solved in a bodiless state after death in the perpetual presence of God. To continue to reject shadow aspects, relegating them to alien status, only isolates them in such a way as to guarantee their enmity and surprise attacks, the violence and cruelty of which demonstrate the pressure of pent-up forces. The experience of being treated with hospitality relieves this pressure; it civilizes and integrates. It places the force (or person) in a position of being modified by the action of love and respect.

In public teachings, Jesus says that the crowd knows how to “interpret the appearance of the earth and sky, but. . . do not know how to interpret the present time.” (Lk. 12:56).” [end quote? Source?] Both Fitzmyer<sup>87</sup> and Johnson<sup>88</sup> refer to Q or the *Gospel of Thomas* as possible sources, and Johnson finds the charge of hypocrisy “odd.”<sup>89</sup> Danker comments that “present time” is more than chronological time but ties it to God's activity among the Israelites.<sup>90</sup> Culpepper hears a warning about hypocrisy and the judgment to come.<sup>91</sup> The latter two comments raise questions of Jesus' motivations. Was he preaching a theology in which God's focus was on showing people a workable way to navigate life in the present?

The present moment is the jumble of our feelings, impulses, and thoughts, added to what we are doing externally, and the two--feelings, impulses, and thoughts on the one hand and actions on the other--are not isolated from one another. Internal conditions directly influence what we perceive and how we act and relate externally. If an alien presence occupying part of my internal space makes me afraid, the sight of strangers going about their business on the city

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<sup>87</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 999.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 208.

<sup>89</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*, trans. Thomas O. Lambdin et al., in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson, rev. ed. (San Francisco, HarperCollins 1990) 91 <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gthlamb.html>.

<sup>90</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (St. Louis, Missouri: Clayton Publishing House 1972), 156.

<sup>91</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke” in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume IX (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995), 268.

street may become, through projection, the object of my fear because I cannot tell the difference between my internal reality and a person walking down the street. Jesus teaches disciples, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn and you will not be condemned.”<sup>92</sup>

Linking judging, objectivity, and reconciliation with the shadow, Jung writes:

This is what I mean by “unprejudiced objectivity.” It is a moral achievement on the part of the doctor, who ought not to let himself be repelled by sickness and corruption. We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses. I am the oppressor of the person I condemn, not his friend and fellow-sufferer.<sup>93</sup>

Perhaps this sounds simple, but simple things are always the most difficult. In actual life it requires the greatest art to be simple, and so acceptance of oneself is the essence of the moral problem and the acid test of one’s whole outlook on life. That I feed the beggar, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ – all these are undoubtedly great virtues. But what if I should discover that the least among them, the poorest of all beggars, the most impudent of all offenders, yea the very fiend himself – that all these are within me, and that I stand in need of the alms of my own kindness, that I am the enemy who must be loved – what then? Then, as a rule, the whole truth of Christianity is reversed: there is then no more talk of love and long-suffering; we say to the brother within us “Raca,” and condemn and rage against ourselves. We hide him from the world. We deny ever having met this least among the lowly in ourselves, and had it been God himself who drew near to us in this despicable form, we should have denied him a thousand times before a single cock had crowed.”<sup>94</sup>

It is difficult to grasp the existence of internal worlds, much less the advantages of poverty, or enduring hunger, or any idea that this great spiritual path could possibly include anguish and conflict, or that having people speak well of you could be as much damnation as a sign of respect.

The expanded lesson of whether one with a log in the eye can successfully remove a splinter in the eye of a colleague returns later in this Gospel in the conversations about who takes what seat at a banquet (Lk 11:43; 20:46) and the petition of James and John (or their mother, in

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<sup>92</sup> Lk 6:37

<sup>93</sup> *Psychology East and West*, para. 519.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 520.

Matthew) to sit at the right and left hands of Jesus (Matt 20:23; Mk 10:46), as well as the arguments in Acts among Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James in Jerusalem (15:1-21). All of these instances involve disciples learning more deeply the first lessons, lessons of hearing (obedience), poverty, and charity.

Unconscious attitudes are of primary concern to Matthew, Luke, *Thomas*, and the desert monastics. Danker and others adopt a position that “Luke never views the kingdom of God as a psychological reality. It is always God’s reigning action.”<sup>95</sup> Such positions, viewed through clinical eyes, raise serious questions. What does Danker mean when he says “psychological reality”? Is psychological reality somehow separate from physical reality? What exactly is “God’s reigning action”? Does Jesus employ examples of everyday human problems only for the purpose of talking about matters that are clearly beyond the pay grade of most humans, or does he use human problems as symbolic of larger truths? Are these everyday situations he talks about all parables designed to conceal the truth from all but a few? How do the commentators who take these positions know what they claim?

Clinicians view these positions with a degree of skepticism. “Whom does it serve?”<sup>96</sup> This is the question that is key to the healing the Grail King’s wound in von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*. It is also a question that is a key to revealing hidden parts of many chronic situations, a question that we would do well to carry around in our pocket along with our cell phone and keys.

The phrase “God’s reigning action” removes Jesus’ very practical teaching from the human sphere where it invites us to be self-aware and places it into a realm that is ripe for speculation or, to use the clinical term, projection. Rather than teaching disciples something that can be put to immediate beneficial use, “reigning action” becomes a depository for largely

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<sup>95</sup> Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, 292.

<sup>96</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, trans. Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 16. 795.29. [lines?]

unconscious attitudes, fears, and hopes, not all of which are benign. It reserves knowledge to an elite group of experts who are in the know. The question remains: Was Jesus teaching something accessible only to the few, or do these stories set their aim toward immediate goals while leaving open the probability of other deeper insights for those able to hear and do more?

Words and teachings from teachers flow over disciples like healing balm in the beginning, but that soon passes as the necessity for embodying the teacher's words becomes a challenging present. It is only expected and perhaps inevitable that human beings hear what they want to hear in the way that they want to hear it.<sup>97</sup> Learning to hear what is said is a deeper problem. The parable of the sower found in all three Synoptics (Matt 13:18-23; Mk 4:13-20; Lk 8:11-15) outlines the circumstances that interfere with hearing. Immediately before (Lk 8:9-10), Jesus tells them that "secrets of the kingdom of God are for you to know, but for others they are revealed in parables" (8:10). The reason seems without compassion: "for to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not even what he thinks that he has will be taken away, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand" (8:18). Statements like these might contribute to arrogance on the part of the disciples, and it could be wondered if they perceived the irony of their having to ask for the meaning of the parable.

Even though Jesus has named apostles out of those who follow him, these are not by any stretch finished products (6:13-16). They have not yet learned that disciples are always disciples first, perhaps giving rise to the teacher's warning that disciples are not superior to their teacher (6:40). It is a difficult lesson to learn when one is in the company of real authority and power. Displays of such powers carry great dangers of inflation for disciples, feeding into an aura of

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<sup>97</sup> Fitzmyer uses the term 'eisegetical' to describe this common phenomenon, and the desert monks may well have described it in terms of 'passions', habits of thought and mind that hamper spiritual progress.

entitlement, magic, and the machinations of an underdeveloped humanity. Difficult work remains before the student.

Luke's overall emphasis is on hearing. The result of hearing is healing, and the result of healing is the kingdom of God. This is a straight line from which Luke does not deviate for the rest of the Gospel. It highlights the difference between Mary's responses to the events surrounding the Annunciation (she ponders, tosses the words together in her heart) and the disciples' asking to be told the meaning of the parables.

It might be said that the only thing Luke's Jesus does more than eat is heal. There are seventeen healings in the twenty-four chapters. Yet all he has given his disciples is a list of simple-seeming wisdom sayings as their instruction book. The answer lies in the disciples' gradual awakening to the depths of these simple teachings, realizing (embodying) them and coming to live in a kingdom already spread out before them. This is a matter of ongoing experience, not just an intellectual or moral exercise. Hospitality, the path to loving one's neighbor, a word not used in the Gospels but used four times in Paul (Rom 12:13; 1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8; 1 Pet 4:9), is more than an ethical exercise. It involves genuine openness of heart, ears, resources, and mind.

The job of a disciple is not to imitate the example of the Pharisees--acting in order to preserve or enhance claims to power or in profiting from it themselves--but to give freely to those who seek and knock and ask (Matt 7:7; Lk. 11: 9). This principle echoes instructions to disciples being sent out in Matthew: "you have received without payment; give without payment" (7:7), in the promise of being filled when hungry (Lk.6:21), and in the teaching to "Give to anyone who begs from you" (6: 21).



Assuming that Jesus was often accompanied by disciples, it can be argued that whatever he did and said served diverse purposes. When he healed he was doing so out of a genuine regard for the person being healed, but he was also performing that action as a teaching moment for those with him (e. g., 7:1-11 and, more explicitly in Matt 17: 21). Thus Luke's Jesus is always commenting on the circumstances, people, and events at hand. Whether he is speaking with the centurion (7:2-10), giving advice to potential followers (9:57-62), healing the Gerasene demoniac (8:26-39), delivering ironic statements like disciples having to hate father and mother (14:26-27) or warning his students about the "leaven of the Pharisees" (12:1), Jesus is teaching not about the way things could/should be but the way they are. His frequent admonitions to look and listen take on new shape. They are no longer perceived as being only about the future or an ideal. They are about awakening to the kingdom spread out on the earth for them to see and live in, and this is the essence of discipleship.

How to see; how to hear, how to realize, are major themes explored in the next chapter on the Gospel of *Thomas*.

