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Travis Patten

The Purification of Love: Heavenly Ascent from Plato to Dante

In this paper I attempt to show three things. First, that the common interpretation of Dante’s ascent to heaven is flawed in placing Dante’s deification at the beginning of the *Paradiso* when it actually, as I argue, takes place at the end. Second, that Dante’s ascent to heaven follows a traditional pattern derived from ancient Greek philosophy, and that by understanding his adherence to this pattern, my first claim becomes evident. Thirdly, I will demonstrate that Dante had access to this pattern by delineating one particular lineage of authors who transmitted it to him.

1. Dante, *Paradiso*, 33.142–45. [“Here my exalted vision lost its power. / But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving / with an even motion, were turning with / the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.”—Ed. All editor translation notes, where necessary for the reader’s convenience, are from the Princeton Dante Project, http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp.]

2. I am very grateful to those who contributed their time and support to this paper. Professors William Cobb, Michael Minch and Mike Shaw all read various drafts and gave useful criticism. Dr. Keith Snedegar encouraged me to develop a little idea I had. And special thanks to Diego Jara, whose constant and selfless help with so many aspects of the research and writing was invaluable, and made it a far better study than it would have been otherwise.
This pattern of ascent consists of three parts: the purification of the individual, his or her illumination, and finally the achievement of union with God; this last step often signifies some form of deification. There are two aspects to the ascent: the microcosmic, in which the focus is on the individual’s struggle to purify his faculty of love in order to achieve illumination and union with the divine; and the macrocosmic, in which the process of ascent is seen as being inseparable from the cosmos itself, and, while the individual is still responsible for fitting him or herself into the larger scheme, there is considerable emphasis on the love which emanates from the divine and lifts all creation back to it. The various figures I examine will vary in the extent to which they emphasize the former or the latter doctrine, but aspects of both will be present in all those whom I treat.

The beginning of this study is Plato, who expounds his doctrine of love and ascent most fully in the *Symposium*. From him the doctrine passed to Plotinus who put it into the tripartite Neoplatonic form which would influence the later figures in the genealogy. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus Confessor developed and transmitted the doctrine, and the writings of both were translated by John Scotus Eriugena. It was in that form that it reached Bernard of Clairvaux and through him to Dante. I do not argue that this particular lineage

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3. These two aspects can be viewed in terms of the Christian notions of “grace” and “works.” In all of the authors whom I treat, including Plato, the need for grace is never disregarded in spite of the emphasis placed on the responsibility of the individual to exercise his faculties to the utmost in order to achieve union with God. The “works” done by the individual open him or her up to the grace of God, making union possible.

4. The idea of ascent precedes Plato by millennia. The ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians believed in the ascent of the soul to heaven in the afterlife, and some have suggested that they practiced rituals by which they believed the soul could ascend in this life also. For Egypt, see Walter Federn, “Transformations in the Coffin Texts: a New Approach,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 19, no. 4 (1960): 241–257, and Edward F. Wente, “Mysticism in Pharaonic Egypt?” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 41, no. 3 (1982): 161–179; and for Mesopotamia, see Geo Widengren, “Aspetti simbolici dei templi e luoghi di culto del Vicino Oriente Antico,” *Numen* 7 (1960), 1–25, esp. 3–5. One influence on Plato was the Pythagoreans and their methods of ascent which were derived at least in part from shamanistic practices. See E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962). Shamanism itself was surely influenced by the ancient Near East. See Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). However, Plato was, as far as I am aware, the first to emphasize the role of love in ascent. This is, perhaps, a possible area for future research.

5. The fact that Augustine is absent from this lineage may be remarked upon. In spite of the
is the only one through which these ideas were transmitted, or even necessarily the most important one, but its significance lies most particularly in the fact that it provides clear and demonstrable evidence that these doctrines were preserved from ancient Greece to Dante.

To justify my selection of authors it may be helpful to explain how I came to link them. The starting point was Dante’s ascent. In reading various commentaries on the *Paradiso* I became convinced that they misinterpreted a central aspect of Dante’s experience. In the first canto of the *Paradiso* Dante was transformed by the light of the sun which flowed into him as he looked at Beatrice. He cannot describe his transformation and simply refers the reader to the experience of Glaucus, the deified fisherman of Greek mythology. The majority of commentators explain that through the Glaucus allusion Dante describes his own deification. However, Steven Botterill has argued persuasively that rather than deification, this experience corresponded to the medieval idea of *excessus*, which was a preparatory transformation. This being the case, Dante could not have been deified until the last canto of *Paradiso*. Evidence of this is that Dante described his final experience in much the same way that Bernard of Clairvaux described the experience of deification and, significantly, Bernard was his companion when Dante underwent this experience. Following this interpretation, the experience described in the Glaucus allusion becomes, therefore, a preparation for Dante’s deification, and not the deification itself. Significantly, just prior to the transformation described in the Glaucus allusion Dante had been purified in Purgatory. Thus Dante underwent a three-part process of purification, transformation, and deification. When interpreted this way the similarity between his experience and the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent is obvious and suggests historical dependence.

In investigating the way in which Dante may have become aware of this inestimable influence he had on introducing Neoplatonism into the Christian Middle Ages, his writings concerning ascent and deification were never to any great extent influential on subsequent generations. See Steven Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also note 53 below.

pattern I begin with Bernard. As mentioned above, Dante describes his final experience in terms of a Bernardine deification, but while Bernard was an eloquent expositor of the ideas of ascent and deification, he was not their originator. Scholars have demonstrated his dependence on the writings of Maximus Confessor and possibly Dionysius in the translations by Eriugena. Maximus was the principal interpreter of Dionysius, who had in turn adapted the Neoplatonic ideas of ascent to a Christian framework. From Dante to Dionysius the chain is very clear and unambiguous, with each author being a seminal figure in the history of ascent and each one being directly dependent on the writings of his predecessor; however when we reach the Neoplatonists the situation is not so simple. Neoplatonism was a large and diffuse school of philosophical thought and, rather than attempting to provide a history of the development of ascent within it, I content myself with discussing the doctrine as outlined by its founder Plotinus. This provides a sufficient foundation for recognizing the principal steps of the Neoplatonic ascent in later authors without tracing its development through subsequent Neoplatonists such as Iamblicus and Proclus. I also omit an account of the doctrine from Plato to Plotinus and limit myself to examining those two key figures in the Greek philosophical tradition before moving to the Christian reception of the doctrine.

PLATO AND “THE LADDER OF LOVE”: ASCENT THROUGH THE CHANNELING OF DESIRE IN THE SYMPOSIUM

The desire for union with God did not begin in Greece with Plato. Festugiere has argued that it can be traced back at least to Heraclitus and the tragedians, and that it has its roots in the native Greek pessimism, which often led to a desire to escape this world. The remedy for this dissatisfaction with the world was a flight which would make one like the gods who lived in eternal bliss.

7. Another well known example is Heraclitus, who, like Plato, was an aristocrat who withdrew from public life and took refuge in philosophy. He first went to the sanctuary of Artemis and later to the mountains above Ephesus where he lived as a hermit. It was there that he developed his philosophy which explained how chaos was governed ultimately by God. Andre-Jean Festugiere, Personal Religion Among the Greeks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 34. See Festugiere for a justification of the term God in this context.
Since the earth is bad why not leave it? Why not fly to the place where the gods dwell, share their life and be happy like them? That is the original sense of this φυγη or flight to the gods, of this ὁμοίωσις or assimilation to the gods. It is a desire of escape, it is the homesickness for heaven, it is the aspiration to lose oneself, to pass from this world, into the unsounded depths of divine peace.8

Plato himself is an example of this withdrawal from the world. Born an aristocrat, he eventually gave up all public life and devoted himself to the consolations of philosophy. His well known passage in The Republic asserting that “when the affairs of his country become too corrupt[ed]” the “wise man” will prefer “the hidden life, the life in retreat,” is a personal one.9

When Plato develops his philosophy of ascent to heaven “the formula takes on a moral ring . . . But this is, as is so often the case with Plato, a transposition; Plato shifts to the plane of philosophy a preëxistent tendency which was not essentially an ethical principle. It was much more a fundamental aspiration of the human spirit.”10 While Plato, to a large degree, simply adapted to his own philosophy certain concepts that were already current in his time, they would become very influential in the form in which he cast them.

Plato’s most complete discussion of love and ascent takes place in his Symposium, a dialogue that takes place at a symposium, or after-dinner party, in which Socrates and other guests offer eulogies to love. The earlier discourses at the symposium set the stage for, and prefigure Socrates’s fuller account of love which he claims to have learned from a wise woman named Diotima. The first part of Socrates’s discussion concerns what Diotima terms the “Lesser Mysteries.” The earlier eulogies have concerned themselves principally with homosexual love and its justifications; however, in discussing the lesser mysteries Diotima conceives of love as desire of the good or beautiful and describes

8. Ibid., 21.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Ibid., 20. More specifically this tendency contributed to the popularity of cults such as the Orphics and Pythagoreans which would greatly influence the way in which Plato conceived of the ideas of ascent and union with God. See Walter Will, “Orpheus and the Greek Spirit” in The Mysteries, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 64–92, esp. 87–92.
its purpose as being the engendering of progeny, whether physical or intellectual. Diotima considers homosexual love as superior to heterosexual love because in its highest form it gives birth to what she calls “beautiful discourses,”11 which include laws, institutions, poetry, etc., which are more eternal than physical offspring.

The “Higher Mysteries,” however, concern the transformation of love from earthly desire to something very much more elevated. In discussing these mysteries, Diotima builds on her previous definition of love as desire of the beautiful or good, but now describes the process by which love can be channeled, not only to beget beautiful discourses, but to lead the lover to behold the pure form of beauty itself. The emphasis from this point forward will be on practice rather than doctrine, on the channeling of love which will lead the philosopher to an actual encounter with absolute beauty. This process is a mystery, therefore the primary goal is not that of understanding but of achieving an experience which will, of itself, bring understanding.12 It is an ascent to the realm of the ideas achieved by liberating the soul from its attachment to physical things, through the reeducation of its faculty of love.

Diotima compares this ascent of love to climbing a ladder, the first step of

12. In discussing the mysteries Aristotle says that the purpose is not to learn but to experience, to be put in a certain frame of mind if one can be.
which is the loving of a beautiful body. 13 “It is necessary for him14 who proceeds rightly to this thing to begin while still young by going to beautiful bodies; and first, if his guide guides rightly, to love one single body and beget there beautiful discourses.”15 Elsewhere, Plato emphasizes the fact that the sight of this “god-like face or bodily form” causes “a shuddering and a measure of . . . awe.”16 This then must give birth to beautiful discourses.

The second step is “to recognize that the beauty on any body whatever is akin to that on any other body, and if it is necessary to pursue the beautiful as it attaches to form, it is quite unreasonable to believe that the beauty on all bodies is not one and the same. Realizing this, he is constituted lover of all beautiful bodies and brings his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or no importance.”17

The difficulty of the process of ascent is implied because here the lover is placed in a position where, having been attached to the beauty of one body, he is forced by logical argument to love all physical beauty wherever it is found, thereby breaking the hold that the love of one particular body has on him. By achieving this, the lover has made the first step towards the ability to appreciate beauty in all of its manifestations.18

Next the neophyte “must come to believe that beauty in souls is more to be valued than that in the body.” He must then seek the “sorts of discourses that will make the young better, in order that he may be constrained in turn to contemplate what is beautiful in practices and laws and to see that it is in itself

13. Plato, Symposium, 211c. Diotima describes it twice, first in detail and then in summary. The last three steps are the same in both descriptions, but the first steps don’t seem to match exactly. However, the discrepancies are minor and will be noted in the footnotes.
14. The scheme as it is presented here seems to be applicable only to men.
15. Plato, Symposium, 210a.
17. Plato, Symposium, 210b.
18. In Diotima's summation the second step is the love of two bodies and the third is the love of all beautiful bodies. This sequence is perhaps taken for granted in this account.
all akin to itself, in order that he may believe bodily beauty a small thing.”19 The first part of this step is the appreciation of beauty in souls over that of bodies. Allen points out that for Diotima the distinction between two types of beauty is a difference of kind and not of degree. No matter how beautiful a body may be, it cannot compare to any degree of beauty in a soul.

When the lover comes to love the beauty of his beloved’s soul he wants to improve it, therefore he seeks to create discourses on laws and practices which opens his mind to the beauty they have in and of themselves. The appreciation of laws and practices prepares one for the next step, which is the study of the “various branches of knowledge, in order that he may see their beauty too.”20

At this point the lover has progressed from loving one individual body to loving beauty in its multitude of manifestations. He “no longer delight[s] like a slave . . . in the beauty of one single thing . . . but rather, having been turned toward the multitudinous ocean of the beautiful and contemplating it, he begets many beautiful and imposing discourses and thoughts in ungrudging love of wisdom.” Having gone from the one to the many he is now prepared to apprehend the “certain kind of knowledge which is one.”

At this point the philosopher has done everything possible and has finished his preparation for the vision of the actual form of beauty itself, which is the goal of the entire process. It is while one is contemplating (θεώρον) this vast “sea of beauty” that the pure form of Beauty is revealed. In Diotima’s words, “suddenly, in an instant . . . there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for.” The way that Plato describes this final revelation seems to emphasize that, in spite of the fact that one must struggle to purify one’s passions and prepare oneself mentally for this vision, one cannot achieve the vision through one’s own efforts. Instead, all of the preceding work seems to be only a means by which one opens one’s soul to receive what could be called divine grace.21

20. Ibid., 210d.
21. At this point Diotima describes the vision of beauty itself and in so doing gives an excellent
This is the end of all that has gone before: “when someone, ascending from things here . . . begins clearly to see that, the Beautiful, he would pretty well touch the end. . . . It is there if anywhere that human life is to be lived: in contemplating the Beautiful itself.”

Not only does he see what true beauty is, but by touching it he begets true virtue, and “in begetting true virtue and nurturing it, it is given to him to become dear to god, and if any other among men is immortal, he is too.” In Greek thought becoming immortal can be considered equivalent to deification, and, while Diotima does not commit herself, she leaves open the possibility of the initiate becoming divine. This idea will be very important for later writers.

This entire process is conceived of in terms of an askesis (ασκήσις) or conscious discipline, a purging of the passions (as indicated by the statement “bringing his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or no importance”) in which one passes through various levels of desire and knowledge. This progression requires the initiate at each stage to forsake his or her desire for things of the lower order, until he or she reaches the “one single form of knowledge.” This progression implies a form of ascent, which is made explicit when Diotima uses the metaphor “mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung . . . until [one] comes to know what beauty is.”

McGinn description of the Platonic Forms. Beauty always is, it doesn't grow or shrink, “it is not in one respect beautiful but in another ugly, nor beautiful at one time but not at another . . . All other things are beautiful by sharing in that.” Plato, Symposium, 211a–b.

22. Here Diotima purposefully juxtaposes sight and touch. Allen points out that the reference to the sudden revelation of the Form of Beauty is analogous to the revelation of the sacred object in the mysteries, and Festugiere has alluded to the similarity between Diotima’s reference to “touching” and the rite of the mysteries which consists in grasping a holy object. The exact correlation between Diotima’s system and the mysteries seems to have been overlooked by both. In the Eleusinian Mysteries the penultimate experience was the “revelation” of a stalk of wheat which was then followed by the “touching” of the effigy of a womb. For a brief description of the mysteries see Wili, “Orphic Mysteries,” in The Mysteries, 81–82. Also, see note 25 below.

