Apophatic Spirituality in Contemporary Christian Practice: A Mindfulness Approach

David Arthur Johnson
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A MINDFULNESS APPROACH

Written by

DAVID ARTHUR JOHNSON

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upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

__________________________
Tony Jones

__________________________
Kurt Fredrickson

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ABSTRACT

Apophatic Spirituality in Contemporary Christian Practice:
A Mindfulness Approach
David Arthur Johnson
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
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Contemplative spiritual disciplines are being engaged by American Evangelicals who are drawn to an experiential spirituality, expanding the traditional pietistic practices that emphasize biblical knowledge and moral behavior over the pursuit of union with the Divine. Apophatic Christian theology speaks of God in terms of what God is not. It transcends words and positive assertions. A survey of the history of apophaticism in the Eastern Orthodox Church will explain the holistic potential of apophatic theology and practice as a corrective to an Evangelical spirituality often limited by statements of propositional truth and a wrath-based concept of atonement.

Modern mindfulness meditation practices, as applied in wellness and mental health disciplines today, are rooted in the principles of non-theistic Buddhist philosophy. This may seem antithetical to orthodox Christianity, but a study of the science and therapeutic practice of mindfulness reveals a remarkable resonance with Christian contemplative disciplines, particularly in those practices of an apophatic nature.

The thesis put forward in this dissertation is that the goals of contemporary mindfulness meditation practice—becoming fully aware of one’s experience, being grounded in the present moment, and being immersed in an atmosphere of non-judgmental acceptance—are philosophically aligned with apophatic theology and beneficial to enhance prayer practices in the Christian tradition. A survey of the primary thought and practice in the apophatic tradition through Christian history will be placed alongside the foundations and practice of contemporary mindfulness, leading to a theology of contemplative practice which integrates mindfulness, particularly in relation to personality types. The conclusion will provide a description of the challenge and potential benefits of the proposed practices within the American Evangelical tradition.

Content Reader: Tony Jones, PhD

Words: 299
For Cherlyn

Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me.
See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone.
Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves is heard in our land.

Song of Songs
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INTRODUCTION

Christianity, both as a historic religion and as a way of life, has been in a constant tension over its two millennia of existence, wrestling with the question of just what defines, on the one hand, an unchanging core element of theology and practice and, on the other hand, a variable form or practice that necessarily evolves over time and uniquely manifests itself in a given culture. The Protestant Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe is an example of a breaking point in this ongoing tension; a cataclysmic event in the West that showed how the struggle to find orthodoxy is a complex mix of theology, culture, politics, and even personalities. A key principle for the reformers was the idea that their changes were not, by definition, permanent fixes for the perceived errors in the theology and practice of the Roman Catholic Church; rather, they were taking but one critical step in an ongoing process of accountability. The principle of *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* (The Church must always be reformed)\(^1\) has continued as the stated ideal in the Protestant tradition for five centuries, even if a human resistance to change has regularly hampered its practical application.

The Protestant tradition has been at its best in pursuit of continuous reformation when it has remained historically grounded, self-reflective, and Kingdom-minded. Following the biblical model, to be “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets”

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\(^1\) Jonathan R. Huggins, *Living Justification: A Historical-Theological Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Justification in the Writings of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and N. T. Wright* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 200. This phrase, used commonly today in the Reformed tradition, appears to have been coined within the Dutch Reformed Church in the seventeenth century. It was popularized by theologian Karl Barth in 1947.
(Eph 2:20)² is to invite a rootedness both to Scripture and to tradition that together serve as anchors necessary to maintain theology and practice that remains truly Christian. While Scripture and tradition are subject to interpretation, it is that very process of interpretation and wrestling with the texts that gives a historical grounding its value for constant reformation. It does not require uniformity to only one hermeneutic; yet it seeks unity in the commitment to the pursuit of staying faithful to the apostolic witness.³

It is critical for Protestantism to be self-reflective. Unless a continuous reform movement is conscious of its surrounding culture and its unique place in that culture, it will be blind to the nature of its mission and the necessary adaptations to changes in the world around it. The Church, in its desire for holiness and to maintain a distinct identity, must not so detach from the realities of the culture that it loses its awareness of societal dynamics and the needs of all the people. At the same time, the Church must also be self-aware, constantly assessing its own motivations, priorities, and practices to ensure that they are both culturally relevant and faithful to the Gospel.

It is vital that Protestantism maintain Kingdom-mindedness in all it does and teaches. The ultimate focus for the Church as a continually reforming movement is its submission of all things, in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, to the pursuit of the Kingdom vision of Jesus. It is a forward momentum that is guided by: Jesus’ prayer that God’s will be done “on earth as in heaven” (Mt 6:10); God’s desire for all people to experience the

² All Scripture quoted is from the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

³ The tradition of the Evangelical Covenant Church, which will be considered in more detail in Chapter 8, emphasizes the centrality of Scripture with its motto, “Where is it written?” At the same time, the denomination’s emphasis on freedom in Christ allows for a diversity of interpretation.
fullness of God’s *shalom* (2 Pt 3:9); and the vision of all of creation being restored to wholeness (Rom 8:21).

In short, when the Church is historically rooted, fearlessly self-reflective, and thoroughly Kingdom-minded, a reforming spirit will thrive. Constructive change will be a normal and natural characteristic of the Church’s structures, of its dogma, and of the daily life of its people. This will also be reflected, quite naturally, in its spirituality.

Christian spirituality, particularly in relation to spiritual practices and disciplines, is the focus of this work. Evan Howard defines Christian spirituality in three areas: in practice, in dynamics, and in academic discipline. With regard to practice, Christian spirituality is a lived relationship with God. This is an acknowledgement that God is moving and acting in and through believers in all areas of life at all times. Within this life together, particular spiritual disciplines may be intentionally chosen to foster one’s awareness of the experience of God’s interaction with oneself.

In its dynamics, Christian spirituality is the formulation of a teaching. Christians frame a way of understanding how this relationship works within the story of Scripture and Christian tradition, providing language for communicating and participating in one’s spirituality with the Christian community. The teaching also provides a means for the Church to pass on its spiritual roots to subsequent generations.

As an academic discipline, Christian spirituality is a formal field of study. Systematic intellectual inquiry strengthens the believer’s understanding of the richness of

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the Christian tradition and supports the integrity of its teaching in its adherence to Scripture and tradition.

In summary, if any new or developing spiritual practices are to meet the above criteria for being truly Christian and solidly in the spirit of an always-reforming Church, they will be deeply connected to the history and tradition of the Church, they will have self-reflection integrally woven into their core, and they will be Kingdom-minded. They will not be designed simply for the indulgent pursuit of one’s self-actualization but for the transformation of all: the individual, the community, and the whole of creation. The practices will pass the test of showing themselves to be deeply experiential for individuals and communities, not merely theoretical or propositional. They must engage the believer’s whole person in transforming ways, not compartmentalizing disciplines into a separate “religious life” of the believer. Practices must be able to be taught and passed on through sharing and mentoring. Additionally, they must stand up under the weight of academic scrutiny. Pursuing the principles outlined above and seeking to provide a meaningful contribution to the spiritual life of the contemporary Evangelical tradition, this paper puts forward the proposition that the goals of modern mindfulness meditation practice—becoming fully aware of one’s experience, being grounded in the present moment, and being immersed in an atmosphere of non-judgmental acceptance—are philosophically aligned with apophatic Christian theology and beneficial to foster and

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5 In this paper, the non-capitalized term “evangelical” is used as an adjective to describe people or things that embody a set of theological distinctives. The capitalized term “Evangelical,” used either as an adjective or substantively as a noun, refers to the group of people who identify with the culture and institutions of the churches who confess an evangelical theology.
enhance contemplative prayer practices in the Christian tradition, with particular focus on the American Evangelical experience.

**Synopsis**

At a time when weekly attendance in the American Evangelical church is dropping⁶ and fewer young adults are looking for spiritual meaning and fulfillment within the structures of traditional Christianity, standard Evangelical practices are losing some of their influence. In personal devotion, this includes daily Bible reading and inductive study of Scripture. Communally, this includes Sunday morning worship services filled with Gospel hymns and contemporary praise songs, culminating in preaching that derives propositional truths from Scripture texts both to foster particular theological underpinnings and to encourage moral behavior. These all appear to be, to a changing world, at best irrelevant pietistic anachronisms and at worst narrow and judgmental ways of viewing and interacting with a complex world. For those who are spiritually hungry for existential transformation, not mere demystified dogma, the heart of the problem is not that the practices are old, mere relics of the past, or that the fundamental message of Christianity is somehow lacking; rather, it is the limitations of a church culture characterized by an exclusivity born from certain ways of knowing and being in relation to God. This church culture freely uses the language of love, but it is ultimately motivated by fear.

In the opening chapter, it will be proposed that the historic focus of Evangelicals on Scripture over and against tradition has emphasized biblical knowledge over spiritual

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⁶ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 15–16.
experience. Theology has been framed almost exclusively in doctrinal formulations, with salvation to be found chiefly in an individual’s assent to propositional truths. This has resulted in skepticism toward mystical thought and experience within many Evangelical circles. In contemporary Evangelicalism, much of atonement theology emphasizes an appeasement of divine wrath over an experience of sacrificial love, further distancing the believer from the existential wholeness that is central to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In contrast, classical contemplative spiritual disciplines and practices, rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition, have found a home in many contemporary American Evangelical churches and ministries in recent years. Believers are drawn to a more experiential spirituality and to an embracing of mystery, an expansion and enrichment of the traditional evangelical pietistic practices which emphasize biblical knowledge and proper moral behavior instead of a contemplative pursuit of union with the Divine. It is this very union with God that is the ultimate goal of spirituality in the ancient mystical theology of the Catholic tradition, both in the Roman West and, most notably, among the Eastern Orthodox. In the East, in particular, there continues to thrive a mystical theology and practice that pursues speaking of God in terms of what God is not. It avoids seeking imagery or any positivistic formulations for describing or interacting with God. This is referred to as apophatic or negative theology. It transcends words and positive assertions in approaching the Divine. Apophatic prayer and other spiritual disciplines are centered on contemplation and the experience of being in the presence of God. This form of prayer is not goal-oriented, not seeking to accomplish something. One trusts that God will be what God will be.
Christian apophatic theology has its roots in Greek Platonic thought and in allegorical interpretations of the Hebrew Torah. Apophatic thought is historically central to the Eastern Church, which roots its practice in the early Fathers of the Church and in important developments of the first millennium that inspired hesychastic spirituality. Western apophatic thought blossomed in the Middle Ages in the context of monasticism. Mystical thought survived in the Reformation, but only at the fringes. Chapter 2 will pursue the history and development of this *via negativa*, seen first in the eastern and then in the western branch of the pre-modern Church, laying the foundation for describing the holistic potential of apophatic theology and practice as a corrective to an Evangelical spirituality often held captive by statements of propositional truth and a wrath-based concept of atonement and salvation.

Addressed next is the question of how an uninitiated individual who is drawn by the mystery of contemplative, apophatic Christian practices gets started. Chapter 3 addresses modern mindfulness meditation practices, as applied in wellness and mental health disciplines today, that are rooted in the principles of ancient, non-theistic Buddhist philosophy. On the surface, this may seem antithetical to orthodox Christianity. Yet Buddhist philosophy, which is able to be considered apart from the development of particular religious trappings, is centered on the universality of suffering, with a decidedly non-theistic approach to suffering’s alleviation. The Buddha’s concept of awakening, or enlightenment, was the overcoming of the illusions to which humans are

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7 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 64. The Greek word *hesychia* refers to an inner stillness. The Hesychasts were practitioners of a prayer of silence, in which all images and words are avoided.
naturally inclined. False concepts of personal identity and the nature of time and reality are to be transcended through meditative practices that foster the release of judgmental thought. Seen in this light, the fundamental principles of Buddhist thought do not run counter to Christian theology and practice. They also align very well with approaches to mental health and wholeness found in modern psychotherapy, a field which has integrated successfully with Christian thought and the practice of pastoral care and counseling.

A study of the science and the non-religious therapeutic practice of mindfulness, a discipline which has its roots in Buddhist philosophy and meditative practice, will reveal a remarkable resonance with Christian contemplative disciplines, particularly in those practices of an apophatic nature. This topic will be engaged in Chapter 4. The goal is to show that modern mindfulness practices have great potential for an individual in accessing contemplative Christian spirituality and enriching the practitioner’s experience of growth toward wholeness. Therapeutic approaches began in the 1970s, when psychotherapists found that mindfulness practices were beneficial in helping clients with various physical and emotional pathologies. Mindfulness-based treatments were developed, particularly in conjunction with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which have been shown to engage the neuroplasticity of the human brain for emotional healing and wellbeing. In addition to the emotional benefits, recent neuroscience has discovered significant ways that meditative practices produce measurable, healthy physiological change in the human brain.

Having considered the primary thought and practice in the apophatic tradition of the Church alongside this description of the science and practice of mindfulness,
contemporary Christian practices which demonstrate a synthesis of apophatic spirituality and mindfulness will be explored in Chapter 5, with special focus on the Jesus Prayer and Centering Prayer. The Jesus Prayer, ancient in origin, has been a vital part of Orthodox spirituality for centuries. The practice of Centering Prayer has been revived in the last century through Roman Catholic monastics who have found commonalities with Buddhist contemplatives. Mindfulness resonates with many of these ancient Christian practices in such a way as to provide a means of access to contemplation for the uninitiated modern Christian.

All of this will culminate in the development of a theology of contemplative practice which integrates mindfulness, the focus of Chapter 6. This theology is grounded in the assumption that all truth is God’s truth, so that it need not be problematic to apply scientifically and therapeutically sound methods for healing and wellness to Christian spiritual practices wherever they are found. Mindfulness and Christian spirituality share some important goals: becoming fully aware of one’s experience, being grounded in the present moment, and being immersed in an atmosphere of non-judgmental acceptance. A mindful spiritual journey will, therefore, be a pursuit of self-discovery, knowing who one truly is in relation to the Divine. If the ultimate pursuit of the Christian believer is to experience union with God in the present, not simply to get to heaven when one dies, any practice which reveals the existential reality of one’s identity in Christ will prove to be a pearl of great price.

Part Three transitions to practical ministry applications and the means by which mindfulness might be integrated into contemporary Christian spirituality. In Chapter 7, traditional Buddhist forms are considered as vehicles for Christian contemplation,
including breath-focused meditation, the body scan, and walking meditation. Breath-focused meditation and prayer aid the practitioner in transcending limited concepts of God or the tendency to create a false image of God. The practice of body scan meditation keeps one grounded in the physical nature of reality, avoiding docetic tendencies to devalue the body in favor of the spiritual. Walking meditation provides a means of contemplation through movement, enhancing self-awareness, and transcending thought.

The typology of the Enneagram assessment will be used to show how the synthesis of mindfulness with Christian practice functions in relation to an individual’s unique design. The Enneagram is a system of classifying nine personality types and defining the psychological motivations of each. It has been used extensively in Christian circles as a means to understand an individual’s unique spirituality and means of spiritual growth. Each of the nine types will be reviewed in light of the benefits a mindfulness-enhanced spirituality could bring to healthy adaptation and resourcefulness.

The final chapter will provide a description of the challenge and potential benefits of the proposed practices within the American Evangelical tradition, with an emphasis on my current ministry. Any tradition’s concept of the Gospel needs to be continually critiqued for cultural and theological centrism and bias. An apophatic spirituality entered through mindfulness practices provides a means for assessing and correcting a positivistic or propositional faith that has lost its relational moorings. In the Evangelical Covenant Church, the atonement theology of P. P. Waldenström is founded on the self-giving love of God in Christ, countering the wrathful nature of penal substitutionary theory. How this grace-centered model might both foster and benefit from spiritual practices that are mindful, apophatic, and contemplative will be considered.
PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
CHAPTER 1

THE AMERICAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH: A LIMITING ATONEMENT

Thomas Merton—American Trappist monk, contemplative, and writer—asserted that one’s primary purpose is to know and live in God. He expressed how this kind of communion with God both requires and fosters self-knowledge, an awareness that comes from honest self-reflection. He wrote: “Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.”¹ If one’s spirituality is to be transformational and holistic, then one’s personal discipleship and spiritual practices will reflect this dual pursuit of knowing God and knowing self.

The Evangelical Struggle to Be “Biblical”

It has been difficult for many in the American Evangelical tradition to access the contemplative spirituality that Merton presents. It has not been a focus of Evangelical piety historically, and it grows out of theology and practices foreign to most Protestants. There are, then, two primary barriers for Evangelicals that must be overcome to access

this spirituality. First, there is the perception of contemplative practices as being too mystical. Given that the practices descend from the Catholic monastic tradition in both the West (Roman Catholic) and in the East (Orthodox), they are seen as a part of the Christian heritage left behind by the Protestant Reformation. Second, an understanding of Christian faith that is framed primarily in terms of doctrinal formulations is also a barrier. Since it is considered that personal salvation is to be found predominantly in assent to certain propositional truths, spirituality and experience take a back seat to dogma. This emphasis on doctrine is all the more pronounced when one church seeks to define itself against another.

In seeking to define spirituality, the Evangelical tradition in America begins with the Bible as its stated foundation for all things of the faith. From there a systematic theology is developed, based on their interpretation of Scripture. Spiritual practices are then taken either directly from biblical models or from long-held cultural traditions that have been determined to be acceptable through a church’s given lens of Scripture and doctrine. The unacknowledged problem, however, is that when one tradition states that “the Bible says” something, it fails to see that the position it holds is really one’s subjective interpretation of the Bible. That interpretation is conditioned by culture, gender, politics, and family history, among many other factors. Additionally, the subsequent systematic theology serves as a tradition’s attempt to make everything in the interpretation fit a schema of logic, often requiring any loose ends (issues that do not fit the theology) to be ignored or de-emphasized. Thus, at the point where spirituality comes into play, the tradition has already been through two layers of interpretation. Complicating matters further, the traditional spirituality of the people also will shape the
layers of interpretation. Given this propensity, it is not surprising that among the myriad Evangelical denominations and independent churches in the US, all can claim to be “biblical,” even when their varied doctrinal statements and practices are different from—or even contradictory to—one another.2

**Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God**

Yet for all the diversity of theological interpretations and practices found within the American Evangelical tradition, one key theological perspective has held sway in the understanding of the atonement, the meaning and purpose of the death of Jesus Christ. This perspective is commonly referred to as the penal substitutionary model or theory of the atonement. This perspective is so pervasive in American evangelicalism that many of those who hold it are not even aware that there are any other atonement theories and that their view is in fact the very definition of the Gospel itself.

Penal substitutionary atonement theology (PSA) begins with the universal Christian concept that all humans have sinned. This sin has alienated all people from communion with God, leaving all in need of redemption if they are to be restored to a relationship with the Divine. In PSA, however, the focus of the problem is that humans have offended the God who is both holy and just. As God is just, he bears a righteous wrath which demands that there be satisfaction for the debt incurred by human sin. As one who is holy, God provides the substitute, Jesus the Son, as a sinless replacement to bear the wrath of the Father, the righteous one given for the unrighteous. By the death of

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Jesus, the guilt of the believing sinner is removed, and the penalty that sinful humans deserve for their rebellion against God has been taken by Jesus in their place. This is penal substitutionary atonement in brief. While the foundations of PSA began to find expression in the works of St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) in the eleventh century, it was central to the doctrine of the Reformers in the sixteenth century, particularly to John Calvin (1509-64). It was Calvin in particular who took Anselm’s atonement of substitution and developed the concept of a penal consequence for human depravity, the requirement of a wrathful God to demand a penalty for sin.3

In America, Calvin’s atonement would become foundational in the widespread revival movement of the 1740s referred to as the Great Awakening. PSA was taken up by revivalist preachers like Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), whose atonement theology was encapsulated in his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”4 In the western expansion of the European colonials in America, a penal substitutionary understanding of Christ’s death was well-suited to a frontier mentality, with its emphases on a demanding justice and on a fierce individualism.5

The proponents of penal substitutionary atonement find logic in their theology that makes for a neatly-packaged systematic description of the mechanism of atonement: human sins are imputed to Christ in his crucifixion. In turn, Christ’s righteousness is


imputed to the elect, those predestined for salvation. The mathematics of this transaction seem to work out. God retains holiness even as God offers mercy. But when the understanding of atonement is approached from a personal level—considering the impact of the doctrine on one’s spirituality as one seeks to know and experience God as an unconditionally loved individual—penal substitution creates as many questions as it answers.

In his book *Did God Kill Jesus?*, Tony Jones points out multiple significant weaknesses that arise in the doctrine when certain key suppositions are considered and the logic is followed to its natural conclusion. First, it suggests that God predestines humans to sin, and it was all part of God’s plan from the beginning with the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It marked the rest of humankind for sin and required God to offer up the Son so that the elect individuals would be rescued from Divine wrath. Second, it means that Jesus was essentially a helpless victim at the hands of his wrathful Father. Jesus did not choose to give himself for humanity but was sacrificed to appease God’s anger. Like Isaac bound by his father Abraham for sacrifice (Gn 16), it communicates no motivation of love from the sacrificial lamb. Third, it does not present God the Father and Jesus the Son as reflections of each other. As members of the Holy Trinity, this reveals a discontinuity in the symbiotic relationship between Father and Son. Jesus has no option to go against the Father’s designed plan. He is “a mere cog in the machine built by God to satisfy God.”

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7 Ibid., 133.
Further problems arise with PSA when one considers the incongruity between the central theme of wrath and the character of God revealed in Jesus. For one, redemption in PSA requires violence. There is a strange inconsistency in having the plan of salvation by which God restores humans from the guilt of sin—transgression which is itself defined as a violence against God, others, self, and creation—to be rooted in violence. And then the consequence of not being one of the elect is a divinely imposed penalty of endless torture. Equally disharmonious to the character of God is the idea that Divine anger burns against a person due to the individual’s sin. One’s draw toward God is not a joyful invitation to new life, but a fear-based warning to escape the flames of a deserved condemnation. This God bears no resemblance to the father Jesus presented in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In sum, the centrality of love is missing from the Gospel message. Jones ponders: “Core to Payment theory is that God, even in love, demands remuneration for the honor that our sin has stolen from him. Is that how we are to understand love? I hope not.”

The Problem with Original Sin

For all his originality of thought, Calvin did not invent the concept of an atonement that required a payment to appease the righteous wrath of God. His theological system evolved from a fundamental interpretation of Scripture and tradition that came long before the Reformation, before Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo, and even before the forerunners who were key influences upon Anselm, including Ambrose, Hilary of

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8 Ibid., 135.

Poitiers, and Victorinus, among others. The seed for all “payment” interpretations of the atonement, as argued by Jones, is the concept of original sin as conceived and promulgated by St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430).

Original sin is the doctrine that the very first sin, the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden (Gn 3), launched the whole subsequent human race into an inescapable propensity to sin. Augustine then helped to push this basic understanding of the Fall to a new level by positing that every human being not only sins but is also burdened from the time of conception to carry an inherited guilt. Augustine’s theory suggests that this inheritance has been and will continue to be passed on to every human through the act of sexual intercourse. Only Jesus and Mary his mother have not been infected by this woeful destiny: Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit, with no intercourse involved; Mary is covered by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, suggesting that she was conceived without the taint of sin, on the merits of her son to come. But this inheritance of guilt as the human condition is not present in the Hebrew Scriptures or theological tradition. As Jones suggests, Augustine (and ultimately Calvin) would interpret the writings of the thoroughly Hebrew Apostle Paul through the lens of original sin and thus present Paul’s discussion of the effect of Adam’s sin on subsequent generations in Romans 5 as support for this universal guilt. Augustine and his theological descendants failed to grasp Paul’s use of Adam’s sin simply as a metaphor for the human condition.

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11 Tony Jones, Did God Kill Jesus?, 117.
In summary, before Augustine the ancient church had primarily understood the inheritance of the Fall to be death, pure and simple. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, all physical life in the created order dies, including humans. This is the fundamental perspective on sin that continues today in the theology of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In the West, however, Roman Catholic tradition has followed in the footsteps of Augustine’s concept of original sin, adding to the inheritance of death the universal burden of guilt, a culpability that demands that a penalty be paid. The Reformed tradition under Calvin adds one more layer: along with death and guilt is total depravity:

Therefore original sin is seen to be an hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature diffused into all parts of the soul. For our nature is not merely bereft of good, but is so productive of every kind of evil that it cannot be inactive. Those who have called it concupiscence have used a word by no means wide of the mark, if it were added (and this is what many do not concede) that whatever is in man from intellect to will, from the soul to the flesh, is all defiled and crammed with concupiscence; or to sum it up briefly, that the whole man is in himself nothing but concupiscence.\textsuperscript{12}

It may seem to some that the more depraved fallen humanity is painted in a given atonement theory, the more profound the redemption appears. But there is a psychological cost to be paid for the individual who sees the self as not simply broken, in need of healing and restoration from a loving God, but as essentially worthless, having all but lost the \textit{Imago Dei}, the image of the Creator within oneself, and being abandoned to an angry deity who declares the individual deserving of nothing but unending flames of conscious torment. As Jones so succinctly puts it, “That’s enough to screw up anyone’s relationship with God.”\textsuperscript{13} For all the objective limitations engendered by a theology of

\textsuperscript{12} Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, II, i, 8. Quoted in Jones, \textit{Did God Kill Jesus?}, 126.