## Chapter 4

### *Thomas*

The *Gospel of Thomas* differs from the Synoptic Gospels in that it is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. There is little context and almost no narrative. It is often bedeviled by negative reactions in orthodox circles even though many of the sayings have parallels in the canon. The gift of the *Gospel of Thomas* is that the sayings open a perspective on discipleship that goes beyond traditional exegesis.

The gospel is an early document. Helmut Koester writes:

The Gospel of Thomas is well attested as a Greek gospel writing that circulated widely during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The attestation is just as strong as that for the canonical gospels. That is affirmed by the early testimonies to this gospel. The earliest reference to the Gospel of Thomas appears in Hippolytus' *Refutatio* 5.7.20 (222-235 CE in Rome).<sup>98</sup>

Koester holds that both the canonical and apocryphal writings owe a debt to earlier writings and traditions about the life and words of Jesus: "Even the Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the canonical gospels, is not the oldest representative of gospel literature, but used written sources, and there can be no doubt about the use of written sources in the later gospels of the canon."<sup>99</sup>

Continuing this thread, Koester writes,

Among these older gospel writings are collections of sayings (Synoptic Sayings Source), a collection of parables (the source of Mark 4), catenae of miracle stories (employed by Mark and recognizable in the Semeia Source, of the Gospel of John, books of apocalyptic prophecies (Mark 13 and Matthew 24-25), and legends about Jesus' birth (Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2).<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development*, (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 77.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

It can be helpful to understand something about how oral traditions migrate to written forms and what happens to sayings and stories along the way. Koester observes,

In the first one and one-half centuries, “scripture,” i.e., authoritative writing, comprised exclusively what was later called the Old Testament. Any additional authority referred to in order to underline the legitimacy of the Christian Message and the teaching of the church was present in a variety of traditions which were still undefined. Sometimes these were transmitted orally, sometimes in written form. Such authority could be called “the sayings of the Lord,” usually transmitted orally.<sup>101</sup>

To someone educated in modern oral traditions, Koester’s statement about the migration from oral teachings to written forms rings true. Teachers, both ancient and modern, meet with their students singly and in small groups to convey their teachings.<sup>102</sup> Seldom do the disciples hear or remember the same things or draw identical meanings from the words.<sup>103</sup> This pattern should serve as a reminder that language is a fragile tool. Language in any form originates from a complex and subjective system (the speaker) and is passed to other complex and subjective systems (the listeners). We need only to look to ongoing arguments over the meaning and reach of the U. S. Constitution: What was the intent of the writers? What was the intent of Congress in writing enabling legislation? Even attempts to answer these questions provoke heated discussion.

The same problems exist in the study of religious texts of whatever stripe. Tibetan Buddhists surround disputation over scripture with great formality, complete with enthusiastic gestures. Jews have midrash in which scripture is contemplated along with centuries of existing commentaries. There is great benefit in this process, but it modifies the original message. When working with clients, I watch a speaker as well as

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Lk 8:9-10, 36; Matt 13:18-19 (reasons for secrecy); 17:9; Mk 4:10-13; 9:9.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Lk 9:33

listen. Intonation, gestures, context, expressions, manner, and overall body language all convey a much wider message than words alone. That wider message is missing when words are converted to letters. Dissonance between these elements is perhaps even more informative in reaching overall understanding. For example, a teacher once visited a residential center occupied by his students to inspect the progress of some remodeling. He took a minute in the bathroom, and when he emerged he was shaking and his eyes were streaming with tears. After collecting himself, he called loudly for the person in charge of the remodeling. Reading this short description conveys several possible scenarios but leaves accurate meaning up in the air. The fact was the teacher was shaking with laughter because an inexperienced brother had connected the toilet to the hot water supply, and the teacher, who was the first to use the facilities, had experienced a gentle steam bath on his exposed bits.

Writing words on paper helps preserve teachings into the future, and that is valuable. It also acts as a filter on the teachings that alters the breadth and personal quality of the message even as it seeks to concretize it by means of the words themselves. The words chosen by any particular teacher are shaped by his or her personality, cultural context, and emotional affect at the time, all of which contribute to the overall meaning drawn by the student who is also operating within a personal set of contexts. Written words tend to limit interpretations to dictionaries and historical contexts.

Koester summarizes the history of early church authorities--Clement, Justin, and Papias among them--concerning what are now extracanonical writings. Justin lobbied for the adoption of written records, which he termed “memoirs,” over oral traditions. He “saw the written gospels as a more reliable record of the words and deeds of Jesus and . . . he advertised them as

replacement of the established, but less trustworthy oral traditions.”<sup>104</sup> Yet Koester maintains that Justin was not using the term “memoir” in order to elevate written gospels to the historical level because different words were used to designate the historical record. “But what is of primary importance is the fact that the use of this term [“remembering” which had been used in such writings as the *Apocryphon of James*] advertises the written gospel as replacement for the older traditions under apostolic authority.”<sup>105</sup>

For disciples, written records present a dilemma. Written records are necessary where different people must agree on common interpretations. For organizations in general--orthodox religion, the law, government and commercial enterprise, anywhere standardization is necessary--writing and, increasingly, other forms of record-keeping are indispensable. But when it comes to the matter of particularized expression of an individual’s discipleship, standardization of meaning and one-size-fits-all interpretations that are so necessary for common life become high walls that hinder and not infrequently prevent progress.

*Thomas*, despite its frequent agreement with the canonical Gospels, has garnered much examination and controversy in part because *Thomas* has the status of a kind of elder brother among the more recently discovered apocryphal writings. As Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše say, “The Coptic Gospel of *Thomas* is the best known, most studied and most controversial of all the apocryphal Gospels.”<sup>106</sup>

Though it is not part of the canon, this collection of sayings has certain strengths – its early dating (100-150 CE),<sup>107</sup> its parallels, modifications, and contrasts with the Synoptic

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<sup>104</sup> Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 37.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>106</sup> Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 303.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

Gospels, and its resemblance to what is considered to be the early sources of the Synoptics.<sup>108</sup>

An ongoing conversation considers whether *Thomas* might be the long-lost Q source. Ehrman and Plese see the possibilities but conclude that “most of the sayings material in Matthew and Luke cannot be found in Thomas, just as many of Thomas’s sayings cannot be found in the Synoptics. But it came to be thought that Q may have been a Gospel *like* Thomas, in structure and purpose (see Robinson, “Logoi Sophon”).<sup>109</sup> But it is the charge that *Thomas* is a “Gnostic” document that breeds the most intense reactions within and outside orthodoxy.

Still, *Thomas* has something important to say about our question of discipleship. My main intention is to examine the worldview of the gospel as seen through the eyes of someone who lives mostly in a realm concerned with human motivations, cognition, and mechanisms of behavior. For *Thomas* to be heard however, I must address the Gnostic controversy. Karen King tries to define and clarify the terms:

Historically, Gnosticism is a term that belongs to the discourses of normative Christian identity formation. It has been used to refer to the following:

1. All varieties of early Christianity that are characterized by these discourses as having too little or too negative an approbation of Judaism;
2. An outside contamination of pure Christianity, either as the force that contaminated Christianity (as in theories of Gnosticism as an independent religion) or as a form of contaminated Christianity (where Gnosticism is understood to be a secondary deviation from the pure Gospel);
3. Any of a number of traditions said to be closely related to this contaminated Christianity, whether or not they contain explicitly Christian elements, such as Hermeticism, Platonizing Sethianism, Mandaeanism, Manichaeism, the Albigensian heresy, or the tenets of the medieval Cathars.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> See Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, chap. 2.

<sup>109</sup> Ehrman and Plese, *Gospels*, 305. The reference to Robinson is to the essay “Logoi Sophon: On the *Gattung* of Q” in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, ed. J. Robinson and H. Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 71-113.

<sup>110</sup> Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 4.

Citing a dictionary<sup>111</sup> definition of “Gnosticism” and “Gnostic” as a reflection of a more general understanding, she observes that

defining the term “Gnosticism” is one of the greatest challenges in Gnostic studies. The term is used so widely and in so many different senses that its precise meaning in any given case is often hard to discern. Indeed, not only is Gnosticism used to refer to certain types of ancient Christian heresy, but has come to have significant application in a variety of other areas, including philosophy, literary studies, politics, and psychology. It has been connected with Buddhism, nihilism, and modern movements such as progressivism, positivism, Hegelianism, and Marxism. Gnosticism was pivotal to Carl Jung’s reflection on the collective unconscious and archetypes.<sup>112</sup>

When a single term is applied so broadly to so many fields of inquiry, both ancient and modern, one may suspect that the term contains emotionally charged elements that make the term a code word for negative personal reactions. Our political world is full of cathetic terms, words like *communist*, *socialist*, and *Nazi* among them.<sup>113</sup> Professional languages also become contaminated with them. My own field, psychotherapy, has had its share of commonly used diagnoses that became so broad in their understanding and so commonly used that they lost meaning to all but the most discerning ears. For instance, *borderline personality* or *schizo-affective* are code words that, besides their more official definitions, sometimes mean, “I don’t like this person” or “I am afraid of this person” or “This person’s behavior and cognitive processes are alien to me.” From an analytic point of view, the use of these terms often reveals more about *the person using the terms* than about their object.

I am suggesting that in order to address Gnosticism in a genuinely helpful way, the scholarly community may need temporarily to set aside well-established arguments against

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<sup>111</sup> *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1987). “*gnosis*: esoteric knowledge of spiritual truth held by the ancient Gnostics to be essential to salvation. *Gnosticism*: the thought and practice esp. of early cults of late pre-Christian and early Christian centuries distinguished by the conviction that matter is evil and that emancipation comes through gnosis.”

<sup>112</sup> King amply supports each of her assertions in her Notes, p.277.