23. Plato, Symposium, 211d, 212a.


25. Plato, Symposium, 211c. This passage is striking in its use of ascent language and serves as an illustration of the indebtedness of Plato’s thought to traditional conceptions. The ladder is a widespread image of heavenly ascent, the most famous of which is that seen by Jacob in the book of Genesis. The ladder would continue to symbolize ascent throughout the Middle Ages, John Climacus’s Scala Coeli, being one of the most representative texts. In Dante’s heaven the mystics
nicely summarizes Plato’s views on ascent and deification:

Plato views the true human subject, or soul, as a searcher always restless\textsuperscript{26} short of permanent possession of the Absolute Good which beatiﬁes. Such possession is achieved through θεώρια, or contemplation, which is the fruit of an ascending puriﬁcation (καθάρσις, ασκήσις) of both love and knowledge and which reaches its goal when νοῦς, the divine element in the soul, is assimilated to its supernal source.\textsuperscript{27}

It is important to note the various aspects of the quest: puriﬁcation, contemplation, and assimilation to the ultimate good. There is some debate about the extent to which Plato conceives of this as solely a mental process or whether it is primarily a mystical experience.\textsuperscript{28} However, I think it is a mistake to separate (contemplatives) are located in the heaven of Saturn, the planetary sphere closest to the Empyrean, which has as its symbol a ladder upon which they are seen ascending. Dante, \textit{Paradiso}, 33.28.

\textsuperscript{26} Compare Dante’s use of the word “vago” to describe someone filled with restless desire. See note 98 below.

\textsuperscript{27} McGinn, \textit{Foundations of Mysticism}, 25

\textsuperscript{28} For example, R.E. Allen argues that ratiocination is, for Plato’s Socrates, a central part of contemplation. As evidence he adduces Alcibiades’s description of Socrates’s contemplation at Potidea being an inquiry into the answer of a problem for the space of a whole day. “If contemplation is allied to intellectual intuition . . . it also involved hard thought . . . [the] state of mind is not prayer but explicitly contrasted to prayer, nor is it trance-like, for the verbs used to describe it imply ratiocination.” This is all true but it ignores the fact that Socrates endorses Diotima’s “mysteries” which lead to what can only be described as a mystic revelation. In trying to go around this, Allen emphasizes secrecy in the mysteries to an exaggerated degree: “[the word mystic] derives from \textit{muo}, to shut the mouth, to shut the eyes—the Indo-European root occurs in English \textit{mouse}. Slang, as often, preserves an archaic root in the expression ‘to keep mum’ that is, to keep one’s mouth shut, and in the pleasant oxymoron ‘mum’s the word.’ Mysticism suggests secret doctrines, that is, doctrines that ought not or cannot be communicated to others. The speech of Diotima, on the contrary, is born not of secrecy but of the intent to communicate, and contemplation involves intellectual apprehension of a ﬁrst principle that is to be explanatory of the structure of the world; it is, that is to say, inherently rational.” R.E. Allen, “Comment,” in Plato, \textit{The Symposium}, trans. with commentary by R.E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 86. Allen is relying too heavily on etymology. His statement that secret doctrines cannot be communicated is itself oxymoronic since a doctrine is something taught. The mysteries were kept secret from the uninitiated, but not from the initiates. Socrates seems to be portrayed as one who was initiated into these mysteries, and it is indisputable that Diotima treats this as a mystery. The fact that Socrates—and Plato—speak of these things openly does not affect their purported origin. Allen is right in emphasizing the rational nature of the ascent, but Diotima emphasizes that once one has done the difﬁcult mental work, which leads the mind to its summit, one “suddenly catches sight” of the pure form of beauty. Allen points out that the reference to the sudden revelation of the Form of Beauty is analogous to the revelation of the sacred object in the mysteries, and Festugiere has alluded to the similarity between Diotima’s reference to “touching” and the rite of the mysteries which consists in grasping a holy object. The exact correlation between Diotima’s system and the mysteries seems to have been overlooked by both. In the Eleusinian Mysteries the penultimate experience was the” revelation”
the two completely; one of Plato’s important contributions may be his emphasis on how rational thought can prepare the mind for mystical experience. Hence his emphasis on an askesis, which leads the mind to higher levels of knowledge and understanding until a revelation is received.29

With Plato, all of the fundamental elements for Dante’s ascent are in place. Like Plato, Dante’s passions will be purified and drawn away from earthly things. This is the theme of Purgatorio. At the end of that experience he contemplates the face of Beatrice from which sunlight is streaming he is transformed and transported into Paradise. Once there he continues to ascend until he achieves the ultimate mystical experience: union with God.

PLOTINUS AND THE NEOPLATONIC CONCEPT OF ASCENT

The centuries following Plato’s death would see continuous interpretation and reformulation of his ideas, but the most significant interpreter of Platonism would be Plotinus.30 He was born in Egypt in 205 CE and died in 270. The preceding century had been, for those in the Roman Empire, an enlightened one with wise rulers, a stable government, and a prosperous economy.31 However, beginning with the ascension of Commodus in the year 180, all that changed and Plotinus would live his entire life through the bleakest period of the Empire. The unstable and difficult conditions led many people to take refuge in philosophy, which was, at that time, the educated person’s religion. A.H. Armstrong writes: “Philosophy was for the men of his period both a full-time professional occupation and a religious occupation demanding withdrawal from the world.”32

of a stalk of wheat and the final rite was the” touching” of the effigy of a womb. See Wili “Orphic Mysteries,” in Mysteries, 81–82.

29. The allegory of the cave is also an example of an ascent, calling for transcending the realm of “shadows” and ascending to the “intelligible region”, through “divine contemplations” by means of the “eye of the soul.” Plato, Republic, 517b, 517d.

30. It should be remembered that Plotinus considered himself a Platonist. It is unlikely that he intended to change Plato’s philosophical system in any significant way. The term” Neoplatonism” would not be coined until the nineteenth century.


32. “. . . as we can see from the case of the senator Rogantius, for whom conversion to philosophy
Festugiere argues that one cannot separate this widespread desire to flee the world from the emphasis it receives in Plotinus’s writings.33

Plotinus withdrew from public life and dedicated himself to explicating Plato’s doctrines. It is important to note that Plotinus would not have seen himself as an innovator developing a new philosophical system. It is more likely he would have viewed his enterprise as the systematization of elements in Plato’s doctrine that were not originally explicit. His goal, to a certain extent, was to meld the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. One of the results of Plotinus’s systematization is the development of three hypostases: the One, which is the First Cause and absolutely simple; Intellect, which corresponds to Plato’s realm of Ideas; and the Soul, which links matter to intellect. Plotinus’s conception of the return of the soul, which is directly inspired by the dialogues of Plato, especially the Symposium, is developed in this three part hierarchy. This format was taken up and developed further by succeeding philosophers, especially Proclus, who developed more triadic levels; but whether in the Plotinian scheme or otherwise, this triadic form will be of lasting importance.

**PLOTINUS’S HIERARCHY**

One of the underlying problems that Plotinus grapples with is the relationship between “the one and the many. According to Plotinus, the universe originated with “the One,” which is the “transcendent” cause of everything, above and before all else. It is this undifferentiated One that causes all individual entities to exist. In his own words, “It is by the One that all Beings are Beings. . . . For what could exist if it was not one? If beings are deprived of what we call unity they do not exist.”34

The One “overflows” and creates the hypostasis or realm of intellect (νους), in which are located the ideas or, as Plotinus prefers, the rational principles

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which give both form and intelligence to all life. Intellect, then, is the first level of differentiation; in it exist diverse forms, but it should be noted that Plotinus is emphatic that although it contains many forms, Intellect itself is one. (This interrelationship of one and many persists on all levels of Plotinus’s thought.)

The Intellect in turn gives existence to the Soul. In the words of Andrew Smith, “Soul is the entity by means of which the incorporeal comes into effective contact with the corporeal and which lies, as it were, on the borderline of the transcendent and physical universe. It is, in Plotinus’ own words, ‘amphibious.”’35 The Soul has two purposes, which are to quicken corporeal things (humans, animals, and plants) and to link them to the Divine Mind (νοῦς). Paradoxically, the soul performs the latter function best when it withdraws from the body and into itself in contemplation (theoria), thereby taking the individual soul back to higher realms. This contemplation is not inevitable. When the soul descends into a body, it is distracted by material things and forgets its divine origin, and most individuals never regain this divine state.36 The goal of the true philosopher is to discipline himself in the practice of contemplation in order to make this ascent back to his divine origin.

THE RETURN OF THE SOUL

As we have seen, Plotinus describes the ascent as a return of the individual soul to the One from whence it came, or in his well-known phrase, “the flight of the alone to the Alone.”37 Plotinus believes that the individual soul itself is divine, but when entangled with the material world its ability to exercise its divine nature is impeded and can only be regained by the process of ascent. In his own words, “For he himself is the god who came thence, and his own real nature, if he becomes what he was when he came, is there.”38 For Plotinus, deification consists

35. Smith, Philosophy in Late Antiquity, 40.
36. “What is it then that has made the souls forget their father, God, and be ignorant of themselves and him, even though they are parts which come from his higher world and altogether belong to it?” Plotinus, Enneads, 5.1.1 in Smith, Philosophy of Late Antiquity, 5.
37. Plotinus, Enneads, 6.9.11.
38. Plotinus, Enneads, 1.2.6, 8ff, in Smith, Philosophy of Late Antiquity, 62.
in regaining the ability to function on a purely intellectual level. In order to do so, one must free the intellect from its entanglement in material attractions. The motive force behind the ascent is desire, and he is emphatic that the ability of the soul to return to the Good or the One is derived from the reality that desire is innate to the soul. These concepts are expressed eloquently in these words:

So we must ascend again to the good, which every soul desires. Anyone who has seen it knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful. It is desired as good, and the desire for it is directed to good, and the attainment of it is for those who go up to the higher world and are converted and strip off what we put on in our descent.³⁹

This return ascent is part of a larger cosmological process in which emanations flow outward from the One and become Intellect, which in turn overflows and creates Being. This then overflows, becoming the World Soul, of which individual souls are composed. These souls are embodied in physical material, but yearn to return to their origin.⁴⁰ The desire to return is due to the constant emanations coming from the One as illustrated in the following statement:

Every one of those beings exists for itself but becomes an object of desire by the colour cast upon it from the Good, source of those graces and of the love they evoke. The soul taking that outflow from the divine is stirred; seized with a Bacchic passion, goaded by these goads, it becomes Love...its very nature bears it upwards, lifted by the giver of that love...there is some glow of the light of the Good and this illumination awakens and lifts the soul.⁴¹

There are two fundamental points to consider in this passage. The first is the way in which grace is fundamental to Plotinus’s philosophy. Living things exist in and of themselves but they become objects of love because of the grace

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³⁹. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.7,1–6, in Smith, *Philosophy of Late Antiquity*, 67–68. The idea of putting on evils as one descends through the heavens was, perhaps, the root of the idea of the seven cardinal sins. Originally these would have been acquired in one’s passage to earth through the seven heavens and then shed as one returned. See H.J. Rose, *Ancient Roman Religion* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1948), 131. Dante goes through an equivalent of the latter part of this process as he ascends through Purgatory shedding a ‘p’ (for peccatum, or sin) at each of its seven levels.

⁴⁰. Smith, *Philosophy of Late Antiquity*, 63.

that flows into them from the One. When the soul feels intense love for things “it is not because they are what they are, but because they have taken on something from above, in addition to what they are by themselves.”42 This grace is almost inseparable from the love that it inspires, indeed, Hadot goes so far as to equate the two: “There is in love a ‘something more,’ something unjustified; and that which, in objects, corresponds to this ‘something more’ is grace, or life in its deepest mystery . . . Life and grace . . . are ‘something more,’ and this gratuitous surplus is everything. In it, Plotinus recognizes the ‘trace of the Good.’”43 This grace illuminates the objects of the soul’s desire, leading the philosopher from the mundane up through the forms of intellect until he or she44 reaches the absolute Good.

The second point is that, through this outpouring of grace, the very nature of the soul is changed and it becomes Love itself. Being love, it naturally ascends upward to the source from which all love comes.

Desire is what leads the soul upwards, but before that can happen it must be redirected away from physical objects and toward divine ones. A prerequisite to this ascent is the exercise of the so-called “political” virtues which regulate how one acts in society. Nevertheless, Plotinus takes these somewhat for granted, focusing instead on the ability of virtues to turn the soul away from its material attachments or affections.45 In this context he is drawing on the Platonic teaching that “the true moral ideal . . . is really a kind of purgation . . . and wisdom itself is a kind of purification.”46 This moral discipline constitutes the beginning of a three-step process of “stripping off what we put on in our descent.” Then,

43. Hadot, Simplicity of Vision, 50.
44. Neoplatonism was very egalitarian as concerned the sexes, and apparently this went back to Plotinus himself. Ibid., 54. On a related note, Plotinus was horrified by “Greek love” and commissioned his student, Porphyry, to write a rebuttal to the idea that in order to acquire virtue a student should submit to the amorous advances of his master. Ibid., 53.
45. Hadot distinguishes these two forms as “social” and “purificatory” virtues. Hadot, Simplicity of Vision, 68.
46. Plato, Phaedo, 69c.
as Smith puts it, follows the “more positively inclined stage of reasoning where there is the first recognition of the higher realm, and last the so-called intellectual virtues representing our activity at the level of intellect.”

Plotinus emphasizes the ability of an individual to undergo this process of purification and ascent—this is something that one must do. However, while one is at the stage of pure intellect, he or she can only wait patiently for the final union with the One, which cannot be forced. Here again is this juxtaposition of “works” and “grace.” One is responsible for opening oneself up to the divine grace by “stripp[ing] off what we put on in our descent,” and if one is willing to undergo this discipline, then grace can lead one from this material world through the level of Intellect and back to the One. This final union with the One is described by Porphry in the following words:

He [Plotinus] was one himself then, with no distinction in him either in relation to himself or anything else; for there was no movement in him, he had no motion, no desire for anything else when he made the ascent, no reason or thought; his own self was not there for him, if we should say even this.

Plotinus makes two important contributions to the doctrine of ascent. First, the development of the tripartite hypostases will be very influential in shaping the conception of ascent as a three step process. Second, Plotinus makes love a cosmological force which exists independent of humanity. This love, which is also called “the light of the Good,” descends from above and inspires its objects to return to it. It is this idea that underlies Dante’s description of his first transformation which occurs when light from the sun is channeled through

47. Smith, *Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 63.
48. Undoubtedly, Plotinus is much more mystical than Plato. Although he views the culmination of the ascent as the exercise of intellect on the level of intellect the process of ascent is a way of life illuminated by the grace which emanates from the Good. The purpose of philosophy is to teach one how to live in such a way. This is very different form the intellectual exercise that ascent seems to have been for Plato.
49. As noted above, this seems to be implied in Plato, but Plotinus emphasized it much more.
51. Ibid., 6.9.11, in Smith, *Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 72. Plotinus’s student, Porphry, records that Plotinus made the ascent four times.
Beatrice into Dante and causes him to ascend into Paradise. And Plotinus’s cosmologizing of love also enables Dante to describe his deification in terms of cosmological love: “as a wheel moves smoothly, free from jars / my will and my desire were turned by love / the love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

**DIONYSIUS AND CHRISTIAN NEOPLATONISM**

In 529 CE, nine hundred years after it was founded by Plato and after years of conflict with the Christians, the Academy at Athens was closed down by the Emperor Justinian. In 532, with a proximity suggesting more than just coincidence, the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (Dionysius) were first quoted. Long believed to have been the Dionysius mentioned in the New Testament, he is now dated to approximately the same period in which his writings first appeared. These writings expound aspects of Christian belief in a Neoplatonic framework. As Paul Rorem puts it, “consciously or not, the first champions of these writings preserved much of the banished Neoplatonism within a Christian system which then influenced centuries of theology and philosophy.”