\textsuperscript{13} Jones, \textit{Did God Kill Jesus?}, 134.
wrath, approaching atonement from a personal, subjective angle also invites a broader doctrine with a more nurturing vision. It is this vision that will shape one’s spirituality and supporting spiritual practices.

A Bigger Vision

Dallas Willard referred to modern conceptions of penal substitution as promoting a one-dimensional Gospel of “sin management.”\(^{14}\) Such approaches to understanding the Atonement limit the scope of Christ’s death to forensic categories. In doing so, as noted in the previous section dealing with the problems of the doctrine of original sin, these approaches disregard the subjective personal experience of redemption as an existential reality for individuals. And, at an objective level, they seriously minimize the concept of the Kingdom of God that was central to the teachings and vision of Jesus.

N. T. Wright, noted New Testament scholar and theologian, seeks to define the meaning of Christ’s death from a broad, Kingdom-centered perspective.\(^{15}\) Human redemption through Christ’s death is not the ultimate goal of God’s saving work, but one significant step in the process of renewing the entire cosmos. This grander vision, attested through the whole scope of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, has been watered down or lost through a narrow focus on the mechanics of atonement in the history of the Church. This has proven to be particularly true in the Western churches, in which Wright identifies three significant influences: a Platonized eschatology, a paganized soteriology, and a moralized anthropology. The Church’s Platonized eschatology finds its roots in


Plutarch (ca. AD 46-120). He was a Greek biographer and essayist who developed a concept of human salvation derived from the cosmology of Plato (427-347 BC).

According to Plutarch, the alienated state of humanity puts people in their material reality in exile from their true home, which is a completely spiritual existence. Humans long to escape to this place, free from the limitations and bondage of space, time, and matter. As the early church was influenced by Neo-Platonic thought, especially as the Church Fathers sought to frame their theology as an apologetic to a Hellenistic world, Christian salvation was conceived of as a kind of divine rescue operation. Christ’s death was framed as the means by which one is saved from the evil realities of the body—and the rest of the material world—to be delivered, ultimately, to the glories of heaven, the non-material home of the soul of the believer. In this scenario, the whole life of Jesus is not of great significance. Most of the material presented in the four Gospels—Jesus’ healing and miracles, his parables of the Kingdom and moral teaching—prove to be little more than backstory to the main event of the Passion.16 Ironically, even the Resurrection becomes almost incidental in this framework, a means to provide a happy ending to the story. In other words, in a Platonized Gospel, Jesus is born to die.

The paganized soteriology of the Church, displayed in the idea of an angry deity being pacified by a human sacrifice, is a pagan concept with an ancient history. It is nowhere to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures or in the Jewish theological tradition. In fact, for the Jews it represents part of the idolatry of the gentile nations that God commands Israel to avoid. Where the metaphor of God’s wrath is presented in the stories

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16 Ibid., 171–72.
of the Old Testament, it is situational. It is never an ongoing state of God’s relationship to humanity that must somehow be appeased. The necessity and efficacy of a god pouring out wrath on a son in place of humans to facilitate human deliverance, Wright contends, is a thoroughly pagan vision.\textsuperscript{17}

The moralized anthropology of the Church is a compromise of the Gospel. How the Church understands human identity and what people are meant to be in a truly biblical vision gets lost when eternal destiny is connected to moral behavior in an atonement schema. As Wright explains:

One of the key problems about the ideas of a platonic “disembodied heaven” is that it generates the wrong view of what human life ought to be in the present time as an anticipation, or even a qualification, for that destiny. The idea of “heaven” carries with it in the popular mind and even in many well-taught Christian minds the notion that this is where “good people” go, while “bad people” go somewhere else. This, of course, quickly gets modified by standard teachings of the gospel: we are all “bad people,” so that if anyone “goes to heaven,” it must be because our badness has somehow been dealt with and, in some traditions, because someone else’s “goodness” has somehow been “reckoned to our account.”

But the problem with this entire way of looking at things is that the idea of moral behavior as the qualification for “heaven” is itself a distortion.\textsuperscript{18}

Wright then proposes that the biblical vision (i.e., the Gospel) is not to be understood individualistically as an explanation of how one gets to heaven when one dies. The vision is so much bigger than that: A new heaven and a new earth (Rv 21). God is redeeming not only humans but the whole of the created order, restoring and transcending the goodness of God’s creation before the Fall in Genesis 1-2. Christ’s \textit{Parousia} will not be a rescue mission to take the faithful away to disembodied glory as

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 113.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 158.
all material creation is destroyed. Instead, Christ will come to join with the transformed people of God as they take up their vocation as God’s image-bearers—the Royal Priesthood—uniting with God in the work of cosmic transformation. The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples will be answered as God’s will is done “on earth as in heaven” (Mt 6:5-15). The meaning and purpose of Christ’s death is found in a new reality in which believers are not mere beneficiaries of salvation, but active participants in the restoration of all things.19

A Deeper Vision

If the Church is able to transcend the tyranny of one-dimensional, wrath-based doctrinal formulations and take hold of the bigger vision that Wright proposes, this expansive eschatology will most certainly be reflected in an expansive spirituality. Returning to the foundations of Merton’s spirituality from the beginning of the chapter, the ultimate human purpose of knowing God and living in God—approached through the spiritual pursuit of coming to know oneself in coming to know God—takes on a vision that is not only bigger than what is typically found in Evangelical piety, but deeper. It is more personally transformational, and it ultimately moves beyond the limitations of words, doctrines, and metaphors.

In this grand vision, the task of seeking to know oneself is now built upon the existential reality that one is unconditionally loved, unconditionally accepted by God, having inestimable value as a person made in God’s image. Each individual has a vocation in God’s Kingdom, a unique calling to join with others in the ongoing work of

19 Ibid., 49.
redemption. In seeking to know God, then, one begins with the knowledge that God longs for all people to live in wholeness, in the unfettered communion that exists between the members of the Trinity. The pilgrims on this journey ponder the truth that it is actually God who is seeking them. They are neither accomplishing something nor giving assent to a systematized doctrinal formula. They are surrendering themselves to the person of God.

In this deeper reality, the emphasis is on being more than on doing, living more from the heart than from the head. Through the history of the Church this has been the way of the mystics, the air in which they live, and move, and have their being (Acts 17:28). Going forward in pursuit of an expansive spiritual practice will require following in the footsteps of the mystics, particularly in the contemplative tradition that ponders what it is to know a God who is beyond knowledge, to love a God who is beyond embrace, and to commune with a God who refuses to be held captive by human doctrines and theological systems. This will provide a framework for understanding the trajectory of a deeply Christian spirituality.

**Conclusion**

If one’s definition of salvation in Christ is merely a ticket to heaven, then the process of becoming “saved” is a simple one: Say a “sinner’s prayer” (an appeal to God for forgiveness of one’s sins) and confess faith in Christ’s salvific death (usually expressed in the form of a certain atonement theory). One might then, depending on the tradition, receive baptism soon after (typically by immersion in Evangelical churches). Each of these experiences is an event, a moment in time that provides new believers with an objective assurance of “going to heaven” when they die. This is all well and good.
But, as has been noted, one unintended consequence of this limited soteriology is that as people are initiated into the Christian Church they also join a faith culture that is perceived to be overseen by a wrathful God. “He may be a God to be feared, but he’s not a God to be loved,” says Jones.\(^{20}\) It is a culture that is governed by shame, not by unconditional love.

But a whole new picture emerges of God’s redemptive purposes when salvation is viewed not simply as an initiation rite, an event at a moment in time, but as an ongoing process of transformation which most certainly takes place in the individual and through the individual to the world. The goal of salvation is new creation, not escape. This vision is truer to Scripture because it is truer to the character of the God who is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. It is this vision that invites people into a truer spirituality.

\(^{20}\) Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus?*, 138.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2
CHRISTIAN APOPHATIC FOUNDATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Greek word *kataphasis* is translated into English as “affirmation.”\(^1\) The adjectival form of the word is applied to the knowledge of God in *kataphatic*\(^2\) theology, which is affirming in that it seeks to describe all things religious and spiritual in positive assertions through the use of metaphor, employing words, images, and symbols. Kataphatic theological assertions are designed as a means to grasp that which is transcendent, or possibly to make the transcendent into the immanent. In most Christian traditions, kataphatic propositions are so normative, like the very air that is breathed, that the average believer does not conceive of any other way to describe, much less address, the God who is unseen. Equally invisible is the fact that metaphors are necessarily limited in the breadth of what they can express and limiting in denying the fullness of the essence.

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\(^2\) Due to the frequent appearance of the Greek terms *kataphasis* and *kataphatic* throughout this work, subsequent uses will not be italicized.
of a thing. Many of the Church Fathers (and pagan Greek philosophers before them) recognized the theological dilemma of trying to capture the boundlessness of God in a thoroughly bounded kataphasis. Out of this conundrum grew a process of thought and theology characterized by apophasis, literally a “repudiation.” In apophatic theology (also commonly referred to as “negative theology”), God can only be described by what God is not, and God is encountered in God’s absence. Simone Weil captured the essence of apophatic spirituality: “Contact with human creatures is given us through the sense of presence. Contact with God is given us through the sense of absence. Compared with this absence, presence becomes more absent than absence.”

Foundations of Christian Apophasis

The apophatic thought of Plato (ca. 427-ca. 347 BC) in expounding on God (the Unlimited, the First Principle) would later become the foundation for early Christian thinkers, pondering the incomprehensible nature of the Divine and seeking to express it in Hellenist categories. It is important to grasp some of the complexity and nuance of apophatic perspectives. First, historical negative theologies can be classified as either subjective or objective. A subjective negative theology suggests that while God can be

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3 Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 38–39. Given the discussion of Chapter 1, it is important to remember that all atonement theories are, in fact, metaphors.


5 The thought of pagan philosopher Plotinus (AD 205-270) is considered the beginnings of Neo-Platonism, which was destined to have a significant impact on Christian theology for centuries to come, particularly in the Western Church. See Charles M. Stang, “Negative Theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 162.
knowable in God’s own self, humans are unequipped to conceive of God given their limited means of perception and expression. In contrast, objective descriptions of God conceive of the Divine as one who is ultimately unknowable in God’s being, apart from reference to any human means of perception.

Subjective apophaticism also can be categorized as being either absolutely subjective, where God is unknowable and not expressible to all people in all ways, or relatively subjective in that God is unknowable only to some people; not at all times, depending on God being revealed; or only in certain forms of knowledge. Plato’s negative theology, for example, could be described as a relative subjective apophaticism, falling into each of the three subtypes at various times.

Another relatively subjective negative theology is found in the writings of Philo (ca. 20 BC-ca. AD 50), an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher who was roughly contemporary with Jesus and Paul. Finding apophatic thought in Philo is significant for the development of Christian theology because he was the first in Western history to synthesize Greek philosophic ideals with the monotheistic God of the Hebrew Scriptures. In this way he served as a model for many early Christian apologists. Philo’s doctrine of the Logos, the Divine Word, serves as the bridge between the unknowable God and the human soul. It is reflected in Christianity as early as the Gospel of John, which was written in the late first or early second century. John introduced his Gospel by presenting Jesus as the pre-existent Logos in human form (Jn 1:1-18). John’s theology

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would later become central to the development of Christian Trinitarian formulations in the fourth century.

Considering New Testament allusions, the visions and revelations recounted by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:1-6 might be considered a relative subjective apophatic experience, where one receives special revelation by a means that seems to transcend natural human modes of comprehension:

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

In the early church, following what is recorded in the New Testament, Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215) was one of the first theologians to begin to frame his work in what would later be referred to as mystical or contemplative categories. Bernard McGinn, an important historian of Christian mysticism, presents Clement as the first Christian writer to give a thorough treatment of many concepts that would later become central to apophatic mysticism, including the idea that the goal of all Christian spirituality is union with the Divine. Clement, like so many other pre-Nicene Christian apologists, constructed his apophatic theology as a marriage between the best of Greek philosophy
and the God of the Hebrew Scriptures who is revealed in Jesus Christ, the Logos. Jesus is the visible bridge between the human soul and an unseen God.\textsuperscript{8}

The fourth century was a watershed period in the life of the Christian Church. The Roman Emperor Constantine (ca. AD 272-337), purportedly having converted to Christian faith, proclaimed religious tolerance for Christianity with the Edict of Milan in 313, making what had been a church of martyrs into a church of the Empire. The groundwork was laid for the Church to formalize its structures of leadership and to define and codify its doctrine. It was a century that also saw the rise of monasticism as an expression of Christian spiritual life.

The key doctrinal movements began with the Council of Nicaea in 325, which formulated the doctrine proclaiming Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, as equal in divinity with God the Father, the two being of one substance (\textit{homoousios}). A key defender of the new creed was Athanasius of Alexandria (298-373). He is significant to the development of apophatic spirituality in his assertion that humans are created to contemplate God and that the believer’s ultimate goal is \textit{theosis}, becoming like God in perfect union. Yet God is utterly unknowable to humans given that there exists no natural point of contact between God and God’s creatures.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 101–2, 108.

\textsuperscript{9} Andrew Louth, \textit{The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75.
Eastern Apophatic Theology

St. Gregory of Nyssa

It was to be another Nicene apologist who ultimately planted the flag for apophatic thought in the East, Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330-395), known today as one of the three Cappadocian Fathers (along with his brother Basil of Alexandria and his good friend Gregory Nazianzus). Gregory would ultimately create the first systematic negative theology. He also expressed his apophatic thought in a paradigmatic model for spiritual development. While he would not prove to have a lasting impact in the West, Gregory’s negative theology was foundational to Eastern thought and practice, an influence that continues in Orthodoxy to this day.  

Gregory’s mystical thought flowed directly from the Nicene Trinitarian theology he helped to formulate. For Gregory, the Nicene concept of the Son being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, and thus equally divine, implied that the full Trinity (Father/Son/Spirit) is in its very essence unknowable, not the Father alone. His doctrine of *epektasis* (“straining”), which expresses the goal of the Christian life as the endless pursuit of the inexhaustible divine nature, was inspired and supported by the trajectory of the Apostle Paul’s deep spiritual aspirations conveyed in his Philippian epistle (Phil 3:12-14):

> Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining [the participial form of the root of *epektasis*] forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

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The apophatic nature of this “straining” toward God is expressed in three significant ways: in one’s spiritual senses, in the stages of ascent in the spiritual journey, and in the quality of the perceptions of the Divine Presence as one moves through the stages of ascent.\textsuperscript{11} Regarding one’s spiritual senses, Gregory approaches Scripture with an allegorical hermeneutic as a means to express the Inexpressible. In his \textit{Commentary on the Song of Songs}, he interprets the imagery of romantic love in the scriptural text (a lover seeking her elusive beloved) as symbolic of a soul yearning for God. The beloved’s presence is experienced as an absence: “She realizes that her sought-after love is known only in her impossibility to comprehend his essence, and that every sign becomes a hindrance to those who seek him.”\textsuperscript{12} Gregory’s \textit{Commentary on the Psalms} speaks of Moses, “whose eyes sharply penetrated the divine darkness, and therein contemplated the invisible.” Referring to this text, Daniélou points out how in Gregory’s negative theology humans only perceive God by contemplation, even as this contemplation demonstrates the relative inability of human minds ever to know God or to span the divine abyss that prevents access to God’s essence.\textsuperscript{13}

As to stages of ascent, Gregory’s contemporary Evagrius Ponticus (345-399) created a systematic ladder of spiritual progress that has endured in one form or another throughout the centuries in both East and West. Evagrius’ model of ascent to the Divine followed a progression from purgation (being purified of one’s sins and overcoming

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 141.

temptations), to illumination (receiving knowledge of God’s truth that had been hindered by sin), and finally to union (the ultimate goal of transcending all human limitations to contemplate God). Gregory built on this model to create his distinctively apophatic framework for the soul’s ascent. It begins with purification. Like the traditional purgation, the initial stage involves a repentance and escape from sin. Gregory identified two components to purification, the active (putting away wrong behavior and worldly attachments) and the contemplative (a divine gift of grace for the soul to perceive that God alone truly exists). The next stage is contemplation, or theoria, which comes to full fruition in the soul as one grows and develops an ability to ponder God and the goodness of the Divine. Whereas this theoria would be almost synonymous to the stage of union in kataphatic models of spiritual ascent, for Gregory the soul has not yet arrived until it transcends the kataphatic. The ultimate state is union of the soul with God, referred to in all Eastern models as “deification.” But in Gregory this third movement of the soul is a passing beyond contemplation. Contemplation is, in fact, impossible at this stage since unity with a God who is unknowable to the human soul cannot even be contemplated. Since God is knowable only to God’s own self, this suggests the form of an absolute subjective apophaticism.

Finally, the aphophatic nature of epektasis is seen demonstrated in the perception of the Divine Presence. There is natural irony, of course, inherent in the task of trying to describe how something is indescribable, and so Gregory enlists the common early

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Christian practice of allegorical interpretation of stories and characters from the
Scriptures to elucidate his apophatic thought. His primary biblical images used in his
writings are 1) the story of Moses and his encounters with God in the wilderness and 2) the romantic/erotic imagery of the lovers in the Song of Songs. With both of these allusions, Gregory employs the same symbols for the three-part spiritual ascent: light for purification, cloud for contemplation, and darkness for union:

Moses’ vision of God began with light (Ex 19:18); afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud (Ex 20:21). But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness (Ex 24:15-18). Now the doctrine we are taught here is as follows. Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which overshadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves below all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she is cut off on all sides by the divine darkness. Now she leaves outside all that can be grasped by sense or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible. And here God is, as the Scriptures tell us in connection with Moses: But Moses went to the dark cloud wherein God was (Ex 20:21). 16

It is a similar intimacy that is found in the darkness between the two lovers described in the Song of Songs:

Now, she says, that I have been deemed worthy of the nuptial rites, I rest as it were upon the bed of all that I have hitherto understood. But I am suddenly introduced into the realm of the invisible, surrounded by the divine darkness, searching for Him Who is hidden in the dark cloud. Then it was that I felt that love for Him Whom I desired—though the Beloved Himself resists the grasp of our thoughts...Then at last she gives up all she has found; for she realizes that what she seeks can be understood only in the very inability to comprehend His essence, and that every intelligible attribute becomes merely a hindrance to those who seek to find Him. 17

16 Daniélou, From Glory to Glory, 246–47.

17 Ibid., 201–2.
And then in the conclusion of this homily, Gregory shows that the mystery of being able to know an unknowable God is the very meaning of faith: “When I gave up every finite mode of comprehension, then it was that I found my Beloved by faith. And I will never let Him go, now that I have found Him from the grasp of faith, until He comes within my chamber.”

Jean Daniélou, a leading scholar on Gregory’s works, points to the role that faith, grace, and love plays in bringing the spiritual pilgrim to the summit of all possibility, union with the Divine. He sums up the significance of Gregory’s apophatic vision:

The term “darkness” takes on a new meaning and an essentially mystical connotation. It expresses the fact that the divine essence remains inaccessible even to the mind that has been enlightened by grace, and that the awareness of this inaccessibility constitutes the highest form of contemplation. Gregory’s originality consists in the fact that he was the first to express this characteristic of the highest stages of mystical experience.

Dionysius the Areopagite

While Gregory of Nyssa’s influence would be limited to the Church in the East, a century later another Eastern theologian would formulate an apophatic vision with a wide impact, East and West, that continues to the present day. The mysterious figure of Dionysius the Areopagite wrestled with the question of how the God who is completely unknowable manifests the divine being in creation in such a way that all things may attain union with God’s unmanifested self. Dionysius, who coined the term “mystical theology” to describe the discipline of thought related to the union of God to the human

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18 Ibid., 202.

19 Ibid., 27.

soul, is mysterious because he used the name of the Apostle Paul’s first convert in Athens after preaching to a meeting of the Areopagus (Acts 17:34). As the writings show a noted reliance upon the Neo-Platonic writings and thought of, among others, the Greek philosopher Proclus, who lived in the fifth century (412-485), the true identity of the author is unknown. The works of this “Dionysius” likely come from Syria in the late fourth or early fifth century.21

More problematic to the Western Church has been the extent of Dionysius’ reliance upon Neo-Platonic philosophy. Some have debated whether he should be categorized as a Neo-Platonic Christian or as a Christian Neo-Platonist, debating the validity of his thought for Christian theology. But no such debate raged in the East, where his mystical theology and apophatic sensibilities were considered an affirmation of his orthodoxy. His dialectic approach espoused how all things both reveal God and conceal God. His concept of the process toward union of the soul with God (deification) required both an affirmation and a negation, a kataphatic and an apophatic understanding. His language is characterized by a deeply aesthetic sense, revealing an incomprehensible God who uses the beauty of creation to bring one to the Unknowable.22 The role of beauty in the kataphatic stage is significant. The harmony and attractiveness of God’s created order is sensible to the human, yet the transcendent nature of beauty makes it an apt image for communicating the transition from what is describable to that which is beyond description. The theology of Dionysius is infused with aesthetics: “[Dionysius] can be

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21 The author is often referred to by the name of “Pseudo-Dionysius.”

regarded as the most aesthetic of all Christian theologians, because the aesthetic
transcendence we know in this world (from the sensible as manifestation to the spiritual
as what is manifest) provides the formal schema for understanding theological or
mystical transcendence (from the world to God).”\textsuperscript{23}

The theological system of Dionysius is built upon an ascending structure of three
“hierarchies” (a term he originated) which correlate to the spiritual ascent seen previously
in Evagrius and Gregory (purification, illumination, union). The level of human
comprehension, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, is the place where those things that can be
grasped by human intelligence and senses are found. The structure of the Church and the
sacraments are God-given representatives of this level. The next level in the ascent is the
celestial hierarchy, the place where ranks of angelic beings are beyond sense knowledge
but still open to intelligence, grasped through reason. The ultimate level is the “thearchy”
(another neologism of Dionysius), which is the Trinity, beyond all sensible and
intelligible apprehension.\textsuperscript{24}

The three hierarchies also correspond to three kinds of theology which Dionysius
identified. Symbolic theology is where the senses come into play. God has given the
Church and the individual believer the sacraments, experienced in the water of baptism,
the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and in the anointing oil of Confirmation. Kataphatic
theology is the place where the reasoning faculties are engaged through expressions of


\textsuperscript{24} Louth, \textit{The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition}, 158.
being, of goodness, and of beauty. And apophatic or mystical theology is the ultimate place of union which is beyond all reason and senses.

The role Christ plays in the spiritual ascent is particularly significant to Dionysius. Jesus as the second person of the Trinity and, as God incarnate, infuses every hierarchy. As the unknowable God radiates his light on all of creation, it is the light of Christ that shines in the lower hierarchies. But Jesus cannot appear to angels or humans as he actually is, but must veil his light in symbols, whether intelligible or sensible. Christ’s primary symbols are the Holy Scriptures, the liturgy, and the Eucharist.  

In his work *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius wrote that Jesus is “transcendent mind, utterly divine mind, who is the source and the being underlying all hierarchy, all sanctification, all the workings of God, who is the ultimate in divine power. He assimilates them, as much as they are able, to his own light.”

All through Dionysius’ teaching about Jesus in regard to his participation in the hierarchies is a singular motivation, that of love. The Incarnation itself is presented as a demonstration of the unconditional love of God. The transforming power of negating the world and returning to God begins with God’s love: “As one considers it all in a divine manner one will recognize in a transcending way that every affirmation regarding Jesus’ love for humanity has the force of a negation pointing toward transcendence.”

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25 Stang, “Negative Theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite,” 171.