Gnosticism and reach into the realm of psychology and studies in modern linguistics. The problems associated with Gnosticism certainly involve ancient languages, theology, history, and politics, but to one attuned to human emotions the strong reactions elicited by the mention of a term point to the perception of threats to personal and group identities. If someone or a literary work is called “Gnostic,” two things may happen. A name is stamped onto a personal fear, and the speaker is relieved of the need to see if and what the person or thought might be accurately describing.

Three terms commonly associated with Gnostic and Gnosticism are *secrets*, *special knowledge*, and *dualism*. These are strong, emotionally laden words that provoke intensely negative responses.

Secrets, in the popular imagination, often indicate espionage, nefarious plots, or secret societies complete with signs and special knowledge that separate members from those who are excluded. One legitimate concern about secrets is their use in acquiring and holding power over other human beings as in the parallel sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* and Q/Luke.

*Gos. Thom. 39*

The Pharisees and the scribes have taken the keys of knowledge and hidden them. They have neither entered nor let those wishing to enter do so.<sup>114</sup>

*Q/Luke 11:52*

Woe to you lawyers (Matt: scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites)! You have taken away the keys of knowledge and hidden them. They themselves have not entered, nor have they allowed to enter those who wish to.

The very strong statements above in *Thomas*, Luke, Q, and Matthew concern an important topic, namely, how one group has controlled access to important information and used it to dominate large groups of people. It is implied that their motivation is preservation of their status and power, and it works to the detriment of the whole population who are neither

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<sup>114</sup> Translation by Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Plese, *The Apocryphal Gospels*, 321.



Pharisees nor scribes. The writers of these early documents (*Thomas*, Luke, Q, and Matthew) are incensed by such a misuse of power and consider it important enough to cite Jesus as having said it. Similar emotions surround the vituperative use of “Gnostic.”

Secrets are potentially dangerous both to their keepers and to those excluded. Great care must be exercised as to the subject and duration of secrets, and above all there must be ongoing consideration, preferably with neutral parties, of the reasons for the secrets and the motivation of the secret-keepers. Those who deal with people in psychological crisis are more than familiar with secrets and resultant physical, emotional, and cognitive effects. The effects are global, reaching into every relationship and perception, and even into physical conditions. Secrets may be inevitable and ubiquitous, but those who deal with them have to learn how to handle them safely.

No one wants to be left out of a secret or excluded from knowledge that is secret. Huge profitable industries exist on the assertion that they are in possession of special knowledge and that they will reveal the secrets of celebrities, success, or the stock market. They thrive on the illusion of access to special inside knowledge that they will reveal for a price. We like to say we value transparency in government. We go to great lengths to ferret out secrets in criminal proceedings. Practically the whole enterprise of scientific and academic research is about uncovering secrets, particularly the secrets of nature. Psychotherapists sit quietly while secrets bubble to the surface, rejoicing when they do.<sup>115</sup> There is great emphasis in the desert literature on revealing secrets to the abba. John Chryssavgis says,

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<sup>115</sup> For a general article on secrets from a scientific point of view see Eric Jaffe, “The Science Behind Secrets,” *Association for Psychological Science* (July, 2006) under “Observer,” <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/getArticle.cfm?id=2015> (Accessed January 31, 2012). It is worth noting that Google lists some 118,000,000 references to secrets, an indication of the ubiquitous fascination with and importance of secrets.

In “telling our elders confidently” all that we do, which is another way of saying “confessing to our spiritual guide” all that we feel, we gradually learn and grow. Such obedience through personal direction and consultation is yet another way of silence; it is a way of slowing down in a fast-moving world in order to pay attention to every detail of our life and our world. Ultimately, what we learn through attention and what we grow in through direction is again the way of love. *Counseling is the first step toward community.* In admitting to another what we think, what we do, and what we feel, we learn to be forgiven and loved.<sup>116</sup>

Most secrets are found in the natural world and have nothing to do with human aspirations for power. They are part of the enormous Reality that is hidden from us even though all around us.

*Gos. Thom. 113*

His disciples said to him, “When will the kingdom come?”<sup>117</sup> “It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be said, ‘Look here it is,’ or ‘Look, it is there.’ Rather the kingdom of the Father is spread out on the earth, and people do not see it.”<sup>118</sup>

From deeply personal secrets like “Who am I?” to “Why is the universe speeding up in its journey away from the origin of the Big Bang?” to “Where have all the birds gone who usually cover my feeders?” secrets are everywhere, all the time. Spiritual secrets also are ubiquitous, and spiritual teachers throughout time have devoted themselves to helping disciples find answers. Across the religious spectrum, teachers’ hints and directions often clash with accepted norms of thinking and instruction. Far from clarity and order, they often pose puzzles for disciples to solve as they develop.

*Gos. Thom. 3*

Jesus said, “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. But the kingdom is within you, and it is outside you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will

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<sup>116</sup>John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 2008), 64.

<sup>117</sup>Cf. Matt 24:3; Mk 13:4; Lk 21:7.

<sup>118</sup>Cf. Lk 17:20-21.

understand that you are the children of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, then you are in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty.”

Koester writes,

Thomas contains a number of sayings whose meaning is not as transparent as the common wisdom forms cited thus far. But there are indications that this is by design. These sayings reveal a more radical concept of secret knowledge. They speak of hidden truths about human existence, heavenly origins, separation from the world, and liberation of the soul from the body. It is particularly this understanding of salvation that is critically interpreted in the Gospel of John. The Thomas Christians are told the truth about their divine origins, and given the secret passwords that will prove effective in the return journey.<sup>119</sup>

*Gos. Thom.5*

Jesus said, “Know what is before your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed.”

*Gos. Thom. 49*

Jesus said, “Blessed are the solitary and the elect, for you will find the kingdom. For you are from it, and to it you will return.”

*Gos. Thom. 50*

Jesus said, “If they say to you, ‘Where did you come from?’, say to them, ‘We came from the light, the place where the light came into being on its own accord and established [itself] and became manifest through their image.’ If they say to you, ‘Is it you?’, say, ‘We are its children and we are the elect of the living Father.’ If they ask you, ‘What is the sign of your Father in you?’, say to them, ‘It is movement and repose.’”<sup>120</sup>

Separated from the incendiary rhetoric that has marked discussions of Gnosticism for over a millennium, there may be plausible explanations of statements like the above. But those are subjects for another paper. The last sentence (“It is movement and repose”) *does* have relevance here because it connects to a kind of practical discipleship. Throughout the literature

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<sup>119</sup> Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* 125.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

of the desert and extending into examples found in thirteenth-century mystical writings and beyond, there are synonyms<sup>121</sup> that point to the condition of “movement and repose.”

John Bamberger, translating and unpacking Evagrius, explains *apatheia*:

For him [Evagrius], *apatheia* is more recognizably human than it is in Clement. Although it does represent only a relatively permanent state of deep calm arising from the full and harmonious integration of the emotional life, under the influence of love. For him, *apatheia* and *agape*, divine love, are but two aspects of a single reality.<sup>122</sup>

Teachers of the desert (abbas and ammas) were recognized for their attainment. They had, as Bamberger so aptly puts it, entered a “relatively permanent” condition of detachment where, while remaining very much involved in daily life and in the demands of troublesome people, evidenced a kind of equanimity in the face of whatever troublesome people and circumstances life presented. This equanimity was then and is now a sign that such a person is in contact with essential secrets about living. When Jesus tells the rich man, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Lk 18:22), he is pointing to a precondition of *apatheia* or detachment.

*Thomas* is more direct: “Whoever finds the world and becomes rich, let him renounce the world” (Gos. Thom. 110). Both of these sayings imply a broad range of possible actions. Literally giving up material possessions is often necessary for spiritual growth, but without surrendering less visible desires, e.g., the desire to be recognized, to be better than the next person, to have an honored place in the kingdom or at the table for which no amount of material sacrifice will suffice, no progress can be made.

*Apatheia* is perceived partly through the senses and thus is a sign of the Father’s functioning in them. A person who remains peaceful in the midst of chaos stands out among

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<sup>121</sup> Some of the synonyms found in Christianity are *apatheia*, *prayer*, *disinterest*, *non-attachment*, *detachment*, and *immovability*. In Eastern circles, words like *emptiness* and *enlightenment* would be similar.

<sup>122</sup> John Bamberger, *Praktikos*, lxxxiv.

others who do not. Focus and concentration are characteristics of repose, but there is an inner foundation upon which focus and concentration rest. There is a sense in which these individuals have found their way between Scylla and Charybdis and as a result are at peace.

This is not just an intellectual discipline and accomplishment. If it were, then those lacking the particular intellectual gifts necessary would be excluded. One of the riches of the desert literature is that abbots and nuns came from all sorts of backgrounds: Moses was a former highway robber and murderer; Antony was a farmer and landholder, John was a dwarf. Some were highly educated and others, illiterate. Some came from wealth and power, but others from dire poverty. The message is that the Way is available to all willing to walk it faithfully.<sup>123</sup> “He who seeks will find, and he who knocks will be let in” (Gos. Thom. 94).

Secrets can be benign and secrets can be malignant, sometimes simultaneously, as in secret military missions. Secrets bind individuals together for good *and* for ill, and secrets are used to delineate membership in a particular group as opposed to those outside the group. Lastly, secrets like what I’m getting my wife for her birthday and the family plans for a party are joyous, even as they produce anxiety for both the secret-keepers and those who are excluded.

Secrets make human beings anxious, and nowhere is that more pronounced than in matters of life and death. There may be no more important matter of life and death than the concerns of religion. How am I to live while I am here on earth? What happens when I die? What will become of me after I die? What does the experience of my living mean in the scheme of things? Am I known? Am I loved? Do I love? Does my being here have any significance? Secrets permeate religion. God, apparently, is full of them, and we feel compelled to try to keep some from God.