Of course Dionysius was not the first one to mix Greek philosophy with Christian thought. Platonism had long been attractive to Christians for various reasons: “the doctrine of a maker of the universe; of a provident God; of the existence of an intelligible and divine world of which the sensible world is only an image; of the spirituality of the soul and its superiority over the body,” to mention only a few. Three centuries before Dionysius, Origen expressed many

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53. Hereafter I will use Dionysius.
54. Paul Rorem, “The Uplifting Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, in collaboration with Jean Ledercq (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985), 133. Scholars have indicated that Dionysius was of Syrian origin, and after the Academy was closed the philosophers fled eastward, therefore he may have been a Christian who became exposed to these ideas in Syria by pagans who were moving out of the Empire.
55. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), 93. Augustine was the most influential figure in the West. And while he incorporated Neo- platonism into a systematic Christian theology his influence would be two-edged. “Indeed, it may be that the apparently definitive nature of Augustine’s formulations inhibited, or at least retarded, further inquiry into deification in the Western Church, and helps to explain why it never became as
of the same ideas that Plotinus did and was later condemned for them. This condemnation was a reflection of the opposition to Neoplatonic thought that also manifested itself in the closing of the Academy. Ironically, it was at the same time that Dionysius’s writings, containing the same Neoplatonic influence and many of the same ideas, began to circulate. They escaped censure because Dionysius was a supposed convert of the Apostle Paul. That his writings show marked aspects of Neoplatonism should be apparent in the following citation:

Inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously toward us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in.⁵⁶

Seen in the light of the above discussion this quote should demonstrate the extent to which Dionysius depended on the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent and deification. It is not only the same pattern but its description is similar. The

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image of light proceeding from God and lifting one up to reunion with him should be very familiar by now as should be the fact that this union deifies. Even the noun “simplicity” used in conjunction with the Father is evidence of his reliance on the Neoplatonic dogma that the One is wholly itself without any admixture.\footnote{Simple being the opposite of compound in Aristotle's philosophy.}

It follows then that, for Dionysius, deification is the result of a process in which one divests oneself of material conceptions that impede one from communing with God on a completely simple level—in other words, on a level that is purely spiritual, surpassing even thought itself. The traditional text justifying the Christian concept is 2 Peter 1:4, which states that the believers are “partakers of the divine nature.” This is the Christian definition of deification. Dionysius’s whole doctrine focuses on the way one can overcome one’s human nature and participate in God’s nature.

After this brief description of Neoplatonic ascent, Dionysius introduces a concept that illustrates the extent to which he is willing to adapt the Neoplatonic ideas to the needs of a Christian community:

However, this divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the providence of the Father adapts to our nature as human beings.\footnote{Pseudo-Dionysius, \textit{The Celestial Hierarchy}, 1.121b–121c, trans. by Colm Luibheid, in Rorem, "Uplifting Spirituality," in \textit{Christian Spirituality}, 134.}

These sacred veils, in which are hidden the divine rays, are for Dionysius the symbols found in the scriptures, liturgy and sacraments. In his system, symbolism constitutes the first part of the heavenly ascent. Symbols lead one into the realm of the intellect: to understand them, it is necessary to transcend through interpretation the meaning associated with the material world represented by the crude symbol and enter the world of the intellect where abstract ideas exist.

It is significant that Dionysius states that it is the Father who created these symbols, adapting them to human nature. One remembers that, in the Sympo-
Travis Patten: Heavenly Ascent from Plato to Dante

sium, Plato describes the ascent as an initiation done under the instruction of a spiritual guide,⁵⁹ and for the pagan in general, ascent and deification are achieved by the mastery of certain techniques, which by their very nature limit their acquisition to the few. Instead of this esotericism, Dionysius shows how, through God’s grace,⁶⁰ the ascent is symbolized throughout the church (the sacred veils) and in this symbolism is evidence of God’s concern for his children.⁶¹

⁵⁹. The idea of a spiritual guide was banished with the church’s victory over the Gnostics. From then on it declared that salvation was to be found in the body of the church and not through hidden knowledge or techniques passed on from master to disciple.

⁶⁰. A brief note on grace is, perhaps, appropriate. The modern Catholic Church has, in the main, adopted the Protestant view of grace, but that this was not always the case is evidenced by the fact that one of Luther’s principal gripes was the selling of indulgences. This rested upon a semi-Pelagian doctrine in which a person could acquire more merit than was needed for salvation and could then confer that on whomever he or she wished. The Church could also mediate that merit and sell it in the form of indulgences. This is contrary to the modern view that God’s grace is not only sufficient for salvation but is also the only contributing factor. Originally, the early church tended to see the gospel as a “new law” in spite of Paul’s protests (although he was not as adamant as Luther declared—cf. Phillipians 2:12 (King James Version): “work out your salvation with fear and trembling”) and this would be the case until the church accepted Augustine’s doctrine of human worthlessness and absolute need for grace in order to be saved, which he developed in his fight against Pelagius. After Augustine the medieval Church “saw a widespread inclination to semi-Pelagianism. This did not deny the importance of grace but also stressed the significance of human cooperation with it.” The medieval structure of sacraments, which Dionysius influenced, was an example of that inclination. See The Encyclopedia of Christianity, 3rd ed., ed. John Bowden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. “Grace,” (by Alasdair Heron). The passage in Phillipians 2 should be quoted in full as it demonstrates the interconnectedness between grace and the need to act: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

⁶¹. McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 184. It should be noted that Dionysius was not the first to describe the relationship of ascent and sacrament; however, he developed it to a greater degree than anyone had before him. Origen and Evagrius are his two notable predecessors. The following quotation provides an example of one class of Dionysius’s “holy veils”—the sacraments—and illustrates the way in which the Neoplatonic ascent was clothed in sacramental language: “The most holy ministration, then, of the Mystic Rites has, as first Godlike power, the holy cleansing of the uninitiated; and as middle, the enlightening instruction of the purified; and as last, and summary of the former, the perfecting of those instructed.” Pseudo-Dionysius, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, 5.1.3, in The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite, vol. 2, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker, 1899), 125, http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/dio/dio63.htm.

Here it is easy to recognize the Neoplatonic elements of this process of ascent, i.e., purification, illumination, and contemplation. These abstract concepts are shown symbolically through physical ministrations, and, as symbols, help the Christian in his return to God. Here Dionysius explains the meaning of the rites by saying: “Let, then, the threefold power of the holy service of the Mystic Rites be extolled, since the Birth in God is exhibited in the Oracles as a purification and enlightening illumination, and the Rite of the Synaxis and the Muron, as a perfecting knowledge and science of the works of God, through which the unifying elevation to the Godhead and most blessed communion is reverently perfected.” Pseudo-Dionysius, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, 5.1.3, in The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite, vol. 2, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker, 1899), 126, http://www.
After the first step, which is symbolism, follows an important dialectic that contrasts the ability to describe God with his ultimate transcendence of all categories. This dialectic is summarized in the following:

[God] possesses all the positive attributes of the universe (being the Universal Cause) yet, in a more strict sense, it does not possess them, since it transcends them all; wherefore there is no contradiction between the affirmations and the negations, inasmuch as it infinitely precedes all conceptions of deprivation, being beyond all positive and negative distinctions.\(^{62}\)

This statement also illustrates the nature of the positive and negative statements: the positive statements concern God’s nature as cause of all things in creation (and therefore present in them) and the negative statements concern his transcendence of all existence. Dionysius illustrates how the positive or cathaphatic statements should be understood in his analysis of the “divine names” in a work of the same title. In this treatise, he explains what the various names and attributes of God (good, angry, merciful, etc.) found in the scriptures actually mean. In the third step, the initiate passes beyond what can be said of God, sheds these material conceptions, and comes to understand the way in which God transcends all categories. This is described in Dionysius’s exhortation:

Let this be my prayer; but do, dear Timothy, in the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and nonbeing, that you may arise by unknowing towards the union, as far as is attainable, with it that transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and of all things you may be borne on high, through pure and entire

self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness.\footnote{Ibid., 203, http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html.}

Various aspects of Dionysius’s thought deserve comment. First, he shows a marked departure from the earlier philosophers in his emphasis on the non-intellectual nature of the ascent. Whereas Plotinus conceives of union as the perfect exercise of intellect on the level of intellect, for Dionysius it requires the active excision of intellectual processes. In the \textit{Enneads}, Plotinus asserts that the mystic must be a spiritual sculptor who carves away all material things from oneself, leaving only the divine soul that is then able to unite with God. Dionysius uses the same metaphor in his \textit{Mystical Theology} but changes it to say that one must actively carve away all of one’s materialistic conceptions of God leaving only a transcendent nothing.\footnote{Ibid. In addition to his emphasis on apophaticism, another example of Dionysius’s departure from the Neoplatonic tradition is his use of the phrase “Radiance of the Divine Darkness” in referring to God, which is not only an example of his preference for apparent paradoxes, but also indicates that he consciously reacted against the Neoplatonists who conceived of God as light.}

Negative theology had been present in Christian thought for centuries (going back at least to Origen) but the positive aspect had typically been emphasized.\footnote{McGinn, \textit{Foundations of Mysticism}, 118.} Dionysius is unique because he emphasized the apophatic nature of God to such a degree that it became a central aspect of the mystical experience. In fact, Dionysius is so consistent in his apophaticism that he even negates negation: “the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of Its absolute nature is outside of every negation—free from every limitation and beyond them all.”\footnote{The extent of his apophaticism is further illustrated in the following quote: “Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that it is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion reason or understanding; nor can it be expressed or conceived, since it is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality; nor similarity nor dissimilarity; neither is it standing, nor moving, nor at rest; neither has it power nor is power, nor is light; neither does it live nor is it life; neither is it essence, nor eternity nor time; nor is it subject to intelligible contact; nor is it science nor truth, nor kingship nor wisdom; neither one nor oneness, nor godhead nor goodness; nor is it spirit according to our understanding, nor filiation, nor paternity; nor anything else known to us or to any other beings of the things that are or the things that are not; neither does anything that is know it as it is; nor does it know existing things according to existing knowledge; neither can the reason attain to it, nor name it, nor know it; neither is it darkness nor light, nor the false nor the}
Many mystics prior to Dionysius had emphasized the ineffability of the mystical experience (St. Paul and Plotinus are obvious examples), but Dionysius takes it even further and states that union with God goes beyond thought itself:

The higher we soar in contemplation the more limited become our expressions of that which is purely intelligible; even as now, when plunging into the Darkness that is above the intellect, we pass not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence of thoughts and of words.\(^\text{67}\)

It may seem from the above that Dionysius departs from the tradition that places love or desire as the foundation of ascent; however, for Dionysius love is still its motive power. The difference is that for him, love is purely cosmological. In his system God is love, and because of love he goes out of himself in ecstasy and creates the universe. The ascent is possible because by its very nature the universe and all living things desire to return to God.\(^\text{68}\) “He is yearning (\(\text{\textit{eros}}\)) on the move, simple, self-moved, self-acting, preexistent in the Good, flowing out from the Good unto all that is and returning once again to the Good.”\(^\text{69}\)

Dionysius is a key turning point in the development of the doctrine of ascent. Writing under the pseudonym of a disciple of St. Paul his authority was unassailable. Even though the Neoplatonic doctrines were but thinly covered in a veneer of Christian language, they would be accepted into the mainstream and become fundamental to Eastern Orthodoxy and eventually influence the

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68. Plato, although holding that love was not an attribute of the gods, opened the way for this doctrine when he taught that eros is the desire to create beauty. McGinn, \textit{Foundations of Mysticism}, 166.

West as well. His emphasis on apophaticism, and the corresponding ineffability of mystical experience would influence later writers in our chain. In fact, Dante will, in both the first and the last cantos of *Paradiso*, refer to the ineffability of his own experiences.

**MAXIMUS CONFESSOR**

In 451 CE, at Chalcedon (Asia Minor, now Turkey), a council of nearly 600 bishops was convened to draft a statement of faith concerning the nature of Christ. This statement declared that Christ had two natures, one human and one divine, which are “united, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.”70 This definition would eventually become widely accepted; however, during the following two centuries it was vigorously opposed by the Monophysites, who declared that Christ had only one nature.

Maximus Confessor was born in Byzantium, ca. 580 CE, in the midst of this theological warfare which was threatening to tear Christendom apart. Although born into the Byzantine aristocracy, he chose the monastic life and became a fierce defender of the definition of Chalcedon, directing many dogmatic treatises against the Monophysites. He was also an important interpreter of Dionysius. These two interests are joined in his description of the three-part ascent to union with God.

The first step in Maximus’s process of ascent is rooted in the *praxis* or ascetic discipline of monastic life, which, for Maximus, has the goal of eradicating the passions. This corresponds to the stage of purification already discussed. He follows the Neoplatonic pattern in deriving the evils of human nature from the perversion of love, and further develops the idea by emphasizing that one’s will is at the very root of the problem. As Elena Vishnevskaya explains, “human will needs to be reoriented towards divine will, for ‘only God is by nature, and only the one who imitates God is good by His will.’”71 This reorientation eradicates

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71. Elena Vishnevskaya, “Divinization and Spiritual Progress in Maximus the Confessor,” in
the passions that Maximus defines “as a movement of the soul contrary to nature, either toward irrational love or senseless hate.” In order to achieve this passionless state, Maximus advocates apathy (απαθεία), “a peaceful state of the soul, in which it becomes resistant to vice.” In this state, one is prepared to exercise the virtues, especially love, which binds one to God and to one’s fellow beings. This begins the process of uniting one’s will with God’s through love; upon completion of this process one is deified.

Maximus’s second step is contemplation of the natural world, which reveals the way in which nature is patterned after heavenly archetypes, and sustained by the divine energies that constantly flow down from God. Vishnevskaya points out, “Maximus’ idea of natural contemplation ‘as an experience of a merely symbolic reflection of the divine realities’ reinforces his stress on apophaticism and betrays an influence of Pseudo-Dionysius.” This contemplation gives one “a growing nourishment of the intellectual through the sensible and transformation of the sensible into the world of the mind.” Having achieved knowledge of the divine forms, one is prepared for the vision of the essence of God. Maximus describes this process:

The human mind is deemed worthy of the grace of theology, when on the wings of love it has passed beyond all the preceding realities, and being in God it will consider the essence of himself through the Spirit, insofar as it is possible for the human mind.

Maximus declares that, in this final state, having seen God’s essence, the saved are “now divinized by love and made like Him by participation in an

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72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid., 140
75. Ibid., 141
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., 142
78. Ibid.
indivisible identity to the extent that this is possible.”79 Elsewhere, he writes, “for what is more desirable to God’s precious one than to be divinized, that is for God to be united to those who have become God and by His goodness to make everything His own?”80

A fundamental aspect of Maximus’s doctrine is that deification consists of a union of human and divine in which both substances join without losing their separate nature. The emphasis that he places on this doctrine is the direct result of the theological conflicts of his time. Being a firm defender of orthodoxy, Maximus’s theory of deification was based on the Christology stated in the definition of Chalcedon, which declared that Christ was of two natures. Maximus restates this:

And what could be more amazing than the fact that, being God by nature, and seeing fit to become man by nature, He did not defy the limits of either one of the natures in relation to the other, but instead remained wholly God while becoming wholly human? . . . He remained wholly one amid both, since he preserved both natures and was truly existent in both natures at once.81

Maximus was sufficiently perspicacious to realize that if a divine nature and a human nature were unified in the person of Christ, then Christ provided the perfect archetype for human divinization. It had long been declared that Christ put on human nature in order to deify human beings; in the traditional formulation, “God became man so that man could become God,”82 but Maximus developed the idea further, describing the way in which an individual’s human nature could be joined to God’s nature, with both preserving their separate substances. He used the example of molten iron in a fire that has taken on the characteristics of the fire without changing its essence83 and summarizes the process:

79. Ibid., 142.
80. Ibid., 144.
82. Athanasius, De Incarnatione, 54.3.
[God] abolishes and dims all their particular relations considered according to each one's nature, but not by dissolving or destroying them or putting an end to their existence. Rather, [he] does so by transcending them and revealing them as the whole reveals its parts.84

For Maximus, this union is achieved through the melding of love and will between God and the individual. As we saw above, love and will cannot be separated because will is at the root of love and through one's will love is purified and returned to its divine state. Vishnevskaya summarizes the importance of the will: "The soul’s going out [ἐκστάσηα or ecstasy; Latin excessus] toward the object of its ultimate desire is humanly willed, and the believer’s resolve to abandon the self for the sake of the supra-logical union with God is indispensable for the authentic divine-human reciprocity."85

Maximus made various important developments in the traditional conception of ascent, among them his restating of the process of ascent and deification in less blatantly Neoplatonic and more traditional Christian language. His emphasis on the dual nature of Christ and the way in which that provides a framework for humanity’s union with God is also a vital contribution. This provides the foundation for the doctrine of deification through the accord of wills, which is the way in which Dante conceives of deification. This will be discussed below. It is not surprising that Maximus’s doctrine of deification would become very influential in the East; what is more remarkable is its subsequent adoption by the West.