27 Ibid., 264–65.
**Divine Names**, Dionysius uses Paul’s words from Galatians 2:20 to demonstrate that the goal of union with Christ comes only through love:

This is why the great Paul, swept along by his yearning for God and seized of its ecstatic power, had this inspired word to say: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Paul was truly a lover and, as he says, he was beside himself for God, possessing not his own life but the life of the One for whom he yearned, as exceptionally beloved.²⁸

Maximus the Confessor

The mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite would find a champion and successor in Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580-662), a monk in the Eastern Church who was deeply involved in the theological and political controversies centered in Constantinople in the seventh century. His commentaries on the work of Dionysius served to clarify (or, in some cases, to establish) a Christological center of the Dionysian dialectic and, in doing so, to ensure a permanent place for the Areopagite’s place in Eastern Orthodox theology.²⁹ Like his forerunner, Maximus expresses the soul’s ascent toward deification, union with God, in both its kataphatic and apophatic dimensions. He also launches from Neo-Platonic categories of the soul’s return to the Divine Source and the imagery of the Logos to create an unmistakably orthodox Christology, giving his theology an important place in both the Eastern and Western traditions of Christian spirituality.³⁰

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²⁸ Ibid., 82.
The Christology of Maximus focuses on two primary areas, the Incarnation of Christ and the two natures of Christ. The Incarnation is all about love. In God’s love for all humanity, all people are granted intimations of the Divine Self through Jesus, who is the enfleshed bridge to the unknowable God. God’s loving gift of atonement is not found solely in Christ’s death but also in his incarnate life, meaning that the Incarnation was not simply the solution to the Fall. Maximus believed that Jesus was predestined to come in the flesh, irrespective of a human need for forgiveness of sins,\(^{31}\) as God’s invitation to communion with the Divine. In this way, the kataphatic and the apophatic converge, the flesh leading to the spirit. In his *Centuries on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation*, Maximus wrote:

> If you theologize in an affirmative or cataphatic manner, starting from positive statements about God, you make the Word flesh (cf. John 1:14), for you have no other means of knowing God as cause except from what is visible and tangible. If you theologize in a negative or apophatic manner, through stripping away of the positive attributes, you make the Word spirit as being in the beginning God and with God (cf. John 1:1): starting from absolutely none of the things that can be known, you come in an admirable way to know Him who transcends unknowing.\(^{32}\)

The importance of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ for Maximus flows directly out of his understanding of the Incarnation. In the mystery of what is known dogmatically as the “hypostatic union,” Jesus is inseparably both fully human and fully divine. As he contended against the Monothelites who argued that the incarnate Jesus had but one will, a divine will, Maximus challenged this thought as heretical in its implicit denial of the full humanity of Jesus. He argued that Jesus on earth had two wills, one


\(^{32}\) Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 53.
human and one divine. As a human, he had the capacity to choose as he would, yet he chose to submit to the divine will. The example for this is Jesus wrestling in the Garden of Gethsemane as he is facing the prospect of death (Mt 26:36-39). In his humanity he experiences a bitter anguish that might lead him to choose to escape this trial. But with his human will he chooses to follow the divine will, the way of the cross. In Jesus the Logos, the hypostatic union is the creation of a new mode of existence, not a destruction of his humanity. Ultimately Maximus would pay with his own life in the theological and political battles fought over this issue, but it would be Maximus’ Christology that would that would ultimately endure in both East and West.33

As with Dionysius the Areopagite and Gregory of Nyssa, the goal for Christian spirituality in Maximus is union with God—a deification, a theosis. Deification is both the consequence and the purpose of the Incarnation. As the Incarnation required a self-emptying (kenosis) of the Son, God’s children are likewise invited to a self-emptying of the passions in surrender to God. The process of deification is also deeply Trinitarian in Maximus’ formulation. As the three of the Trinity dwell in one another, so humans, made in God’s image, dwell in the Trinitarian God. This bond does not make God and human one and the same being; i.e., it is not a pantheism. Maximus, using the language and concepts of the Cappadocian Fathers, would say that in theosis God and human share the same energies but not the same essence. The deified human is not a god by nature, but is a “created god” as a status granted by grace. Maximus saw this theosis in 2 Peter 1:4: “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that

33 Ibid., 54.
through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.\textsuperscript{34}

Ware asserts that in the Orthodox tradition, all theology is mystical, meaning that it is all about union with the Divine. Mysticism without theology breeds subjectivism and heresy. Theology without mysticism results in a dead scholasticism, producing answers but no transformation.\textsuperscript{35} Maximus the Confessor was dedicated to good theology, so much so that he was tortured and martyred for his doctrinal stance. But he knew that good theology is ultimately proven in transforming experience. He wrote:

> The Logos bestows adoption on us when He grants us that birth and deification which, transcending nature, comes by grace from above through the Spirit. The guarding and preservation of this in God depends on the resolve of those thus born: on their sincere acceptance of the grace bestowed on them and, through the practice of the commandments, on their cultivation of the beauty given to them by grace. Moreover, by emptying themselves of the passions they lay hold of the divine to the same degree as that to which, deliberately emptying Himself of His own sublime glory, the Logos of God truly became man.\textsuperscript{36}

**Gregory Palamas**

Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor serve as a few key representatives of the apophatic theology that is foundational to Eastern Orthodoxy. Over a period of three centuries they helped to craft the theology that undergirds *theosis* and helps the Church to ponder how a transcendent God is also an immanent God, how the Unknown can be known, how union with the Divine is possible.

The theology of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) rounds out this survey of Eastern

\textsuperscript{34} Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 231–32.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 207.

\textsuperscript{36} Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 33–34.
apophatic theology. While not particularly a theological innovator, Palamas synthesized for the fourteenth-century East the apophatic legacy received from the Church Fathers and, most significantly, applied his apophaticism to the spiritual practices of the church. He showed how union with God is not merely a theological concept but an existential reality. Deification is the gracious gift of a genuine experience of the Living God.

Born into a noble family in Constantinople at the close of the thirteenth century, Palamas chose early on to pursue a monastic life. It was in the context of hesychastic monasticism that his theology was born. The Hesychasts were monks committed to “quietude” (the meaning of their name) and to the pursuit of unceasing prayer, as directed by the Apostle Paul (1 Thes 5:16-18). As the primary spiritual practice of the Hesychasts, prayer is considered the highest act of the mind, and yet it is experienced ultimately in the heart and throughout the body as well. To maintain a Christological center and focus, the Jesus Prayer was employed. Practiced by attaching the name of Jesus to one’s breath, the prayer grew out of the reclusive eremitic monasticism that began in the fourth century. The physical posture involves a deep bowing of the head, with eyes toward the center of the body. As a practitioner himself, Palamas became an apologist for monastic Hesychasm, successfully defending the movement against harsh critics, one of whom accused the monks of having their “souls in their navels.”

The theology of Palamas is built upon two biblical pillars of thought, the doctrine of the human person and the doctrine of the Incarnation. In the former, he argues that the

37 The formulation of the Jesus Prayer is “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” or slight variants.

human being is a united whole. It is not only one’s mind but one’s whole person that is created in God’s image. As such, a believer prays with both body and soul in collaboration. In the Incarnation, Christ took on a human body and “made the flesh an inexhaustible source of sanctification.” As a result, God became accessible to personal experience when God’s own life was shared with humanity in the Incarnation of Christ.

In his *via negativa*, Palamas insisted that God must remain transcendent within the process of human deification: “God is not a nature, for He is above all beings…No single thing of all that is created has or ever will have even the slightest communion with the supreme nature or nearness to it.” To bridge the gap between God’s transcendence and immanence, he will define this supreme nature of God as God’s essence, distinct from God’s energies, language derived from the Cappadocian Fathers. God’s essence is impenetrable for all humanity for all time. It is the core of God’s self. In contrast, the energies are God’s actions and revelation to the world through which God relates to humans. The energies are synonymous with God’s grace. It is also critical to Palamas’ argument that the energies be uncreated. A product of God’s creation would be other than God. These uncreated energies are present in the hypostatic union, the two natures of Christ, and therefore have always been in existence. Now humans are able through the energies to rise above their own nature to love all others, including God, and to be loved in communion with God. God remains transcendent in the divine essence. The experience

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40 Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 68.

of *theosis* is one of humans always gloriously straining toward the essence (reflecting Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of *epektasis* [“straining”] described above), the inexhaustible source of life.\textsuperscript{42}

In all this, the apophaticism of Palamas serves as a vehicle to *theosis*. It presents a state that is beyond conceiving where God reveals himself to the human spiritual senses without sacrificing transcendence. For Palamas and the Hesychasts, the result is not a pantheistic fusion with God but a kind of transfiguration through the Incarnate Christ, a gift of grace. All this is then modeled (incarnated) in hesychatic spirituality, praying unceasingly with the whole self: body, mind, soul, and heart.

**Conclusion**

The foundations of Eastern Orthodox apophatic theology and spirituality considered in this chapter show many traits that are crucial to the vitality of any healthy, Kingdom-minded Christian tradition. On the path to union with God, the way remains unapologetically Christological, avoiding the traps of pantheism or becoming just a niche of Neo-Platonic philosophy. The soul is not divine by nature but by the gift of God’s grace. Also, mystical theology is always ecclesial, deeply rooted in Scripture and the sacraments, and it is experienced in community, with an active concern for others expressed alongside a contemplative hunger for Christ.\textsuperscript{43} Finally, an apophatic orientation expresses the importance of doctrine while acknowledging the limitations of human knowledge and affirmations. It fosters a humility and openness to mystery that could help

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 14.

a church to ensure that it is truly love that is at the center of their tradition, not rigid
dogmas of exclusivity (like, for example, a narrow atonement metaphor). For the
American Evangelical tradition, a reorientation that turns believers from an
individualistic faith (longing to be saved from the world) to a Kingdom vision (where
one’s soul is saved with the world) would serve as a healthy corrective.44

44 Jaroslav Pelikan, Introduction. In *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, by Maximus the
CHAPTER 3

FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS: THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE BUDDHA

On the surface, Christianity and Buddhism would seem to have little in common regarding their respective religious thought and practices. With radically different concepts of God, of the human person, of faith, and of salvation, just to name a few, they not only provide very different answers to ultimate questions but are often asking different questions altogether. At a deeper level, it is even reasonable to ask if Christianity and Buddhism even share the same definition of religion itself. For example, Christianity is theistic. The belief in a transcendent God is fundamental. Buddhism, in contrast, is non-theistic. It does not deny the existence of a Supreme Being, but there is not a god that is the focal point of its tenets and practices. In fact, from an occidental perspective, the core teachings and practices of the Buddha could be classified not as a religion but as a humanistic philosophy, out of which religious meaning and function have grown. In this case, it is reasonable for Buddhist philosophy to be considered in relation to Christianity as a system of thought that, like Neo-Platonism among the Church Fathers, has the potential to inform and enrich Christian theology and spiritual practice without compromising its core beliefs or ecclesiology. That is the premise upon which
the following survey of the Buddha’s thought and practice is based, in preparation for a
detailed consideration of mindfulness practices in relation to apophatic theology and
Christian spiritual practices in subsequent chapters.

The Buddha and His Teaching

Siddhartha Gautama was born in northern India in a region that today lies in
southern Nepal. He lived in the fifth or sixth century BC,¹ likely to the age of eighty. The
traditional stories, brimming with hagiographic hyperbole, present Siddhartha as a
sheltered boy raised in royalty, the son of King Shuddhodana and Queen Maya. As an
only child and heir to the throne, his parents were very protective of him. He rarely left
the confines of the royal palace. A formative story is told of his wandering outside the
palace when he was in his early thirties. Given his cloistered upbringing, Gautama was
shaken by encounters with four separate individuals: a sick person, an old person, a
corpse, and an ascetic. The first three encounters forced him to face the reality of human
frailty and mortality. The last experience, his encounter with the ascetic, gave him the
desire to pursue a means of transcending this existential crisis. As a result, he was
inspired to leave his life of royal luxury to become an ascetic himself, a sramana.²
Leaving behind a wife and child, he began a new life of strict practices of self-discipline,
all in pursuit of a deeper truth. In time Gautama began to grow weary of the rigors of his

¹ The dating of Siddhartha Gautama’s life has long been thought to be approximately 566-486 BC, but recent scholarship suggests that he could have died as late as 404 BC. That would put his dates at approximately 484-404 BC.

² Throughout this section, Buddhist terms will be presented primarily using their transliterations from Sanskrit, the language of ancient India. It should be noted that it is also common in English usage to present Buddhist terminology from the Pali language, since most of the extant ancient manuscripts of Buddhist scriptures were written in this later derivative of Sanskrit.
chosen form of asceticism. Retaining his material poverty, he developed his own moderate form of contemplative existence, avoiding the extremes of both self-denial and self-indulgence. Following what he called his “Middle Path,” the epiphanic moment came one day as he sat down under a tree to meditate. In a deep state of meditation, Gautama received his enlightenment, what he understood to be an awakening from the ignorance and desire that creates all human suffering and every individual’s cycle of birth and death. By this he had achieved nirvana, the end of his suffering, and would become known as the Buddha, the Enlightened One.\(^3\)

Gautama was raised in a Hindu culture, immersed in traditional interpretations of the Vedic scriptures provided by the priestly members of the Brahmin caste. The innovative spiritual and philosophical thought that was blossoming in Gautama’s time (which had a significant influence on his teaching) was based on the idea that true happiness could only be found as one is able to overcome the natural ignorance human beings have of their true natures. This ignorance or illusion under which people live keeps them caught in samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth. The driving motivation for the typical ascetic at this time was to discover liberating truth, pursued through harsh disciplines of fasting, sleep deprivation, and motionless meditation practices. As noted, the extremities of Gautama’s early ascetic experience led him to create his own less-rigorous Middle Path, but the ultimate goal of overcoming samsara remained central.\(^4\)

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Suffering and the Four Noble Truths

His experience under the Bodhi Tree, the legendary Tree of Enlightenment, is said to have provided Gautama with specific knowledge: the recollection of all of his past lives in the cycle of *samsara*, a comprehension of the fundamental laws of *karma* (the commensurate positive or negative impact of one’s current actions on subsequent rebirths), and, most significantly, the realities of suffering which would later be framed as the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth is the existence of suffering (*dukkha*).

Suffering is a given in human life. When the Buddha said, “All is suffering,” it was not a pessimistic posture, but realistic. The concept of *dukkha* is much broader than simply pain or displeasure. It also includes the sense of imperfection, impermanence, emptiness, and insubstantiality. At the existential level, *dukkha* represents the frustration, alienation, and despair that come with the realization of one’s own mortality.

The Second Noble Truth is that there is origination of suffering (*samudaya*). Human desires, cravings, and greed are examples of what the Buddha refers to as “thirsts,” which are manifested in suffering. They are not the only causes of suffering, but they are principal and palpable causes. The attachment to material things, to experiences of pleasure, and even to ideas is part of the ignorance that must be overcome to escape the suffering of *dukkha* and the cycle of *samsara*.5

The Third Noble Truth is that there is cessation of suffering (*nirvana*). The hopeful message of the Buddha is that all future can be prevented. The literal meaning of *nirvana* is “extinction” or “blowing out,” as a candle. *Nirvana* is the complete extinction

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of the powerful thirsts that drive human desires. It is freedom from the bondage of
attachments, a place of peace.

The Fourth Noble Truth is that there is a path to the cessation of suffering
(magga). The path to nirvana is represented by the Middle Way of the Buddha, which
avoids both extremes of pleasure-seeking and of self-mortification in the pursuit of
happiness. The Middle Way is embodied in the Noble Eight-fold Path: right
understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right
mindfulness, and right concentration. The cultivation of these qualities was central to the
wisdom and detachment the Buddha experienced in his awakening.⁶

For the Buddha, all suffering is experienced one of three ways: suffering that is
obvious (causing physical pain or mental anguish), suffering that is due to change (the
experience of loss of good things in life), or suffering due to conditioned states (pain that
exists in the midst of pleasure when that pleasure is based on the belief that one’s life will
be enhanced by the attachment to that positive sensation). These three ways of suffering
correspond to the three marks of existence that are central to an understanding of
Buddhist philosophy as a whole: everything is suffering (dukkha), everything is
impermanent (anitya), and nothing has any self (the condition of anatta, “No-self”).

The concept of No-self suggests that, as everything is in a constant state of change, a
person has no permanent identity that continues from one moment to the next. The
individual’s personality is defined by one’s material form, by sensations, by perceptions,

⁶ Eckel, Buddhism, 24-25.
by mental formations, and by one’s consciousness. Mark Siderits describes how No-self fits with the other two marks of existence:

Without belief in a separate self, existential suffering would no longer arise. Such suffering requires belief in something whose demand for meaning and significance is violated. It requires belief in a self. Impermanence also plays a role here. It is the fact of impermanence that first awakens us to suffering. And the fact that everything is impermanent will play a major role in the arguments for non-self. But it is non-self that plays the central role. And it is our false belief in a self that Buddhists identify as the core of our ignorance.7

Buddhist Philosophy and Christian Theology

F. C. Happold tells the story of an agnostic woman who once asked a Buddhist monk if the Buddha believed in God. The monk replied: “He didn’t speak of God, which is different. If a man realizes God and is among other men who do not, it is useless to speak about Him for they would not understand. It is better to indicate how they can come to know Him themselves. Man must discover God and his true Self or Ego by following the Path of Enlightenment.”8 This story illustrates the significance of understanding Buddhism as non-theistic (not centered around faith in God) and not atheistic (denying the existence of God). The teaching of the Buddha does not preclude the existence of God, so theism need not be the end of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. It is also important to note that the Buddha was not any kind of messianic figure. He claimed no divinity for himself. He was only a human being, and he had not received any special revelation from outside himself. He understood his own enlightenment as a discovery of reality that was always in existence, reality which any person can experience.

7 Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, chap. 2, Kindle.

The Buddha showed others the path to enlightenment, but he did not consider himself to be any kind of savior for humanity. In this way also, the person of the Buddha is not contradictory to Christianity.

In his work as a writer and philosopher, Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) traveled the path of many philosophers of religion through the ages who sought to identify a perennial philosophy, overarching truths that are common to—or that transcend the beliefs of—all the world’s religions. Focusing primarily on the mystics and the mystical traditions of the world’s great religions, Huxley’s analysis provides helpful insight into points of intersection between Christian and Buddhist thought.

**Suffering**

Huxley begins with the assertion that suffering in the individual person ends when one comes to unity within one’s own organism and to union with the Ground of Being. But standing in the way of this holistic unity is the human urge for separateness, the desire to be independent rather than interdependent. This understanding of suffering would restate the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha. The First Noble Truth is that the elements which make up humanity produce a capacity for pain. The Second is that the cause of pain is the craving for individual life. The Third Truth states that deliverance from craving is what does away with pain. Like the Buddha’s formulation, the Fourth Noble Truth points to the Eightfold Path as the way of deliverance.10

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10 Ibid., 227.
In Christian terms, the drive to be separate from the Ground of Being is the root of sin. Sin produces the existential suffering that manifests not only in the sinner but also in the sinner’s sentient environment. This universal fall from grace undermines the natural harmony of all things. It dulls the sinner’s capacity for empathy, as no living creature is able to experience the suffering of another creature. The perennial choice for the individual is either to abandon self and cling to the Deeper Reality or to seek to extend one’s selfhood apart from others. An intensified selfhood produces extremes of gluttony, greed, overstimulation, and ennui as the individual distances the self from neighbors, from nature, and from the Ground of Being. The Christian concept of hell is the complete separation from God, with the devil as the will to that separation.11

Salvation from suffering requires a surrender of one’s self (one’s will for separation) to Reality and its higher truth. One chooses a path of transformation, represented by the Eightfold Path of the Buddha or the spiritual ascent of the Church Fathers (purgation, illumination, union). Ultimately, the effects of one’s suffering will be good or bad according to choices one makes in response.

The Christian concept of atonement would not find a place in Huxley’s perennial philosophy, at least not in those formulations based upon satisfaction for slights against a lawgiver’s honor or a transaction of debt repayment, as considered in Chapter 1. Yet the idea of vicarious suffering and a transfer of merit is conceivable when a selfless, enlightened, or God-filled individual serves as a channel of grace to another. Still, the redemptive vehicle is not the suffering itself. Rather, it is the compassion and love that

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11 Ibid., 228–29.
motivate the sacrifice for the sake of the other.\textsuperscript{12} This is reflected both in the Christian imagery of the Passion of Christ and in the Buddhist role of the \textit{bodhisattva}, the “Buddha-to-be” who postpones his own \textit{nirvana}, choosing to continue in the cycle of death and rebirth in order to help others to reach \textit{nirvana}. In the perennial philosophy, a righteous one can escape suffering by accepting it and transcending it through the abandonment of self in surrender to the Ultimate Reality. As Jesus directed his disciples, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).\textsuperscript{13}

Transience and Identity

In the Buddha’s philosophy, everything people ordinarily care about is dependent upon causes, and everything that originates in dependence on causes must necessarily cease to exist in the law of constant change.\textsuperscript{14} Consequently, the impermanent nature of all things prevents the establishment of any kind of permanent identity for things, for people, or for ideas. The very nature of change means that any attempt on the part of people to call something “some thing” or someone “some one” must necessarily come from an illusion fostered by humans to overcome their existential angst, that is, their suffering (\textit{dukkha}). \textit{Anatta}, the absence of self, still allows for the reality of the human personality, which is made up of the Five Aggregates (matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness). One’s experience of the Five Aggregates is

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 231–32. Huxley, who considered wrath-based atonement theories “deplorable crudities,” averred, “To believe that God is angry at sin and that His anger cannot be propitiated except by the offer of a certain sum of pain is to blaspheme against the divine Nature.”

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 234.

\textsuperscript{14} Siderits, \textit{Buddhism as Philosophy}, chap. 2, Kindle.
fleeting, even as one creates the illusion of permanence among unenlightened individuals. In *samsara*, the cyclical nature of death and rebirth becomes somewhat more linear as one considers the possibility of progress for the one moving toward enlightenment in subsequent lives. Yet the karmic nature of *samsara* means that one also has an equal opportunity for regression in rebirth, farther away from *nirvana*.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the transience of all life on earth is seen, like the existence of suffering, as a consequence of the Fall. “All flesh is grass” (Is 40:6) is the human lament before an eternal God. The Hebrew Scriptures suggest that the earth itself is a constant (“A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever,” Eccl 1:4), but the New Testament writers developed the cosmic apocalyptic visions of the Old Testament prophets, predicting inescapable chaos and destruction that will ultimately usher in a new heaven and a new earth. In the arc of the biblical story, the fact that much of the New Testament was written to believers who were facing profound persecution appears to be a factor in the shift from a cyclical view of life to a more linear view. The Christian view of the end of suffering is not, as in Buddhism, a transcendent awakening out of an illusory cycle. Instead, it is a temporal movement from the old to the new, received as a gift from the Divine. Every individual has a fundamental identity as one made in the image of God. This identity is obscured by human sin, but never lost. Redemption in Christ liberates one to live out the fullness of the *Imago Dei*.

Even with these distinct differences in the concept of the self between Buddhism and Christianity, from the perspective of a perennial philosophy there is some common

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ground. In both there is a desired transcendent reality to which one can be united, leaving behind alienating separateness. This separation is only overcome in the annihilation of the self-regarding ego. Self-ness is the product of one’s body and psyche, while it is one’s spirit that can learn through disciplines to live free from the bondage of self.  

The Buddha was liberated by the awareness that he had no permanent self that he must hold onto or protect. The Apostle Paul declared his spiritual independence in saying, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

**Mysticism in Buddhism and Christianity**

In his landmark study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James initially had the Western contemplative tradition in mind as he described four primary marks of mysticism: ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. The ineffability of mysticism means that it is too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words. It must be directly experienced, as it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. It involves states of feeling more than intellect. The noetic quality of mysticism relates it to mental activity or the intellect. Mystic experiences function as a state of knowledge. Truth lies beyond the discursive intellect. The transiency of mysticism is displayed in the fact that mystical experiences are not sustained indefinitely. When recurring, experiences can produce continuous development of mystical sensitivity. Mysticism’s passivity is evident in that it involves a sense of surrendering one’s will, as if grasped or held by a superior power.

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But James will go on to describe these mystical—even apophatic—qualities as reflected in Buddhist spiritual practice. *Dhyana*, a higher state of Buddhist contemplation, proceeds through four stages: First, concentration is focused upon one point. Then, intellectual function drops off and there is a satisfied sense of unity. Next, satisfaction departs and indifference begins. Finally, indifference is perfected (and nothing exists beyond this).¹⁷ Akin to the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite, negation functions in *dhyana* as a means to reach a higher kind of affirmation. In the commonality of mystical experience, whether Christian or Buddhist, the barriers between the individual and the Absolute have been overcome. As this mysticism is existential, experienced in spiritual practice, it may be more accurate to say that this commonality exists not so much between Christianity and Buddhism as between European contemplation and Asian *dhyana*. But the parallels become even more intriguing as one explores the concept of emptiness as it relates to Christian kenosis and Buddhist *sunyata*.

**Kenosis and Sunyata**

Traditionally, the concept of kenosis (the act of emptying) is used Christologically. It refers to the Incarnation, specifically to the sacrificial self-emptying of Christ in submitting to the will of the Father by taking on human flesh. The term kenosis arose from the hymn quoted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippian church (Phil 2:5-8):

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied [the verb form of kenosis] himself, taking the form of a slave, being born

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in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

As the invitation of Paul to the church is to imitate Christ in his kenosis, it became a concept applied to devotion and spiritual disciplines, a reciprocal kenosis in which the pious would seek to empty themselves of human or fleshly passions and overcome sinful habits in gratitude to Christ. Maximus the Confessor referenced this discipline of kenosis as a part of the deification process of the believer. It involves the performance of moral actions, not legalistically but symbolically, as a gift of one’s whole self in response to the kenotic self-giving of God.\(^{18}\)

Thomas Merton pointed out the irony that there are those who would approach kenotic disciplines individualistically, focused solely on their own spiritual ascent. For a practice to be truly emptying in the manner of Christ, it must be incarnational—giving oneself for the sake of others—and eschatological—participating in God’s purpose of ultimate renewal. Anything less, Merton warned, is not true contemplation but “consecrated narcissism.”\(^{19}\) The purity of heart required for kenosis was a focus of the Desert Fathers in Egypt during the third and fourth centuries, a pursuit that led them to minimize conceptual knowledge as an end in itself. Merton saw an analogy between this eremitic purity of heart and the striving for non-attachment that characterized modern Zen contemplative practice. As a Christian without purity of heart will fail in kenosis, the Zen monastic fails at emptiness—sunyata—by becoming attached to emptiness itself and


to a concept of purity as an object to be attained. The apophatic nature of Zen practice is seen in its refusal to deliberately foster an inner state of emptiness, remaining free from the bondage of a contemplative “system.” Author and Zen scholar Daisetz Suzuki summed up this apophaticism: “When seeing is no-seeing, this is real seeing; when hearing is no-hearing, there is real hearing.”