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<sup>123</sup> Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 177.

While God's secrets are scattered about our feet as well as among the stars and in our hearts, specialists abound who are seeking the keys that will usher the knowledge hidden in them into common knowledge and practical use. Acquiring knowledge about the structure and processes of this enormous reality we live in is painfully slow, and one side effect has been the development of specialty languages that are spoken and understood only by one or other elite. But more challenging than the private languages of engineers, physicists, and physicians is the fact that trailing behind each new discovery is a whole new set of questions to be answered.

Mario Livio is a physicist with the group that coordinates the science activities of the Hubble space telescope. He specializes in phenomena like white dwarf stars and dark energy. He comments: "Lord Kelvin has been claimed to have said that everything has been actually solved already and there are just two small problems that remain to be solved. And, as it turned out, those two problems led to quantum mechanics and general relativity, the two greatest [of the] scientific revolutions of the twentieth century."<sup>124</sup>

It seems that we keep asking questions, and when the answers come they present us with even more questions and far more complex answers than we ever imagined possible. The questions multiply around us like dragons' teeth even as the answers appear to point in different directions. As a therapist, I know that each person must have a stable sense of self *and* must simultaneously have a sense of self in relation to the rest of creation. Who one is to oneself is largely formed out of one's relationships with other people and the environment added to a mysterious element we call *character*, which seems to be present at birth. But this sense of personal identity is also formed by the meaning one discovers or assigns or creates in concert with other informing influences of one's experience and relationships.

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<sup>124</sup> "Who Ordered This? With Mario Livio." [Being.publicradio.org/programs/2011/who-ordered-this/transcript.shtml](http://Being.publicradio.org/programs/2011/who-ordered-this/transcript.shtml). (accessed January 31, 2012).

Religiously, Christians tend towards a view that we are particular *some things*, souls fixed in the sight of God, and that we shall remain so for eternity. Yet we change and, we hope to evolve throughout life. We are not the same people at seventy as we were at fifteen, although a sharp eye might discern certain threads present at fifteen that are also present in a more developed state at seventy. Yet experience has also modified us in ways that may render the elder almost unrecognizable to the fifteen-year-old.

The necessity to have a stable individual identity and a stable corporate identity simultaneously is yet another example of the term *emergence*, differing systems interacting to form a third system that differs from and is greater than either of the first two. In a very real sense, the two identities are dualistic, and the product of the conflict between the two results in a third something that, in turn, influences not only the individual creator but also those of all other systems.

Human beings must see themselves as unique and important, but the progress of knowledge continually delivers a consistent message that we are really much smaller than we would like to think. Once we were the centerpiece of God's creative effort, occupying the central position in the universe, unique, with minds that assured our control of ourselves and the world around us. Then came along Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud telling us that that we are none of these things.

. . . we thought that the Earth was the center of the universe. We then discovered that the Earth is not even the center of the solar system. We then discovered that the solar system is not at the center of our galaxy. . . . Then. . .Edwin Hubble discovered that there are billions of galaxies like ours.<sup>125</sup>

Darwin's observations detailed that species change in response to their environment and that new creatures emerge from existing ones. Thus modern human beings emerged from earlier humans

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 11.

with a prize for those who were best at developing tools that aided adaption to changing conditions. Ongoing research is discovering that there are more varieties of humanoids than ever imagined in the commonly held linear conception model of a monkey to human.<sup>126</sup>

These two discoveries ironically necessitate that we not think of ourselves as highly as was possible when we were at the center of God's gaze, and we are being forced to recalibrate our sense of self to exist within an ever greater pattern of living things instead of special creations living next door to the Creator.

The everyday instances of human beings' facing the choices of which values and actions are to be pursued gives rise to a sense of a dualistic creation, one of an underlying eternal unity and another that is a complex, ever-changing reflection of individual and corporate experience. I suggest that the appearance of this dualism that tears at our attention and desires is a reasonable explanation for what Gnostic writers and, perhaps, the writer of Ephesians (6:12) were trying to address.<sup>127</sup> This sense of dualism looms so large in human experience that the term "peace" often means freedom from this never-ending conflict.

*Gos. Thom. 90*

Jesus said, Come to me, for my yoke is easy and my lordship is kind. And you will find repose for yourselves.

It is reasonable that no matter how they are translated--aeons, principalities, dominions, powers--the experience of perpetual conflict must somehow be addressed by anyone seeking answers to the problem of pain and evil in the human condition.

Whether or not the *Gospel of Thomas* records the actual words of Jesus, whether or not its sayings are difficult or obscure or maddening, and whether or not this gospel presents a view

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<sup>126</sup> <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/anthro/bioanth/ch1/chap1.htm> (accessed February 2, 2012).

<sup>127</sup> "For our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."



of the cosmos that differs from that of the canonical Gospels, the point of view it does present can be helpful to serious seekers. *Thomas* shifts how we perceive Jesus from savior of humanity to teacher of human beings without speculating what or who Jesus may be in the realm of God's mind or intentions. Rather, he is presented as a teacher in the process of teaching disciples.

*Thomas* emphasizes the importance of everyday experience, and his instructions about practices like fasting and prayer are simple.

*Gos. Thom. 5-6*

Jesus said, "Recognize what is in your sight, and that which is hidden from you will become plain to you. For there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest."

His disciples questioned Him and said to Him, "Do you want us to fast? How shall we pray? Shall we give alms? What diet shall we observe?" Jesus said, "Do not tell lies, and do not do what you hate, for all things are plain in the sight of Heaven. For nothing hidden will not become manifest, and nothing covered will remain without being uncovered."

"Pay attention to what is around you!" This is one principal emphasis of the gospel, and the complement is "Become passers-by"(42).<sup>128</sup> Jesus emphasizes what is immediate as opposed to future events.<sup>129</sup> The goal of praxis is personal integration,<sup>130</sup> and personal integration leads to apatheia. This is not a linear process. Personal integration is enhanced by the development of apatheia, and one's practice is further developed by integration and apatheia.

One key difference between the canonical Gospels and the *Gospel of Thomas* is the almost complete absence of concern with a world to come at some future time.

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. Sayings 5, 8, 17, 51, 54, 55, 87, 110.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Sayings 52, 90, 72, 91.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Sayings 47, 106.

*Gos. Thom.*

(18) The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us how our end will be.” Jesus said, “Have you discovered, then, the beginning, that you look for the end? For where the beginning is, there will the end be. Blessed is he who will take his place in the beginning; he will know the end and will not experience death.”

(51) His disciples said to him, “When will the repose of the dead come about, and when will the new world come?” He said to them, “What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.”

Another major departure of *Thomas* from the Synoptic Gospels is that *Thomas* says nothing about Jesus’ birth, death, or resurrection. Nor is there any mention of events that take place after the resurrection of Jesus. This is a gospel that has its sights set squarely on Jesus’ teaching relationship with disciples. It is important to realize that we who read the *Gospel of Thomas* are interlopers, eavesdropping on intimate conversations that happened a very long time ago in a culture and language very different from our own. Simply put, we find the context and manner of expression contained in it difficult to grasp and foreign to modern sensibilities.

The vision of discipleship found in both *Thomas* and the desert teachers suggests that it is necessary to become aware of our various cultural, historical, and educational prejudices so that when faced with very different ways of perceiving and processing, we do not take refuge in *us versus them* thinking. While these prejudices are considered to be riches in their native cultures, they are marks of *otherness* among those rooted in different paradigms, and sources of abiding conflict where cultures and paradigms meet.

## Chapter 5

### *The Desert Tradition*

#### *The Desert*

“Desert” (erēmos) literally means “abandonment.”<sup>131</sup> It is a geographical, spiritual and psychological space. In ancient times, it was a place vital to those who lived in the Levant and Egypt, whether Israelites in search of the land of God’s promise or, in later times, men and women gathered to discover their humanness in the presence of God. It is a place of danger where want and delusion are common, and considerable knowledge and skill are required to secure food and water.<sup>132</sup>

The Egyptian desert is a rocky expanse of apparent emptiness that is vital enough to support a wide diversity of life and to help transform individuals and whole peoples. The desert (in Luke erēmos is translated as “wilderness” e. g., 4:1) is the place of Jesus’ temptations and where, in the centuries following, explorers went in search of what it meant to be men and women among others, as well as persons to themselves.<sup>133</sup> There is little to distract one in the desert, so that forces normally buried below our very thin layer of awareness rise to make themselves known in all their fierceness and promise. Spiritually and psychologically, silence and isolation can either transform persons or lead to their end.

The desert is a place of stark contrasts between life and death, self-delusion and authentic vision. For Jesus and the countless others who have journeyed there it is a place for testing and

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<sup>131</sup> John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 33.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Rowan Williams says that “at its height Christian desert monasticism in the early fourth century was said to have numbered ten thousand men and twenty thousand women.” Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (Boston: New Seeds, 2005), 128.

ordeal, a place for discovering the essential qualities of one's life, a place of profound learning where one confronts utter loneliness and inner fearfulness. Some look for the desert in a particular piece of geography, but psychologically we carry it with us wherever we are. It is, as my teacher used to say, "closer than your breath." So the desert waits, whether for seekers in the North African desert, the lush fruitfulness of ancient Ireland, or the cacophony of a modern city. It beckons throughout life, but if we try to avoid it, the desert will come upon us uninvited and unexpected, at a time not of our own choosing. If we undergo the experience voluntarily, it can prove liberating, but if we do not submit to it it can be overwhelming and crushing. The desert is a symbol out of which has grown myriad stories vital to our living, a constant reminder of a psychological and spiritual landscape within us all.