THE INTRODUCTION OF EASTERN MYSTICAL THEOLOGY INTO THE WEST

In the latter half of the eighth century and beginning of the ninth, Charlemagne established a tradition of learning in the court of the Holy Roman Empire, which continued to a certain extent with his son, Louis the Pious and grandson, Charles the Bald. Part of this Carolingian Renaissance was due to the monastic learning brought from the British Isles.

85. Ibid., 135.
John Scotus Eriugena was a part of this Carolingian renaissance. At the Carolingian court he translated the Dionysian corpus, which led him to the writings of Maximus, some of which he also translated. This was a pivotal moment because for the first time in centuries the rich tradition of Eastern mystical theology became available to the West. However, while other aspects of Dionysian thought become immediately popular, such as his angelology—Dante, in fact, calls Dionysius the teacher of the angelic ranks—we do not see an increase of interest in ascent and deification theology until these writings reach Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) decided at an early age to become a monk at the very strict monastery in Citeaux, France. He was soon assigned to open a new monastery at Clairvaux to accommodate the droves of people who were flocking to Citeaux, many of whom had recognized his leadership and devotion and wished to be under his direction. Bernard’s objective was to provide a place where monks could strictly adhere to the Rule of Benedict, a collection of principles and practices which monks were to follow, largely inspired by the holy lives of the Egyptian Desert Fathers, who were known, not only for their remarkable asceticism, but also for the ecstatic mysticism that was associated with it.

The influence of Bernard on the idea of celestial ascent derives from the power with which he framed these ideas in his sermons and letters. He was the first important theologian since John Scotus to draw on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius86 and Maximus Confessor.87 As Gilson wrote, “in his mind the Latin theology of Augustine found itself confronted, for the first time since Erigena, with the Greek theology of . . . Denis. Only instead of being carried away

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86. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. Alfred Howard Campbell Downes (London: Sheed and Ward, 1940), 18. Gilson points out that it is not absolutely certain that Bernard read Dionysius because he does not use his language or distinctive concepts. However, William of St. Thierry was a close friend of Bernard’s and he did use language and imagery borrowed from Dionysius so it likely that Bernard was familiar with him to some degree. Bernard was very traditional and may have preferred not to use the Neoplatonic vocabulary of Dionysius.

by his discovery, Bernard achieved a synthesis of the two traditions. Maximus in particular provided him with analogies, vocabulary, and to a great degree the conceptual foundations for his doctrine of deification. From him Bernard borrowed the word *excessus* or ecstasy, which is central to his theology. He employs it to describe how the soul changes from its current state of being into one that is surrounded by the love and light of God and is also drawn towards him. This process is treated in chapter 10 of *De Diligendo Deo*, which is the most important of Bernard’s writings on this subject.

In chapter 10, Bernard explains the fourth stage of love, in which one loves oneself only in God. When one reaches that point, he or she is open to the changing power of God’s love:

> When shall my soul, rapt with divine love and altogether self-forgetting, yea, become like a broken vessel, yearn wholly for God, and, joined unto the Lord, be one spirit with Him? . . . I would count him blessed and holy to whom such rapture has been vouchsafed in this mortal life, for even an instant to lose thyself, as if thou wert emptied and lost and swallowed up in God, is no human love; it is celestial.

Here he describes the soul as “rapt . . . joined unto the Lord,” and “swallowed up in God.” This is the effect of ecstasy and is the precursor to deification. It is important to note that Bernard indicated this is a process that happens in this life, even if it is only for an instant. Elsewhere he describes this type of experience with the epigram “*Rara hora, parva mora*” meaning it “the moments are rare and quickly pass.” Bernard goes on to clarify exactly how this process comes about and he emphasizes that it comes about through the accord of human and Godly wills:

> [God’s] creatures ought to conform themselves, as much as they can, to His will. In Him should all our affections center, so that

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88. Ibid. Botterill states, “The decisive factor for the development of deification doctrine in general and for Bernard’s understanding of it in particular, was the marriage of the Greek and Latin traditions brought about by John Scotus Eriigena’s translations of pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus Confessor.” Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 207.

in all things we should seek only to do His will, not to please ourselves. And real happiness will come, not in gratifying our desires or in gaining transient pleasures, but in accomplishing God’s will for us: even as we pray every day: ‘Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10).  

In this short paragraph Bernard uses the word “will” three times, following the scriptural practice of repetition in order to emphasize to the reader the importance of subjecting one’s will to God. He then describes the effects of such a submission. “O chaste and holy love! O sweet and gracious affection! O pure and cleansed purpose, thoroughly washed and purged from any admixture of selfishness, and sweetened by contact with the divine will!”  

Here Bernard mentions two key aspects: The first is lack of selfishness and the second is contact with the divine will. The prerequisite of selflessness, which is here equated with purity, is characteristic of Bernard’s thought, and it is the purging of selfishness that he terms excessus, and this, as we saw above, is the preparation for deification.

To enjoy this feeling is to be deified [deificari est]. As a drop of water poured into wine loses itself, and takes the color and savor of wine; or as a bar of iron, heated red-hot, becomes like fire itself, forgetting its own nature; or as the air, radiant with sun-beams, seems not so much to be illuminated as to be light itself; so in the saints all human affections melt away by some unspeakable transmutation into the will of God.  

90. Ibid.  
91. Ibid.  
92. Ibid. The examples of the iron and the air are taken almost verbatim from Maximus’s writings (see Botterill, Dante and the Mystical Tradition, 210), but the analogy of mixing the wine and the water is Bernard’s addition. It is curious, because, as mentioned in an earlier note, wine was anciently associated with ecstasy and deification, and it was mixed in a krater. This would become, in Latin, cratere (fem.), then gradale, which is the origin of the word grail (the chalice in which wine and water were mixed in during the Middle Ages). Kahane and Kahane, The Krater and the Grail: Hermetic Sources of the Parzival (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Bernard was the patron of the Knights Templar, and at the Synod of Troyes (1128) convinced the Pope to grant them a charter. He then wrote the eulogy “In Praise of the New Knighthood.” The Knights Templar were, from very early on, the brotherhood associated with the search for the Holy Grail. (Cf. templeis, in Wolfram’s Parzival.) Bernard’s allusion to mixing wine and water in conjunction with this background is most likely pure coincidence, and a tenuous coincidence at that, but it is interesting. The mixing of wine and water, and its corresponding association with deification persists in the Mass. The priest places a few drops of water in the wine and prays: Per huius aquae et vini mysterium eius efficiamur divinitatis
Bernard clearly says that this union is deification, which takes place by contacting the divine will. It is important to note that for Bernard the individual does not change his physical nature; it is only the “human affections” which are changed, not the substance. This is emphasized by the examples he gives: the iron, for instance, is indistinguishable from the fire but it is still iron. He goes on to emphasize that humans cannot achieve this through their own efforts, because, even though one may hope for it, “it is in God’s power to give it to whom He wills.” In addition, deification is only temporary in life due to life’s demands and distractions; however, if it were possible to maintain one’s will in harmony with God’s, then one could remain in this state permanently. As we shall see, that is exactly how Dante conceives of the state of the beings in heaven.

**DANTE AND THE ASCENT OF LOVE**

Dante was born into Florentine aristocracy during a tempestuous time. The political parties in Florence were violently struggling for power and, when the opposing party came to power, Dante was exiled. It was during this exile that he composed his *Commedia.* We do not know exactly how Dante gained familiarity with the vast array of philosophers and theologians whose ideas, as well as their personas, appear in the *Commedia.* Dante tells us that he spent a long period studying philosophy, and in addition to his studies he must have imbibed much of it through the intellectual culture of his time.93 This culture of philosophical and theological discourse coexisted alongside the tradition of courtly love, which also influenced Dante. However, I will attempt to show that it is the Neoplatonic tradition of ascent and deification that provided the fundamental structure for the *Commedia.*

PURIFICATION

The preparation for Dante’s heavenly ascent begins in Purgatory. After surviving his descent into Hell, Dante finds himself at the gate of Purgatory. An angel appears and with his sword engravés the letter “p” (for peccatum, Latin for “sin”) on his forehead seven times and admonishes him to wash the wound from the inside. Purgatory itself consists of seven terraces, each of which is associated with a certain sin and, upon passing through each level, a “p” is removed from his forehead symbolizing his progressive purification. The seven sins are: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust. On entering the lowest terrace Dante sees a wall of flame through which every soul must pass regardless of the particular sin for which it is in Purgatory. The seventh sin is lust, and here Dante introduces the theme that unites all the seven sins. “Poi fummo dentro al soglio della porta / che ’l malo amor dell’anime disusa, / perche fa parer dritta la via torta, / sonando la senti’ esser richiusa.” It is misused love, Dante declares, which leads the soul to commit sin. The purification of the soul will, therefore, in striking similarity to the Neoplatonic pattern, consist in the redirection and reeducation of love.

94. Dante’s descent into Hell also parallels the Neoplatonic scheme in which the ascent to God is necessitated by the prior descent of the soul into this world. However to include that aspect of the pattern in this paper would swell it even further, straining even the most forgiving reader’s patience.

95. Dante, Purgatorio, 10.1–4. [“Once we had crossed the threshold of the gate / not used by souls whose twisted love / tries to make the crooked way seem straight, / I knew that it had shut by its resounding.”—Ed.]

96. For example, Pride is the inordinate love of honor, Envy is the desire for what others possess, and Wrath is a misdirected love of justice.
Upon passing through the wall of flame and being purified of all sin, Virgil, who has been his guide up to this point, leaves him with the following words: “Tratto t’ho qui con ingegno e con arte; / lo tuo piacere omai prendi per duce. . . . / libero, dritto e sano e tu arbitrio, / e fallo fora non fare a suo senno: / per chi’io te sovra te corono e mitrio.”

Dante can now follow where his desire leads because it has been purified and redirected. From this point on, desire will lead him closer and closer to God. In conjunction with this, Dante’s will is now “free, straight, and whole,” and the scene ends with Virgil investing him with a crown and scepter.

Dante now finds himself in the Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise in which sin does not exist and desiring to take in all its beauty, he begins to explore. After a while he encounters a procession in which he sees Beatrice, at which point, she becomes his guide. Her first action is to rebuke him:

When I had risen to spirit from my flesh,
As beauty and virtue in me became more rich,
To him I was less dear and less than pleasing . . .
Useless the inspiration I sought and won for him,
As both with dreams and other means,
I called him back, so little did he heed them.

97. Dante, Purgatorio, 27.130–41. [“I have brought you here with intellect and skill. / From now on take your pleasure as your guide. . . . / Your will is free, upright, and sound. / Not to act as it chooses is unworthy: / over yourself I crown and miter you.” —Ed.]

98. It this coronation makes Dante a king and, at least to me, invokes an image of God as king of kings, and, inasmuch as it does so, it points toward the final scene of the Commedia in which Dante’s love and will are joined to God, in a final if not explicit coronation.

99. The canto begins “Vago gia di cercar dentro e dintorno la divina foresta.” Sapegno draws attention to the word “vago.” He writes: “Vago: desideroso. Il vocabolo esprime, come gia altrove (Inf. 8.52; 29.3; . . .ecc.) un desiderio intense, e al tempo stesso indeterminate, non circoscritto in un oggetto preciso e preveduto; sottolinea insomma quello stato di estrema disponibilita e di sospesa aspettazione, che aderisce alla condizione di liberta ricuperata del Pellegrino, in un’aura stupefatta ed intent, gravid di rivelazione e di prodigy.” Dante Alighieri, Purgatorio, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1956), 305. In light of this definition it is significant that from this point on Dante does not describe himself as “vago.” Apparently after encountering Beatrice, his desire has a precise object.

Beatrice reprimands Dante for his hitherto purely physical love for her, stating that in her spiritual state she was “less dear and less than pleasing” to him than she had been in life. She complains that the spiritual means by which she had tried to influence him were useless because “he [had sunken] so low.” Beatrice shows him her spiritual body (previously she had been veiled) which, now that his faculty of love has been purified, he recognizes as far surpassing the physical one: “she seemed to surpass her former self in beauty / more than she had on earth surpassed all others.” Upon seeing her spiritual body Dante expresses remorse and acknowledges his folly, and at this moment his affections start to change:

The nettle of remorse so stung me then
That whatever else had lured me most to loving
Had now become to me most hateful
Such knowledge of my fault was gnawing at my heart
That I was overcome, and what I then became
She knows who was the reason for my state.

This was the beginning of his purification, which was completed when Beatrice led him into the river and pushed his head under the water. Just before his head was submerged, Dante heard the hymn *Asperges Me*, which is sung to accompany the sprinkling of the altar and the congregation as they entered the church for mass. This hymn concerns purification, and that, in conjunction with its association of entering a holy space (Dante is about to enter Heaven), reinforces the significance of the event as the final rite of Dante’s purification. Lastly, the following lines confirm that this purification is not an end in itself, but a step in the process of ascent:

From those most holy waters

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101. Ibid., 30.136.
102. This is an interesting parallel to Plato’s doctrine that the “beauties of the body are as nothing to the beauties of the soul.” Plato, *Symposium*, 210a.
103. Ibid., 85–90. The first three lines are reminiscent of Plato’s statement that the initiate “will relax his intense passion for just one body, despising this passion and regarding it as petty.” Plato, *Symposium*, 210b.
I came away remade, as are new plants
Renewed with new-sprung leaves,

*Pure and prepared to rise up to the stars.* 104

**ILLUMINATION**

Now we come to the *Paradiso* proper, which Dante introduces by stating that he has been in the Heaven that receives the greatest portion of God’s light, and, while it is difficult to remember and tell all that he saw, he will do all he can to communicate his experience. At this point Dante is still on Mount Purgatory. He recounts that he turned and found Beatrice staring into the sun. Dante himself also began to gaze at the sun, but finding himself unable to stand the sight for very long, 105 looked at her instead, describing her as “a second sun.” 106

Upon doing so a change came upon him:

As I gazed on her, I was changed within,
as Glaucus was on tasting of the grass
that made him consort of the gods in the sea.

To soar beyond the human cannot be described in words.

Let the example be enough to one for whom

grace holds this experience in store. 107

The allusion is to Glaucus the mythological fisherman, whose story is told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. 108 Because this mention of him in the *Paradiso* is, in

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105. Dante does clarify, however, that in the brief time that he gazed at the sun he was able to see it sparkling as if it were molten iron in a fire. To my knowledge it has not been pointed out, to my knowledge, that this may be a reference to a statement of Bernard of Clairvaux cited on page 33 above, cf., note 91. If this is the case then it may also be a subtle foreshadowing of Bernard’s involvement in, and significance for, the final canto of *Paradiso*.


108. Glaucus fell in love with a nymph named Scylla to whom he relates his story. He tells her that he is a god as powerful as Proteus or Triton but before becoming a god he had been a mortal
my opinion, the source of a fundamental misreading of the Paradiso as a whole, I will analyze the Glaucus allusion in some detail.

One day while fishing Glaucus ate magical grass, which changed his nature and caused him to leap into the ocean. There he was received by the sea gods who, accompanied by hymns, bathed him with the water of a hundred rivers and changed him into a god. Most commentators have concluded that by referring to Glaucus, Dante is indicating that he himself has been deified. This error began with the Trecento commentaries and it is still an interpretation commonly followed today.