**Apophasis and Spiritual Ascent**

Janet Williams, an authority in both patristic theology and in Soto Zen Buddhism, finds apophaticism to be an undercurrent throughout the teaching of the Buddha. She argues that Gautama’s Middle Path is not to be understood as a kind of moderate synthesis between the extremes of asceticism and hedonism, but as a radical negation of both extremes. Both affirmative and negative views are to be transcended and all dualities rejected. The Buddha applies this negation even to his own teaching, which, he says in a famous parable, is like a raft which is used to bring a traveler to a safe shore and is then abandoned as a burden after it has served its purpose.

The path to *nirvana* is traveled not in theories but in practice, both in meditative disciplines and in the mindful living of everyday life. In the same way, Maximus the Confessor saw the spiritual ascent to the Unknowable not as a theological exercise but as an active expression of love for God by emulating the kenosis of Christ in self-giving for others. His is an existential “negation of negation” as an act of the will. And, like the

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21 Williams, *Denying Divinity*, 41–42.
teaching of the Buddha, it transcends all dualisms by acknowledging the profound interconnectedness of all things.22

In the highest states of Buddhist contemplation short of nirvana, one comes to a place where nothing exists, where there are neither ideas nor the absence of ideas, and where all perception has been abandoned. In a Christian parallel, Dorothee Soelle wrote of the classic way of ascent—purgation, illumination, union—as the personal relinquishing of the world, of the ego, and of God. She referenced a fifteenth-century anonymous letter that encapsulates this apophatic surrender:

Learn to deny God for the sake of God—the hidden God for the sake of the unveiled God. Be willing to lose a copper coin so that you may find a golden one. Pour out water so that you may draw wine instead. Creation itself is not so great that it can rob you of God or even of the slightest grace unless you yourself will it…Thou silent cry, no one can find you who knows not how to let you go.23

The Mindfulness Practice of the Buddha

As the Buddha’s teaching was designed to be a practical means toward life transformation—not a mere exercise in academic philosophy—it is important to explore the elements of the Buddha’s practice, particularly with regard to the meditative tradition he established. In the six-year period previous to his enlightenment, Gautama was said to have mastered advanced meditative techniques through which he accessed “the plane of nothingness, a state of deep concentration in which the mind goes beyond the duality of thinking subject and object thought of, and achieves a non-discriminative consciousness

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22 Ibid., 119.
of unity with Reality.” What was still missing for Gautama, however, was a permanent solution to the problem of suffering (*dukkha*). Insight meditation was his means of filling that void.

Insight meditation (*Vipassana*) was designed, according to Gautama, to develop “mindfulness and self-possession” in the practitioner, the qualities required to transcend the illusory self that binds humanity to suffering. The insight received jettisons the supposed objectivity of objects so that they lose their grip on people. The subjectivity of the ego-self continues, but is weakened in the absence of objectivity. Once one reaches a state beyond subject-object consciousness, one then knows the deepest reality without any hindrances whatsoever.

The *Satipathhana-sutta* (“The Setting-up of Mindfulness”) is the Buddha’s primary discourse on meditation. In this teaching, he identified four types of meditative practice that employ and develop mindfulness in all areas of life: body-oriented meditation, meditation focused on sensations and feelings, meditation on the state of one’s mind, and conceptual meditation on particular ethical, spiritual, or moral subjects.

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**Body Meditation**

The primary body-oriented form of meditation centers on the breath and the act of respiration, called *anapanasatt*, “the mindfulness or awareness of in-and-out breathing.” This practice helps to develop powers of concentration that are foundational in all Buddhist disciplines. According to the Buddha, one should sit “cross-legged, keeping the

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24 Williams, *Denying Divinity*, 42.

25 Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Kindle. The following descriptions of meditation types are based on Chapter 7 of this work.
body erect and mindfulness alert.” One sits erect but not stiff, with hands placed on the lap. Settled in this posture, the meditator either closes the eyes or gazes at the tip of one’s nose. The entire goal is to focus on one’s breath, so fully concentrated on breathing that one is aware of all breath movements and changes in respiration. In the development of mindfulness through breathing, one will inevitably encounter distracting thoughts and sounds. One does not fight against thoughts but merely acknowledges them and refocuses on the breath.

Another form of body-focused meditation takes place throughout the day, as practitioners are mindfully attentive to their actions and words in every one of their normal daily activities, large or small. As with breathing meditation, the mindfulness goal is to be present in the present moment, fully experiencing the physicality of one’s current movements and actions. One releases thoughts of the past or consideration of what is yet to come to stay present in the moment.

Meditation on Sensations and Feelings

Meditation on sensations and feelings invites a person to be attentive to one’s sense of well-being, whether happy, unhappy, or neutral. One seeks to observe oneself with objectivity and detachment, identifying feelings and considering their sources, where they arise, and how they subside. Mindful detachment allows one not to be identified with one’s sensations or to foster feelings about one’s feelings, which would become another layer of internal bondage.

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[26] The wandering mind is a challenge also encountered in the hesychastic practice of the Jesus Prayer, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.
Meditation on Mental States

To be mindful of one’s mental states is similar to the awareness of sensations and feelings, but it moves beyond a simple sense of well-being to engage all emotions, sentiments, and states of mind, whether pleasant or unpleasant. The key to this discipline is to maintain a non-critical and non-judgmental attitude. One refrains from making any distinction between right and wrong, good and bad. One simply observes, watches, and examines with curiosity and openness.

Conceptual Meditation

Unlike the previous disciplines, the forms of conceptual meditation engage one’s thoughts directly. One chooses an ethical or moral dilemma, a spiritual theme, or an intellectual subject on which to ponder in the pursuit of greater wisdom, understanding, and insight. The Five Hindrances, barriers to mindfulness, are common topics for this type of meditation. These include lustful desires (kāmacchanda); ill-will, hatred, or anger (vyāpāda); torpor and languor (thīna-middha); restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca); and sceptical doubts (vicikicchā). Along with negative conditions one seeks to overcome, positive qualities can also be pondered, including The Seven Factors of Enlightenment: mindfulness (sati), awareness in all activities and movements both physical and mental; investigation and research into the various problems of doctrine (dhamma-vicaya), including all religious, ethical, and philosophical studies, reading, researches, discussions, and conversation; energy (viriya), perseverance to work with determination until a task is completed; joy (pīti), the quality in contrast to the pessimistic, gloomy, or melancholic attitude of mind; relaxation (passaddhi), both of
body and of mind; concentration (*samādhi*), non-distracted focus; and equanimity (*upekkhā*), the ability to face all of life’s unpredictability undisturbed, with calmness of mind and tranquility.

Also formative for meditation are The Four Sublime States, ways of life that resonate well with Christianity: 27 extending unlimited, universal love and goodwill to all living beings without discrimination; compassion for all living beings who are suffering, either in trouble or affliction; sympathetic joy in others’ successes, welfare, and happiness; and equanimity in all the ups and downs of life. As seen above, there are multiple forms of Insight meditation. Yet they all have the same goal of training the practitioner in the ways of mindfulness. The Buddha conceived of mindfulness as an acute awareness of one’s immediate experience, which is focused on the present moment in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance. This encapsulates the working definition of mindfulness which will be employed in subsequent chapters.

**Conclusion**

Historically, the exclusive nature of many of the world’s religions has produced a segregation, both *de facto* and *de jure*, between faith traditions that has often precluded ecumenical cooperation, dialogue, and mutual understanding. For Christianity, words of Jesus from the Gospel of John, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6), have been traditionally interpreted as a consecration of this separation, which is only to be bridged for the purpose of proselytizing members of the “false religions.” The intent in this chapter has been to step

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27 See Gal 5:22-23, the traditional “Fruits of the Spirit.”
beyond these common boundaries to see the potential within certain thought and practice of the Buddha for enriching and expanding Christian spiritual practices, particularly those of an apophatic nature, through the vehicle of mindfulness. If personal emotional healing is also considered as a part of the spiritual ascent, integrated with the growth that comes through purgation and illumination, mindfulness practices take on an even greater significance for life transformation. This is the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4

MINDFULNESS AND THE SCIENCE OF HEALING

In Chapter 3, reference was made to the original teachings of the Buddha as “Buddhist philosophy.” The appropriateness of this terminology is demonstrated in the fact that the pedagogy of Siddhartha Gautama, even apart from the later religious developments, includes a metaphysic for understanding reality, an ontology to express a concept of being, an epistemology that ponders the nature of knowledge, and an ethic that addresses morality. Now in recent decades it has also become commonplace to hear the term “Buddhist psychology” used in those branches of psychotherapy and the neurosciences that are finding resources for the health and wellness of the human mind within the Buddha’s concepts and practices. The term need not be seen as an anachronism if one considers the commonalities between Buddhism and psychology. Both pursue an understanding of the nature of suffering, and both seek to discover the origin and cause of that suffering. Each has developed systematic methods and practices for overcoming suffering. It is all included in the science of the mind.¹

The concept of mind generates varied definitions, extending beyond human consciousness and thought. The mind also involves emotions and sensations, and it includes the physical systems of the body in its connection with the brain. Additionally, it encompasses patterns of human behavior. Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist and founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, suggests that, along with the physical and mental processes, the mind should also be understood in its relational dimensions, as a phenomenon that occurs between people as they interact interpersonally and engage with their culture. Siegel provides this expansive definition of mind: “A process that regulates the flow of energy and information.”

Given the complexity that is the mind, the science of healing the mind is multifaceted and benefits from interdisciplinary approaches both to general wellness and to the treatment of pathology. This chapter is an exploration of how two disciplines in particular, psychotherapy and neuroscience, have incorporated mindfulness into their methods in meaningful and effective ways. Together they give insight into how mindfulness works scientifically as a tool for healing of the mind. Then to be considered are the ramifications of this science with regard to the healing potential of mindful spiritual practices.

**Psychotherapeutic Mindfulness**

As noted previously, the Buddha’s concept of mindfulness was summarized as an acute awareness of one’s immediate experience, which is focused on the present

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moment in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance. Hypothesizing that these qualities could be beneficial to his work with patients suffering from chronic physical pain, Jon Kabat-Zinn experimented with the use of mindfulness techniques at the stress-reduction clinic of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in the 1970s. What developed from his studies was a pioneering method called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), an eight-week program focused on helping patients to encounter the ways in which their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being is influenced by their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. The application of mindfulness meditation practices in this method has resulted in significant reduction in patient stress and anxiety, changing not the actual physical sensations of pain themselves, but the perceived experience of pain. In other words, a negative emotional response to the pain tends to increase the intensity of suffering from the pain. Here mindfulness works by enhancing the attention and focus, nurturing an awareness in patients that they need not equate their identity with their pain and its accompanying thoughts. This allows patients to take an objective stance toward their pain, which helps to mitigate the emotional reactivity that is the source of suffering.\(^3\)

In MBSR, mindfulness is practiced through sitting and walking meditation, guided body awareness, and yoga. In sitting meditation, focus is placed on one’s breath, the sensation and natural rhythm of one’s breathing. Walking meditation draws the practitioner’s attention to the movements of the body and the physical sensations of motion. Guided body awareness involves centering the mind sequentially on the sensations in the parts of one’s body, engaged from a stationary posture, either seated or

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lying down. Yoga engages the body in exercises that are more strenuous, employing various postures and forms of stretching.⁴

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is another psychotherapeutic methodology that is built around mindfulness. Marsha Linehan, a psychology researcher at the University of Washington, developed DBT in the late 1980s, particularly designed to address the psychopathology of people with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). BPD presents complex challenges for therapy as it typically involves multiple disorders and symptoms.⁵ Underpinned by Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Linehan’s approach applies mindfulness practices to help clients stay rooted in the present moment in a compassionate, non-judging atmosphere. The dialectic aspect of DBT is seen in the bringing together of, on one hand, an acceptance of oneself in the present reality while, on the other hand, fostering and motivating one’s ability to change. DBT’s effectiveness has been demonstrated in research data showing that abatement in self-harm, anger, and social dysfunction has been a common positive result among clients who have been treated using this methodology.⁶

Like DBT, the basis of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is also CBT. It was developed by British behavioral therapists Mark Williams, John Teasdale, and Zindel Segal. Seeking to find better treatment for long-term depression sufferers,

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⁵ See Marsha Linehan, Cognitive Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder (New York: Guilford, 1993). Disorders and symptoms include such things as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, cutting, intense emptiness, and identity disturbance in various combinations.

⁶ Nolasco, The Contemplative Counselor, 43.
they were inspired by Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR success to include mindfulness concepts and practices into their therapy. MBCT was the result of their work, providing significant improvement for their depression patients, especially those who were on antidepressant medication but still experiencing recurrent major depressive episodes. The uniqueness of the MBCT model is that the therapy begins with mindfulness techniques alone, including sitting, walking, and body-awareness meditation. The cognitive behavioral piece is not engaged until after clients have experienced a level of success in disconnecting from their negative thought processes through mindfulness. Initial results showed a fifty percent decrease in recurrent depressive episodes among patients who were compared to a control group. The sequential application of mindfulness and cognitive behavioral techniques in MBCT provides depression sufferers a sense of having feasible options for them to respond effectively to the challenges of their condition.  

Common outcomes for clients in these three therapeutic approaches (MBSR, DBT, and MBCT) include increased patience, non-reactivity, self-compassion, and wisdom for engaging daily life. Each of these therapies nurtures enhanced awareness, the valuing of subjective experience, a grounding in the current moment, and compassionate acceptance free of judgment, reflecting all the primary qualities of mindfulness.  

Therapists and researchers have found that mindful awareness helps people to choose how they will respond to things in life proactively, not living in a reactive “auto-pilot” mode. Mindfulness of personal experience gives one a clearer sense of one’s current


8 Nolasco, *The Contemplative Counselor*, 44.
reality, side-stepping the tendency to avoidance or over-analyzation. Mindful living in the present moment helps one to disconnect from obsession with the unchangeable past and the unrealized future so that life can be deeply experienced and appreciated. Additionally, mindful non-judgment helps to prevent one’s tendency to repress inner sources of shame or embarrassment, opening those painful places to the possibility of healing. In the terminology of the Buddha, mindful psychotherapeutic methods provide the means for one to experience what is to be “awake.”

The Neuroscience of Mindfulness

Neuroplasticity refers to the ability of the human brain to shape its structural connections, creating physical neurological pathways in response to the influence of repeated experience. Recent studies suggest that mindful awareness itself is a form of experience that, as practiced over time, seems to promote neuroplasticity. Daniel Siegel, a leading expert on the neuroscience of mindfulness, describes his perspective on this intriguing phenomenon:

When we focus our attention in specific ways, we are activating the brain's circuitry. This activation can strengthen the synaptic linkages in those areas. By exploring the notion that mindfulness, as a form of relationship with yourself, may involve not just attentional circuits, but also social circuitry, we can then explore new dimensions of the brain aspect of our mindful experience.

The “social circuitry” in Siegel’s description refers to those neural pathways a person uses to understand another person, to form a conceptualization of the other’s mind, including the other’s feelings, intentions, and attitudes. Research by Richard Davidson at

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10 Siegel, *The Mindful Brain*, 54.
the University of Wisconsin lends support to Siegel’s thesis. Davidson monitored the brain activity of both novice meditators and Buddhist monks with thousands of hours of contemplative experience, all of whom were engaged in compassion-oriented forms of meditation.\(^\text{11}\) Comparing data from both groups, the monks showed significant increases in brain activity during the compassion meditation:

Activity in the left prefrontal cortex (the seat of positive emotions such as happiness) swamped activity in the right prefrontal (site of negative emotions and anxiety), something never before seen from purely mental activity. A sprawling circuit that switches on at the sight of suffering also showed greater activity in the monks. So did regions responsible for planned movement, as if the monks’ brains were itching to go to the aid of those in distress.\(^\text{12}\)

Through this research, Davidson was able to identify a neural pathway for compassion and empathy, validating Siegel’s social circuitry concept. In collaboration with psychologist Daniel Goleman, Davidson’s interpretation of the data led to the classification of three forms of empathy (the experience of “feeling with” another person). First is cognitive empathy, one having the idea of concern for the suffering of another. Second is emotional empathy, when one allows the other’s suffering to touch one’s emotions. Finally, there is empathic concern, when one experiences a level of care that leads to action to alleviate the other’s suffering. The movement to engage another person’s suffering motivated by empathic concern is commonly seen in those who practice compassion-focused meditation. While basic breathing meditation, for example, will calm the reactive centers of the brain, compassion meditation, in contrast, stimulates circuits for good feelings and love, along with social circuits sensitive to the suffering of

\(^{11}\) Nolasco, *The Contemplative Counselor*, 45.

others, preparing one to act. Empathic concern has been shown to increase with continued practice.\textsuperscript{13}

Along with the circuits for compassion and empathy, Goleman and Davidson have identified three other neural pathways that are influenced by mindfulness. These are pathways for attention, for stress, and for sense of self. The attention pathway serves one’s awareness and focus, the primary qualities of mindfulness. Additionally, Goleman and Davidson note that attention itself is manifested in multiple abilities, including selective attention (the capacity to focus on one element and ignore others), vigilance (maintaining a constant level of attention as time goes on), an allocating attention (noticing small or rapid shifts in what is being experienced), goal focus (keeping a specific goal or task in mind despite distractions), and meta-awareness (being able to track the quality of one’s own awareness, as when one notices that the mind is wandering or that one has made a mistake). Meditation enhances each of these types of attention, with improvement commensurate with one’s level of experience in meditating. In particular, meditation has been shown to benefit mind-wandering and concentration problems caused by multi-tasking. One’s working memory is also enhanced, with research even showing improved academic test scores for meditators.\textsuperscript{14}

Neurologically speaking, these varied forms of attention are brought to life in complex interaction between the amygdala\textsuperscript{15} and the prefrontal cortex of the brain.

\textsuperscript{13} Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson, \textit{Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body} (New York: Avery, 2017), 121.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 128, 144-145.

\textsuperscript{15} There are two amygdalae in the midbrain, one in each cerebral hemisphere.
The amygdala functions as a threat monitor. When danger is perceived, the amygdala triggers the brain’s freeze/fight/or flight response, and the threatened individual is prepared for action by the release of energizing hormones into the system. The activity of the amygdala decreases when one meditates. The prefrontal cortex, directly behind the forehead, is the executive center of the brain. Its circuitry is engaged by all voluntary attention. Every type and aspect of attention is connected to the prefrontal cortex, making it the central focus of most meditation research.\(^{16}\)

The stress pathway is also a part of the complex interaction between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. For those who are experiencing stress, research indicates that the active amygdala can be calmed by thirty hours of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. It is particularly significant that the quieting of the amygdala in MBSR is ongoing, not limited to the actual time when one is engaged in mindfulness practices. Other stress-related benefits of mindfulness practice are: the ability to withstand higher levels of pain and to minimize reaction to pain among experienced practitioners of Zen; amelioration of emotional regulation; enhanced prefrontal emotional management, with better connectivity to the amygdala, easing reactivity to stress; ability to better regulate one’s focus and attention; and faster recovery from stress.\(^{17}\)

Finally, it has been demonstrated that the pathway for one’s sense of self is also nourished by mindfulness:

The brain’s default mode activates when we are doing nothing that demands mental effort, just letting our mind wander; we hash over thoughts and feelings (often unpleasant) that focus on ourselves, constructing the narrative we

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\(^{16}\) Goleman and Davidson, \textit{Altered Traits}, 127.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 98–99.
experience as our “self.” The default mode circuits quiet during mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation.\(^{18}\)

The mindful individual finds that self-focused thoughts and feelings that arise in the mind are not long-lasting. They have a weakened ability to hijack one’s attention. The benefits one gains by nurturing all these neural pathways through meditation practices culminate over time in a deepening personal awareness which Siegel refers to as attunement. In Buddhist terminology, it could be said that the enlightened individual is a truly attuned individual, that *nirvana* is the ultimate level of attunement.

Regarding the relational aspect of mindfulness, in which the neural social circuitry is involved, there is also an interpersonal form of attunement, a non-judgmental awareness experienced in the present moment (the qualities of mindfulness) that Siegel calls secure attachment. The intimate bond of mother and baby, for example, would be the epitome of the attunement that creates secure attachment. The individual who is securely attached with another person has an increased capacity for resilience, for well-being, and for developing other intimate relationships. Neurologically, research on secure attachment and studies of mindful awareness practices have common findings. Both engage the prefrontal cortex with regard to the functions of regulating body systems, balancing emotions, attuning to others, regulating fear, responding with flexibility, and demonstrating insight and empathy. In sum, these findings suggest a symbiotic relationship between mindfulness practices, the neural pathways of the brain, and attunement (both intrapersonal and interpersonal).\(^{19}\)

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 163.

\(^{19}\) Siegel, *The Mindful Brain*, 49-50.
Goleman and Davidson have shown through their research that the practice of mindfulness enhances the neuroplasticity of the brain to an extent that is proportional to one’s intensity and number of years of engagement in meditation. Their book, *Altered Traits*, gets its title from the conclusion that the long-term result of meditation is not simply that one feels better or handles life challenges more efficiently, but that one’s fundamental traits of character are transformed. A truly mindful person becomes a better person: more compassionate, more kind, more empathic. This suggests that mindfulness supports the healthy integration of body, mind, and spirit. And since mindfulness practices have been shown to be a significant resource for healing of the mind and body, it is also reasonable to consider the potential of mindfulness as a means of restoring spiritual wholeness.

**Mindfulness for Spiritual Healing and Wholeness**

The ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, both in word and in deed, was a proclamation of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus was considered to be a rabbi for his teaching, a healer for his ability to restore health, and a prophet for his ability to drive out manifestations of evil. He did not simply do miraculous things to prove to people that he was the Messiah so that they would believe in him and gain future access to heaven. In every one of his roles, the goal was restored relationships: person to person, person to community, person to self, and person to God. The meaning and purpose of the Kingdom Jesus was proclaiming was defined by his words: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

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20 Goleman and Davidson, *Altered Traits*. 
This all-encompassing restoration, this *shalom* of Jesus, Tim Stead refers to as inner healing, “the process by which we become whole and as free as is possible for each of us as human beings.” Healing was not simply a one-time event but a process, even for those who experienced an immediate physical transformation from Jesus, since the development of each person’s way of responding to their newfound abilities and to the world around them was just beginning in their encounter with Jesus. As noted above in the discussion of Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR therapy, the objective sensation of pain is distinct from the subjective experience of suffering. The Gospel story of the man Jesus cleansed of leprosy (Mk 1:40-45) is an example of this. The removal of the man’s skin disease in itself would not have equipped him to know how to live his life as a healthy person or how to reintegrate into the community. The nature of Jesus’ action is multifaceted and holistic. First, Jesus’ application of physical touch to the man with leprosy and his willingness to grant the man’s request communicates to an untouchable social outcast that he has value. Then, the directive to go and show himself to the priest for ceremonial cleansing does three things: It invites the man to take an active role in his own restoration, it removes any excuse of the community and the religious establishment to continue to exclude him, and it symbolically restores the man to the means of grace of temple worship, showing him that he is accepted in the sight of God. In this way, Jesus removed the objective obstacles to the relief of the man’s suffering. But the subjective

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experience of inner healing, which will involve the man’s own willingness and participation,\textsuperscript{22} is still in process.

The modern medical and psychotherapeutic emphasis on the alleviation of pain provides significant benefits for many, particularly given pharmaceutical advances. But Rolf Nolasco suggests that when all pain is seen as an enemy to be vanquished, with pain relief as the driving focus of treatment, opportunities for inner healing and transformation may be missed.\textsuperscript{23} Both Christian and Buddhist contemplatives promote mindfulness as a resource for changing one’s relationship to pain and its causes. In the midst of pain, mindfulness invites one to pause, to notice, to offer oneself compassion with acceptance, and to be fully present to one’s experience of suffering. One does not avoid the existential reality of suffering but finds deliverance by moving through it. Thich Nhat Hanh, the distinguished Zen master, describes this dynamic of mindful engagement of suffering:

The First Truth is dukkha, suffering. The Fourth Truth is marga, the path leading out of the suffering. Everyone knows that if you run away from suffering you have no chance to find out what path you should take up in order to get out of the suffering. So our practice is to embrace suffering and look deeply into its nature…But looking deeply we find out what has created our suffering. If we have seen this, we know how to stop, to cut the source of nutrition for suffering, and then healing will take place.\textsuperscript{24}

In Christian terms, Stead explains how this mindful attentiveness allows the sufferer to release one’s suffering to the healing power of the Holy Spirit. The role of the

\textsuperscript{22} In John 5:1-18, the story is told of Jesus encountering a physically handicapped man who has spent thirty-eight years coming regularly to the Bethesda pool, a place of healing, but making excuses for never entering the water. Jesus first addresses the man by asking, “Do you want to be made well?”

\textsuperscript{23} Nolasco, \textit{The Contemplative Counselor}, 34.

\textsuperscript{24} Thich Nhat Hanh, \textit{Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers} (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 124–25.
sufferer is to surrender one’s whole self and whole will to the Spirit, to give permission to the Spirit and thus engage with God as a co-healer. Yet for this to happen, one must overcome the natural tendency toward hiddenness, a reluctance to bring the source of suffering into the light of day where it can be healed. This reluctance is due to the attendant shame, fear, or emotional pain at the core of the suffering. In this insecurity, the sufferer struggles to trust that God is truly unconditionally loving, that God is safe. The sad irony of the tyranny of shame is that it leads the sufferer to abandon the divine source of forgiveness and healing and to try in one’s own power to “fix” oneself. This is a futile pursuit. It tends to lead to further denial and repression of negative emotions, giving those feelings increased power to cause suffering. It is a vicious cycle of shame.