### ***The Monks***

The early monks were predominantly indigenous to the area. Many, perhaps most, were illiterate. Some were relatively well to do. Antony, for example, was a landholder near Herakleopolis Magna in Lower Egypt.<sup>134</sup> Many fled to the life in response to adverse political and economic conditions.<sup>135</sup> Later they were joined by men and women from the northern Mediterranean, some of whom, women in particular, fled to escape the social and political requirements of the Roman state. In the desert, women found they could "exercise freedom they did not have in the dominant culture."<sup>136</sup> Freedom from arranged marriages and the freedom to have a say in how they lived their lives were high among their motivations according to my

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<sup>134</sup> <http://www.ewtn.com/library/mary/antony.htm>.

<sup>135</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 41.

<sup>136</sup> Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 7.

conversations with Roberta Bondi.<sup>137</sup> Speaking of the women monastics, Laura Swan writes that “It was a place of death – the place to die to the false self and false supports, bury old ways and attitudes.”<sup>138</sup> “Desert ascetics believed that the greatest enemies of the inner journey were hurry, crowds and noise. The desert was a place for quieting the inner noise that kept them from hearing the whispers of God.”<sup>139</sup>

Women in the northern Mediterranean at first found a kind of equal footing with men in Christianity, being named ruler of the synagogue, deacon, presbyter, and honorable woman bishop in communities that were culturally Jewish, Greek, or Roman. However, by the fourth century, as Christianity gained acceptance as the official religion of the Roman Empire, social mores dictated that women remain at home and out of the public sphere. Pressure built for women to be removed from public leadership.<sup>140</sup> Pressure also mounted to force desert traditions to conform to the values and orientation of the churches of the cities, not only in the cities north of the Mediterranean but also in places like Alexandria where the Alexandrian bishops sought to expand their influence over not only the developing church but also the political climate of the Empire as a whole.<sup>141</sup>

The spiritual orientation towards the conditions found in one’s inner world rather than the external, organizational one, raised spirited and even nasty accusations against monasticism in general and desert spirituality in particular. Men and women who abandoned their dominant cultures and civic duties to flee to a harsh environment where they claimed to find life were “from the perspective of educated pagans like the Emperor Julian or Eunapius of Sardis, . . .

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<sup>137</sup> Private conversations with Roberta Bondi.

<sup>138</sup> Swan, *Forgotten Desert Mothers*, 15.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 6, 7.

<sup>141</sup> Michael J. Hollerich, “The Alexandrian Bishops and the Grain Trade: Ecclesiastical Commerce in Late Roman Egypt,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24 (1982), 187-207.

miscreants who had abandoned the way of the gods and refused to share in the burdens of society.”<sup>142</sup> Characterizations like “uncultured boors whose way of life was so utterly bereft of the refinements of traditional *paideia*<sup>143</sup> that their religious search appeared ludicrous,”<sup>144</sup> were only the beginning of what was to become a thousand-year scorched-earth campaign against both the practice of and the ascetic ideals of monasticism. From the end of the nineteenth century, Douglas Burton-Christie quotes W. E. H. Lecky portraying the monk as

a hideous, sordid, and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, passing his life in a long routine of useless self-torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain, [and who] had become the ideal of nations which had known the writings of Plato and Cicero and the lives of Socrates and Cato.<sup>145</sup>

Invective over such a long period of time seeps into unconscious attitudes of a wide segment of the population and becomes part of an automatic (unconscious) response.

Responsibility must also rest partially at the feet of established European state religions, whose insistence on granting privileges, political power, and great wealth to monasteries resulted in rampant corruption, and partially must rest with the religious orders themselves who were corrupted by the temptations of money and power.

But while some orders succumbed to temptations of power, other segments, individuals, and parts of orders resisted. We have only to recall the campaigns of Martin Luther (himself an Augustinian monk) against indulgences as one example. From within the monastic tradition, there were frequent attempts to reform orders like the Benedictines by returning to strict observance of the Rule of Benedict.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 11.

<sup>143</sup> *Paideia*: training of the physical and mental faculties in such a way as to produce a broad enlightened mature outlook harmoniously combined with maximum cultural development <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paideia>.

<sup>144</sup> Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 12

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> <http://historymedren.about.com/od/cterms/g/cistercians.htm> date of access, and in 13 as well

However, corruption and the well-rehearsed attacks on monasticism, righteous or not, cannot fully account for such extreme and persistent prejudice against it. Burton-Christie, one of whose undergraduate degrees was in psychology,<sup>147</sup> is sensitive to the challenges encountered when communication and understanding across cultures, history, and languages is attempted. Not only are there technical challenges, but there are also psychological ones that go the core of how we see ourselves. I have tried to extract the sense of his thesis without quoting him at full length, which is what he deserves.

Any encounter with words immediately raises questions of interpretation. If the words are familiar to us, close to us in time, culture, and language, the questions may not make themselves felt very sharply at first, since it is easy to take such words at face value. (p. 16)

. . . recognition of the linguistic and historical distance between ourselves and an ancient text reveals the real depth and breadth of the interpretative task. It suggests that we must not only familiarize ourselves with the basic geography of that other world, we must find a way of translating meaning from that world to our own. Such a translation, if it to be viable, must find a way of bringing our world into dialogue with that other world, so that we experience growth and new understanding. (pp. 16-17)

. . . [we] “understand through language.” And, because we come to language through a language tradition, our self-understanding is indirect and comes into being through our encounter with fixed expressions from the past. (p.17)

Text [scripture] implies words which are written and must be read to be understood. However, this is somewhat misleading for as paradoxical as it may seem, not all texts are written nor are all texts read. It is important to take seriously the notion of *oral texts*, that is, texts that exist primarily not as “fixed expressions” on the pages of a book, but words in the minds and hearts of certain persons who on occasion utter those words to others. Such oral texts have a different character from written texts in that they are not fixed expressions encountered through the act of reading, but are by their very nature encountered only in the presence of a living mediator. . . . (p.18)

Quoting Walter Ong, he addresses our literate bias, which

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<sup>147</sup> [http://bellarmine.lmu.edu/theologicalstudies/Graduate\\_Programs/About\\_Our\\_Faculty/Douglas\\_Burton-Christie.htm](http://bellarmine.lmu.edu/theologicalstudies/Graduate_Programs/About_Our_Faculty/Douglas_Burton-Christie.htm)

makes it difficult to understand how powerful language is in oral cultures. “Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as primarily oral, as events, and hence as necessarily powered: for them, words tend rather to be assimilated to things ‘out there’ on a flat surface. Such ‘things’ . . . are not actions, but are in a radical sense dead, though subject to dynamic resurrection.” The desert fathers, however, experienced words as events. It would be no exaggeration to say that the word event stands as one of the key experiences in desert spirituality. (p. 19)<sup>148</sup>

Burton-Christie is pointing to a crucial and very complex problem in communication, namely, how deeply ingrained are our assumptions about words and language and how they are incorporated into our identities as individuals within a culture. It requires a great deal of self-awareness and hard work to begin reaching beyond our personal/cultural paradigm into the world of someone from a different culture. Writing about the particular mindsets of the desert folk, he writes,

They [the monks<sup>149</sup>] brought to scripture a general pre-understanding and certain prejudices arising out of their life and experiences. These prejudices influenced not only which texts they found particularly significant, but also how they treated those texts. For example, understanding how the probing light of solitude searched out the frailties of the human heart helps to explain why the monks focused so much attention on biblical texts about the need for humility and mercy. And knowing how highly the desert fathers valued integrity of words and actions sheds light on their reticence to engage in speculation about the meaning of scripture and their strong commitment to put the texts into practice.<sup>150</sup>

The error that cripples understanding of what these monks were trying to live and convey is the assumption that the eyes through which they looked, the experiential and historical contexts out of which they spoke, were identical to those of a person from the northern Mediterranean from present-day Italy, Greece, or Turkey. They were not then and are not now.

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<sup>148</sup> Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 16-19.

<sup>149</sup> Throughout the paper, when I refer to monks, I am referring to both sexes.

<sup>150</sup> Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 21.



### *The Collections of Sayings*

Spanning roughly six hundred years, from the third century well into the eighth,<sup>151</sup> the collections of stories about these old men and women are fragments that lack unifying narratives even as they possess common themes. They have their origins in stories passed from mouth to ear, then gradually shed their original context, which was that of a particular disciple asking his teacher for “a word” [of insight or advice] under specific circumstances. The teacher responded to him or her, and what he said was remembered by someone--the student to which it was directed or someone who happened to standing by. Gradually, these stories came to be repeated by others who applied to them to their own contexts.