Much of the confusion about the interpretation of Dante’s experience as described in these verses stems from the word trasumanar, a neologism that translates into “going beyond the human.” It would be natural to suppose that going beyond the human necessarily signifies deification, were it not for the fact that the second step in the Neoplatonic tradition is midway between the normal human state and a deified state. In his important study, Dante and the Mystical Tradition, Steven Botterill argues that the identification of trasumanar with deification is mistaken, and that the term most closely corresponding to trasumanar is excessus. He bases this on the following definition by Etienne Gilson:

A generic term signifying, in a general way, any exceeding of the limits of a state in order to attain to another. To free oneself of...
one’s passions is already an *excessus*. However the word takes on a mystical sense only when it indicates the passage from a normal state, even were this attained by the aid of grace, to a state that is more than human.\footnote{111. Gilson, *Mystical Theology*, 25 (emphasis added). Cf. Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 239–241.}

The last phrase, “a state that is more than human,” is clearly the meaning of trasumanar, and as Gilson points out *excessus* is not deification, instead it is the state through which one must pass in order to experience this deification. Thus the transformation that Dante underwent at the beginning of *Paradiso* is a preparation for what is to come. Interpreting it in the light of the Neoplatonic pattern, nearly the whole of *Paradiso* comprises Dante’s experience on the level of illumination and is therefore a precursor to his union with God and deification.

It is important to note that what has been lacking in the previous analyses of this allusion is a close reading of both Dante and Ovid. The Trecento commentaries did not sufficiently distinguish between the various aspects of Glauclus’s transformation. Benvenuto da Imola is perhaps the most perspicacious\footnote{112. See Steven Botterill, chapter 6, “From *deificari* to *trasumanar*? Dante’s Paradiso and Bernard’s *De dilegendo Deo,*” in *Dante and the Mystical Tradition* (see note 5), 223, 233. In this chapter he has amassed a wealth of information.} when he explains that when Glauclus first left the land he was only a partial-god (*primo semideus*); but when the sweet and perfect ‘waters of paradise’ (his interpolation) washed over him he was transformed into a ‘sea god’ (*deus in magno mari*).\footnote{113. See Steven Botterill, “‘Quae non Licet Homini Loqui’: The Ineffability of Mystical Experience in *Paradiso* I and the ‘Epistle to Can Grande,’” *The Modern Language Review* 83, no. 2 (1988): 333. For further treatment, see also ibid., 332–341.} Most of the Trecento commentators pay less attention to detail and conflate the two parts. More typical than Benvenuto is the influential Francesco da Buti. He summarizes the myth thus: “Glaucus the fisherman became a god by eating of the herb.”\footnote{114. Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 223.} This interpretation has been followed by the vast majority of commentators since then. As mentioned above, Botterill is perhaps the first to persuasively argue that this cannot be correct.
I have followed Botterill thus far, but at this point he argues that the Glaucus allusion is included in order to illustrate the ineffability of mystical experience.

The central point about ‘trasumanar’ is its ineffability; and the relevance of the Glaucus story here is that it describes a transformation that is ultimately ineffable. Only in this respect are the situations of Dante personaggio and Glaucus truly identical . . . . It is, then, not because Glaucus recounts an identical, or even an analogous, experience to his character’s that Dante poeta cites him here, but precisely because he does not; after his transformation Glaucus’s powers of memory and expression fail him, just as do Dante’s when he attempts to describe ‘trasumanar.’

I disagree. Dante specifically refers to the part of the Glaucus myth that is concerned with Glaucus’s preliminary transformation: Glaucus eats the grass, which effects some internal change in him, impelling him to dive into the ocean and enabling him to survive in that environment and mingle with the sea gods. Since Dante refers to the first part of the myth, and not the following section in which Glaucus is deified, in order to illustrate his own experience of transformation, I am justified in supposing that the reason for the mention of Glaucus is that his experience at this point is analogous to Dante’s own. In gazing upon Beatrice, Dante is changed and immediately carried into another realm—in this case, Paradise—in which he is also surrounded by heavenly beings. This matches Glaucus’s itinerary closely, and, Dante will, like Glaucus, experience a form of deification.

Instead of declaring that his experience was ineffable and that the reader should look at the Glaucus myth for another example of an ineffable experience—as Botterill would have it—Dante is actually saying, “I cannot describe the experience of trasumanar, instead I refer the reader to the Glaucus myth which describes a similar experience of going beyond the human.” This seems

115. Ibid., 238.
116. That Glaucus is eventually deified prefigures Dante’s own deification in the last canto of Paradiso.
the plain sense of “trasumanar significar per verba / non si poria; però l’esempio basti / a cui esperiënza grazia serba.”

Additionally, with an understanding of the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent, it is clear that in this canto Dante is describing an excessus, or ecstatic experience, an ascent, or “illumination.” Indeed illumination is a central aspect of the rest of Paradiso: throughout this cantica, Dante is continually involved in a process of learning or increasing in the knowledge of the divine. His entire journey consists of encounters with heavenly beings, including Beatrice, whom he questions, gaining knowledge about the various realms and hierarchies of heaven. More striking is the correspondence between the fact that Dante’s ascent to heaven begins when light from the sun flows into him through the medium of Beatrice, and the Neoplationic tradition in which it is the light that flows down from the highest realm that “stirs the soul” leading it upwards.117

**UNION**

Perhaps the most surprising event in the Paradiso is when, near the end of his journey, Dante turns to speak to Beatrice and instead finds an old man. This old man, whom we find out later is St. Bernard, declares that Beatrice has sent him to terminar lo [s]uo disio.118 This emphasis on desire, which runs through Paradiso, should remind us of the way in which love and desire have formed the foundation for ascent and union with God in the writers whom we have already discussed.

It will be remembered that Plato’s ascent of the mind is through the broadening and refining of love until one receives the final vision of beauty. In Plotinus’s scheme, love originates with the “One,” overflowing through the various levels

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until it touches one’s soul, motivating it to return to its origin. He states, “every soul desires” to return to the Good, and when the soul receives the emanations from it, “it becomes Love . . . its very nature bears it upwards, lifted by the giver of that love.” Love is also central for Dionysius, being the reason for which God goes out of himself to cause the creation, and it is for that same love that all things want to return to him. Maximus states that the “wings of love” carry the soul to God who then “divinizes the soul with love.” For Bernard the “soul, rapt with divine love . . . [is] joined unto the Lord, [and] one spirit with Him.” Having seen how this love or desire leads one to union with God, we can recognize that Dante is mentioning desire in order to foreshadow his union and deification. Indeed, the very last verse of the Paradiso describes how God’s love worked upon Dante’s desire: “But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving/ With an even motion, were turning with/ The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

That Dante mentions specifically his will and love, indicates that he conceives this moment of union as consisting not of a union of substance, but rather of a union of the affections. Maximus, as we have seen, described deification as the union of will and love between God and humans instead of a union of sub-

119. Dante, Paradiso, 33.143–145. There is a certain apophaticism in Dante’s experience which is made more apparent by the preceding lines in which he states that “la mia mente fu percossa”; in other words, he passes beyond the intelligible before uniting with God.
stance, and Bernard elaborated more fully on these ideas. He described deification as the result of “our human affections [melting] away by some unspeakable transmutation into the will of God,” which is achieved through “celestial love.” It is this elaboration of the doctrine by Bernard that seems to be that which Dante describes in the Paradiso.

The Bernardine conception of deification in terms of love and will is described earlier in the Paradiso when Dante learns from Piccarda Donati that in heaven:

Our love . . . is like the Love that would have
All its court be similar to Itself . . . .
To live in love is–here–necessity,
If you think on love’s nature carefully.
The essence of this blessed life consists
In keeping to the boundaries of God’s will,
Through which our wills become one single will.120

Again it is through love that the wills of God and humans are joined, implying, in this case, that through the accord of wills, the souls in heaven maintain a continued state of deification.

The interpretation of Dante’s experience as a Bernardine deification is of course strengthened by the fact that it is Bernard, in particular, who is guiding Dante through this experience. Dante calls Bernard “quel contemplante” and describes him as “him who, still within the confines of this world, in contemplation tasted of that peace [which is the state of union with God].”121 Since Bernard was well known for having both experienced the divine union in this life and describing the way in which it can be attained, he was eminently fitted for assisting Dante.

120. Ibid., 3.43–45, 76–81. The Bernardine nature of this statement seems to have been first pointed out by Rosetta Migliorini Fissi in her book Dante. Rosetta Migliorini Fissi, Dante (Firenze [Florence]: La Nuova Italia, 1979), 85.
121. Dante, Paradiso, 31.110–11.
Taken as a whole it seems indisputable that the itinerary of the *Commedia* is inspired by, and closely follows, the pattern of ascent and deification expounded in the Neoplatonic doctrines preserved and developed by Christian theologians. From the broad pattern of purification, illumination, and union with God, to more particular details such as the reeducation of desire and the accord of wills, Dante throughout shows his familiarity with, and dependence on, the Neoplatonic ascent. In addition, it seems clear that it is not until the final scene of the *Commedia* that Dante is deified and that this deification is couched in terms taken from Bernard.

Rosetta Migliorini Fissi, in her book *Dante*, first pointed out the pervasive-ness of Bernardine deification in the *Paradiso*. She recognized it in the speech by Piccarda Donati quoted above, in the final scene of the *Paradiso* and in several other places not discussed in this paper. However, she also saw it, somewhat contradictorily, in the first canto when Dante gazes upon Beatrice. This was the starting point for Botterill’s rebuttal of the equation of trasumanar and deificatio. He took issue with her interpretation of the *Paradiso* in general, but conceded that:

> [H]er suggestion of a direct influence on the Piccarda episode—and thus, by extension, on the definition of the situation of the blessed as a group, since that, in theological terms, is what Piccarda undertakes—is potentially more stimulating. For if the state of the blessed is indeed identifiable as *deificatio* in the Bernardine sense, and if it may thus be surmised (though not, I think, proved) that contact with the historical Bernard’s work played a part in determining the conceptual boundaries of Dante’s thinking about that state, then we may have, perhaps, another clue to Bernard’s problematic presence in the *Commedia*, and to the significance of his role as a character within it.\(^\text{122}\)

Botterill goes on to restate the distinction between trasumanar and deificatio and admits that the theological foundations for “the deifying vision that ends the journey of [Dante are] . . . laid in the historical Bernard’s own writings.”\(^\text{123}\)

\(^{122}\) Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 240.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 241.
This may seem definitive, but we still find in the latest comprehensive commentary on the *Commedia*, that of Robert Hollander, the equation of trasumanar and deification. It is for this reason that I believed that an in depth analysis of Dante’s experience and the Neoplatonic tradition on which it is based was called for. In the course of this study I have developed my own interpretation of the Glaucus allusion, finding in Glaucus’s experience a close structural parallel to that of Dante. I believe that when it is recognized that by gazing upon Beatrice and being filled with light Dante undergoes a transformation, the purpose of which is to enable him to ascend through Paradise in preparation for his deification, itself taking place in the same way that is described by Bernard, the nature of his experience in the *Paradiso* becomes clear. Additionally, when we find that closely preceding his transformation he is thoroughly purified and his desire is redirected from earthly to heavenly things, we can see that he described a three-part journey which corresponds exactly to the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent.

The main purpose of this paper, therefore, has been to show that Dante’s experience parallels the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent not only in some particulars, but also in the overarching structure of Dante’s experience as a whole, and that this pattern can be traced as far back as Plato’s *Symposium*. Also I have attempted to illustrate the way in which the core of this tradition was preserved even as it was modified and handed down by generations of mystics and theologians from Plotinus to Dante. One key in establishing the extent to which this tradition influenced Dante is the recognition that trasumanar is not deification as has traditionally been believed, but that it is instead a stage preceding deification.

**CONCLUSION**

The influence of the doctrine of celestial ascent developed by Plato has proven to be remarkably widespread and long lasting. Put into a three-part form of purification, illumination and union/deification corresponding to the three hypostases, World-Soul, Intellect, and the One developed by Plotinus, it was adopted by Greek speaking Christians and became a central part of Orthodox
Christianity. In the ninth century the Dionysian and Maximian corpora were translated from Greek to Latin and thus made available to the West. Bernard of Clairvaux, with his devotion to the rule of St. Benedict and inspiration from the examples of asceticism and ecstatic mysticism that it contained, was predisposed to mystical thought, which was given a framework and justification in the writings of Dionysius and Maximus. Bernard’s voice, which had dominated the twelfth century, would still be echoing in the fourteenth. This contemplante inspired Dante with his doctrine of the ascent of love and the accord of wills, and Dante immortalized them in one of the greatest poems in any language.

In terms of the history of ideas, this tradition is an example of the synthesis of Greek philosophy and Christian dogma, but, on another level, it is an example of the way in which ideas are dependent on, and find their expression in, a way of life. Indeed, as Bernard said, these ideas are based on and inseparable from experience. This is not to say that every expositor of these ideas underwent the same experience or even an experience at all, but these ideas are rooted in experience, and seem to flourish when certain conditions are present.
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A Balancing Act: A Discussion of Gender Roles Within Wiccan Ritual

Most of what we know about Wicca is gleaned from books that reside on the shelves of booksellers under the heading of “New Age.” But the tantalizing titles and helpful how-to indexes are a far cry from scholarly probing. Many are little more than how-to books—Wicca for Dummies explains how to buy or make a robe, how to buy the right candles, and step by step instructions for some common rituals—and many are simply autobiographical; however, there are a few books that give a detailed analysis of Wiccan ritual and belief. Wicca is quite new in the world of religion and the vast majority of academia ignores all but the basic questions of dogma, ritual, and goddess worship. Few scholars delve into the idea of masculinity within a religion that worships both a god and a goddess. This lack of curiosity and attention has led to a superficial analysis of Wicca as a woman’s religion, a religion where women are powerful and men are secondary.1 Because Wicca is a religion of balance, the marginalization of the god and masculinity seems a major oversight of the scholarly analysis of Wiccan

Many female Wiccans see the goddess as a long-lost champion for women’s rights not only in religion, but in life. As Janet and Stewart Farrar state in their book *The Witches’ Goddess*, “after centuries of banishment, the Goddess has returned.” The goddess became a symbol for strong and independent women and Wicca became a religion that was for women, by women. As Jon Bloch points out, “the Goddess movement is claimed to offer self-empowerment through an articulation of the female experience as divine, and to protest what are perceived to be patriarchal values that promote gender inequalities.” The idea of Wicca as a goddess religion has permeated popular culture and academia and the feminine aspect of deity has overshadowed most other concepts found in Wicca. Understandably, then, most scholars focus on Wicca as a “woman’s religion” and there is a lot of information about being and understanding female Wiccans. However, this analysis is inadequate. While Wicca is a goddess religion, Wicca values both masculinity and femininity; neither is dominant over the other, neither is valued above the other, nor is one more powerful than the other. Never is this more apparent than within Wiccan rituals. The liminal space of Wiccan ritual modifies practitioners’ gender identities by inscribing both masculine and feminine identities upon the individual to create balance.

Scholars have described Wiccan rituals and what they entail, some even including incantations or invocations from rituals the authors have personally witnessed. Lynne Hume discusses sacred space in Wiccan ritual in *Creating Sacred Space: Outer Expressions of Inner Worlds in Modern Wicca* and she bases her arguments on “participant observation, informal interviews and literature research.” Joanne Pearson has many articles, and one book, that deal with Wicca in various capacities; she discusses sex magic and inappropriate sexual-

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ity in *Inappropriate Sexuality? Sex Magic, S/M and Wicca,*\(^5\) Wiccan history in *The History and Development of Wiccan and Paganism,*\(^6\) and witches in popular culture in *Witches and Wicca,*\(^7\) Joanne Pearson also deals with ritual and goddess worship in *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex, and Magic;*\(^8\) she describes dogma, goddess worship, and she even gives a detailed and in depth account of ritual preparation and structure. However, she uses this analysis to understand Christian ritual, not Wiccan ritual.