To undo this cycle, the mindful person is developing the ability to step back from the feelings and to notice objectively the patterns of negative and persistent thoughts that arise. A non-judgmental stance allows one to set aside overwhelming fears and to become fully aware of the source of one’s shame. One doesn’t need to fight anything, just to notice. All kinds of thoughts may arise, but one no longer needs to get caught up them. They are not the sufferer’s identity. Then the mindful one is able to release the inhibiting shame and to choose to see oneself objectively as but a sufferer in the hands of a loving God. Now wholeness, the transformation of suffering, is possible.

Siegel’s concept of secure attachment, the apex of interpersonal attunement, can be applied to the relationship between an individual and God. If one considers Siegel’s

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26 Ibid., 103–9.
description of the parent/child relationship as a metaphor for the God/person relationship, the holistic nature of healing body, mind, and spirit through mindfulness takes on an even deeper significance:

When relationships between parent and child are attuned, a child is able to feel felt by a caregiver and has a sense of stability in the present moment. During that here-and-now interaction, the child feels good, connected, and loved. The child’s internal world is seen with clarity by the parent, and the parent comes to resonate with the child’s state. This is attunement.27

In the language of the Church Fathers, attunement with the Divine would be another way to describe *theosis*, union with God.

**Conclusion**

Holistic healing—the restoration of an individual’s wholeness and well-being of mind, body, and spirit—brings together the disciplines of psychology, neurology, and spirituality in remarkable ways. Most notable is the impact that contemplative meditation practices which foster mindfulness have been shown to have in the integration of these disciplines, making them mutually beneficial for human health and flourishing. Mindfulness enables individuals to make choices in their lives that make positive change possible. It develops a new level of personal awareness that enables people to become more secure in themselves, to establish and nurture deep relationships with others, and to experience intimacy with God.

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CHAPTER 5
MODERN APOPHATIC PRACTICES AND MINDFULNESS

Eastern meditation practices which employ and foster mindfulness developed a world away from European Christianity, both geographically and philosophically. Yet many of the principles of mindfulness are not altogether foreign to the Christian mystical tradition, particularly in the emphasis upon cultivating attentiveness and awareness. Ernest Larkin, a Carmelite priest and scholar, identified mindful qualities in three particular models of Roman Catholic spirituality: the practice of the presence of God promoted by Brother Lawrence, the sacrament of the present moment of Jean-Pierre de Caussade, and the prayer of recollection as it was shaped by St. Teresa of Avila.¹

Brother Lawrence (1614-1691) served as a lay brother in a Carmelite monastery in Paris. His book *The Practice of the Presence*² has continually inspired Christian piety and spiritual disciplines, both Catholic and Protestant, since its introduction in seventeenth-century France. His practice centers on maintaining a humble attentiveness to God’s continual work in each and every activity of one’s day, marking this awareness

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with ritual acts of recognition and prayer. Brother Lawrence spoke to God continuously during the humble chores of his role in the monastery, observantly attending to even the smallest of tasks as an encounter with the Divine. A similar sensitivity and focus are reflected in Thich Nhat Hanh’s description of mindful daily life from his perspective as a Zen Buddhist monk:

While washing the dishes, you might be thinking about the tea afterwards, and so try to get them out of the way as quickly as possible in order to sit and drink tea. But that means that you are incapable of living during the time you are washing the dishes. When you are washing the dishes, washing the dishes must be the most important thing in your life.³

Brother Lawrence suggested that the one who is mature in the discipline will be able to remain unmoved by either pain or pleasure, given the ability to stay focused upon God’s will in each moment. This mindful acceptance is also reflected in his simple prayer of confession for his sins, “I can do nothing better without You. Please keep me from falling and correct the mistakes I make,” which allowed him to release any fear of judgment.⁴ The language he uses to describe the way of spiritual transformation also reflects the kenotic influences of earlier apophatic Fathers:

I still believe that all spiritual life consists of practicing God's presence and that anyone who practices it correctly will soon attain spiritual fulfillment. To accomplish this, it is necessary for the heart to be emptied of everything that would offend God. He wants to possess our hearts completely. Before any work can be done in our souls, God must be totally in control.⁵


⁴ Brother Lawrence, The Practice of the Presence, pt. 1.

⁵ Ibid., pt. 2.
In sum, Brother Lawrence’s focused awareness on his every action from moment to moment in daily life displays a mindfulness that facilitates his sensitivity to God.

*Abandonment to Divine Providence* was the literary vehicle for Jean-Pierre de Caussade to introduce his concept of “the sacrament of the present moment,” a term he coined in developing his thesis that there is an opportunity to meet God found in all that the believer does, in everything that one experiences. One’s attentiveness to the present (as God cannot be encountered in the past or in the future) rests on the faith that everything that is happening to the believer is a gift of God that contains all that is best for the individual, even those things that seem negative or troublesome. He states, “There is not a moment in which God does not present Himself under the cover of some pain to be endured, of some consolation to be enjoyed, or of some duty to be performed. All that takes place within us, around us, or through us, contains and conceals His divine action.”

In the spirit of mindfulness, de Caussade invites the believer to practice a posture of acceptance, learning to passively receive all things with love and simplicity. Akin to the mindful practice of Brother Lawrence, there is a kenotic orientation to his spirituality that not only serves to empty the self, but also pursues a profound detachment that ultimately empties the self of self:

The one thing necessary can always be found for it in the present moment. It is no longer a choice between prayer and silence, seclusion and society, reading and writing, meditation and cessation of thought, flight from and seeking after spiritual consolations, abundance and dearth, feebleness and health, life and death, but it is all that each moment presents by the will of God. In this is despoilment, abnegation, renunciation of all things created, either in reality or affectively, in order to retain nothing of self, or for self, to be in all things submissive to the will.

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of God and to please Him; making it our sole satisfaction to sustain the present moment as though there were nothing else to hope for in the world.  

De Caussade’s embrace of the present moment cultivates an ability to surrender fully to God, which for him is the essence of faith.

The term “recollection” has been used historically for a variety of methods of devotional prayer and discipline. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), influenced significantly by the guidance of her mentor Francis of Osuna, developed her own unique form of recollection in which all one’s faculties are focused inward, centered within oneself as the place to encounter God. The deeper one is able to go into oneself, the closer one comes to the Divine:

I should like to be able to explain the nature of this holy companionship with our great Companion, the Holiest of the holy, in which there is nothing to hinder the soul and her Spouse from remaining alone together, when the soul desires to enter within herself, to shut the door behind her so as to keep out all that is worldly and to dwell in that Paradise with her God.  

Key to the practice of recollection as a prayer discipline is a commitment to renunciation in one’s daily life. This involves a conscious choice to rid one’s life of all that competes with or is opposed to God. Particular sacrifices are not prescribed, but it is expected that the believer will discern, under the guidance of a spiritual director, all that might hinder a complete surrender to God in the journey to union with the Divine. Renunciation is the path to what ascetic John Cassian referred to as “purity of the heart,” the spiritual condition of affective detachment from the emotions through effective detachment from one’s physical goods and desires. In this way, true recollection is a

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7 Ibid., 24.  
lifestyle as much as it is a time-specific practice. Recollection is transformational for believers who are open to look deeply into themselves and to face themselves as they really are. It is a discipline of self-awareness and honesty before God.⁹

In these qualities, Larkin sees Teresa’s conception of recollection as fundamentally mindful. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that Teresa’s method of recollection could be referred to as “Christian mindfulness,” the very heart of the believer’s search for God.¹⁰ Equating recollection or any of these Christian practices with mindfulness itself is problematic, however. It would imply that certain Christian disciplines and mindfulness meditation share the same ultimate goal. But all contemplative practices that are truly Christian are focused on union with God and the experience of God’s Trinitarian presence. In contrast, mindfulness serves as a technique for fostering deep awareness, cultivating an openness that can be applied to Christian practice as a support for the path to theosis. Mindfulness, while a helpful tool, does not in itself arrive at theosis. In other words, Christians may use mindfulness to support their prayer life, but they do not pray in order to become mindful.

Larkin is more accurate in his assessment of the role of mindfulness when he describes its ability to help believers engage in the fullness of their Christian practices in all their dimensions. For example, mindfulness meditation puts an emphasis on the concrete and finite aspects of each action one performs. In doing so, it keeps the practitioner grounded in one’s physical reality and in one’s body, holistically integrating


this with the mind and spirit. It also helps the individual to carry a spiritual awareness away from the time of devotion into every aspect of daily life. Given the incarnational nature of Christian faith, the mindful believer is more inclined to engage in existential reality, the place where God is encountered. As Larkin asserts, mindfulness aids in the fight against the “enemies of wholeness”:

The enemies of wholeness are what divide us, such as our addictions and compulsions, our unfreedoms and attachments, our sins and imperfections. They undermine our love of God. Mindfulness faces these temptations head on by maintaining attention to the call of faith. We are thoroughly present to the moment because it is God’s call for us at that time. Mindfulness recognizes distractions, calls them by name, then lets them pass, all the while gently focusing on the moment.¹¹

The prayer practices of Brother Lawrence, de Caussade, and St. Teresa share certain common characteristics with mindfulness meditation. It has also been demonstrated how a contemplative Christian’s engagement in these disciplines could be enhanced by mindfulness techniques, particularly as an aid to one’s awareness and to a focus on the present moment. These three prayer models show glimpses of apophatic orientation, most notably in kenotic emphases upon self-emptying and self-denial. But none of these is an inherently apophatic practice. They all employ one’s imagination and the symbolic use of images to communicate an understanding of God, which is a distinctly kataphatic approach. They also rest on Western dualisms (black and white, good and evil, light and dark, spirit and body) that are transcended in the works of the

¹¹ Ibid., 239–40.
apophatic Fathers, especially in the Eastern Christian tradition. Mindfulness today resonates most profoundly with modern apophatic disciplines that display three qualities: they are imageless, focused on the experience of the heart rather than on concepts of the mind; they are fundamentally kenotic, guiding the practitioner to an emptying of the mind and of the self; and they are non-dualistic, pursuing integration over division. To demonstrate how mindfulness engages with Christian practices of an apophatic nature, the current practices of the Jesus Prayer and Centering Prayer will be explored.

**The Jesus Prayer**

The Jesus Prayer, often referred to as Prayer of the Heart in the Eastern Orthodox tradition from which it arose, developed over generations in the pursuit of obedience to St. Paul’s call to unceasing prayer among the faithful (1 Thes 5:16-18). The practice of prayer involves the repeated rhythmic recitation of an appeal to Christ for mercy, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,” patterned after appeals to Jesus for healing in the stories of the Gospels. The prayer is often expanded to “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” based on the humble prayer of the repentant tax collector in Jesus’ parable told in Luke 18:9-14.

The roots of the Jesus Prayer go back to the early Desert Fathers and Mothers who employed repetitive prayers for the memorization of Scripture and as a means to

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12 It is true that St. Teresa’s practice of recollection was highly influenced by the theology of Francis of Osuna, her mentor, who spoke of a *via negativa* in approaching the unknowable God. But his cosmology was much more dualistic in its degradation of creation, the human body, and all physical existence, considered to be hindrances to spiritual union with God. Teresa chose a less dualistic (yet more *kataphatic*) foundation for her spiritual practice.

focus the wandering mind during devotional practice. John Cassian (360-435) introduced a Davidic plea for mercy, “Be pleased, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me” (Ps 70), in his monastic orders. Diadochus of Photice, fifth-century ascetic, and St. John Climacus (ca. 579-ca. 649) both encouraged the recitation of the name of Jesus as a valuable prayer discipline.¹⁴

By the thirteenth century there are records of the Jesus Prayer being practiced with the incorporation of physical aspects, initiated for the purpose of aiding concentration. Breathing was regulated in rhythm with the prayer, established in a posture of bowed head, chin on the chest, and eyes closed but oriented toward the heart. As noted earlier, the fourteenth-century Byzantine monasticism of Gregory of Palamas was characterized by hesychia (Greek for silence, quiet, stillness, rest), an approach to prayer and the monastic vocation designed around attentive listening to God. The Hesychasts diligently and regularly (though not exclusively) practiced the Jesus Prayer, seen as an opening of one’s whole self to God in hope that the Holy Spirit will take the mental repetition and establish the “Prayer of the Heart” at the core of one’s being, radiating through every moment of one’s daily life.¹⁵ The hesychastic aspiration is reflected in the words of St. Isaac the Syrian, a seventh-century bishop and theologian:

> When the Spirit takes its dwelling-place in someone, he does not cease to pray, because the Spirit will constantly pray in him. Then, neither when he sleeps, nor when he is awake, will prayer be cut off from his soul; but when he eats and when

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¹⁵ Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer That Tunes the Heart to God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), 18–19. The terms “Jesus Prayer” and “Prayer of the Heart” are often treated as being synonymous and are used interchangeably. Mathewes-Green suggests that it is more accurate to say that “Jesus Prayer” refers to the specific words of the prayer, while “Prayer of the Heart” points to the action of prayer, God’s movement within the heart.
he drinks, when he lies down or when he does any work, even when he is immersed in sleep, the perfumes of prayer will breathe in his heart spontaneously.16

The Philokalia, a compilation of a millennium of ascetic and mystical texts from a variety of Eastern Fathers, has functioned essentially as a manual for Orthodox prayer since its publication in 1782, making it a central source for understanding the theology and development of the Jesus Prayer. Prayer of the Heart stands as the key to the spiritual ascent of all believers, both religious and lay. For each of these writers, the ultimate goal of prayer and all spiritual practice is the transformation of the heart. In the East, it is the heart (both figuratively and literally) that is the place of union with the Divine.

But the way to the heart begins with the transformation of the nous, a term that is usually translated into English as “mind.” But the concept of the nous as it is employed in the Philokalia is much broader than simply the seat of cognitive processes, more than reason and emotion. Frederica Mathewes-Green points out that the nous is both the receptive faculty, providing deep meaning and understanding, and the perceptive faculty, equipping the individual to recognize truth (and its counterfeits). The nous enables people to hear their own consciences, making direct experience with God possible. As a person’s primary awareness or basic consciousness, it is the nous that must be trained to dwell in the heart—the spiritual center of one’s being—through spiritual practice.17

St. Hesychios of Sinai (8th–9th c.), who’s writing figures prominently in the Philokalia, taught that a critical challenge in the training of the nous is the problem of

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thoughts. As it is acknowledged in the meditative spiritual disciplines of many religious traditions, the intrusion of scattered thoughts and the inability to focus attention is a key hurdle to be overcome for those engaging in the Jesus Prayer. According to Hesychios, thoughts are not merely a distraction. Because people identify with their thoughts and give mental consent to them, they are inclined to act upon them. Hesychios suggests that the key to mastering one’s thoughts for the sake of spiritual ascent is found in *nepsis*, which he describes as “the steadfast concentration and stand of the rational faculty at the gate of the heart, so that it sees the thoughts that are coming as thieves, and hears what they say and do. It sees what is the form delineated in them by the demons, through which forms they are trying to deceive the mind by fantasy.”¹⁸ The Eastern Fathers represented in the Philokalia all describe *nepsis* as a necessary aid to achieving Prayer of the Heart. Providentially, one’s faculty of *nepsis* is not a prerequisite but a product of the disciplined practice of the Jesus Prayer over time. So then, the key to focusing and to overcoming wandering thoughts in prayer is not to try hard; it is simply to continue to be faithful in daily prayer.

Kallistos Ware, an Orthodox bishop, sums up the historic practice and development of the Jesus Prayer by describing four critical components that have come down to the present day: the cry for mercy, the discipline of repetition, the quest for stillness (*hesychia*), and the veneration of the Holy Name of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ The appeal to God’s mercy is less a confession of sin than an acknowledgement of the believer’s need

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¹⁸ Ibid., 66.

for heavenly sustenance in every moment of life, a declaration of dependence; the
discipline of repetition is aid to the desired focus of nepsis; the quest for stillness is to
facilitate one’s ability to hear from God through prayer; and the veneration of the Holy
Name keeps the practice grounded in the person of Christ. Ware insists that a truly
Orthodox spirituality is necessarily Jesus-centered, reflecting both Incarnational and
Trinitarian theology. The praying believer participates in the two inseparable natures of
Christ (the divine and the human), encountering the ungraspable God through the bodily
actions of the Jesus Prayer. In this way Christ is incarnate in the act of prayer as the
bridge between earth and heaven. As a Trinitarian experience, the Jesus Prayer is offered
in the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father. Gregory Palamas suggested
that the Trinity is continuously reflected in every human through the three qualities of
nous, word, and spirit.  

Along with these Christological foundations, it is also theologically significant to
recognize the emphasis upon grace in the Orthodox approach to prayer. Sin is seen not as
a violation that demands satisfaction or punishment, but as a sickness that requires
healing, healing only God can provide. The fallen state of humanity manifests in damage
to self, to others, to relationships, and to creation. Salvation in the Orthodox cosmology is
a process of healing all of this brokenness to restore union with God. The Jesus Prayer is
seen as a heavenly gift, a means to grow into the grace that God has initiated.

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20 Ibid., 39-40. See St. Gregory Palamas, “Topics of Natural and Theological Science and On the
Moral and Ascetic Life,” in The Philokalia: The Complete Text, ed. St. Nicodimos, Kindle (Philadelphia,
As at the time of Gregory Palamas, the desire of the faithful practitioner of the Jesus Prayer today is for the prayer to become a part of oneself, ever flowing from even the unconscious mind at all times, a means of fulfilling the Apostle Paul’s admonition to pray without ceasing (1 Thes 5:17). This means that it is appropriate to engage in the prayer at any time of the day and in all activities of one’s life, a la Brother Lawrence. But it is the fixed, intentional time of prayer that is the foundation for developing this ongoing form of Christ-consciousness. In contemporary Orthodoxy, the Jesus Prayer is practiced most often seated on a chair or stool in an upright position. As with the ancient model noted above, the posture is a bowed head with the chin on the chest. The eyes are closed but focused toward the heart. Breathing may be regulated in rhythm with the words of the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me (a sinner).” Considering the postures both physical and spiritual of the Jesus Prayer, it is not difficult to identify parallels with the philosophical and therapeutic mindfulness meditation disciplines discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Both hesychastic prayer and mindfulness meditation seek to harness the wandering of the mind toward a focused point that fosters holistic integration of body, mind, and spirit. Additionally, both show themselves to be inherently apophatic in three specific ways: 1) they are imageless, focused toward the experience of the heart rather than concepts of the mind; 2) they are kenotic, guiding the practitioner to an emptying of the mind and, ultimately, of the self; and 3) they are non-dualistic, pursuing integration and interaction over division within the diversity of one’s world.

In the anonymous nineteenth-century Russian novel *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the protagonist expounds on the transforming power of the Jesus Prayer in his life in terms
that reflect an apophatic mindfulness, including focus, a changed relationship to pain, detachment, and illumination:

And now, I am wandering about repeating incessantly the Prayer of Jesus. To me it has greater value than anything else on earth. Occasionally I walk seventy versts or so and do not feel it at all. I am conscious of only one thing [focus], my Prayer. When bitter cold pierces me, I say it more eagerly and warm up in no time. When I am hungry I begin to call on the Name of Jesus more often and forget about food. When I am ill and rheumatic pains set in in my back and legs, I concentrate on the Prayer and no longer notice the discomfort. When people do me wrong, my wrath and indignation are quickly forgotten [a changed relationship to pain] as soon as I remember the sweetness of the prayer of Jesus. In a way, I have become a half-witted person; I have no anxiety and no interest in the vanities of the world, for which I care no longer [detachment]. God will enlighten me [illumination] at the same time. Meanwhile, I hope that my late elder prays for me. Though I have not yet reached the state in which ceaseless spiritual prayer is self-acting in the heart, I do understand, thank God, the meaning of the Apostle’s words in the Epistle: “Pray incessantly” [my notes in brackets].

Centering Prayer

The imageless, kenotic, and non-dual nature of the Jesus Prayer as an apophatic discipline is also reflected in the modern practice of Centering Prayer, developed in the 1970s by three Trappist monks at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Massachusetts: William Meninger, Basil Pennington, and their abbot, Thomas Keating. Following on Meninger’s personal discovery of The Cloud of Unknowing, the monks’ work grew out of a desire to facilitate the layperson’s entry into contemplative prayer through a method that would transcend the affections and the intellect. Their designation of “Centering Prayer” was

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inspired by Thomas Merton’s description of his own way of prayer as “centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love.”

According to Father Pennington, the basic principles of Centering Prayer inherited from the *The Cloud of Unknowing* are simple: In stillness, to be present to God as the One who lives in the center of one’s being; to select a sacred word to initiate one’s focus; and to use that word again to re-center when thoughts arise. Pennington outlines in more detail the steps used in Father Keating’s teaching:

Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within. When you become aware of anything, return ever so gently to God, using the sacred word. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

As an apophatic practice, Centering Prayer begins with the intention simply to be, to rest in God’s presence with no goals in mind, to release even one’s intentions. As a deeply Trinitarian discipline, it allows one to experience communion with the Divine in a therapeutic atmosphere of unconditional acceptance and intimacy:

In Centering Prayer we go beyond thought and image, beyond the senses and the rational mind, to that center of our being where God is working his wonderful work. There God our Father is not only bringing us forth at each moment in his wonderful creative love, but by virtue of the grace of filiation, which we received at baptism, he is indeed making us sons and daughters, one with his own Son, pouring out in our hearts the Spirit of his Son, so that we can in fullest sense cry, “Abba, Father.”

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25 Ibid., 8–9.
In modern practice, it is common to precede the experience of Centering Prayer with *Lectio Divina*, a devotional approach to reading and pondering a passage from Scripture (or other sacred writings), as a conscious and intentional means of initiating discursive meditation and affective prayer, the kataphatic foundation for the ascent to the apophatic contemplation. The time is often concluded with the Lord’s Prayer, a kataphatic coda to the centering experience. In this way, the framing of Centering Prayer with *Lectio* and the *Pater Noster* sets apart the kataphatic from the apophatic, the active and knowable from the passive and receptive. Father Keating insists that what makes Centering Prayer apophatic is not that one can ponder the unknowability of God, but that one need not ponder at all. The centered contemplative is one who is “resting in God beyond our ordinary human faculties of thinking and feeling.”

Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest and scholar of the history, theology, and practice of Centering Prayer who studied under Father Keating. She contends that the imageless, kenotic, and non-dual nature of Centering Prayer does not serve to focus one’s attention; rather, it functions to release one’s attention completely, as requisite to the experience of communion with God. This surrender of one’s focus is the starting point of Centering Prayer and the beginning of true contemplation. Additionally, Bourgeault concludes that the keys to understanding the heart of contemporary Centering Prayer are found in the East—in the Eastern Orthodoxy of Christendom and in Far Eastern Buddhism. She points to the concepts of “attention of the heart” in the prayer instruction

of Simeon the New Theologian (AD 949-1022) and of the “objectless awareness” that is most notably expressed in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy.\footnote{Cynthia Bourgeault, \textit{The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice} (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2016), 2–3.}

Works on prayer by Simeon the New Theologian figure prominently in the Philokalia. In his treatise entitled “Three Methods of Attention and Prayer,” Simeon describes prayer as the means of putting the mind “in the heart,” which is the only way to experience conscious presence with God, what he calls “attention of the heart.” And the radical transparency and compassion of Christ can only be manifested in the believer who has ascended to this spiritual plane. In preparation for this heart-centered ascent, Simeon lists three requirements:

You should observe three things before all else: freedom from all cares, not only cares about bad and vain but even about good things, or in other words, you should become dead to everything; Your conscience should be clear in all things, so that it denounces you in nothing; and you should have complete absence of passionate attachment, so that your thought inclines towards nothing worldly. Keep your attention within yourself (not in your head but in your heart). Keep your mind there (in the heart), trying by every possible means to find the place where the heart is, in order that, having found it, your mind should constantly abide there.\footnote{E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, eds., \textit{Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart} (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 158–59.}

Bourgeault points out that these essentials—freedom from cares, a clear conscience, and the absence of passionate attachment—are the very essence of kenotic surrender in the apophatic Christian tradition. She makes the argument that Father Keating’s approach to Centering Prayer—founded on the maxim of “resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought”—serves to give meditational form to Simeon’s “attention of the heart.”\footnote{Bourgeault, \textit{The Heart of Centering Prayer}, 74.}
The Buddhist concept of “objectless awareness” is presented by Bourgeault as another source for grasping the depth of what is meant by “attention” in modern Centering Prayer. She illustrates objectless awareness as the miniscule space of time between one’s scattered thoughts, that brief moment when one simply is. The Western concept of attention is problematic because it requires both a subject (one who is attending) and an object (that which receives the action of the subject). But in Centering Prayer, objectless awareness transcends these poles, allowing one the space to simply be (not to act or to be acted upon) with God. The solitude and silence of prayer is meant to open up this awareness, not a means to hear God better or to receive a revelation or insight. The subject/object orientation toward attention leads one to find one’s selfhood in one’s actions in relation to God, a sure recipe for experiencing one’s relationship to God as conditional upon performance, thus denying the immensity of God’s grace. According to *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the one “who is aware and experiences not only what he is but that he is” lives earnestly. In this dimension, Centering Prayer fosters apophatic kenosis, a true emptying of the self that shatters false images and breaks down dualistic walls that separate people from God and God’s creation.