These sayings also remind us of the importance of a kind of simple storytelling that we moderns tend to forget. “Listening to their stories and sayings, meditating on them in silence and subsequently telling them to others, helped our ancestors to live humanely, to be more human, to remain truly alive.”<sup>152</sup> Chryssavgis’s observation about the benefit of stories underlines a common theme of oral traditions throughout the world. Hyemeyohsts Storm, a contemporary Northern Cheyenne, writes of his people’s stories:

These Stories were used among the People to Teach the meaning of the Sun Dance Way. They were themselves a Way of Understanding among the People, and also between different Peoples. Because the People did not have written language, these Stories were memorized and passed down in one way through countless generations. (p.10)

*These Stories are almost entirely allegorical in form, and everything in them should be read symbolically.* Every story can be symbolically unfolded for you through your own Medicines, Reflections and Seekings. As you do this, you will learn to See through the eyes of your Brothers and Sisters, and to share in their Perceptions. (p.10)

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<sup>151</sup> Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 159-60.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Questioning is one of the most vital paths to understanding these Stories. . . .  
When you question the Medicine Wheel is turned for you. These Stories are  
magical Teachers in this way. They are Flowers of Truth whose petals can be  
unfolded by the Seeker without end. (p.10)

These Stories were meant to be told, not written. In this way the Teachers . . .  
were able to give inflections to particular words to reflect their symbolic content.  
(p.11)<sup>153</sup>

The languages of North Africa--Coptic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin--presented challenges of translation, and the cultural backgrounds of hearers further modified the stories. Details were added, interpretations and values layered on, and finally, as they began to be collected and written down, the sayings were edited and translated into other languages. It is difficult to overemphasize the degree to which this process modified the original material. Emphasis and subtle clues found only in speech that are available to listeners from the same culture are lost in the flattening effects of writing. Even in a small group of disciples present with a teacher at the same time, one can hear dramatically different messages. I was once part of a group of three meeting with a teacher. He talked for a bit, then asked that we do a specific meditation. At the end, he asked what each had experienced. Three radically different versions emerged. He used this exercise to demonstrate how meanings are molded to needs and pre-existing patterns of thought.

In her introduction to John Chryssavgis's book *In the Heart of the Desert*, Benedicta Ward sheds some light on the choice of subjects and organization of what is left of the writings that came from the desert:

Many of the sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers are unfinished, partial  
john chryssavgisrecords of what was said, and all were subject to change. The  
later sources in Palestine laid greater stress...on giving teaching and advice; the

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<sup>153</sup> Hyemeyohsts Storm, *Seven Arrow* (New York: Ballantine Books, New York, 1972). 10-11. Storm clarifies his odd capitalization: “. . . the words to which the Teller would have given inflections are capitalized. *These words are symbolic Teachers, and it is very important that you approach them symbolically rather than literally.*”

monks who lived in communities spoke more about fraternal love within the group; the monks in the cities were more involved in works of charity, in learning and corporate liturgical prayer, But the basic theme of implementing Christian baptism by total self-commitment for life in these hidden ways is found in them all and established a continuing tradition of solitary hermit life as well as creating the great monastic communities of East and West.<sup>154</sup>

Then she quotes Antony of Egypt to summarize the essence of this journey:

Fear not goodness as something impossible nor the pursuit of it as something alien, set a great way off; it hangs only on our own choice. For the sake of Greek learning, men go overseas, but the City of God has its foundations in every place of human habitation. *The kingdom of God is within*. Goodness is within us and it needs only the human heart.<sup>155</sup>

Ward's comments about the variety and limits of the written sayings combined with Antony's pointing of the way serve to caution readers not to expect to find singular statements of truth in them. The desert fathers and mothers were not attempting to do systematic or speculative theology. That is almost entirely absent. Nor was theirs a mass audience. They were seeking to advise one or two or three people at a time how to navigate the next hour or month of their journey, in other words, how to live into Antony's statement about where God is found and the requirements necessary for finding God. Necessarily, the abba's word addresses the inner conditions existing in his students.

It is not surprising that written translations of canonical scripture with their emphasis on the larger church would run afoul of the words of a teacher advising a very small group of students. Antony's saying, if we have an accurate translation, poses interpretive problems for modern commentators on the New Revised Standard Version like Joseph Fitzmyer<sup>156</sup> and Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh,<sup>157</sup> who read "the kingdom of God is within you" to mean

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<sup>154</sup> Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, xix.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, xx-xxi. (emphasis mine).

<sup>156</sup> Fitzmyer, 1157.

<sup>157</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, second edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2003), 298.

“among you” i.e., in human society. Culpepper prefers “in the midst of you” as referring to those gathered around the person of Jesus.<sup>158</sup> Danker is more blunt, preferring “in the midst of you,” dismissing “within” as referring to a psychological reality Luke never addresses.<sup>159</sup> Yet Antony is translated not only as saying “within,” but as clarifying it with the statement about goodness as having an abode within, needing only a human heart to make itself known. Hans-Josef Klauck stakes out a middle way. Commenting on *Thomas 3* and by implication Luke, he understands that “the presence of the kingdom both individually (‘inside of you’) and in a manner transcending the individual (‘outside of you’). If the believer looks into his own heart, he will find the kingdom, which also has an external dimension thanks to the fact that a number of individuals . . . share in this knowledge.”<sup>160</sup>

The Greek word (*entos*) is translated in all these ways, but it is important to discern what is being emphasized: human society, an individual’s inner world, or possibly these two and more. This is one key to understanding differences between the organizationally minded church of the north Mediterranean and the primacy of the individual’s inner journey as the beginning point emphasized in the desert. While desert abbas and ammas strongly emphasized the importance of larger relationships with one’s spiritual community and the whole community of humanity outside the monastery including strangers, their focus was squarely on the indissoluble connection between the welfare of the stranger and the salvation of the monk. That said, the process always begins with the response of the individual monk.

It was said of [Abba Agathon] that, upon coming to town one day to sell his manual work, he encountered an ill traveler lying in the public square without

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<sup>158</sup> Alan R. Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke” In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander Keck. Volume 9. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 330.

<sup>159</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel*. Revised and expanded edition. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). 292. The same point is made in the Luke section.

<sup>160</sup> Hans-Joseph Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: an Introduction*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Continuum, 2003), 111.

anyone to care for him. The old man rented a room and lived there with him, working with his hands in order to pay the rent and spending all his money on the needs of the sick man. He stayed there for four months until the sick man became healthy. Then he returned in peace to his own cell.<sup>161</sup>

Hospitality was not always a simple act of charity. The presence of strangers in the desert was fraught with danger for the monks. Some years ago, my wife and I visited St. Antony's monastery close by the Red Sea in Egypt. There we were greeted by an ancient cluster of buildings complete with archeological digs that were revealing what was thought to be one of its earliest chapels (circa fourth century C.E.). Outside the walls, there was a large kitchen and dining hall that were open to all. Inside the walls, we were shown through a fortified tower from earlier times with the only opening to the outside a door high above the ground that could be opened to lower food and materials to tribal people below. Most of the time, this arrangement kept the monks safe from banditry or harm. Throughout eighteen hundred years, the monastery had been repeatedly overrun and destroyed, and the monks killed by outsiders.

The relationship between apparently opposite poles of the world around us and individual development is fundamental to understanding desert literature. To what extent is there a fundamental ingredient that lives within us that must be nurtured within individuals so we become fully persons to ourselves? How is balance achieved between this ingredient and the equally compelling reality of living among other men and women? Because we also live in a still greater relationship with non-personal elements of a greater-lesser network symbolized by the Star of David,<sup>162</sup> we find ourselves torn between two poles of church as on the one hand the people of God and the organizational authority, and on the other hand those who gravitate towards an inner path. Are we to choose one pole or the other, or is there a way to live in (and thrive) in the perpetual tension of having all operating simultaneously in dynamic balance?

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<sup>161</sup> Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 152.

<sup>162</sup> See chapter 1.

## *Abbas and Ammas*

The role of *transmission* is central to understanding the spirituality of oral traditions. What must be learned or accomplished is not just intellectual in nature. It cannot be learned from books or lectures. To borrow a simile or metaphor from Luke, it is like yeast in flour; disciples become leavened by their mentors. There are many more figures of speech that apply. I prefer the common medical term *infect* or *catch*, i.e., teachers infect their students and disciples catch the reality of the teacher's message. An eastern teacher who was asked how transmission works said, "It is comparable to having two lasers, one focused and one unfocused. When the focused laser becomes operational, the unfocused laser organizes itself to match the one already focused."<sup>163</sup>

Disciples are leavened by what the teacher transmits.<sup>164</sup> Disciples learn forgiveness and love from those able to forgive and love. This agrees with modern theories of how children learn: primarily through imitation of adults whose faces, moods, and expressions are studied carefully by them for clues that will lead to successful engagement with the world.<sup>165</sup> Jesus advocates something similar: "it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher" (Matt 10:25). Such phrases tend to grate on western individualistic sensibilities, but mirroring and imitating are how we begin to learn. It is literally the way brains are built. Desert teachers were keenly aware about how this happens.

Education in the desert tradition is transformational, not merely informational, and the old men seemed to be able to tell the difference between genuine seekers and dabblers.

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<sup>163</sup>Russell Targ and Jane Katra, "Close to Grace: The Physics of Silent Transmission," *Spirituality and Health*, July/August 2003. <http://www.spiritualityhealth.com/magazine/articles/> (Accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>164</sup>Luke 13:20.

<sup>165</sup>Brooks, *The Social Animal*. 33, 34.

A brother came to Abba Theodore and spent three days begging him to say a word to him, but without getting a single reply. So he went away aggrieved. Then the old man's disciple asked him: "Abba, why did you not say a word to him? See how he has gone away grieved?" The old man said: "I did not speak to him because he is a trafficker who seeks to glorify himself through the words of others."<sup>166</sup>

Chryssavgis comments:

In general, *the desert produced healers, not thinkers*. It cultivated the heart, not letters. It sought to quench a thirst of the soul, not merely a curiosity of the mind. The desert was a place of inner work and of personal experience.

We tend to separate the mind from the heart. We like to fill the mind; yet, we forget the heart. Or else, we fill the heart with information that should fill the mind. Nevertheless, the two work differently: the mind learns; the heart knows. The mind is educated; the heart believes. The mind is intellectual, speculative; it reads and speaks. The heart is intuitive, mystical; it grows in silence. The two should be held together; and they should be brought together in the presence of God.