Ritual creates a liminal space, a sort of in between time or transitional condition, and is a way of stepping outside of normal time and space to create and live the ideal, if only for a moment, that is nearly impossible to realize in everyday life.\(^9\) Every aspect of Wiccan ritual is aimed toward enacting and embodying balance and unity, even the altar and the circle itself. As the priest and priestess enact the divine coupling in order to instruct and guide the other participants, the solitary practitioner enacts this coupling of masculine and feminine internally to create a gender identity that is outside of the normal performance of gender, one that is divine. As Janet and Stewart Farrar explain, “we are not separate from the God and Goddess but part of them.”\(^{10}\) The modified gender identity that comes out of the liminal space is a representation of unity, of wholeness, which is so pervasive in Wicca.

When thinking about Wiccan ritual it is helpful to deal with group rituals, such as the Great Rite. Most rituals within Wicca, including Sabbat rituals, take the same shape and have many of the same elements. They begin with a circle casting where a circle is marked on the floor and the participants of the circle or

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the priest and priestess “cast” the circle by moving around the perimeter clockwise. This directs power into the circle making it sacred and safe for magic work. The altar is located in the center of the circle with two candles. A representation of each element—another candle for fire, a bowl of water, incense for air, and cornmeal or other grains for earth—are placed at their respective directions. The earth element is placed in the north, air in the east, fire in the south, and water in the west. Also on the altar are tools for whichever ritual is in progress. For a Sabbat ritual—such as Samhain or Beltane—a chalice and an athame (a ritual knife) are placed on either side of the altar, and a plant and antlers are placed in the center of the altar to represent the god and the goddess. Other rituals might have food and drink placed on the altar, a sword, a wand, a cauldron, god and goddess statues, or any number of decorative items dictated by the owner of the altar, but the principle of balance is still enacted by the careful placement of these items.

All of this structure and balance serves a dual purpose: it is there not only to create balance in all things, but it also helps create liminal space with its repetitive and ceremonial layout. As Joanne Pearson puts it, “the framework operates as a mechanism used to build ritual space and time—it frames liminality.” In this way the circle casting, the placement of the tools, and even the repetition of incantations becomes a way of slipping into a different place, of stepping beyond the threshold of normal existence. Lynne Hume says of the drama of ritual that “just as a play consists of performance and performers, props, costumes, lighting, music, and special effects in order to create a mood, or atmosphere, so it is with any pagan ritual.” The performance of the ritual, the theater of it, creates a space that is in between. It is no longer the space of everyday life, but it is not yet the return to structure that happens after the closing of the circle. The repetition of the ritual structure almost exactly each time provides a blank space for liminality, just as the practitioners become a blank slate and are cleared of their

11. See Figure 1.
cultural status by going naked or dressing identically. As Turner explains, “the neophyte in liminality must be a tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group.”  

14 Each element of the ritual becomes a symbol that expresses the ambiguity of the liminal space. Even the idea of the circle provides a symbol of balance. Janet and Stewart Farrar state, “the Magic Circle is neither male nor female; it is a power-house for the polarity of the two, and the whole ritual of Circle-casting emphasizes a deliberate balance of aspects.”  

15 The closing of the circle, which is also highly repetitive and ceremonial, becomes a way of bringing the participants of the ritual back into the here and now and out of the liminal space. The closing of the circle brings back the structure of secular life; the priest and the priestess are no longer the god and goddess, but have names, careers, and wealth distinctions. Speech not regarding

14 Turner, Ritual Process, 103.

the ritual is allowed, and the mystical is remarked upon only in reference to the previous ritual. All of the traits that make up liminality have been left behind, and instead of a balance, or a whole, there is only partiality, individuals.

While the opening and closing of rituals are structured, the body of the ritual, after the circle casting and before the closing of the circle, is much less rigid. While the initiates are inside the circle, the ritual becomes whatever the participants deem necessary, whether it is a celebration in honor of a certain deity, a prayer, a spellworking, or a Sabbat. The ritual can be performed by a group or by a solitary practitioner and still have the same effect. However, regardless of the content of the ritual, the goal is still balance, the ideal. This balance is exemplified by the god and the goddess. Janet and Stewart Farrar explain that manifestation of life, of everything, requires polarity, from the gods down.\textsuperscript{16} The goddess’ ideal femininity balances the god’s ideal masculinity and this is performed within the ritual space. Within a practitioner this “whole” or unity between masculine and feminine is created by combining both aspects of the divine in—hopefully—equal measure within oneself. As Hume states “ritual is the \textit{outer form} whose purpose is to act as catalyst to the \textit{inner process}.”\textsuperscript{17} It is similar to Turner’s descriptions of rites of passage, where neophytes “have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society.”\textsuperscript{18} The priest and priestess are the society or ritual elders to whom the practitioners have submitted and they become the molds into which the practitioners strive to fit.

In the Great Rite, balance is achieved at a divine level between the god and the goddess, masculine and feminine within a coven setting. The Great Rite is performed between the circle casting and the closing of the circle where the liminal space has been created. The Great Rite is a ritual that is usually enacted during Sabbat rituals and is a performance of the union of the god and the goddess. Some covens prefer to participate in ritual naked—“skyclad”—but

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Janet and Stewart Farrar, \textit{The Witches' God: Lord of the Dance} (Custer, Wash.: Phoenix, 1989), 1.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Hume, “Creating Sacred Space,” 313.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Turner, \textit{Ritual Process}, 103.
\end{itemize}
most covens simply wear robes that are almost identical. Liminal space minimizes the distinctions between sexes which allows for equality, but also makes it easier for gender identities to be modified. The identical dress of the ritual participants creates the ambiguity of status that defines them as liminal entities. It strips them of their cultural rank, position, and gender so that they cannot be distinguished from one another. They therefore enter into ritual communitas, as Turner puts it, in order to “become equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”

In many covens a priest and a priestess serve as versions of the deities; the priestess becomes the goddess and the priest becomes the god. As Janet and Stewart Farrar put it “the Great Rite is . . . the ritual mating, by human representatives, of the Goddess-principle and the God-principle.” The Great Rite actually performs both gender ideals in an almost play-like setting and the priest and priestess do, on many occasions, have sexual intercourse in order to show the unity and balance of gender. This can be disturbing to those who have watched movies where the ritual intercourse takes place in plain sight, but the actual sexual intercourse is conducted in private.

The Great Rite ritual can be performed symbolically as well. The chalice and the athame stand in for the priest and priestess so that actual sexual intercourse is left out. When the Great Rite is done symbolically, the priestess, who has at this point become the goddess, holds the chalice at waist height while the priest, who has become the god, holds the athame over his head. Even in this symbolic version “it is the body, mind, and spirit of the High Priestess which are seen as the channel for the Goddess, and the opening-up of that channel is a central feature of Wiccan ritual,” just as the priest is the channel for the god in the liminal space. As the priest moves his athame down, the priestess moves the chalice up and they meet in the middle. This is symbolic of penetration, of

19. Ibid., 96.
course, but it also has a deeper meaning. The two aspects, masculine (in the form of the athame) and feminine (in the form of the chalice) meet together in the middle; they balance each other. This performance is a more user-friendly version of the Great Rite that many covens employ in order to avoid controversy, to make the Great Rite easier to perform, and in order to show the practitioners, in person, the ritual meeting of masculine and feminine. But the principle of balance and unity is the same.

In the actual Great Rite the god and goddess create balance by uniting and becoming one whole through sexual intercourse. Pearson explains, “in the center of the ritual, the Priestess experiences the Goddess.”24 Both the priestess and priest transubstantiate into the goddess and the god.25 Most Wiccans understand this as the priest becoming the god and the priestess becoming the goddess, almost like possession. The priest and priestess are the ideal masculine and feminine within the liminal space when they assume the forms of the god and goddess; they represent gender identities where men are strong and women are intuitive. The priest and priestess use each other to create the balance within themselves and eventually come together to perform the modified gender identity that the others are performing or trying to perform within themselves. The couple participating in the Great Rite are offering themselves joyfully to the god and goddess.26 This gives the other practitioners something tangible and human to emulate and also, in the case of the Great Rite, gives an outward example of how to balance masculine and feminine within oneself, which is the goal of ritual. The priest and priestess perform the entire struggle for balance in a very physical way so that the other practitioners have an example to follow. The physical intercourse between the priest and the priestess serve as a symbol of the internal balancing of masculine and feminine. As Samuel Wagar explains, “The mystical experience dissolves away the boundaries of the individual and permits them


to honour themselves as a part of the *All*. The individual can become aware of
themselves as a unique expression of the divine purpose or an integral portion
of the universe. By dissolving the ego boundaries an intensity of feeling, a depth
of connection and a kind of meaning is derived.”

The dissolving of the ego, of the individual self, and replacing it with the
*All*, or the *Whole*, is what the priest and the priestess demonstrate for the other
practitioners. The internalization of ritual is equally meaningful, or even more
so, for practitioners than the actual physical act, which is not strictly neces-
sary since the symbolic Great Rite is available. Wagar goes on to explain: “The
Priestess and Priest engage in the ritual not for the sake of their own pleasure
or to achieve a purely personal enlightenment but to find and bring power and
wisdom back into their community.” While the physical or the symbolic acts
show a physical meeting of the masculine and the feminine into a whole, the
internalization of this balance is what is taught and desired in the practitioners,
both visually and verbally. Thus the Great Rite gives the practitioners a deeper
understanding of the differences between gender identities within and without
the liminal space by adding the priest and priestess as an example of both.

In solitary rituals balance is still considered the central ideal within ritual.
The structure is similar with a circle casting and closing of the circle, and the
altar, which is normally present, is set up according to the same rules. All of this
helps, just as in group ritual, to bring the practitioner into the liminal space.
However, in solitary ritual the balancing of masculine and feminine, the modi-
fication of traditional gender identity, is done solely by the practitioner for the
practitioner. Even though this is the goal for all ritual, to balance masculine and
feminine within oneself, the solitary practitioner has the god and goddess, as
well as his or her own understanding of gender identity, to guide him or her. The
strong male and intuitive female gender identities performed and exemplified
by the god and the goddess are used as templates, patterns for personal behavior,

28. Ibid., 3.
but they are only part of a whole. In ritual these templates are merged internally by the practitioner in the liminal state in a way that creates a balance between male gender identity and female gender identity within one person.

Practitioners also outwardly perform both gender identities as if they were a single, modified gender identity. As Hume explains, “ritual paraphernalia are merely outward and visible symbols of an inward and psychological process.”29 The practitioners become liminal entities or liminal personae within the ritual and the resulting ambiguity of the practitioners—they are no longer classified by cultural space—is expressed by symbols of masculinity and femininity, namely the athame and the chalice. Liminality is very similar to balance, so it is not hard to see why the practitioners of Wicca seek balance in the liminal space. Turner explains, “liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.”30 It seems perfectly natural, then, that Wiccan ritual seeks to balance both masculine gender identity and feminine gender identity within this transitional space.

The practitioner must also become, in the liminal space, a blank slate in order to gain the knowledge of the ritual elders or the social group.31 The knowledge and wisdom of the group becomes inscribed upon the practitioners, as well as their gender identity. Judith Butler tells us that gender is performative, but it seems that in liminal space, gender is also inscribed upon the practitioner.32 With both a priest and priestess as models for gender performance, that the Wiccan practitioners, while worshiping both masculine and feminine deities in a liminal space, would become inscribed with both masculine and feminine gender identity—by the submission to the priest and priestess—and begin to perform them. So in solitary ritual the god and goddess, as embodied by the priest and

31. Ibid., 103.
priestess, are the examples of not only strong masculine gender identity and submissive feminine gender identity, but also of the modified gender identity that the practitioner is striving for. Without a tangible example the solitary practitioner is creating the balance within him or herself using only the god and goddess. This modified gender identity creates a “whole” that is the goal of ritual in Wicca and the balance is achieved in the liminal space that happens in ritual because the modified gender identity, the “whole”, is hard to contemplate in normal space.

A perfect balance of masculinity and femininity is doubtless impossible to perform in any circumstance. However, within the liminal space of ritual where the performance of gender identities and gender itself is outside of normal understanding, within Turner’s “realm of pure possibility,” the balance of masculinity and femininity within a practitioner can exist, at least in part. While this is true of group ritual as well, solitary ritual exemplifies the difficulty of performing the ideal of balance and internally creating the ideal gender identity outside of ritual. Although balance between masculine and feminine is a central belief of Wicca, it is hard to live in balance in everyday life.

This idea of balance, which is extremely important in Wicca, comes through in almost every aspect of the religion. Most striking is the importance of balance within ritual. Each element is balanced with another, each color, each instrument upon the altar, and even the form of the circle itself is based on the principle of balance. Wiccan ritual takes many forms and has many purposes, but the goal of ritual is always the same: balance. As Amber Fisher states, “the world is created of complements, and from within the pattern of these complements balance is born.” To Wiccans, everything is dualistic and must be in balance, including gender, and ritual is a way to create and perpetuate that balance. Ritual, like gender, is a performance. Each step, from the circle casting to the closing of the circle is carefully orchestrated and rehearsed in order

34. Fisher, Philosophy of Wicca, 111.
to create the liminal space that is necessary for stepping out of everyday life. Most Wiccan rituals are not rites of passage, but ultimately contain many of the same attributes. Practitioners go naked or dress uniformly, all are considered equal, none possess status or rank, sex differences are minimized, and partiality is minimized. These characteristics enable the practitioners to be a blank slate for the priest and priestess to manipulate in ritual. Whether the liminal space, with its propensity towards equality and unity, gave way to the belief of balance or whether the belief happened to fit into the liminality of ritual, it is clear that Wicca is a religion of balance. It is not hard to see then that Wiccan practitioners, while worshiping both male and female deities in a liminal space where totality, or the whole, is a characteristic, would balance masculine and feminine gender identities to create that whole.
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Excessive Formalities in the Mormon Sacrament, 1928–1940

“We are not a people who look to formality, certainly we do not believe in phylacteries, in uniforms, on sacred occasions.”

There has been perhaps no sacred rite more familiar and fundamental in all of Christendom than the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Similarly, in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (‘the Church’), partaking of bread and wine (or water) has been a tangible pledge of remembrance and discipleship of Jesus Christ since it was first performed at the church’s organization in 1830. Since then, communicants have literally raised a glass to the life, teachings, and mission of their Messiah.

Eventually, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, young men, charged with the responsibility to distribute the sacramental emblems throughout Mormon congregations, became somewhat sluggish in the manner in which they fulfilled their duty, especially in their dress. They came to worship services in “a motley array of vividly colored sweaters, seldom pressed coats, and shirt sleeves of vary-

ing degrees of color and cleanliness.” Their appearance and attitude toward the sacrament caused more seasoned members of the church to question the boys’ maturity and to impose strict stipulations, including the use of uniforms, upon those who distributed the bread and water. These members hoped that the new rules would instill in the boys a sense of respect for the sacred ordinance.

This paper is an effort to understand the effect of uniforms and other rigid regulations on young men distributing the bread and water in Mormon sacrament services in the early 1930s, the concern of excessive formalities during the Lord’s Supper on the part of the Church’s highest authorities, and the lasting impact of local LDS congregations on the general administration of the sacrament.

BACKGROUND

Nowadays, the administration of the Lord’s Supper is a duty of the Aaronic Priesthood, the lesser of two priesthoods in the Mormon Church. Worthy young men are ordained to the office of Deacon in the Aaronic Priesthood at age twelve and are commissioned to pass the bread and water each Sunday in LDS congregations. However, twelve-year-old boys did not always assume such important pastoral responsibilities in the Church. For the first seventy years since its inception, leaders entrusted older men of the higher, Melchizedek Priesthood with the task to distribute the emblems in sacrament services. The transition from men to boys, according to William G. Hartley, professor emeritus of history at Brigham Young University, was part of a “greater interest in youth that was sweeping the nation as part of the Progressive Movement (1890–1920).”