**Mindfulness in Support of Apophatic Practices**

The mindfulness meditation practices that have grown out of ancient Buddhist philosophy in the East and modern psychotherapy in the West, as considered in previous chapters, resonate well with the practice of the Jesus Prayer, of Centering Prayer, and of other apophatic disciplines from the Christian tradition. The kinship is two-fold. First, as

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it has already been demonstrated, these apophatic practices are in many respects mindful in themselves. They reflect mindfulness as they foster one’s ability to become fully aware of one’s experience, to be grounded in the present moment, and to be immersed in an atmosphere of non-judgmental acceptance. Additionally, the practice of mindfulness disciplines can, as a result of this resonance, serve as a holistic support to one’s apophatic Christian practices, whether before, during, or after engagement in those practices.

Before engaging in contemplative prayer, mindfulness practices help to prepare one for the kenotic release, the attitude of surrender that is central to both the Jesus Prayer and Centering Prayer. A mindful posture of body, mind, and spirit helps one to quiet the busy thoughts of the mind and to reduce the anxiety of daily multi-tasking. One begins to focus on the activity in the moment, disconnecting from the other activities of the day and from the tyranny of being a slave to the clock and time management. Mindfulness creates an attitude of reception for what is coming, not an obligation of duty. It separates out all competing daily interests to help one center on just one thing in the current moment. Breath-focused meditation can be particularly helpful in the simultaneous calming of the body, the mind, and the spirit.

In the midst of practicing contemplative disciplines, mindfulness supports the ability to stay focused more consistently, then to return to one’s center when focus is temporarily lost through wandering thoughts (what Buddhists refer to as “monkey mind”) and other distractions. As focus is maintained or restored, mindfulness also helps one to avoid the tendency to center on an object, instead resting in the experience of the present moment. The accepting, non-judgmental stance that is fostered in mindfulness helps one to transcend the Western proclivity for seeking to achieve something, or conversely, from
the inclination toward self-criticism at one’s lack of accomplishment. One who is experienced in the mindfulness discipline of the body scan, for example, is better prepared to engage in the releasing of one’s attachments and cares in contemplative prayer. Mindful individuals grow to see themselves naturally as an integrated unity of body, mind, and spirit, a non-duality strengthened by a deep attention and awareness of one’s experience in the moment.

As one completes a fixed time of practicing a contemplative discipline, the mindful individuals are better equipped to live in moment-to-moment God-awareness. They are less stressed, less anxiety-driven. Not only are they more attentive to what is happening within themselves—physically, mentally, and spiritually—but they also tend to bring a non-anxious awareness into the interpersonal dynamics of their relationships. They can observe without judgment and engage life with intentionality, more proactive than reactive. Mindful Christians are better equipped to savor the depths of compassion and gratitude experienced in their God-encounter of contemplative prayer.

**Conclusion**

Both the ancient Orthodox Fathers who taught the Jesus Prayer and the modern Trappist monks instructing in the way of Centering Prayer saw that in the silence of their apophatic contemplative practice lay a unique, God-given resource for human transformation and restoration. They discovered a way of experiencing communion with an unknowable God, an encounter that cannot help but leave a person changed, drawn closer to the *shalom* for which God made them. While these practices are open to all, not limited to a spiritual elite or to those with a monastic call, they have been unknown to (or
under-valued by) a significant portion of Christendom. In an age where people are hungry for holistic transformation and restoration, mindfulness practices offer an entry point into these contemplative riches and the Good News of Christ to be experienced therein.
CHAPTER 6

MINDFULNESS IN APOPHATIC SPIRITUALITY: A THEOLOGY

To this point in the discussion, focus has been on the intersection of apophatic spiritual practices (grounded primary in Orthodox theology) and mindfulness disciplines (rooted in Buddhist philosophy and modern psychotherapeutic theory). The remaining step in fulfilling the thesis is to connect these two to the devotional tradition of American Evangelicalism, the application of which will be considered in the final two chapters. As a foundation to that practical application, the task in this chapter is to bring together these three strands—the apophatic and the mindful with the Evangelical—in a theology, a synergistic framework that is true to the integrity of each. The distinctively Christian components of this harmonization will be explored first, structured on the traditional dogmatic classifications of the Trinity, of Christology, and of the anthropology of the Imago Dei. Then these doctrinal considerations will be applied to elucidating the meaning and purpose of contemplative Christian spirituality as a vehicle to transition from objective truth to subjective encounter, with the subset of apophatic disciplines serving to overcome false images of God. Finally, mindfulness finds its definition as a tool for transformative engagement with a God who is not imaged but experienced.
Trinity: Procession and Perichoresis

The doctrine of the Trinity, one God in the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is fundamental to all Christian orthodoxy, a point of commonality to Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant alike. Early Trinitarian formulations identified the Father as source of all things, spiritual and material, and the one from whom the Son and the Holy Spirit proceed. According to the original Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed from AD 381, both the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father. In the West, however, the thought developed as early as the sixth century that the Spirit’s procession comes from both the Father and the Son. This became a formal creedal addition to the Roman liturgy in 1014, an innovation that precipitated the Great Schism of 1054 that severed the communion of East and West. The Filioque (“and the Son”) controversy has been a significant dividing point between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism ever since. Protestant churches, springing from the West, have inherited the Western amendment to the Nicene Creed.

As in Orthodox theology, the original form of the Nicene Creed is vital in maintaining the co-equality of each hypostasis (person) of the Trinity. The three share the same life, defined together as One, each an equal member of the Godhead. This relationship has been traditionally described as perichoresis, a “mutual interpenetration”:

The concept of perichoresis allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of a “community of being,” in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them.¹

The balance of this “community of being” is not undermined by the procession of the Son and the Spirit from the Father. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann says of the Trinity:

Finally, through the concept of perichoresis, all subordinationism in the doctrine of the Trinity is avoided. It is true that the Trinity is constituted with the Father as starting point, inasmuch as he is understood as being “the origin of the Godhead.” But this “monarchy of the Father” only applies to the constitution of the Trinity. It has no validity within the eternal circulation of the divine life, and none in the perichoretic unity of the Trinity. Here the three Persons are equal; they live and are manifested in one another and through one another.²

Additionally, the doctrine of appropriation suggests that all the actions of the Triune God are a unity, with each person of the Trinity involved in every outward work of the Godhead. Through perichoresis and appropriation, God is expressed theologically as a relationship, a relationship defined by love.³

Connecting the roles of the three persons to relationship with people, the fundamental challenge is to understand how a transcendent, unknowable God can welcome humans into union with the Divine, into the love of the Trinitarian perchoresis. As noted in Chapter 2, the Eastern Fathers distinguished between God’s essence, which only God can know, and God’s energies, the creative actions that are manifest to human beings. As an essence, God the Father has no image to be grasped by human senses or knowledge. Christ the Son, however, serves as the ultimate image of God’s energies, becoming the bridge from God to humanity in the Incarnation. The Son is also the redeemer/healer who, through kenotic emptying of himself, overcomes the barriers of


human frailty in the atonement. The Holy Spirit is the indwelling manifestation of God in the human body as its temple, transcending all words and images to enable communion with God through Prayer of the Heart.4

Christology: Incarnation and Salvation

As the Eastern Fathers insisted, the efficacy of the Incarnation rests on an understanding of the two natures of Christ the Son. To be the bridge to communion with God, Jesus must be both completely human and completely divine. And like the unified nature of the Trinity, these two natures do not function separately or independently. They exist and work in harmony with one another. The Incarnation might find a more apt metaphor in a ladder than a bridge. The Son “descends” the ladder in the kenosis of Philippians 2, providing a means of “ascent” to union with the Unknowable. The Word became flesh to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4), or as St. Athenasius proclaimed, “Christ became a human that humans might become God.”5

According to Moltmann, the kenosis of God began not with the Incarnation but at creation. In creation, God engaged in a self-limiting, self-emptying act of love in order to be separate from the material cosmos for the sake of creating relationship with what is created. For Moltmann, creation itself was not an event but a continuing process, so that the kenosis of the Incarnation was a part of the on-going creative work of God, as was the self-sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost:

4 See 1 Cor 6:19 and Rom 8:26-27. In his teaching regarding Prayer of the Heart, Gregory Palamas supported the concept that the heart is the main instrument of the Holy Spirit. See John Meyendorf, “Introduction,” in The Triads, by Gregory Palamas, 16.

“The Persons do not merely ‘exist’ in their relations; they also realize themselves in one another by virtue of self-surrendering love.”\(^6\)

It is this experience of love through self-emptying that invites people into the perichoresis of the Trinity, into communion with God. It is the true definition of human salvation. Like creation, salvation is not an event but an on-going process of the lived existential experience of relationship with God, with others, and with creation, all characterized by love. As New Testament scholar Scot McKnight points out, this communion is at the heart of God’s purpose in the Incarnation, giving insight into the words of Jesus in the Farewell Discourse of the Gospel of John (Jn 17:20-24):

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.\(^7\)

This holistic and relational framing of the concept of salvation, which has been present in Eastern Christianity for two thousand years, has the potential of reforming the atonement theories of the Reformation, away from a focus on violence and wrath toward self-giving love. McKnight writes: “Atonement finally concerns union with God and, simultaneously, communion with one another as its mirror image among God’s created beings. If the perichoresis is another place to begin [to understand the Atonement], so also is the

\(^6\) Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 174.

\(^7\) Scot McKnight, A Community Called Atonement (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 17.
central importance of being made in ‘God’s image.’”

And so a consideration of the *Imago Dei*, what it means to be created in the image of God, will bring insight into the role of Christian spirituality in the human experience of salvation.

**Imago Dei: Fall and Restoration**

While the concept of humans being created in the image of God is not a widely recurring theme for the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is certainly foundational and prominent in the early chapters of Genesis, especially with regard to creation:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Here the idea is that humans as images serve to represent God in the world as stewards entrusted with the care of the rest of creation. Humans are not separate from creation, but hold a certain *je ne sais quoi* that makes them unique within creation for being somehow like God. Genesis presents the introduction of sin into the relational biome of creation, known traditionally as “the Fall” in Genesis 3, as a kind of breaking of the image, a fracture that has consequences not only for the relationship between God and humans but for the whole of the creation over which humans were assigned to superintend. Gregory Palamas suggests that divine likeness given to humans was lost in the Fall, requiring restoration. But he insists that the divine image is maintained:

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8 Ibid., 17.

9 Gn 1:26-27.

This image the soul possesses inalienably, even if it does not recognize its own dignity, or think and live in a manner worthy of the Creator’s image within it. After our forefather’s transgression in paradise through the tree, we suffered the death of our soul—which is the separation of the soul from God—prior to our bodily death; yet although we cast away our divine likeness we did not lose our divine image.  

In the New Testament, The Apostle Paul uses the term *eikon* as the Greek term for image. In his theology, he shifts the emphasis of the image-bearing humans as stewarding representatives of God to that of redeemed *eikons*, ones who emulate Christ who is the true *eikon* of God and “are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). The Pauline redemption that happens in Christ is a process, the on-going work of God to restore the broken relationship with God for which humans were created. Reflecting on the meaning of the atonement, Cherith Fee Nordling writes: “I contend that to be saved is to be renewed in the true image of God as women and men in Christ, to have our relationality restored so that our sinful selves, hopelessly *incurvatus in se* [turned in on themselves], are set free to be new creations in true divine and human *koinonia.*”

In discussing the human consequences of the Fall, Thomas Merton made the distinction between the True Self and the False Self. The True Self is an authentic manifestation of the person enjoying the abundance of the redemption of one’s *Imago Dei*, a redemption fulfilled through the self-giving love of Christ. The True Self is not perfect, but it is free to be open and vulnerable in relationship with God and others.

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because of grace. In contrast, the False Self is that part of a person which developed out of the Fall, resulting in a marring of the *Imago Dei* which drives one to live in fear behind a mask of falsehood:

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.\(^{13}\)

As a counterfeit to the True Self, the False Self creates an illusory view of oneself and a false reality of the surrounding world. Addictions, compulsions, thirst for power over others, and all forms of violence arise from this façade of the mind’s invention. But the needed atonement for such a condition is not accomplished by labeling the person as “bad” and executing judgment. According to the Orthodox tradition, the state of the False Self is a result of a kind of illness that requires healing, a restoration to wholeness which Christ offers. From this perspective, Christian spirituality can be described, in part, as the human engagement in God’s process of healing the heart by revealing the lie of the False Self, allowing one to live as one’s True Self in communion with God and with others in reality. Merton wrote, “The relative perfection which we must attain to in this life if we are to live as sons of God is not the twenty-four-hour-a-day production of perfect acts of

virtue, but a life from which practically all the obstacles to God’s love have been
removed or overcome.”¹⁴

Of concern to Christian spirituality is not only the false image one creates of
oneself, but also the false images humans create of God. Psychologist David Benner
avers, “Having first created a self in the image of our own making, we then set out to
create the sort of god who might in fact create us. Such is the perversity of the false
self.”¹⁵ Yet while our spiritual practices should serve to overcome false images of God,
poor theology can actually foster false images and conceptions of the Divine. This is why
wrath-based formulations of the atonement, as explored in the opening chapter, become
extremely problematic for spiritual practices designed to heal the wounded soul and draw
one close to God. In the ladder of spiritual ascent, the image of an angry, blood-thirsty
God keeps one mired in a perpetual stage of purgation. Driven by fear, one never rises
through the illumination of grace to the union (and freedom) of theosis.

Poor theology can also arise from another hermeneutical problem. The drive to
frame Christian faith primarily (if not exclusively) in statements of propositional truth (a
common Evangelical trait also considered in Chapter 1) can lead one to read too much
into atonement metaphors in the Bible (wrath, blood, punishment, ransom, propitiation,
flesh, sacrificial offering, purchase, righteousness, etc.), even to codify those metaphors
into dogma as being themselves the deeper reality to which they were meant to point, a
simulacrum. In the philosophy and social theory of Jean Baudrillard, a simulacrum is “a


¹⁵ David Benner, The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery (Downers Grove,
IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 88–89.
representation that precedes and determines the real.” Baudrillard asserts, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.” A biblical metaphor, following Baudrillard’s progression, could descend to become a simulacrum following four phases: 1) the metaphor is the reflection of a profound reality; 2) the metaphor masks and denatures a profound reality; 3) the metaphor masks the absence of a profound reality; and 4) the metaphor has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum. Much of the profundity of God’s self-giving love in Christ has been drowned in the simulacra of misused atonement metaphors. When Christians divide over metaphors, the unity for which Christ prayed has already been sabotaged.

**Contemplative Spirituality and Transfiguration**

If Christian spiritual practices are to overcome false images of both self and God, they must help the practitioner to experience subjectively what is already objectively true. As John Meyendorf affirmed of Gregory Palamas, it is important for the Christian to approach theology “not only as a conceptual exercise based on ‘revealed premises,’ but also, and primarily, as an expression of true Christian experience.” In other words, while good theology is essential for the sake of experiential spirituality, the converse is also true: experiential spirituality is essential to ensure good theology. The mystic and the theologian are partners in a holistic Christian faith.

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It is also important to note that the spiritual processes of abandoning false images of self and false images of God are not mutually exclusive. They are integrally intertwined as one process in contemplative Christian spirituality. Merton’s aphorism, “If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him,” demonstrates this mutuality. Yet from the perspective of apophatic theology, there is one significant difference between escaping a false image of the self and abandoning a false image of God. One seeks to replace a false image of the self with a true image. But the false image of God is to be replaced with no image at all. All images, by definition, fall short of grasping the unknowable transcendence of God and threaten to become simulacra, mere human projections. This is why in Eastern Orthodoxy, for example—where icons of the Son as the image of God Incarnate are plentiful—there are no images to be found of God the Father. In this way, the Christian contemplative is led closer to God through the via negativa that requires the destruction of images altogether.

But it would be mistaken to define the goal of apophatic Christian spirituality as simply a vacuum or of an empty darkness. John Meyendorf describes the hesychastic spirituality of Gregory Palamas in this way:

While eliminating all perceptions of the senses, or of the mind, it nevertheless places man before a Presence, revealed to a transfigured mind and a purified body. Thus, divine “unknowability does not mean agnosticism, or refusal to know God,” but is a preliminary step for “a change of heart and mind enabling us to attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God.”

18 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 38.

There is, however, an important image in Orthodoxy that signals a transcendent moment. The theme of transfiguration, an experience of God through light, is a prominent motif in Orthodox spirituality. Drawing on the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah (Mt 17:1-13, Mk 9:2-8, Lk 9:28-36), where Christ’s clothes turn a dazzling white with radiant light, one knows God has been present when the “uncreated light” appears. The light is not God, naturally, since that would be an image. But the light serves as a witness to an encounter with the Divine. Jim Forrest tells a transfiguration story, popular in Eastern Orthodoxy, about St. Seraphim of Sarov, a Russian monastic who died in the nineteenth century:

Among many remarkable stories left to us about Seraphim’s life, one of the most impressive comes from the diary of Nicholas Motovilov, who as a young man came to Sarov seeking advice. At a certain point in their conversation, Seraphim said to his guest, “Look at me.” Motovilov replied, “I am not able, Father, for there is lightning flashing in your eyes. Your face has grown more radiant than the sun and my eyes cannot bear the pain.” The starets answered, “Do not be afraid, my dear lover of God, you have also now become as radiant as I. You yourself are now in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise you would not be able to perceive me in the exact same state.” Saint Seraphim asked him how he felt. “I feel a great calm in my soul, a peace which no words can express,” Motovilov replied, “I feel an amazing happiness.”

In this experience, the uncreated light of transfiguration demonstrates that the darkness of apophatic spirituality is not without substance.

The Mindfulness of Jesus

Thomas Merton included this instruction from a monastic in a discussion of apophatic spiritual practice:

Putting your simple faith in this, discipline yourself accordingly; let your body and your mind be turned into an inanimate object of nature like a piece of stone or

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wood; when a state of perfect motionlessness and unawareness is obtained all the
signs of life will depart and also every trace of limitation will vanish. Not a single
idea will disturb your consciousness when lo! All of a sudden you will come to
realize a light abounding in full gladness. It is like coming across a light in thick
darkness; it is like receiving treasure in poverty…This is so when you surrender
all—your body, your life, and all that belongs to your inmost self.21

It would be quite possible to mistake this for the writing of Gregory Palamas or
another Hesychast in the Orthodox tradition. These are instead the words of Yuan-Wu, a
Chinese Zen master. And while not centered on God, Yuan-Wu’s thought displays most
profoundly the kenotic nature of apophatic spiritual practice and the inner posture of the
heart that, when indeed focused on the Triune Godhead, will help to open a person to
experience release from the false to receive all that is real. That is mindfulness in
Christian spirituality.

From a theological perspective, it is instructive to explore how the characteristics
of mindfulness—becoming fully aware of one’s experience, being grounded in the
present moment, and being immersed in an atmosphere of non-judgmental acceptance—
were represented in the life of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels. As a case study, the story
of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness will be considered, as told in Matthew 4:1-11:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the
devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The
tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones
to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by
bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of
the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it
is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they
will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to
the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the
kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give
you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you,
Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”
Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

This story tells of an experience of spiritual formation for Jesus in preparation for
the beginning of his preaching ministry. It is placed in the narrative between Jesus’
baptism and his launching out with his first disciples. In his baptism (4:21-22), an
initiation rite signaling the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has the experience of the
blessing of both the Spirit, who descends on him as a dove, and the Father, who speaks to
him in a voice from heaven, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well
pleased.” In this way Jesus not only has his call confirmed, but he also receives an
experience of the acceptance and unconditional love of God.

Being guided by the Spirit, Jesus is clearly in a state of profound mindful and
spiritual attentiveness, following the Spirit into the formative experience that is to come
in the desert. His spiritual focus is enhanced by the setting of the barren Judean
wilderness. In silence and solitude, Jesus is wide awake to his experience in the moment,
set apart from images and distractions of his daily social world. His practice of fasting, as
a traditional Hebrew discipline, is mindful, as it would be intended to aid one in releasing
one’s material attachments and emptying oneself spiritually to receive from God.

As Jesus faces the testing of the devil, his responses resonate with mindful
attentiveness. The first test is the challenge to abandon his discipline of fasting for the
sake of addressing his extreme physical hunger. The point in the story is not that eating
bread would be a sin for Jesus or that his bodily needs were not important, but simply that
it would take him away from his uninterrupted attentiveness to God. The response of
Jesus, “‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,’” quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, displays his mindful detachment for the sake of remaining focused on his purpose.22

The second temptation, which Jesus considers to be a test not of himself but of the Father, is the prompting to jump from the top of the temple to force God’s hand in his promise of protection. Ultimately, this temptation represents the human proclivity for retreating from reality into the False Self, an illusory world where one imagines having control over one’s destiny and selfishly demands that others live into the illusion. When Jesus responds, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Dt 6:16), he is ultimately speaking to himself, repelling the False Self that would lead him to a counterfeit life.

The final test, the promise of world domination in exchange for worship of the devil, is a direct appeal for Jesus to crown his False Self as king, locking up the True Self and throwing away the key. To worship the One God is to stay connected to the eternal source of life for the True Self, living in the non-duality of an integrated body, mind, and spirit. Ironically, this story has been used in Christian tradition to support dualism, a cosmic battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. But here Jesus rejects the duality of the False Self in favor of remaining in the reality of the oneness of God’s good creation, in the reality of union with God. Jesus rejects this duality without compromise: “Away with you, Satan!”

Over all, the story of Jesus’ testing in the wilderness displays a deep mindfulness. The spiritual discipline of this time of silence and solitude provides for Jesus a deep

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22 The practice of using a sacred word in Centering Prayer to sustain focus and return one from wandering thoughts is a reflection of this.
awareness of his surroundings and of his experience of inner struggles as a human being to remain living out of his True Self. In his clarity, he is able to reject a falsity that would lead him to wear an emotional and spiritual mask, hiding from himself in addictions and compulsions in hope of alleviating the pain of his suffering. In this awareness, Jesus stays engaged in the present moment. He does not live in the past, questioning his call or hiding in memories of better times. Neither does he engage in wishful thinking or fantasize about future glory. By remaining in the moment, he is able to stay on course for the ministry to which he has been called. In the Gospel story, it is a trajectory that will lead to the cross. That is a destiny from which the False Self would most certainly retreat, yet which the True Self would embrace as the way of self-giving love. In light of this, the New Testament writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes one particular result of these formative experiences of Jesus: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). In the mindfulness of his own spiritual practice, Jesus developed his empathy of non-judgmental acceptance for all people.

Conclusion

Theological formulations for the Holy Trinity run the risk of losing its beauty and mystery in the drive toward intellectual systemization. The language of the perichoresis in pondering the Trinity is helpful in maintaining two important emphases for Christian spirituality: relationship and experience. As a Trinity, God’s very essence is a relationship, a relationship in which, through the Incarnation, all humanity is invited to participate. Salvation is found in the experience of the reality that the human uniqueness
of the *Imago Dei*, being made in the image of God, has been fully restored through the self-giving love of Jesus. People are freed from any need to live out of a False Self and are restored to the True Self that lives in communion with God. Apophatic Christian spiritual disciplines serve to lead one away from false images of self and God, beyond intellectual doctrines of restoration to a lived experience of new life. The mindfulness of these contemplative practices is an asset to their efficacy, as it was displayed even in the experience of Jesus himself.
PART THREE

MINISTRY PRACTICE
CHAPTER 7
MINDFULNESS MEDITATION AND PERSONALITY TYPES

At this point in the current study, the relationship between mindfulness and apophatic Christian disciplines has been explored in multiple dimensions: in the mindfulness qualities which apophatic disciplines exhibit, in the ways in which mindfulness has a beneficial role in enhancing the practice of apophatic Christian disciplines, and in the development of a theological framework for a Christian spirituality that is enhanced by encounter with God through apophatic and mindfulness means. In this chapter, three fundamental mindfulness meditation practices—breath-focused meditation, the body scan, and walking meditation—will be proposed as tools to nurture the Christian spirituality of individuals according to their unique personality type, employing the typology of the Enneagram Type Indicator assessment tool.

Mindfulness Meditation Practices

Breath-focused meditation, the body scan, and walking meditation are three fundamental disciplines that are historically rooted in the mindfulness practice of the
Buddha\(^1\) and translated over two millennia of religious traditions and spiritual practices. As explored in Chapter 4, the modern Western world has developed these forms of mindfulness meditation for use in holistic and psychotherapeutic wellness, separated from any religious framework or devotional assumptions. It is these therapeutic models that will form the basis of the proposed application to Christian spiritual practice.

**Breath Meditation**

Breath meditation is the bedrock for all the disciplines rooted in Buddhist philosophy. It involves the act and experience of breathing as the focal point for one’s concentration. One starts by centering the mind and body. In a seated position, in a chair or on a pillow on the floor, one takes a few deep breaths to establish calmness. One stays still but not rigid. When the body is settled, the attention goes to the mind. One takes a brief moment to establish in oneself the intention to be mindful. It is common in the East to use a mantra—a repeated short phrase or syllables—to focus the mind.\(^2\)

When the mind is centered, it is time to bring the focus to one’s breath. From a physical standpoint, the act of attending to the rhythm of inhaling and exhaling brings significant calmness to the body. This calming and this focus of awareness are the central purpose of the breath focus. One can either center on the sensation of air moving through the nostrils or on the movement and feeling of the up and down motion of the chest or abdomen. Either way, it is important not to labor one’s breathing, simply to notice

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\(^1\) See Chapter 3, pp. 62-66.