And on education, he observes:

It is not that secular education was unacceptable. . . . Indeed many of them were lettered: Arsenius, Basil, Evagrius and Cassian. It is simply that secular education remains insufficient without an ascetic depth; it is unfulfilled without the spiritual content. The only degree that counted in the desert was the degree to which one was humbled. . . in order to reveal the presence of God.<sup>167</sup>

There were no elections or appointments to an "office" called "abba" or to administrative positions in a monastery. Sometimes, specific abbots were sought out by potential disciples, some of whom had traveled a very long way in order to undertake another very long, often painful spiritual journey with them. Students and teachers found matches with one another. The fathers were not rulers of monasteries bearing their unique brand above the gate.

A brother asked Abba Poemen: "Some brothers live with me; should I be in charge of them?" The old man said to him: "No, just work first and foremost. And if they want to live like you, then they will see to it themselves." The brother

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<sup>166</sup> Theodore quoted by Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 75.

<sup>167</sup> Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 76-77.

said to him: “But it is they themselves, Father, who want me to be in charge of them.” The old man replied: “No, be their example, not their legislator.”<sup>168</sup>

John Chryssavgis says that alongside institutional lines of “apostolic succession” there was a “complementary inspirational element of spiritual succession.”<sup>169</sup> That view is echoed in similar traditions today where a senior monk may be named to succeed a teacher upon his death, or a search may be instituted to find the teacher’s successor. There is a current debate about this issue within the Tibetan Buddhist community as the Dalai Lama ages and the Chinese government openly expresses its desire to choose his successor. Some groups find obvious successors among them, and when the time is right they are simply recognized. Monastic orders like the Benedictines incorporate term limits and an assembly that functions similarly to a Society of Friends meeting. Silence is the rule until the Spirit moves. There is no campaigning or arguing over who is to be chosen as abbot, simply prayerful contemplation and discussion until a decision is reached. In some traditions, succession proceeds through a circle of elders. The ways are varied, but in the desert abbas or ammas seem to have emerged from a consensus of recognition. These were wise men and women who were intimately acquainted with their own humanity, and consequently with the humanity of others.

Abbas generally held no office in the institutional structure of the church. In fact, most avoided ordination, and some who did not succeed ran away in order to avoid exercising the office. Theodore of Pherme was one of those.

Time after time, the old men brought him back to Scetis saying, “Do not abandon your role as a deacon.” Abba Theodore said to them, “Let me pray to God so that he may tell me for sure whether I ought to function publicly as a deacon in the liturgy.” This is how he prayed to God: “If it is your will that I should stand in this place, make me sure of it.” A pillar of fire appeared to him, stretching from earth to heaven and a voice said, “If you can become like this pillar of fire, go and be a deacon.” So he decided against it. He went to church, and the brothers

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.



bowed before him and said, “If you don’t want to be a deacon, at least administer the chalice.” But he refused and said, “If you do not leave me alone, I shall leave here for good.” So they left him in peace.

Rowan Williams ventures an explanation:

The monk’s calling is to become fire. I suspect that it is the *identification* of this personal summons to “become fire” with a specific role in the church – as if ordination involved some sort of attempt to lay hold of a destiny that would take a lifetime of prayer and watchfulness to grow into.<sup>170</sup>

The desert emphasis on continuous perfecting of practice, and the resulting spiritual condition of the individual monk, militated against acceptance of titles or positions. Acceptance of official positions of authority was perceived to involve temptations toward ambition that might at any time prove too subtle or great to resist. Abbas seemed to be keenly aware of an unknown potential for growth that stretched out before them, far more than could be accomplished during their lives. Thus they tended to hold to the abiding need for humility and modesty. No matter how perfected and honored a monk became, he still saw endless horizons of practice and perfection.

In the spirit and discipline of the desert tradition, Pope Gregory I (c. 560 – 604) addressed the dangers of seeking ecclesiastical office: “He, therefore who seeks the distinction of the office, cannot teach humility to his flock; he is rather a leader to perdition. Those are to be deterred from taking office who do not exhibit in their way of life what they have learned in meditation.”<sup>171</sup> While the churches of the northern Mediterranean tended towards goals of common belief, practice, and organization, desert traditions seem to have largely ignored them. Without an emphasis on organization and systematic thought, without prizing education or collecting books or recording histories, they kept to the value of one individual’s progress in the spiritual life.

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<sup>170</sup> Williams, *Where God Happens*, 65.

<sup>171</sup> St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1950), 5.

Being split between opposing forces is described in psychological literature as *ambivalence* and often finds expression in exercises in self-justification. It is easy to think that others must be guided into right living, or conversely that all organizations are inherently corrupt. One way desert teachers described these forces was to talk about *passions*. To this point, Rowan Williams writes,

The desert monastics are keenly interested in diagnosing what sort of things get in the way [of putting the neighbor in touch with God in Christ]. They seem very well aware that one of the great temptations of religious living is the urge to intrude between God and other people. We love to think we know more of God than others; we find it comfortable and comforting to try and control the access of others to God. Jesus himself speaks bluntly about this when he describes the religious enthusiasts of his day shutting the door to the Kingdom in the face of others. “You do not enter yourselves, and when others try to enter, you stop them” (Matt 23:13).<sup>172</sup>

Williams is saying in non-psychological language what clinicians point to as they examine the nature and quality of relationships within individuals, families, and groups. How power is distributed, used, and regarded is important to both professions because of the ways in which it shapes, for good and ill, its holders and subjects. The antithesis to knowing more of God than others and of intruding between God and them is that spiritual authority does not exist. Yet expertise and authority are real. Whether individuals or groups, we depend on the presence of people who know more than we do to navigate the world. Because of this principle, authority cannot be simply ignored. Its usefulness is best acknowledged, and its boundaries recognized, understood, and accommodated. We do not know precisely how abbas and ammas came to be recognized, but there was something of a list of job requirements:

Amma Theodora said that a teacher ought to be a stranger to the desire for domination, vainglory and pride. One should not be able to fool that person by flattery, nor blind that person by gifts. . . . Rather the teacher should be patient,

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<sup>172</sup> Williams, *Where God Happens*, 25-26.

gentle and humble as far as possible; the teacher must also be tested and be without favoritism, full of concern for others and a lover of souls.<sup>173</sup>

In oral cultures, wisdom is greatly valued. Where survival depends on good information and advice, a few individuals come to be recognized as walking, talking libraries. In assembly, these individuals may form a council of elders with whom the community consults. Because the knowledge held by them takes years to learn, most wise men and women are old, and the terms “old men” and “old women” are terms of respect and honor. However, there are also individuals who manifest the same wisdom from a relatively young age and these are also accorded the recognition of an “old man.”

Abba Joseph said: “While we were sitting with Abba Poeman, he mentioned Abba Agathon as being an abba, and we said to him: “He is very young; why do you call him ‘Abba’?” Abba Poeman replied, “Because his speech makes him worthy of being called abba.”<sup>174</sup>

To the men and women of the desert, accountability and silence formed a complementary round between the seed planting of instruction and the discipline of inner silence in which seed finds fertile ground. The process can be symbolized by a figure 8 lying on its side.



Silence is a vacuum filled by thoughts, desires, and feelings that we normally keep from view. Deliberate silence is a practice that allows these hidden aspects to come to consciousness, where we can become aware of them and their effects. Among Jungian analysts there is recognition of progressively deeper levels of these hidden aspects, from the personal to the universal. Problems and developmental possibilities arise where forces come into conflict and an individual rises to meet the challenge to forge peace rather than continue internal war. The

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<sup>173</sup> Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 66.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, .64.

Jungian term *shadow* is used to describe “that part of the personality that has been repressed for the sake of an ego ideal.”<sup>175</sup>

Another way of describing the shadow is that it is composed of the totality of our unlived life. It forms our attitudes and responses to surroundings, situations, and people we encounter and manifests itself in projections onto other people those feelings and attitudes we reject in ourselves.<sup>176</sup>

A projection invariably blurs our own view of the other person. Even when the projected qualities happen to be real qualities of the other person . . . the affect reaction which marks the projection points to the affect-toned complex in *us* which blurs our vision and interferes with our capacity to see objectively and relate humanly.<sup>177</sup>

Being alone in silence allows these projections and the attendant reactions to rise to the surface. In the presence of a compassionate other, these projections and reactions begin to modulate and heal, and we start to move toward a more accurate way of seeing and relating to reality.<sup>178</sup> It is a rhythm: silence, consultation, communal activity, and back to silence.

Much of our lives is consumed by distraction. We play games; we gossip with our co-workers; we fret over the latest news about our neighbors and country; we submerge ourselves in the immediacy of work and family demands; we give images to our emotions and desires. Certain thoughts and feelings become habitual and part of who we believe ourselves to be. We craft an identity that incorporates these thoughts and feelings, and a face and manner of relating that we present to the world.

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<sup>175</sup> Edward C Whitmont, *The Symbolic Quest: Basic Concepts of Analytical Psychology* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1978), 160.

<sup>176</sup> Carl Jung, *On the Psychology of the Unconscious*, in *The Collected Works*, vol 7, para. 103n. “By shadow I mean the ‘negative’ side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and contents of the personal unconscious.”

<sup>177</sup> Whitmont, *The Symbolic Quest*, 161.

<sup>178</sup> A blatant misuse of silence and isolation is found in prisons where an inmate is thrown “in the hole,” in a state of sensory deprivation with no human contact and little light. The result is often psychosis and is described by those who have experienced it as torture.