Although the Mormon Church has historically been a top-down organization in terms of policies and procedures for its members, local leaders seemed to have had a hand in introducing new ideas during the Progressive Era. For example, weekly family nights, visitors centers, individual sacrament cups,


meetinghouse janitors, missionary farewells, and the Church Education System, were all ideas that began on the local level before being sanctioned by the general authorities of the church and adopted worldwide.

Having young men receive the Aaronic Priesthood and participate in the administration of the Lord’s Supper was no different. The idea began among local congregations throughout Utah, particularly in St. George and Salt Lake City. In 1908, Joseph F. Smith, President of the LDS Church, officially turned the administration of the sacrament over to the young men. He wanted to give the boys “something to do that will make them interested in the work of the Lord.”

As mentioned, the decision to give the young men more responsibility in the Mormon Church came at a time of increasing concern for the well-being of youth in America, due to the rise of several social problems including drunkenness, sexual indulgence, and other forms of immoral and unruly behavior. Church leaders believed athletics, scouting, and other youth programs were the best way to avert juvenile delinquency. However, the challenge of protecting youth only intensified throughout the 1920s and into the Great Depression.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Like most Americans, members of the Mormon Church faced severe economic challenges throughout the 1930s. At one point, the unemployment rate in Utah reached thirty-five percent—fourth highest in the nation. In 1933, the annual income per capita in Utah fell to a mere $300, causing some desperate families to sit down to a “lunchpail meal of potato peels.” Frustrated Utahans protested at the capitol building in Salt Lake City until the fire department literally hosed them away. Eventually, the church aided those in need by organizing several

programs, including employment bureaus, storehouses, and welfare services.

The depression had a significant effect on Mormon priesthood holders’ church attendance. During such periods of financial stress many were “away from home seeking work.” Not only were adult, Melchizedek Priesthood-holding men away, but young men as well. Retaining deacons during the summer months was particularly difficult since their quorum meetings were “adjourned” during the irrigation season in order for them to work in the fields and harvest sugar beets and other crops. It was not uncommon to discontinue Aaronic Priesthood meetings when the academic school year ended in the spring. In fact, during the summer months between 1928 and 1932, the highest attendance in a single deacons quorum throughout the entire church was thirty-two percent. The average hovered around ten percent.

While on leave from quorum meetings, adults working with the young men questioned the spiritual safety of deacons and believed that they were more susceptible to “character-destroying forces.” Often referred to as the “summer slump,” many deacons developed habits of drinking liquor and chewing tobacco, which were contrary to church standards, and they resumed quorum meetings in the fall, which were more troublesome than before.

This sense of youthful immaturity was evident while deacons distributed the bread and water throughout Mormon congregations. Not only were they careless in their dress and appearance, wearing tattered, unwashed, wrinkled shirts and coats, but the deacons also talked, whispered, snickered, and made “other unnecessary noises” during the administration of the sacrament; others would point fingers, chew gum, doze off, twist nervously, or “hitch at [their] trousers every half

10. Minutes of the Aaronic Priesthood convention, April 8, 1933, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
minute” throughout the meeting.\textsuperscript{13} Many left Sunday services early, immediately after passing the sacrament. Some deacons even used tobacco prior to sacrament services, causing parents to call for reform.\textsuperscript{14}

These concerned members implemented ideas to revive attendance in deacons quorums attendance and stimulate interest in priesthood responsibilities. Some methods included holding one-on-one meetings between the local bishop and deacon, calling more engaging class instructors, and promoting social events. Surprisingly, uniforms—consisting of white shirts, black slacks, and bow ties—proved to be one of the most effective approaches in attracting and disciplining the deacons.

**UNIFORMS**

Earl Jay Glade, a Melchizedek Priesthood holder and a leader over the deacons of the Highland Park Ward, first introduced the “white shirt-black tie system” at a priesthood convention in Salt Lake City.\textsuperscript{15} According to Glade, uniforms were not “just any old shirt, any old sweater, [or] any old coat,” but rather identical white shirts and bow ties; he felt they were the solution for “building morale in deacon’s quorum work.”\textsuperscript{16} The idea of uniforms was received enthusiastically by other deacons quorum leaders and spread until a number of local ward units adopted their own uniform dress code for young men passing the sacrament.\textsuperscript{17}

Although uniforms varied from ward to ward, bow ties became a distinctive characteristic of deacons quorums in the 1930s. Why bow ties? According to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Minutes of the Aaronic Priesthood convention, April 8, 1933, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
\item \textsuperscript{14} “Field Notes,” Improvement Era 34:7 (May 1931): 417.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Minutes of the Aaronic Priesthood convention, April 8, 1933, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Earl Jay Glade Jr., “Highland Park Ward Sacrament Service,” Improvement Era 36:4 (April 1933): 361.
\end{itemize}
Earl Jay Glade, matching bow ties would “do more to build morale and pride in organization-membership, than a 10,000 word lecture.”18

Studies in organizational behavior confirm the effect of uniforms. First, uniforms “elicit psychological processes that inspire compliance.”19 Thus, those who wear “organizationally designated attire are psychologically in a position of having complied with one organizational standard. Such employees can maintain cognitive consistency by fulfilling other organizational expectations.”20 In other words, uniforms act as “situational cues” that de-individuate employees, bringing them to focus on, and fulfill, assignments related to the uniform. The individual often forgets personal preferences and concentrates on the job at hand when required to dress for work. “Once you put on that uniform . . . then you are certainly not the same person. You really become that role.”21

Second, uniforms legitimize the wearer to outsiders. For example, uniforms and badges set police officers apart from other citizens and enable them to enforce the law. Similarly, white shirts and bow ties helped to distinguish deacons from

18. Minutes of the Aaronic Priesthood convention, April 8, 1933, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
21. Ibid.
other young men and empower them, in the eyes of the congregation, to administer the sacrament.  

The uniforms worked effectively; one ward that implemented a dress code immediately noticed “more reverence shown during the passing of the sacrament by the members as well as the boys themselves.” This same ward found that a deacon had a “greater incentive to be courteous, thoughtful and orderly in the performance of his sacred duties” when all the deacons were dressed alike. Other members not only witnessed an “increase of boys in attendance at Sunday School” after a dress code was imposed, but noted that the uniforms had “a wonderful effect on the boys eleven and twelve years of age. When they see these deacons they long to become a deacon.” The success of the uniforms caused some adult priesthood leaders to incorporate “additional features” and rigid rules into the procedure of administering the Lord’s Supper.

“ADDITIONAL FEATURES”

Most of the new rules accompanying the inception of uniforms dealt with posture and invariability in the deacon’s walk and stance. For example, in some wards deacons were to simultaneously arise and strictly “march” to and from the sacrament table, keeping the arms that handle the trays at right angles. While waiting for the tray to be returned to them at each row, the deacons were to “stand erect with arms folded in front of them,” in order to avoid distracting the congregation.

Many wards began to implement even more stringent and detail-attentive
rules. In some wards, the deacons lined up to receive specific assignments according to their height. Others split up the passing of the bread and water between multiple quorums of deacons. Some wards became so exacting as to ban the crust of the bread from the sacrament so that “the pieces when broken shall be uniform in color and size.” These rules, together with the uniforms, became known as the “military order” of administering the Lord’s Supper.

One rule popularized in the 1930s, which is still a popular Mormon practice today, is the nonuse of the left hand when passing the bread and water. The Granite Stake was the first to publicize this directive in the Improvement Era, a church-distributed magazine. According to their instructions, the deacons were to take the tray by the right hand only and keep the left hand behind their backs “at all times.” The only explanation by the Granite Stake was that “it is not proper to have a boy handling the sacrament with the left hand.”

There is still uncertainty in the church about the appropriateness of using the left hand in the sacrament. Joseph Fielding Smith, Church Historian and influential LDS writer, aimed to clarify this matter. In 1946, Smith spoke against

33. Ibid.
deacons with their “left hand plastered on their backs in a most awkward manner,” as well as the practice among members to cautiously take the sacrament only with the right hand.  

However, almost a decade later, Smith insisted the sacrament be taken and passed by the right hand only—the right hand being “a symbol of righteousness.” He said, “The right hand or side is called the dexter and the left the sinister. Dexter connotes something favorable; sinister, something unfavorable or unfortunate. It is a well-established practice in the church to partake of the sacrament with the right hand and also to anoint with the right hand, according to the custom which the scriptures indicate is, and always was, approved by divine injunction.”

Interestingly, attendance in deacons quorums increased considerably in many wards at the time these strict instructions were taught to the young men. Wards consistently congratulated their deacons for perfect attendance through articles in the Improvement Era during the 1930s. Why did young men positively respond to such rules? Manton Moody of the Deseret Stake published an article in the Improvement Era about the deacons’ behavior and emphasized that young men “like to be noticed” and yearn for attention. The extra regard for, and the strict rules imposed on, the deacons helped them sense the spotlight and “feel a little bigger,” thus building morale and inspiriting them. In essence, the deacons had a new identity. They were no longer the bottom of the priesthood totem pole; they had become the center of attention.

CONCERN OF FORMALISM

The matching shirts and bow ties were not the first uniforms popularized

34. Joseph Fielding Smith, Church History and Modern Revelation, Volume 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1946), 103.


37. Ibid.
by church members. In the mid-1910s, students at Brigham Young University sported class uniforms, consisting of various types of sweaters, blazers, hats, and collars. The original intent of uniforms on campus was to distinguish between, and create a sense of community among, different classes. However, by the mid-1920s the uniforms became a “craze for something exclusive.” Administrators at BYU felt too much attention went toward dress and grooming instead of study, and the uniforms were soon dropped. Similarly, it was thought by some that deacon uniforms drew attention away from their main objective and led to further procedural changes in the administration of the sacrament.

Interestingly, however, according to Earl Jay Glade, uniforms were not only “encouraged by many prominent church leaders” at first, but they also received “recommendation by authorities for general adoption.” As a matter of fact, the priesthood convention at which Glade first spoke about matching dress for deacons was conducted by Presiding Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon, with Joseph F. Merrill and Joseph Fielding Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles presiding. These were some of the highest authorities over the general work of young men in the church, and they initially “expressed their approval” of this new method of officiating the sacrament. However, over time they grew wary of established customs in the sacred ordinance when matching outfits became mandatory in order to pass the bread and water in some wards.

Robert L. Simpson, a notable member of the church who served as a counselor in the Presiding Bishopric and member of the First Quorum of the Seventy—both of which are appointments which confer authority for general governance of the Church—spoke at a Brigham Young University convocation and related his experience as a deacon in the early 1930s. His story illustrates the mores of sacrament administration during that time:

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
Our new chapel had just been dedicated. It was beautiful. We were so proud. We even had a separate sacrament alcove behind the bishopric seats on the stand. Bit by bit we tried to enhance our sacrament service. Red velour drapes were installed to be drawn apart at the precise psychological moment. Smaller drapes revealing a picture of the Last Supper were drawn just before the sacrament prayers were given. All of the deacons wore white shirts and black bow ties. And last but not least, we had worked out a system of musical chimes to signal the opening of the drapes and the sacrament prayers. It was the most beautiful and dramatic sacrament presentation ever devised in any dispensation. Even the stake president was impressed—so much so that he invited President Heber J. Grant to come and see the Church’s new ‘Hollywood’ version of the sacrament. President Grant accepted the invitation and witnessed what turned out to be our final presentation. We were taught in unmistakable, but kindly, terms what the sacrament service should be. I’ll never forget that lesson. It was valuable not only to me, but to everyone else in that ward and in that stake.42

Although many adult members and deacons preferred uniforms and military order in the sacrament, the general officers of the church increasingly questioned these practices beginning in the late 1930s. Their message was clear: “Though white shirts and dark ties for the young men are proper, it should not be required that all be exactly alike in dress and general appearance. . . . Also, there should not be any requirement as to the posture or action while passing the sacrament, such as carrying the left hand behind the back or maintaining stiffness in walking or any tendency toward military order in action.”43


eral authorities understood that “these changes and innovations are innocently adopted, but in course of time there is the danger that they will become fixed customs and considered as necessary to the welfare of the Church.” In other words, they felt these supplements to the sacrament tended toward religious formalism.

Formalism meant worshipping with less regard to inner significance than to external forms. In essence, general authorities believed deacons and members wearing uniforms were more concerned with the outward appearance of those passing the emblems than the meaning of the sacred ordinance itself. Bishop Cannon understood the importance of “order, appropriateness, and reverence” in the sacrament, but cautioned in his monthly bulletin to avoid extreme formalities and uniformity in dress that “detract from the thought and purpose thereof.” He further taught “the administration of the sacrament was to be quietly natural and unobtrusive.” Joseph Fielding Smith warned against something even as small as formalism in the sacrament: “If we are not careful, we will find ourselves traveling the road that brought the Church of Jesus Christ in the first centuries into disrepute and paved the way for the apostasy.”

This was not the first time member-imposed formalities in the sacrament had caused a stir among the Latter-day Saints. In the 1890s, several general authorities spoke against entire congregations kneeling during the sacramental prayers, which had become a practice among some wards in Utah since their arrival in the 1850s and even more common after Presiding Bishop Edward Hunter preferred

44. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation Volume 1* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1946), 103.
47. Ibid.
“the kneeling posture.” When the matter was brought up in one particular sacrament meeting, members of the congregation debated the issue until “contention on the part of some [became] very strong.” Joseph E. Taylor, counselor in the Salt Lake Stake presidency, recounted the reaction by those opposed to the change: “We have a great many brethren in the Church who are very technical on certain points, and who harp upon these technicalities to the disturbance of many individuals who are perfectly willing to remain satisfied with the examples that have been set in the Church by the highest authorities.”

Like the deacon uniforms and military order, general authorities feared that the “confusion and noise [in relation] to kneeling” by the whole congregation distracted members’ attention away from the sacrament, and that such procedures would become permanent components of the ordinance. Moreover, church leaders removed deacon uniforms before members became too attached to them, as they had with the kneeling practices.

By the early 1940s, most wards abandoned uniform dress for their deacons. Traces of bow ties lingered among some quorums, but identical outfits were dropped. In an effort to continue to encourage deacons quorum attendance and responsibility, the Presiding Bishopric introduced the Standard Quorum Award.

The Standard Quorum Award was presented to groups of young men for completion of prescribed guidelines, including seventy-five percent quorum attendance for a month. The award successfully created “new interest” and “greater enthusiasm” for attending priesthood meetings and fulfilling assignments. Along with framed certificates, deacons quorums were often recognized with group

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49. Bishops Meeting Minutes: 1851–1884, April 2, 1868, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.


photographs in the *Improvement Era*. The award essentially replaced uniforms as a primary means of retaining their attendance.

**CONCLUSION**

This episode involving deacons uniforms is a peculiar topic in Mormon history, since general authorities have rarely spoken about members’ dress and appearance, except for encouraging modesty. Though members’ might say their hearts were right in trying to reverence the sacrament by adding uniforms, leaders consistently counseled members to focus on the meaning rather than the procedural aspects of the ordinance.

The uniforms also reflected the time in which they had become popular. During a decade of depression—when Americans had to depend on one another, not only for economic, but also emotional survival—churches across the country often provided “a splendid opportunity to bring cheer and courage to those who [faced] a seemingly hopeless outlook on life.” The uniforms and military order in the sacrament helped create a sense of community among the young men during hard times.

Finally, LDS leaders took into account the financial circumstances of deacons and their families, and made sure that parents were not forced to buy prescribed outfits at a time when they needed to be economically thrifty. Instead, leaders called on deacons only to be neat, clean, and “appear manly” for the sacrament.  

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52. See ibid. Photographs are featured in “Aaronic Priesthood” sections of the *Improvement Era*, starting in the 1940s.