\(^2\) The use of a sacred word in the practice of Centering Prayer is similar to a mantra in that it is used as a point of focus. It should not, however, be seen as identical to the mantra, given that the sacred word is typically centered on Christ and carries deep theological significance.
without effort. One seeks to attend to the subtle sensations of being in the moment, refraining from judgment or evaluation.

It is inevitable that the mind will wander or be drawn to sounds or other distractions. Thoughts and judgments are to be expected. One need not try to stop the thoughts but simply to acknowledge them and gently return to one’s breath. Mindfulness does not stop because of one’s thoughts as long as one stays aware of the thoughts. The experience is a continuous process of straying and returning, with the breath as the focal point. Along with thoughts and judgments, boredom can be another part of the meditation experience, particularly for modern Western minds which are trained to seek stimulation. In Buddhist philosophy, boredom is not the product of one’s external circumstances but of inattention. Boredom comes when one withdraws full awareness from the experience of the moment. When one feels boredom, the task is to observe mindfully what one feels without judgment, then return to the breath.

The practice of breath meditation has profound effects. It brings an acute awareness to the passage of time, enhancing the experience of each given moment. It also fosters a sense of human interconnectedness and interdependence with others and the surrounding created order, emphasizing our non-duality. According to Prof. Mark Muesse, “When you can be wholly engaged with the simple pleasure of breathing, you’ll find yourself with a refined sense of completeness in that moment.”

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The Body Scan

More than breath meditation, the body scan serves to acquaint one to one’s own body, head to toe, through enhanced concentration. It nurtures focus in the same way as breath meditation, while moving that focus throughout the body in a systematic way that can be used to enhance all the benefits from breath meditation. In time, one begins to see how thoughts and feelings that originate in the mind manifest themselves physiologically in our bodies, both for good and for ill. And the body scan, more than any other form of meditation, promotes deep relaxation.

A typical body scan is practiced in either a sitting or lying position. Lying down is often preferable for the sake of full relaxation of muscles. In a supine position, one lies on a lightly padded surface with eyes closed, hands open with palms up, and feet falling open naturally. One can also use a light pillow for the head and under the knees to release tension. As in breath meditation, one begins by taking a few deep breaths, attentive to the sensation at the nostrils or in the chest and abdomen, relaxing with each exhalation into the cushioned surface. Initially, the breath is the focal point for recentering a wandering mind.

The first stage of moving through the body is to progress upward, feet to head, through the general areas of the body (feet, legs, abdomen, hands, arms, chest, shoulders, head), consciously choosing to release any tensions in these areas. Once this baseline of relaxation is established, one moves slowly through each part of the body, now from head to toe. One moves one’s attention to each part, noticing any sensations that may be there

\[4\] In hatha yoga, this is called *shavasana*, the corpse pose.
or may arise. These sensations may include temperature, pain, tingling, stiffness, relaxation, or nothing at all. The key is to watch with curiosity and compassion, without judgment or any kind of evaluation of the experience. Moving to each new part of the body, attention to the previous part is relinquished so that total focus can be experienced. During this scan, the wandering or distracted mind will be returned not to the breath but to the part of the body to which one is currently attending. When one comes to the end of the meditation, one’s awareness encompasses the whole body, experiencing the body as a unified organism.  

Walking Meditation

While walking meditation expands mindfulness practice with movement, it is important to remember that one is not moving with the intent of arriving at another place. The goal is awareness, not a destination. As with breath meditation and the body scan, one seeks to be physically calm, even in mindful motion, for the sake of nurturing a tranquility of body, mind, and spirit that is needed to maintain the desired moment-to-moment awareness.

Walking meditation can be done anywhere, indoors or outdoors, that is free from dangers or distractions. To emphasize the experience of walking over reaching a destination, the practice typically follows a back-and-forth path between two points. Walking barefoot, if it is safe, can enhance the experience with the greater sensations of the feet. Combining walking meditation with seated breath meditation, either before or after, can enhance one’s experience synergistically.

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5 Muesse, Practicing Mindfulness, 57–62.
To begin, one should assume an upright posture, with limbs relaxed. Hands can be folded in front of oneself or behind, or with arms swinging gently at one’s side. As with the other forms of meditation, it is helpful to begin with a few deep breaths for centering. One does well to pay special attention to the sensations of the bottom of the feet, attuned to the qualities of the walking surface. Again, one can start by reminding oneself of the intention to be mindful. One’s eyes should be open, focused on the ground ahead, yet without centering one’s gaze on anything in particular. One begins with a breath focus, taking small and deliberate steps. One is aware of the full movement of the feet and legs, lifting and setting down. It is possible to choose to coordinate walking with one’s breath, though some rhythm is likely to happen naturally. The natural rhythms help to promote relaxation of both the body and the mind. When one experiences a sense of rhythm, the breath focus can be released, shifting to the bodily sensations of walking.

There are multiple ways of focusing one’s awareness in the walking process. Many will center their focus on the three motions of the legs and feet: lifting, moving, and placing. Another possible focal point is the sensation of the feet as they make contact with the ground, given that the bottoms of the feet are very sensitive, with many nerve endings. When the mind wanders or is distracted, focus can be returned to the soles of the feet. A third focus of one’s awareness can be on the body as a whole, open and attentive to whatever experiences may come one’s way in the process of walking. Whatever the method, the objective is to keep one’s attention on the present, moment by moment. Walkers are free to stop at any point to experience what is around them. At the end of one’s chosen path, one comes to a complete stop, standing still and observing the whole body, like a brief body scan. One turns around slowly, repeats the intention to
mindfulness, and continues in the next segment. The typical walking meditation lasts about thirty minutes.

Referring back to Chapter 4 and the discussion of neural pathways, the human capacity for attention represents one of those pathways, where awareness and focus are centered in the human brain. Goleman and Davidson report that these key characteristics of mindfulness—awareness and focus—manifest in five primary types of attention: selective attention (the capacity to focus on one element and ignore others), vigilance (maintaining a constant level of attention as time goes on), an allocating attention (noticing small or rapid shifts in what is being experienced), goal focus (keeping a specific goal or task in mind despite distractions), and meta-awareness (being able to track the quality of one’s own awareness, as when one notices that the mind is wandering or that one has made a mistake). 6 Given that meditation has been shown to have a positive effect on every kind of attention, these neurological factors will be taken into consideration in the proposal of specific mindfulness practices with regard to the various personality types delineated in the Enneagram.

The Enneagram

Each of the three types of meditation explored above—breath, body scan, and walking—presents its own potential holistic benefits for any given person. It is only natural to assume that each type would enhance the well-being of different people in different ways, with factors like one’s culture, life experience, and heredity—things that

have an effect on the formation of one’s personality—determining the best means to personal growth and wholeness. In light of this, the task in the remainder of this chapter is to propose which kinds of meditation would best serve the spiritual growth of various personality types. The Enneagram Type Indicator is the assessment tool to be used to classify these types.

As an aid to understanding personality, the Enneagram defines nine different types or styles, each representing a worldview that flows from the way individuals think, feel, and act in relation to the world, to others, and to themselves. According to Riso and Hudson,\(^7\) each of the types displays both resourceful and non-resourceful characteristics that one might seek to enhance or to limit in the path to growth. The Enneagram also identifies a wing or auxiliary style for each person’s primary style, based on the understanding that personality is more complex than what can be contained in each given style. In the circle of types, people tend to display characteristics of one of their adjacent types. Also, people will typically manifest other personality types under different conditions. The Enneagram identifies a secondary type for growth (Direction of Integration) to show how one responds when moving in the direction of health, and a type for responding under stressful circumstances (Direction of Disintegration).\(^8\)

To better understand each individual type, Riso and Hudson have classified each personality type in one of three centers which describe a profound (and largely unconscious) emotional response to the loss of connection with one’s True Self.

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\(^8\) Ibid., 28-30.
The Instinctive Center displays intuitive responses, the Thinking Center shows cognitive responses, and the Feeling Center reacts from the emotions. As the Enneagram has resonated in a profound way in many Christian circles, particularly those of a contemplative nature, uniquely Christian interpretations and applications of the Enneagram have been developed to enhance spiritual growth, referring to the three Centers in physiological terms: the gut (Instinctive Center), the head (Thinking Center), and the heart (Feeling Center).

The Enneagram in Christian Spirituality

Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert employ the centers of gut, head, and heart as they approach the Enneagram from a spiritual perspective. They identify the core feelings that are characteristic of each of the centers: the gut types act instinctively out of anger and rage, the head types out of fear, and the heart types out of shame. From these centers, Rohr and Ebert go on to identify the core need that drives each of the nine types. These centers and needs will be part of the foundation for the mindfulness practices which are proposed below. Another part of this foundation is the application of the Enneagram to contemplative spirituality expressed by Christopher Heuertz in his book *The Sacred Enneagram*. Heuertz expands on the spiritual nature of the Enneagram as delineated by Rohr and Ebert by connecting each style to particular contemplative practices that promote the spiritual growth of each unique individual. Beginning with the

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three centers of gut, head, and heart, Heuertz describes three prayer postures and three prayer intentions that suggest particular focus for the individual’s prayer practice.

The three prayer postures proposed by Heuertz are solitude, silence, and stillness. The practice of solitude teaches people, through intentional withdrawal from others, to be present to oneself, to God, and to others. The practice of silence teaches one to listen, not to speak, in an attentive posture to God, to others, and to the surrounding world without anxiety or judgments. And it is the practice of stillness, pausing from busy-ness and constant motion to learn restraint, that enables one to discern and to choose intentionally how to respond to others.\textsuperscript{11}

The three prayer intentions are consent, engagement, and resting. Consent ing to God’s love, one savors the experience of love without needing to earn it, figure it out, or resist it. Engaging in God’s love is an active participation in God’s loving initiative for the sake of one’s own process of spiritual growth. Finally, resting in God’s love is the passive reception of love as an unconditional gift.\textsuperscript{12} Bringing the three components of centers, postures, and intentions together makes it possible to propose recommendations for the ways in which the three mindfulness practices of breath meditation, the body scan, and walking meditation can be applied to the process of spiritual growth for each type. These recommendations are included with the following descriptions of the nine types.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 171–72.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 194–95.
Mindfulness Meditation and the Nine Types

Type One – The Reformer

The Type One personality is rational and idealistic. Type Ones tend to be very principled, purposeful, self-controlled, and perfectionistic. Their inner need is to be perfect. As such, they can be very self-critical when they do not meet high standards. On the positive side, they can exude a cheerful tranquility to others. But the False Self resides in finding one’s self-worth in one’s ability to live up to one’s ideals. Spiritually, the invitation for the One is to pursue growth rather than an ideal, experiencing oneself as not yet perfect but in process. As the center for Ones is the gut, the needed inner prayer posture is stillness. Body scan meditation would benefit the nurturing of the stillness of the body, bringing attention to every part of the body with relaxation and open curiosity. This attention is an allocating attention, focused to notice small and sudden changes in what one is experiencing in each moment. The prayer intention for the One is to rest, to stop and receive God’s love as an unconditional, unmerited gift. Seated breath meditation supports selective attention, the singular focus on one thing while ignoring others, allowing as well for a meta-awareness that uncritically notices one’s experience without judging or evaluating.

Type Two – The Helper

The Type Two is caring and interpersonally-oriented. As a helping personality, Twos are demonstrative, generous, and typically people-pleasing. They need to be needed. A Two can express great humility in relation to others as a beneficial trait. At the same time, the Two does not tend to be self-aware enough to notice the deep inner need
for validation that lies beneath the kindnesses. The invitation to growth for the Two is to spiritual freedom, to be released from the tyranny of people-pleasing and to be able to look at oneself with awareness and acceptance. The center for Twos is the heart. With a prayer posture of solitude, Twos will have an experience of knowing themselves apart from others, able to attend to their own hearts instead of the hearts of others. They will see that it is okay to be alone. A discipline of walking meditation would support this shift of focus, learning to do inner work by moving purposefully in the world without engaging other people. The prayer intention is consent, releasing one’s fear of rejection to allow God’s love to permeate the painful places in the heart of the Two. Employing the body scan, Twos have the experience, through an allocating form of attention, of permission to release concern for others and attend compassionately to themselves.

Type Three – The Achiever

As the name implies, the Type Three Achiever is oriented toward being successful. Threes are characteristically pragmatic and show themselves to be adaptive, excelling, driven, and image-conscious. Their fundamental underlying need is to succeed in all they do. As an asset, Threes are very honest and straightforward. They are energized by receiving praise from others, unconsciously finding their sense of self-worth in the message, “I am good when I win.” The invitation to growth for the Achiever is the call to hope, a positive outlook that helps the Three to develop depth of character and strength to endure momentary failures. The center for Threes is the heart, where they are open to their feelings and emotions. Like Twos, the prayer posture for Threes is solitude, a place to disengage from people so they can see themselves—experience themselves—
apart from the opinions of others. Walking meditation can assist the Three simply to be oneself in the present moment, moving but not accomplishing, aware of the True Self as acceptable and loved as one is. The prayer intention is to engage, to participate actively in God’s love for the sake of one’s own growth. In this way, walking meditation would also be beneficial to foster a selective form of attention, focused on being oneself without anxiety over the response of anyone other than an accepting God.

**Type Four – The Individualist**

The Type Four personality, sensitive and withdrawn, lives in pursuit of uniqueness. Fours are expressive, dramatic, temperamental, and given to self-absorption, with a need to be special. They strive for authenticity, yet may struggle profoundly with feelings of envy toward others. When Fours are at their most resourceful, they offer a balanced view of both the world around them and their own inner worlds. The invitation to spiritual growth for Fours is to offer their drive for originality as a gift to the world, creating unique objects of meaning. Like Threes, Fours are centered in their hearts. Yet they are singularly honest and self-aware about their emotions, unlike the other heart types, even if they over-indulge those emotions. The prayer posture for the Four is solitude, finding a space to identify and mourn the sense of shame, abandonment, and loss that is common to the Individualist. Walking meditation gives Fours the opportunity to choose more resourceful responses to the emotions that are felt so profoundly. Combining this posture with the prayer intention of rest in the practice of breath meditation, the Four grows in the ability to receive soothing restoration from emotional pain and to experience union with God in meta-awareness.
Type Five – The Investigator

Intense and cerebral are words to describe the Type Five. The Investigator can be very perceptive and innovative yet, at the same time, secretive and isolated. Fives are driven by a need to perceive. As such, they are objective, always seeking new ideas. They are hungry for knowledge, though they can be as contemplative as they are intellectual. Their objectivity is their gift to offer a polarized society, yet it is also common for the Five to experience profound feelings of emptiness. The invitation to growth for the Five is to go beyond knowledge to find wisdom. Fives are centered in the head, inclined to take in everything through their mental faculties, suggesting silence as a helpful prayer posture. Breath meditation nurtures silence, a place to see that knowledge is not to be equated with power for its own sake but used in the pursuit of deeper meaning and purpose. Additionally, Fives need the prayer intention of consent, giving God permission to meet them in their emptiness. The discipline of the body scan, noticing how this emptiness is being felt in the body without judgment, would help to bring awareness to Fives that their real need is not to fill the void; rather, they encounter God within the emptiness. This invites a vigilance type of attention, learning to maintain a constant level of awareness grounded in wisdom and preventing one from falling into despair.

Type Six – The Loyalist

Sixes, the Loyalists, are both committed and security-oriented. They are engaging and responsible, even as they are often anxious and suspicious. They are cooperative team players and highly reliable. Consciously or unconsciously, however, it is fear that drives Sixes. They can be mistrustful and easily succumb to self-doubt. Yet while fear
can be a paralyzing Achilles Heel to the Six, the daily experience with enduring anxieties can foster a deep courage, perseverance in the face of perceived danger. The invitation to spiritual growth for the Six is to live by faith, trusting there is good beyond the perils they fear. Like the Fives, Sixes are centered in their heads. Their fear grows through their thoughts, even as they are often disconnected from their rational minds. The lie they believe is this: “I am what I have.” In a prayer posture of silence, Sixes can face their fears and reconnect to the rational mind. Breath meditation is a tool for developing the singular focus—the selective form of attention—required to ignore the voices of fear. The prayer intention is engagement, actively and purposefully engaging in God’s love even when it doesn’t feel safe to do so. Walking meditation, with its intentional movement, supports and enhances both the selective focus and the non-passive participation that fosters faith and trust.

**Type Seven – The Enthusiast**

Ever-busy and fun-loving, the Type Seven Enthusiast is the proverbial life of the party. Spontaneity and versatility characterize Sevens, along with a less-resourceful tendency to be easily distractible and scattered. They exude joy and optimism, welcoming change and stimulation. At the root of the Seven’s external positivity is an internal need to avoid pain at all costs. Sevens have a wonderful gift to offer the world in their sheer joyfulness and optimism. At the same time, the invitation to spiritual growth is to step away from trying to manufacture good feelings and to cooperate with God in what God is doing to bring them wholeness. Sevens, like Fives and Sixes, are centered in the head. One might naturally expect that joyful Sevens are heart-centered, but they are actually
disconnected from their true hearts due to their avoidance of pain. It is their hearts that they need to come to know. In a prayer posture of silence, Sevens can step away from the manic compulsion for constant activity to take a deep breath and to listen for their true hearts. Breath meditation provides this quieting of the mind and spirit to attend to the often-avoided needs of the heart. Likewise, the prayer intention of rest quiets the restless body so that one can stop the active pursuit of emotional highs to learn simply to receive the unconditional gift of God’s love. An allocating attention grows out of these practices, sensitizing the over-stimulated Seven to notice, with curiosity and compassion, the smaller and subtler experiences of being alive in the moment.

**Type Eight – The Challenger**

Eights are the powerful and dominating type. They are consistently self-confident, decisive, willful, and confrontational. They have a fundamental need to be against something, to speak prophetically to counter perceived injustices or inequities around them. The Eight carries the “bad boy” or “bad girl” persona proudly. As a powerful asset, Eights have a great capacity to lead others to develop their true potential. At the same time, the lie that burdens the Eight is this: “I am what I do.” Even as other types may be intimidated by the confrontational nature of Eights, there is an integrity and innocence that every Eight can display. The invitation to spiritual and relational growth for the Eight is both to receive and to give mercy. The Eight lives out of the gut, a bodily expression of a force of presence. The prayer posture is stillness, allowing the Eight simply to be. Through the discipline of the body scan, an Eight can nurture an allocating attentiveness that teaches one to value all the subtle things happening in the physical nature, those
things beyond the Eight’s control. Also as a gesture of releasing demand for control, the 
Eight’s prayer intention is consent, choosing to allow God to give one the experience of 
love that is not subject to being earned and not needing to be resisted. The body scan is 
helpful for this as well, teaching one to give compassion and acceptance to oneself.

**Type Nine – The Peacemaker**

In contrast to the Type Eight Challenger, Type Nines are the Peacemakers, easy-
going and self-effacing. These qualities are displayed in a receptive, reassuring, 
agreeable, and complacent approach to life. Their deep need is to avoid interpersonal 
conflict, along with anything that is seen to foster discord. They offer a non-biased 
acceptance of others, though often at the expense of belittling themselves and 
withdrawing from others in an effort to maintain a level of comfort. Even as they are 
naturally averse to engaging life proactively, they can have a profound impact when they 
choose to act decisively. Nines are invited to receive unconditional love from God, from 
others, and from themselves. Their tensions are all carried in the gut/body, even as they 
are profoundly disconnected from their physical selves. The caring efforts of Nines to 
reconcile others comes at the cost of attending to those unreconciled things in their own 
natures. They require a prayer posture of stillness, fostered by the body scan to get the 
body to stop—stop acting, stop fixing, stop withdrawing out of fear—and to turn off the 
busy-ness of the worried mind so that they can connect to their own bodies. Engagement 
is the prayer intention of Nines, encouraging them to participate in what God is doing in 
them at the moment, detached from concern about others. This is a valuable result of
walking meditation, since it nurtures one’s ability to engage in vigilant attention to oneself with the compassion and acceptance the Nine typically reserves only for others.

Conclusion

The variety in traditional mindfulness meditation practices is a reflection of the multiple types of human awareness, the multifaceted ways awareness is achieved, and the complex diversity of personality types that develops as a product of heredity, culture, and life experience. For the same reasons, Christian spiritual practices need to provide a variety and flexibility that makes them accessible and meaningful for everyone. When mindfulness and Christian spirituality are combined, the resulting richness of sacred experience is more than the sum of its parts, a synergy that has great potential for healing, growth, and spiritual transformation.
CHAPTER 8

APOPHATICISM AND MINDFULNESS IN EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

As it has been demonstrated, the holistic qualities of mindfulness—integrating body, mind, and spirit—are uniquely beneficial in accessing an apophatic Christian spirituality that is healing and transformative. Mindful apophatic practice promotes an imageless, kenotic, and non-dual spirituality that helps one to overcome false views of the self and of God, spiritual façades which, theologically speaking, point to the very definition of human brokenness: estrangement from God, from self, from others, and from the created order. If, therefore, broken relationships are the essence of the human dilemma, then there must be a source for this estrangement, something that both initiates and drives the human reality of alienation. As the theological and psychological weaknesses of the traditional view that holds original sin responsible for human brokenness were enumerated in the opening chapter, a better answer is needed. Here it is proposed that the core driver in human brokenness is shame. Shame is the
emotionally-determined conclusion that there is something fundamentally wrong with oneself, prompting one to hide oneself from others.¹

Evangelical atonement theology promises a release from guilt (the responsibility and penalty for one’s sin) through justification, an imputed righteousness. But this theology proclaims only an objective stance in relationship to God. It says nothing about an experienced redemption for the justified individual. And given that the proclaimed objective reality is a restored relationship between persons, that relationship must be—by its very definition—experienced to be real. In this concluding chapter, it will be considered how mindful apophatic practices can be integrated into Evangelical spirituality both as a corrective to shame-based theology and as a channel for the transformative power of God to free people from the bondage of shame.

**Guilt and Shame in Evangelical Theology and Practice**

While there are varied definitions and uses of the terms “guilt” and “shame” in both the psychological and theological fields, the distinction between the two is important. As it will be used here, guilt is the awareness that one’s actions, thoughts, or intentions are improper or immoral, causing harm to self or to another; one knows one has done something “wrong.” Shame, on the other hand, is a self-determined devaluation of oneself as unworthy or unlovable as a result of a perceived failure, wrong action, or character flaw; one sees oneself as “bad.” According to psychologist Mark Baker, any momentary feeling of shame is a state from which one can learn and move on. But over

time one can become shame-prone, meaning that shame has moved from being a temporary state to become an ingrained trait that has an impact on one’s ability to relate to others in healthy ways. This chronic state of shame is a misattunement to the God-given need to connect to others, the need for secure attachment, which is part of the *Imago Dei* in humans.²

At its heart, shame is felt as an emotion, creating psychological pain and discomfort that can also manifest itself in physiological symptoms. But the deeper difficulty with shame is not the momentary feelings, emotional or physical, but what happens when those feelings become internalized over time. According to Baker, “The problem with shame comes when you unconsciously organize it as defining your sense of self.”³ In fact, it is not the intensity of the feeling that is psychologically and spiritually damaging, but the meaning that one ascribes to oneself about one’s character and identity. Baker suggests that the roots of identifying the self with one’s actions and thoughts is the duality of Western thought founded on the Cartesian Error:

Rene Descartes put forth the idea “I think, therefore I am,” which resulted in a widespread belief in Western culture that we each have an individual mind within our separate selves that can independently reason its own way to truth. Neuroscientists have now disproven this notion and the current thinking in science is that both our emotions and our thoughts go into making up our “minds” about things, and all of that is dependent on the context of our relationships with others. In other words, you don’t have a separate self or a mind that is isolated from what other people think and feel.⁴

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² Ibid., 27–34.
³ Ibid., 33.
⁴ Ibid., 36.
This duality in the life of an individual means that what one feels, even outside of consciousness, becomes what one experiences as fact. Those who are shame-prone, then, cannot be reasoned out of their shame, and they can even hold two conflicting beliefs at the same time. As a spiritual example, it is not uncommon for a Christian to hold to a belief in one’s unmerited salvation while, at the same time, seeing themselves through the eyes of shame as deeply flawed and unlovable. Evangelical theology fails to be holistic when it does not combine its objective doctrines with the existential reality of hurting people. Evangelical culture is built upon the idea that when one assents to an objective intellectual knowledge of the atonement, put forward through the proclamation of propositional truths, this is deemed “saving faith.” And that assent is expected automatically to provide existential release for the convert from both guilt and shame (as well as motivation for transformed behavior). But here’s the dilemma: If one is so wounded by the shame that produced and fed the False Self in the first place, intellectual knowledge will not be enough to undo the psychological and spiritual damage of shame. Then the wounded converts who continue to experience woundedness are left to come to one of two conclusions: either their faith is not valid or sufficiently strong, or, unlike “victorious” Christians, their healing will only come in eternity. Ironically, in both cases the shame of the wounded believers will be continuously perpetuated by the “good news.” Matters are compounded if the propositional truth of the Gospel is presented with the incongruity of a God who is both loving and, at the same time, filled with wrath. A picture of an angry deity who has only allowed one to escape the eternal conscious torture one deserves by means of a violent blood sacrifice can hardly be a source of peace to the shame-prone. Instead, both a false image of God and one’s shame are intensified.
With these challenges and contradictions in the Evangelical approach to the problem of shame, it becomes more and more apparent how mindful apophatic spiritual practice can be of service in overcoming the theological limitations and enhancing the healing potential of the Evangelical message. At the core, apophaticism and mindfulness are effective in overcoming shame because they work together to overcome false images, both of self and of God. In this sense, an image serves as a metaphor. It is a kind of signpost, pointing to a deeper reality that cannot be captured fully in words. A false image, then, is a bad metaphor, one that points away from or distorts what is really true.