Many habits of thought, besides creating a kind of ephemeral identity, result in our isolation from one another, and from a deeper realization of our personhood and place in creation. They isolate us from the knowledge that we are loved. From a psychological perspective, mental disorders can be characterized as patterns of thought and action that isolate us. Talk therapy aims toward reconsideration and reconciliation of these patterns and their associated feelings. Medical interventions are prescribed in order to relieve oppressive symptoms. The two together are often used in tandem to provide access to a new way of seeing one's situation, one that we hope results in a greater sense of connection and ability to respond to the world. However, no amount of talk therapy or prescriptions will take the place of stable, on-going relationships.

When the fathers and mothers of the desert speak of the passions, they are pointing to the habits of thought and mind that isolate us, that remove us from the knowledge that we are loved and known.

The desert elders are convinced that we cannot address our passions, we cannot know our heart, without the presence of at least one other person. We require a counselor, an advisor, a guide. We need someone to consult, someone with whom to share. We are supposed to reveal our inner thought--including, and perhaps highlighting the darker side--honestly and verbally.<sup>179</sup>

A brother said to Abba Poeman: "Why should I not be free to live without manifesting my thoughts to the old men?" The old man replied: "Abba John the Dwarf said: 'The enemy rejoices over nothing so much as those who do not manifest their thoughts.'"<sup>180</sup>

John Chryssavgis emphasizes that "*Counseling is the first step toward community*" (his emphasis),<sup>181</sup> bringing the desert tradition and clinical work to the very center of their common

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<sup>179</sup> Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 63.

<sup>180</sup> Poeman quoted *Ibid.*, 63

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

ground. He further clarifies the matter: “In admitting to another what we think, what we do and what we feel we learn to be forgiven and loved.”

Often the blessed Zosimas would say: “We human beings do not know how to be loved, and how to be honored. We have lost our sense of balance.”<sup>182</sup>

This sort of counseling cannot be compelled. Novices learned and could open to it, not only because they heard about it, but because they saw it being practiced all around them by more experienced monks. This sort of counseling requires mutuality, the mutuality that grows from a sense of having someone standing beside us, sharing our predicament.

A brother said to Abba Theodore: “Speak a word to me, for I am perishing.” Sorrowfully, the old man said to him: “I am myself in danger. So what can I say to you?”<sup>183</sup>

In some ways, this sort of thing flies in the face of our notions of professional expertise, that our ills require an authority, preferably the very best, to evaluate and prescribe the cure for our ailment. But we are not machines that can be fixed by a good mechanic. The problem lies in our humanness, and the path to healing can only be discerned by other humans who are well versed in the dilemmas that plague us and who are ahead of us on the path of reconciliation.

In another time, clinicians’ primary training was their own therapy, and only secondarily their course work and supervision. This analytical approach, espoused by both Freud and Jung, held that only by engaging one’s own roadblocks and lack of development would a person be able to help another. When therapists began to be trained exclusively in the classroom, many therapists started practice having never engaged in their own therapy. Without this process, the experience of and development of genuine compassion, along with the ability to stand beside another, depends on luck and finding mentors who can transmit more than diagnoses, billing codes, insurance requirements, and “best practices.”

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 123-150.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 65.

In my experience, teachers in oral traditions respond to the request to “give me a word” to individuals or small groups facing particular situations within specific contexts. Often students are cautioned not to repeat what they have been told to others because what they have heard has been tailored to those present at the time.<sup>184</sup> Such cautions do not serve a goal of secrecy but rather are focused on the student’s still-fragile spiritual maturity, and because he has not yet attained the authority to teach others.

Time is important in the desert, time to clear one’s inner landscape of unneeded growth and prepare one’s inner ground for the new; time for new seeds to take root and grow from darkness into light; time for maturing of a new way of life.

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<sup>184</sup> Similar cautions are found in Lk 8:9-10; Matt 13:10-17; 17:9; Mk 4:10-12; 9: 9, *Thomas*, sayings 1, 5, 17, among others.

## Conclusion

This paper ends where it began, with questions. What must I do to inherit eternal life? How are we to be disciples of Jesus, not in terms of predetermined beliefs, but in relationship and action? The answers arise only with continual thought, reflection, and practice.

My purpose in entering this Doctor of Ministry program was to have a conversation about these questions as Christianity moves into the twenty-first century between those trained in oral traditions and those who spring from more familiar orthodox roots. Among our subjects is how we are to square the views and findings of science as it is unfolding with spiritual life; what do scientific findings and views mean to the Christian practice of discipleship; and how might a civil conversation between parties who have long stood in opposition to one another possibly help heal the existing state of animosity to the benefit of all?

I have found that my conviction of the value of the inside-out approach of oral traditions to spiritual development has been strengthened, as has my value of the contributions made by religious institutions in fostering an atmosphere of curiosity about the teachings of Jesus. I also have found more and sometimes quirky questions that seem to have little to do with religious studies. I want to know more about how trade along routes that reached China and the northernmost shores of Europe may have facilitated inter-religious exchanges along the trade routes and in the cities of the Mediterranean basin. I want to learn more about the power of stories in the lives of individuals and their cultures. And finally, I want to learn more about the universal desire to acquire power and influence.

This desire, which is present in every individual and group, is possibly the elephant that insists on sharing the couch with us. We believe that we are able to command our own wants



and desires and think that others should do so too. We cast leaders as icons which are more able or deserving of being followed than others are and then convince ourselves that because we are with them, we are on the side of the angels. We believe our conscious, rational brain should command the more primitive aspects of ourselves. We assume that our culture knows best how the rest of the world should go about their lives. We believe our religion is the one with God's stamp of approval. We think that our group is wiser, more knowledgeable, or innately superior to the other. All this operates in spite of almost overwhelming evidence to the contrary, or even any indication that it is an effective long-term strategy for solving problems.

Because religion deals with ultimate questions, it is an especially fertile field for those who desire power, and thus religion with power at the center becomes dangerous for both those who lead and those who follow because it feeds a kind of mass delusion of automatically having God's favor, and sanctions whatever actions may be undertaken in its name. More subtly, power is dangerous because possessing it conveys that we have arrived at some end point, a state of grace beyond which we need not develop.

The caution about seeking power in its many forms is certainly one principal message of *Thomas* and the desert literature. The message of the abbas and ammas is that humility and love (gained through the practice of labor and prayer) result in poverty, the counter to the desire to accumulate from the world.

Luke also presents us with instances of a kind of power different than what the world loves. He shows us chosen individuals in extraordinary situations responding in very human ways: Mary's confusion at the Annunciation (1:28-31), her amazement at Simeon's declaration in the temple (2:33), the parents' lack of understanding of what Jesus was doing when they

discovered him in the temple talking to the teachers (2:50). In each instance Mary and Joseph respond by being willing to ponder situations they simply do not understand.

John the Baptist confronts the delusion of superiority when he characterizes those seeking the blessing of his baptism as a “brood of vipers” and wonders aloud who warned them “to flee from the wrath to come” (3:7). Perhaps John was not addressing some inherent evil in the people, but rather the fact that they were in the grip of a mass consciousness that transcended the need for effort, individual responsibility, and conscious input.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry and trial are filled with illustrations of what it means to be an authentic human being. Humility and obedience produce a self-possession that I believe guides him through the chaos of the howling mob of neighbors gathered for Shabbat who are intent on throwing him off a cliff (4:16-30). Despite the outcome, I believe that this same self-possession prompts a normally cynical Pilate to say of Jesus, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man” (23:4). Finally, it is Jesus’ willingness to accept the experience of the cross that enables it to lead to a new and transformed life instead of annihilation.

All of the experiences cited from Luke are part of the human condition, and yet there is something about them that we work hard to avoid even though they hold the promise of something new and better than what we have previously known. Perhaps it is a primal fear of Mystery--what we don’t know and cannot grasp. Perhaps it is the threat of an ultimate “other” inhabiting our life, changing us forever. I wish I knew more.

To me, the value of the teachings found in Luke, *Thomas*, and the desert tradition is that they teach us the outline of being authentically human.

Our desire for certainty makes it easy to frame spiritual life in terms of beliefs. We can accept or reject the tenets of a particular church, and conclude that we as individuals or a group

occupy the high ground of truth. It is much, much harder to embrace the vastness of our individual and collective unknowing. Even Pilate, trying to maneuver his way through difficult political waters, asks the question, “I que es la veritat?”<sup>185</sup> To become aware that we don’t know leaves us vulnerable and in need of the alms of our brothers and sisters, patterns of intelligent life beyond our personal doors.

But realizing this very difficult and painful fact--that we are poor and in need of alms--is precisely what Luke, *Thomas*, and the desert fathers and mothers recommend. John Chryssavgis, in a recent homily, goes further. Quoting St. Maximus, he recommends confession. Confession is “thanksgiving that reminds the soul that it has the grace of God. Confession gives thanks for blessings received, and brings to light what still needs to be done.” Such acts, Chryssavgis adds, lead to thankfulness and gratitude, fullness and wholeness, openness and sharing.<sup>186</sup> For one engaged in (re)establishing mental health, the goals he lists match what I try to do with clients. No amount of organization, technique, policy, or I might add, intellectual effort, can accomplish them. Becoming authentically human is an enormous undertaking that is only accomplished by individuals working in conjunction with other individuals who are also awaiting the wind of Spirit to catch them in its movement. An organization may nurture an atmosphere where individuals can become authentically human, but no organization can make it happen.

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<sup>185</sup> This quote is taken from a photograph that hangs close to my dining table. It is a photograph of a polished section of one of the massive doors on the Gaudi Cathedral in Barcelona, Spain and refers to Luke 26:13-15.

<sup>186</sup> John Chryssavgis, *Homily for the Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers, March 4, 2012*, [www.saintjohnwonderworker.org](http://www.saintjohnwonderworker.org) (Accessed March 10, 2012).

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