Regarding the True Self and the False Self, one’s self image is not simply a description or metaphor for what one is like or what type of personality one displays. A self-image is a signpost to what is true about a person in relation to that person’s place in the interdependent diversity of the world in which they live. In the goodness of God’s creation, humans enjoy a unique role as those made in God’s image. Thus, they are signposts to reflect the goodness of God. A false image of the self, then, is a belittling of the person in relation to God, robbing the person of God-given dignity. For the shame-prone person, the false image labels one as worthless and unlovable. In contrast, a true image of self provides an experience of unconditional love from God and others. True Selves see themselves not only as God’s image-bearers but as precious ones to the God who seeks union with them above all else.

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5 The False Self can also manifest itself, of course, in grandiosity and arrogance. But external overconfidence and anger in the False Self are also the product of shame, a compensation for feelings of unworthiness.
A false image of God would include any picture of a character who is judgmental and angry, demanding submission above all. Approval from this God is completely conditioned by purity of intent and moral behavior. As noted previously, however, the correction of a false image for God is not a true image but no image at all. According to apophatic theology, there is no picture of God to be found or created that is not idolatrous. The goal, instead, is to transcend images in our spiritual practice. Reflecting the mystics through the ages, to yearn for God apart from images is how God is to be experienced. In this light, it can be said that the incarnate Jesus is the perfect image for God (not of God) as an unblemished signpost, since Jesus displays perfectly the infinite, sacrificial, and unconditional love of God the Father for humans to receive through Jesus.

Apophatic theology teaches believers the importance of refraining from the limitations of images. Apophatic spiritual practices, like the Jesus Prayer and Centering Prayer, invite believers to let go of the False Self and all to which it clings. Mindfulness teaches believers to pay attention to reality, what is really happening and what is really true. Mindful spiritual disciplines provide believers with practice in emptying themselves of all that is not God. In contrast, Evangelical theology is centered on right doctrine, on a faith defined primarily by creedal assent. Evangelical spiritual practice is either centered on the affirmation of dogma or, in certain pietistic and charismatic circles, on establishing a particular spiritual feeling or mindset. The dogmatic person tends to equate knowing God with knowledge of God. The charismatic evaluates spiritual maturity through the lens of a prescribed emotional or ecstatic experience. The problem for the dogmatic is that knowledge has been substituted for relationship. For the charismatic, religious experience is the counterfeit. In both cases, the self-awareness and self-reflection that
would help one to grasp both the true and the false are discouraged in the name of religious conformity. Ironically, these are the conditions that drive one deeper into the False Self and farther from freedom and union with God.

**Toward a Shame-free Evangelical Model**

What is needed to pave the way for an Evangelical entrée into the contemplative practices designed to move the believer from doctrine to experience, from head to heart, is a sense of need and a theological precedent. The need is demonstrated both in the growing cultural irrelevance that is keeping people from looking to the Evangelical churches for spiritual significance and also in the numbers of wounded or discouraged people who no longer feel at home in the churches of their youth. A hunger for meaningful spiritual encounter and restored relationships has gone unmet for many people. One helpful theological precedent is found in the atonement theory that was foundational to the creation of the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination in North America. As with all Evangelical denominations, the Covenant holds to a high view of the Bible as Holy Scripture. It does not, however, hold to a doctrine of inerrancy or subscribe to carefully-worded creedal formulations that limit theological inquiry. The motto of “Where is it written?” is a Covenant invitation both to value the Bible as authoritative for Christian life while humbly engaging with the scriptural text apart from prescribed conclusions.

**Scripture and Atonement in the Evangelical Covenant Church**

What was to become the Evangelical Covenant Church in the United States and Canada began as a pietistic revival movement within the Lutheran State Church in
Sweden in the nineteenth century. Inspired by the writings of seventeenth-century German Pietists Philipp Jakob Spener and August Hermann Franke, along with the growing free church movement in northern Europe, the Covenant forebearers put emphasis on personal conversion and on the centrality of the Bible in all theological considerations. But their approach to Scripture emphasized a transformed life ahead of codified doctrine. They reflected the ethos of Spener and Franke: “For them the truth of the Scriptures was not in the particularities of interpretive schemes but in their capacity to give life. They read the Scriptures seriously, closely, and lovingly. They did so not to determine how to best their rivals, but how best to love their God.”

Their relational emphasis on a lived theology ultimately led to another distinctive of the Covenanters, namely its understanding of the atonement. Like many American Evangelical churches today, the Lutheran State Church of Sweden in the nineteenth century took penal substitution so for granted that there was little awareness among the laity that there was any other view. But in the 1870s the young pastor and theologian Paul Peter Waldenström began to challenge the prevailing thought on the atonement. A leading voice in the pietistic movement within the State Church, Waldenström had been discussing the doctrine of God’s reconciliation in Christ with other pastors when it occurred to him to ask the proverbial question, “Where is it written?” This launched Waldenström into a renewed study of the New Testament, in which he was unable to find the expression “God reconciled in Christ.” He concluded that it was not God who was reconciled to humans in the atonement, which would suggest a change in God’s heart. 

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toward people. Rather, it was humanity that was reconciled to God, transformed by the love of God demonstrated in the act of Christ’s sacrificial death.  

Waldenström published a sermon in the journal *Pietisten* in 1872 that presented his five major points of atonement theology:

Here comes now the Kingdom of God in the Gospel with another message, which brings to naught all human speculation and renders the wisdom of the wise foolishness, teaching 1) that through our fall no change has entered the heart of God, 2) that because of this it was no severity or anger against man which through the fall rose up in the way of man’s redemption, 3) that the change, which occurred with the fall, was a change in man alone, in that he became sinful and thus fell away from God and from the life which is in him, 4) that for this reason an atonement indeed is needed for man’s salvation, but not an act of atonement which appeases God and presents him as being once again gracious but one which removes man’s sin and makes him once again righteous, and 5) that this atonement is in Jesus Christ.

For Waldenström, love is always central to understanding God’s character, God’s motivations, and God’s action. If God is indeed love, as the Scripture proclaims, and God is likewise unchangeable, Waldenström concluded that God’s love for humans had to remain constant both before and after the Fall, both before and after Calvary, and both before and after a sinner’s conversion. This means that a posture of wrath toward humanity is incongruent with God’s character, as is the suggestion that God’s heart must be changed for humanity to be redeemed and reconciled to God. There is no anger to be appeased, only sin to be addressed. The Fall alienated humanity from God but not God from humanity. God’s loving action in Christ is to restore what was lost through this

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change in humanity. Christ’s death provides this restoration to communion with the God who has always been gracious.⁹

If there is any shame in the theology of Waldenström, it is only in that moment of awareness that leads a person to acknowledge one’s sinfulness and one’s need for redemption. The apprehension of God’s love graciously dispels all guilt and shame. The Holy Spirit uses love, not fear, to move a soul to receive the restoration that God offers through Christ in the atonement. Waldenström’s theology, not surprisingly, fell on deaf ears in the Lutheran State Church in Sweden. But it was also controversial among many in his Pietist circle. Penal substitution continued to be the very definition of the gospel for many. It was fortuitous for the Swedish Mission Friends in the United States, the fellowship of immigrant churches that would become known as the Evangelical Covenant, that Waldenström’s theology was foundational to the new denomination at its formation in 1885.

Over the decades since its inception, the Evangelical Covenant in the US and Canada has broadened its reach beyond those of Scandinavian heritage to become one of the most ethnically diverse denominations in North America. It’s non-creedal stance has served to welcome people from a variety of theological backgrounds as well. Ironically, since one result of that theological diversity is inclusivity of those for whom penal substitution is orthodoxy, the Covenant still wrestles with maintaining a shame-free, wrath-free proclamation of the Gospel among a diverse laity. Covenant theologian Jay Phelan describes the Covenant ideal in this way:

From its heritage in Pietism, the Evangelical Covenant Church developed a “centered set” as opposed to a “bounded set” approach to biblical authority and the life of the church. Rather than set boundaries and defend them, the Covenant Church has insisted we move toward the center, the heart of Christian faith as a lived reality. Rather than seeking ways to defend and exclude, the church has sought to assure many points of access to enable even the most skeptical or broken to move toward the heart of God.\footnote{Phelan, “Setting Boundaries or Finding Life?,” 12.}

It is incumbent upon the Covenant continuously to return to the foundations of Waldenström’s atonement principles and to reclaim its Pietistic heritage that affirms the preeminence of God’s love over images of wrath and shame, of living the Scriptures over rigid creeds and dogma, and of the “centered set” over the “bounded set.” Phelan continues: “We seek more than truth in the Bible; we seek life. We are ‘centered set Pietists.’ We do not set up boundaries and borders but rather points of access for people to find new life in Christ. We find in our living faith an occasion for ecumenical conversations, whatever our theological differences.”\footnote{Ibid., 14.}

Another benefit to the Covenant’s inclusive posture in recent years has been an open door to contemplative spirituality. Primarily rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition, this approach to spiritual practice was introduced into American Evangelicalism by Richard Foster and Dallas Willard, among others. It focuses, for the most part, on kataphatic disciplines, emphasizing such classical categories as the three-level ascent (purgation, illumination, union); the progression of reading, prayer, meditation, and contemplation \textit{(lectio, oratio, meditatio, contemplatio)}; Ignatian practices which employ the imagination; and the Benedictine Rule of Life. Though not universally practiced or
received within the Evangelical Covenant, this precedent potentially paves the way for
the introduction of apophatic disciplines and mindfulness, which can easily be
incorporated into traditional Western disciplines.

Integrating Mindful Apophatic Practice into Evangelical Contemplation

As examples of applying an apophatic and mindful approach to contemplative
disciplines currently practiced in Evangelical circles, the following proposals are applied
to Lectio Divina, to the Examen, to silence and solitude, to Sabbath-keeping, and to the
Benedictine Rule of Life. As holistic practices, it is important that each has a way to
engage the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. It is also vital that these are not only
seen as disciplines solely for the individual, but that they also connect each person
relationally to the community of faith.

*Lectio Divina* is the practice of holy reading, most often a text from the Bible. *Lectio* involves slowly reading through a passage multiple times, each time listening for
something different, such as a word that resonates with the individual, an image that is
brought to mind, or, in the case of a narrative, naming a character in the story with which
one identifies. *Lectio* can be done alone or engaged in a group in which experiences can
be shared aloud. Ignatian spirituality promotes the use of images and the imagination as a
kataphatic discipline for self-awareness and prayerfully receiving from God. An
apophatic and mindful approach to *Lectio* invites one to move beyond the images brought
up by the words or story and to attend to what is happening in the individual and the
group in the experience of listening. One can notice both one’s emotional reactions and
the visceral responses created in the moment. One can also choose a non-anxious and
non-judging posture to sense the dynamics of the group and the communal spirit that comes in the process of sharing one’s experience with others.

The *Examen* is a quiet space at the end of the day when one slowly reviews in one’s mind the events and experiences of the day. It is designed as a means of self-reflection to help one notice where God has been present in the activities of the day. It is also used as a means for evaluating one’s actions, attitudes, and choices of the day. In mindfulness, however, it is important for one to refrain from making judgments about oneself or any of the events and experiences. One attends to how one’s emotions and body responded to experiences without discerning good and bad, right and wrong. One observes oneself as God would observe, with interest and compassion. If *Examen* is done in a group, it is equally important that individuals receive no evaluative responses to the sharing they do within the group. The goal is simply to notice, never to evaluate.

Silence and solitude are both disciplines that are practiced as a means of learning to release control, whether it is control over oneself, over others, or over one’s environment. In this sense they are very kenotic, inviting the individual to let go or to empty oneself. These are also naturally mindful, as they teach the practitioner to pay attention. To attain to an apophatic posture, it is important as well to release images that come to mind when one is alone and quiet. One notices the images but does not seek to learn from them or to interpret them. One lets them go, with the goal simply to be in the present moment. Unlike solitude, silence can also be practiced in a group. The important thing for the individual in a silent communal setting is to be aware of any self-consciousness that may arise in relation to others. One notices it and releases it.
Sabbath-keeping is the practice of creating a regular space in time (typically one day a week) when one’s invitation is to rest and to re-create. To be holistic, it must give rest to body, mind, and spirit. It is permission to live apart from expectations, either from oneself or from others. Resting does not necessarily require inactivity, given that many endeavors of play and enjoyment are re-creative. A Sabbath that is apophatic and mindful will nurture an alertness to all that is happening in oneself—body, mind, and spirit—as one rests and re-creates. Communally, one savors the relationships in which one is participating in the moment. A healing posture of self-compassion and gratitude is in itself healing and re-creative.

Sabbath is one example of building space and rhythms into one’s spiritual life. The purpose of establishing a Rule of Life is intentionally to create a rhythm for one’s daily and weekly life that is constructed around spiritual disciplines that are life-giving. The Rule of Life, as it was conceived in Benedictine monasticism, served not to make life more severe or restrictive but to help one to bring order to the chaos of life and to attend to God’s daily movements in the soul. Each of the disciplines considered above—Lectio Divina, the Examen, silence and solitude, and Sabbath-keeping—would be meaningful components to establish and prioritize in a Rule of Life as a means to be alert to God’s presence in one’s life and to savor the goodness of all of one’s God-given relationships. In addition to including these disciplines in a daily and weekly rhythm that applies an apophatic mindfulness, the previously-explored practices of the Jesus Prayer, Centering Prayer, and mindfulness meditation (breath-focused, body scan, and walking) can be included to expand the holistic benefits of a Rule of Life.
Conclusion

The complexity and challenges of modern life naturally make incorporating spiritual disciplines into one’s life difficult. Yet it is those very challenges that make a spiritual rhythm of life all the more critical to one’s wholeness, one’s health and well-being as it relates to God, to oneself, to others, and to one’s environs. Additionally, there may be other barriers for the typical American Evangelical to step into the new world of contemplative living here proposed. To engage in apophatic and mindfulness disciplines, one may be required to transcend both the foreignness of contemplative practices to Evangelical culture and a discomfort with the idea of in engaging in meditation practices that are historically Buddhist. Additionally, for those raised in a fear-based and shame-based church culture, that fear and shame may seem stronger than one’s desire for freedom and wholeness. But the only way to overcome is simply to engage. The only way to learn a new way is to release the old and to trust in the care of a compassionate God who is fully invested in the redemption and transformation of every person. In other words, it calls for an act of faith.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In his posthumously published work *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer*, C. S. Lewis used a fictional correspondence with a friend as a vehicle to ponder his personal thoughts and experiences on communing with God through prayer. Although not himself evangelical, Lewis has been something of a darling among present-day American Evangelicals for his apologetics in defense of orthodox Christian faith and for his fantasy novels that include allegory for a theocentric worldview. It would seem that if these rather mystical thoughts on prayer were taken to heart by Evangelicals, it would foster in them a deep mindfulness in their encounter with God:

Now the moment of prayer is for me—or involves for me as its condition—the awareness, the reawakened awareness, that this “real world” and “real self” are very far from being rock-bottom realities…The attempt is not to escape from space and time and from my creaturely situation as a subject facing objects. It is more modest: to re-awake the awareness of that situation. If that can be done, there is no need to go anywhere else. This situation itself is, at every moment, a possible theophany. Here is the holy ground; the Bush is burning now.\(^1\)

It is clear to see in Lewis the concepts—even the language—of mindfulness: becoming fully aware of one’s experience, being grounded in the present moment, and being immersed in an atmosphere of non-judgmental acceptance as body, mind, and spirit.

Additionally, Lewis goes on to reflect the apophatic Fathers when he writes of the futility of knowing God through human theological systems or when trapped in the idolatry of false images of God: “[God] must constantly work as the iconoclast. Every idea of Him we form, He must in mercy shatter. The most blessed result of prayer would be to rise

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thinking, ‘But I never knew before. I never dreamed…’ I suppose it was at such a moment that Thomas Aquinas said of all his own theology: ‘It reminds me of straw.’”\(^2\)

All told, Lewis reflects the self-awareness and humility required by the spiritual practices proposed in this paper as both a corrective and an expansion for Evangelical spirituality.

**Summary**

The need for corrective and expansion in the spirituality of American Evangelicalism has been presented here as a product of a weakness in being historically grounded in the fullness of two millennia of diverse Christian experience, in a disinclination toward self-reflection and continuous reformation, and in narrow theological systems that have often minimized the emphasis on the Kingdom of God that was central to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Of these theological systems, those framed around penal substitutionary atonement are rooted in a Platonized eschatology (a dualistic vision of disembodied spirits escaping the evil physical world), a paganized soteriology (presenting an angry god ready to condemn souls who can only be appeased by blood), and a moralized anthropology (putting human goodness and badness on a scale to determine one’s eternal fate). The end result is a spirituality that sacrifices the present for the future, that emphasizes the head over the heart, and that is motivated most profoundly by shame. The desire in this study has been to find a better spirituality, one built on the vision of an atonement that has been initiated by God to bring a new creation, not condemnation; to bring relationships of unconditional love, not shame; and to bring life transformation, not mere moral rectitude.

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\(^2\) Ibid., 82.
A grace-centered atonement is at the heart of the Eastern tradition of the Christian Church. The apophatic nature of Orthodox theology, built on the assumption of the utter unknowability of God, began from formulations and language found in Neo-Platonism. But the apophatic Fathers veered strongly from Platonic dualism due to a strong adherence to the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, who was fully human and fully divine. The emphasis on the Incarnation in their Christology provided the Fathers with a way to see Jesus as the bridge between humanity and the unknowable Father, the immanence of God reaching God’s transcendence. Each of the Eastern Fathers—from Gregory of Nyssa, to Dionysius the Areopagite, to Maximus the Confessor, to Gregory Palamas—taught that the believer must transcend the limitations of human knowledge and theological affirmations if one is to climb the ladder of spiritual ascent and embrace the mysterious grace of union with God, the goal of all human existence. The great gift the East has to offer the West, especially applicable to the integrity of American Evangelicalism, is a view of the Incarnation that proclaims that Christ came not simply as an answer to the Fall but as God’s invitation to this theosis. And as a corollary, Eastern Orthodoxy also has much to be emulated in its spirituality which embodies this grace.

To open the door to the understanding of mindfulness as a means for the Christian to access apophatic spirituality and to experience its fullness, it has been important here to grasp the traditional philosophy of the Buddha from which mindfulness has arisen. As a philosophy, non-theistic Buddhist thought need not be seen as contrary or anathema to Christianity. The desire to transcend suffering and to live interdependently in harmony with all things provides common ground that is worth pursuing, particularly when practices of mindfulness have the potential to strengthen and enhance one’s own
Christian disciplines. The common themes of sacrifice for others, of impermanence, and of the emptying nature of kenosis and *sunyata* are invitations to expand the palate of Christian practices in ways that do not simply advance one’s abilities to pray, but also serve to overcome the barriers to the transformation that God is seeking to do in the believer’s life through one’s spiritual practices.

In recent years, the foundations of Buddhist practices have been considered not only as a philosophy but also as a psychology, given the applied nature of meditative disciplines in healing the concept of the self and in fostering wellness in relationships with others. The psychotherapeutic potential of mindfulness has been successfully engaged in several clinical methodologies since the 1970s. Through mindfulness practices, mental health clients have experienced more wholeness and alleviation of suffering both in the decrease of symptoms and in a changed relationship to pain. The neurosciences have been able to identify the physiological mechanisms of the brain that promote a neuroplasticity that is influenced positively through mindfulness practices over time. The science is confirming the ability of a mindful person to perceive the world differently and to respond in healthy ways to the challenges of life. Both the psychology and the neuroscience support the idea that mindfulness promotes an attunement between individuals that creates the secure attachment necessary for healthy relationships. If the healing ministry of Jesus is considered as a ministry of restored attunement, it becomes apparent how mindfulness supports a healing spirituality that serves to create for people a secure attachment with themselves, with others, and with God in an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance. Through mindfulness, it is evident that psychology, neuroscience, and spirituality work together to integrate mind, body, and spirit.
Surveying the history of Christian spirituality, it not difficult to find mystically-inclined practitioners of disciplines that engage the qualities of mindfulness. From Teresa of Avila, to Brother Lawrence, to Jean-Pierre de Caussade, practices have reflected the focused awareness on the present moment, fearlessly looking inward to experience God even in the darkest places of the human heart. These disciplines should not in themselves be equated with mindfulness as they merely engage mindfulness in their process, given that mindfulness is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Nevertheless, intentional mindfulness disciplines can most certainly be of aid to apophatic Christian practices since they share the qualities and goals of being imageless, of engaging the heart over the mind, and of inviting kenotic surrender, all in a non-dual integration of body, mind, and spirit. The Jesus Prayer (as it has developed in the Eastern Orthodox tradition) and Centering Prayer (a modern revival of ancient Western prayer forms) both display an apophatic core where the focus and non-judgmental acceptance of mindfulness would be an asset. Mindfulness disciplines show great potential for aiding the practitioners of the Jesus Prayer and Centering Prayer in the release of control, of expectations, and of the fear that often stands in the way of learning to trust in God and to allow God to be God within the human heart.

Central to the theology behind the thesis of this paper is that salvation is defined as the ultimate reality of humanity and all of creation living in harmonious communion with God. Personal salvation is not merely a trip to heaven in the future but a present reality lived in the moment, a reality of peace with God. It is a relationship that is experienced. Atonement is the restoration of each person to live as one’s True Self, set free through the self-giving love of Christ to abandon the illusions created by the False
Self in a futile effort to escape the existential despair of alienation from God. In the Incarnation, the perichoretic community of the Trinity is offered to humanity, Christ in his two natures (human and divine) serving as the bridge between the creation and the unknowable God. All people are invited into a transfiguration of the self in which the uncreated light of the transcendent God allows them to see who they are as the *Imago Dei* and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be who they were meant to be: image-bearers who join in God’s work of restoration. All Christian spiritual practices must serve and flow from this reality.

The fundamental modern mindfulness meditation practices are: breath-focused meditation, the body scan, and walking meditation. Together they provide important techniques beneficial to physical wellness, psychotherapeutic healing, and spiritual wholeness. Each of these three meditation forms has been an asset to address the variety of holistic human needs and, additionally, to serve the diversity of human personality types, as each type presents its own unique set of challenges and requirements for health and well-being. The Enneagram Type Indicator has been an important assessment tool in multiple disciplines, not least of which is Christian spirituality. The richness of resources on the interpretive potential of the Enneagram has had a profound impact on the ability to understand an individual’s unique make-up and, in turn, to recommend specific mindfulness disciplines that are appropriate and meaningful to one’s needs.

If mindful apophatic spiritual disciplines are to be engaged meaningfully to help individuals address the False Self in pursuit of the True Self, it is important to identify the source of the brokenness that has created the False Self in the first place. This source is shame. Shame is a self-determined devaluation of oneself as unworthy or unlovable as a
result of a perceived failure, wrong action, or character flaw. For Christians to overcome their shame, particularly within American Evangelical culture, the message of redemption in Christ must necessarily be presented and proclaimed as an act of pure unconditional love on the part of the Triune God. It must be free from wrath-based images of God that only serve to promote the very shame the Gospel promises to destroy. The atonement theory of P. P. Waldenström is a hopeful example of how a re-focus on the centrality of God’s love can be a corrective that helps people to be freed from false images of themselves and of God to find life-transformation free from shame. But as this transformation does not come simply from knowing about freedom but also experiencing freedom, our spiritual practices must serve to bring people to a new existential reality. Given the growing interest in contemplative disciplines in many American Evangelical churches, driven by the desire for a deeper experience of God, the door is opening to introduce apophatic and mindful spirituality that has unique potential for overcoming shame and fostering union with God.

**Conclusion**

The American Evangelical churches have always been at their best when believers and congregations have been Kingdom-minded, seeking to join in the transformative work of God in a hurting world by displaying the true character of God through graciousness, compassion, humility, and unconditional love toward all. Kingdom Christians neither capitulate to culture nor set themselves up as enemies of the culture. Instead, they take the best of all of God’s gifts to build bridges of hope to the God who offers redemption in Christ and empowerment through the Holy Spirit. But to do this well
takes humility, a humility that puts loving others ahead of being right; a humility that is willing to be self-reflective, able to see when what is called the Gospel has become a reflection of tribal biases; and humility to let God be revealed in the world on God’s own terms, not forming God in one’s own image. It is safe to be humble because, in a sense, God does not need to be pursued at all. God is pursuing humanity. In light of this fact, Richard Rohr reminds us that God is everywhere: “We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with God. God walks everywhere incognito. And the Incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labor is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.”3 The invitation of apophatic Christian spirituality is to surrender to the unconditional love of the Triune God, to release all that is not God. The invitation of mindfulness is to be awake, to savor the reality of union with God in each moment, with each breath. Together, these are calls that speak to the deepest longings of the human heart.

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