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The Mystical Debate: Constructivism and the Resurgence of Perennialism

Mysticism is at the heart of a pivotal and ongoing academic debate, yet it can be an uncomfortable subject to explore, mainly due to the myriad definitions for the term *mysticism* that one encounters. Etymologically, the “myst” prefix has led to the colloquial use of mysticism as denoting practices, traditions, and beliefs that are simply shrouded in mystery. As Walter Stace puts it, “[it] is absurd that ‘mysticism’ should be associated with what is ‘misty’ . . . there is nothing misty, foggy, vague or sloppy about mysticism,” rather, it is characterized by vivid experience. Academically, “mysticism” has been narrowed to describe “mystical experience” in no small part due to William James’ landmark exposition of mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Mysticism is anchored in experience, namely, mystical experience, and as a result, it is not one particular tradition, but a theme that can be found in any religious tradition correctly deemed mystical.

Yet, to this day, what is termed “mystical experience” is still a hotly debated subject. On the modern landscape of this debate, there are at least two notable ideological camps which stand in opposition to one another: the perennialists

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and the constructivists. Two experiential events which may be considered mystical, in the perennialist sense, are at the heart of the debate between these two ideological stances: Absolute Unitary Being (AUB) and the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE). Perennialists tend to claim that these events represent universal traits of mystical experience, while constructivists argue that there are no such universal traits. This paper seeks to conduct an exploration of Perennialism, and Constructivism as a response, after which the PCE and AUB events are analyzed in the context of that debate. Further evidence will then be drawn from mystical traditions to support the prevalence of PCE and AUB experiences. As a result, these two events will serve as a perennialist counterargument to constructivism and its mystical relativism, demonstrating the persevering utility of a perennialist approach to mystical experience.

I. PERENNIALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST RESPONSE

Perennialism can accurately be described as the dominant treatment of mysticism from William James’ exploration of mysticism in The Varieties of Religious Experience, up through the constructivist response in the 1970s and 1980s. The name is primarily derived from Aldous Huxley’s work which labeled mysticism as “the perennial philosophy.” Perennialists saw mystical experience as representing “a direct contact with a (variously defined) absolute principle.” Since this “contact” can be found existing within several traditions, “Religious traditions, they argued, all teach a cross-culturally similar philosophy that does not change over the centuries, i.e., a perennial philosophy.” Evelyn Underhill posits a definition of mysticism that depicts this perennialist understanding of mysticism’s role in religion as a whole. Her definition describes mysticism as “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendent order; whatever be the theological formula


3. Ibid.
under which that order is understood.” The concept that mysticism is unitive survives through modern definitions, but what is problematic with Underhill’s definition is the use of the term “innate.” It is the innateness of the experience, as well as the assumption that a transcendent order actually exists, that has inspired the constructivists to vehemently reject such a definition of mysticism.

Constructivists, such as Steven Katz, Hans Penner, and Robert Gimello, put forth their pluralist theories in response to perennialism, each of which will be briefly discussed below. Each one has perceived perennialism as an academically accepted view. Constructivism is by no means exclusive to the discussion of mystical experience. It is an academic point of view that is closely related to pluralism, relativism, and subjectivism. Put simply, constructivism asserts that the individual constructs the surrounding world through his or her understanding, explaining experience and perception with mental constructs. What this view means, in terms of how mystical experience is to be interpreted, is that 1) there is no objective, numinous reality with which the mystic can interact or identify, and 2) there is no innate experience independent of mental and cultural constructs.

Steven T. Katz’s *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* is a compilation of articles with primarily constructivist views on mystical experience, and contains an attack on the idea of an objective reality. His own article in this compilation, “The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience,” expresses the constructivist distaste for claims to a transcendent reality:

> The metaphysical naivety that seeks for, or worse, asserts, the truth of some meta-ontological schema in which either the mystic or the student of mysticism is said to have reached some phenomenological ‘pure land’ in which he grasps transcendent reality in its pristine pre-predicative state is to be avoided.⁵

There is good reason, from the constructivist’s point of view, why such

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assertions of essential truth are so undesirable: reality itself is relative. Hans Penner elaborates on this point in terms of mystical experience, declaring that “[t]he basic assumption of the mystical relativist can be described as follows: what is meaningful, what is in accord with reality and not in accord with reality, shows itself in the context that a mystical system has.” In other words, it is the particular religious or cultural system that determines what “reality” is as well as how to achieve mystical union with it. This is opposed to one universal reality which is experienced through multiple mystical paths as many perennialists would argue. Nailing down this point, Gimello bluntly asserts that “what various mysticisms have most in common is their fidelity to their respective traditions.”

Thus, the constructivist approach to mysticism, or mystical relativism, denies an objective reality, and as a result, any interaction with it by the mystic. This goes hand in hand with the second assertion of mystical relativism, that there is no innate experience independent of mental and cultural constructs.

II. THE PCE AND AUB

Both the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE) and Absolute Unitary Being (AUB) are well worth a thorough exposition in order to evaluate their respective places amongst the Perennialist and Constructivist debate. Together they cover a range of experiences that are commonly considered mystical.

A. ABSOLUTE UNITARY BEING

The neuroscientists Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew Newberg are responsible for the creation of the term Absolute Unitary Being. Roughly speaking, AUB may be described as “theistic mysticism,” a mysticism that is deity-based. AUB is achieved after a journey from dualism to monism; it typically entails the soul, or the self, arriving at union with a divine entity or transcendent reality. Newberg

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and d’Aquili describe this ascent in emotional and aesthetic terms in that its achievement is coincidental with ecstatic emotions and an overwhelming sense of wholeness, or unity. The concept of AUB is problematic from a constructivist standpoint because of its consideration of a numinous reality, or supernal being to whom the mystic ascends.

**B. PURE CONSCIOUSNESS EVENT**

Robert K.C. Foreman is responsible for the term *Pure Consciousness Event*,⁹ and has written extensively about it in addition to having experienced mystical states himself. Like AUB, the PCE is the result of a journey from dualism to monism, however, if AUB can be described as the ascension of the soul towards unity with the divine, the PCE is an inward journey of the soul into itself, achieving what is often termed the “void,” or pure awareness. The PCE is problematic from a constructivist standpoint, since there can be no unmediated experiences such as the supposed cognitive blankness of a PCE. The cognitive status of mystical experience is a subject of much debate and aside from individual claims, there is no way of knowing whether the mind ever is truly rid of conceptions as the PCE is purported to be.

**C. PCE and AUB within the Perennialist/Constructivist Debate**

Yet for all this debate, a major fallacy is being committed on the part of both perennialists and constructivists; it is the importance that is placed on assessing the “reality” of mystical experiences. An ethnographer does not need to assert his own belief in the religious system of the culture under study in order to appreciate the importance of religious belief and its impactful role in society; likewise, one need not accept that the mystic is uniting with a numinous reality, but simply that the mystic claims to unite with such a reality. With this in mind, a perennialism that asserts the essentiality of a particular trend in mystical experience would appear misguided. Similarly, a constructivism that seeks to do away with the categorization of similarities between traditions would also ap-

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pear misguided, ignoring the many accounts of mystical experiences saturating religious texts throughout history. Both the PCE and AUB can be validated in a pragmatic fashion. First, time tested definitions of mystical experience can be applied to both, and second, mystical traditions provide striking evidence for the categorization into either Pure Consciousness Event or Absolute Unitary Being.

First of all, this is no arbitrary division of mystical experience; mysticism is often divided into categories of “external” and “internal.” Walter Stace, a noted scholar of mysticism, divides the experience into “extrovertive” and “introvertive” mystical experience:

One may be called extrovertive mystical experience, the other introvertive mystical experience. Both are apprehensions of the One, but they reach it in different ways. The extrovertive way looks outward and through the physical senses into the external world and finds the One there. The introvertive way turns inward, introspectively, and finds the One at the bottom of the self, at the bottom of the human personality.10

Accordingly, AUB can be described as extrovertive and PCE as introvertive. As stated above, both are monistic, or in Stace’s Neoplatonic words, “apprehensions of the One,” but the respective paths indicate an external journey in AUB, and an internal journey in PCE. While these are different varieties of mystical experience, they share three significant traits that help define them as such: ineffability, a noetic quality, and a unitive perspective on reality.

William James labeled “ineffability” as the first characteristic of mystical experience and it still holds today, although it requires some further elaboration. First and foremost, if mystical experiences were truly ineffable, there would be no accounts to speak of. Although the experience is ineffable, descriptions of what it is not—negative descriptions—are commonly used to explain a mystical experience. James describes this by stating:

The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it

defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be
given in words. 11

Yet—and not necessarily to the contrary—Ninian Smart provides valu-
able insight as to how negative descriptions are not strictly ineffable. He writes
that “such terms as ‘indescribable’, ‘ineffable’ and so on are themselves perform-
matives also, and help to express an off-scale sublimity beyond the usual rungs
of the ladder of value and joy.”12 Thus, ineffability, in the case of mysticism is not
to be considered strict ineffability, but rather, it simply necessitates the use of
“performatives” such as negative descriptions and metaphors.

The motivating force behind an attempt to describe mystical experience,
however, often results from another one of James’ “marks” of a mystical experi-
ence, which he calls its “noetic quality.” By this, he means that certain knowledge
is imparted through the mystical experience. In other words, a transcendent
experience provides knowledge to the participant. James describes this quality
as follows:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem
to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge.
They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by
the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full
of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they
remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of
authority for after-time.13

To highlight two aspects of this noetic quality, James first describes the
experience as one that communicates knowledge in a way that goes beyond the
“discursive intellect.” He then describes this knowledge as carrying weight even
after the event of transcendence.

Often the knowledge that is imparted through mystical consciousness is a

Lectures_XVI_and_XVII&oldid=912487.

12. Ninian Smart, “The Purification of Consciousness,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (see
note 5), 123–124.

13. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, lectures XVI and XVII.
monistic representation of reality, bringing one to a third characteristic of mystical experience: a unitive perspective of reality. William J. Wainwright declares that “[m]ystical consciousness . . . is ‘unitive’” and that in this consciousness “[d]istinctions are transcended or overcome (although the way in which they are overcome varies from one type of mystical experience to another).” As Wainwright notes, and this paper has stated above, the path differs from tradition to tradition, but the goal in each is monistic. AUB is unitive in an extrovertive fashion, blending the self with a supernal presence, while PCE is unitive through the utter lack of distinction achieved in the state of Pure Consciousness.

D’Aquili and Newberg place religious experiences and aesthetic states of unity at parallel spots on an ascending scale in their article titled, “The Neuropsychology of Aesthetic, Spiritual, and Mystical States.” William James, like d’Aquili and Newberg, was interested in the emotional sensation of a totally unitive mystical experience, declaring that it is “[i]n this peculiarity” that “mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect.” Within this spectrum, as the felt sense of unity increases, the emotional content of a corresponding religious state does as well. This spectrum consists of levels of classical aesthetics ranging from disunity to unity, or “Integritas.” Each rung on this aesthetic ladder has a corresponding emotional state, and type of religious experience associated with it. To exemplify this, Newberg describes “[a] transitional phase between aesthetic and religious experience,” that is, “romantic love, which might be characterized by the phrase, ‘It is bigger than both of us.’” In this situation, aesthetic appreciation can be seen to coincide with the awe and corresponding emotional content in the religious sense. Newberg describes the ascent up the spectrum: “As one moves up this continuum, one moves through

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16. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, lectures XVI and XVII.
18. Ibid.
the experience of numinosity, or religious awe,”19 until “the self becomes as a drop of water in the ocean of reality.”20 This final stage is what he and d’Aquili term AUB. For example, one of the ascending states “involves an elated sense of well-being and joy, in which the universe is perceived to be fundamentally good and all its parts are sensed to be related in a unified whole.”21 D’Aquili and Newberg place AUB at the very pinnacle of an emotional-aesthetic spectrum of consciousness:

There is a progressive blurring of the boundaries between entities until one finally moves into Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). AUB is characterized by absolute unity. There are no longer any discrete entities that relate to each other. The boundaries of entities within the world disappear, and even the self-other dichotomy is totally obliterated. In AUB there is no extension of space or duration of time.22

III. NEWBERG AND D’AQUILI’S AUB IN MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

Newberg and d’Aquili’s model is worth being put to the test; whether mystics, their texts and traditions, reflect this state in all its emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual manifestations can determine if the model has pragmatic use or not. Neoplatonic thought appears to affirm all of these in the state of Absolute Unitary Being. Plotinus, a philosopher-mystic of 3rd century Alexandria, expounds the existence of a singular Unity, which he also terms the One, or even God, from which all existence both emanates from, and shares a part in. Speaking of the One he uses the highest Platonic Forms as points of reference, “while both The Good and The Beautiful participate in the common source, The One precedes both.”23 The One, then, is beyond even the highest platonic forms, that

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 47.
21. Ibid., 42.
22. Ibid., 43.
of “The Good” and “The Beautiful,” since form denotes difference, the highest Unity conceivable, the One, must necessarily be above even these forms. Here, Newberg and d’Aquili’s sense of wholeness accompanying AUB could not be more apparent. Since the Unity must remain perfect, the self is necessarily a part of this unity, and is capable of merging with the One through the very contemplation of it. Plotinus recognizes that the pinnacle of being, AUB, conveys a strong emotional content, characterized by an ecstatic love. He writes of the union of the soul with the One, “Suppose the soul to have attained: the highest has come to her, or rather has revealed its presence . . . here is no longer a duality but a two in one . . . it is as lover and beloved here . . . so huge the happiness she has won to.”

From this, one can see the aesthetic perfection in that the One is beyond even beauty itself, and the ecstatic emotional content of the soul’s merging from a spiritual belief in and contemplation of this concept.

From this analysis, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu mysticism can be evaluated similarly where the concept of a monistic God-concept, just like that of the One, exists. Meister Eckhart, a Dominican scholar, declares God to be “That being in comparison with which nothing better can be conceived” — Plotinus’ very concept of the One having survived an entire millennium. Sufi belief revolves around the concept of uniting the soul with its infinitely divine origin, Allah. Of the same infinite scale as Plotinus’ “One,” is the Upanishadic conceptualization of Brahman who “though one, takes new forms in all things that live. He is within all, and is also outside.”

Brahman is also Atman, or the divine self, in the Upanishads. Several Hindu traditions borrow this concept, though under different names. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna declares, “Nothing is higher than I am; . . . all that exists is woven on me . . . ” Within various traditions, the self is capable of uniting

24. Ibid., 454


with a deity of the same infinite-beyond-conception scale.

Newberg and d’Aquili would need to confront the constructivist criticism that there is no one transcendent reality which is being encountered objectively from each tradition. Fortunately they would rather “maintain an attitude of humility, rather than presume that our understanding of neurophysiology can give us an intrinsic knowledge of the relationship between ‘reality’ and consciousness.” Their model is just that, a mere model. Even though it is derived from brain imaging scans and is empirically grounded, there is hardly certainty regarding the correlation of the imaging to actual experience. Nonetheless, this model illuminates several useful, inter-causal links between aesthetics, emotion, and spiritual states, describing the progression towards AUB in terms familiar to the mystic.

IV. FOREMAN’S PCE IN MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

The Pure Consciousness Event can be defined as a mystical experience as determined by the criteria mentioned above: ineffability, the knowledge-imparting noetic quality, and the presentation of a unitive model of reality. Robert K.C. Foreman cites examples to illustrate just what the PCE is as its ineffable nature evades description. In fact pure consciousness can be described as a state which does not seek description while engaged. The yogic philosophy of Patanjali perhaps exemplifies this state best. It refers to an inward journey, beyond the layers of selfhood, towards what is seen as the true self, purusa, the eternal soul. Patanjali describes this goal as the “enlightenment of the distinction between the pure Purusa and Buddhi” where Buddhi is the lesser self, the Ego. Patanjali’s path to one-ness is described in terms of going into one’s self, where “the mind rests in itself” and “the awareness of one’s individual self gets lost.”

30. Ibid., 7.
31. Ibid., 8.
This inward journey is seen elsewhere in Hindu philosophy and religious tradition. For example, in the Baghavad Gita, speaking of what essentially appears to be purusa, Krishna remarks, “[e]ternal and supreme is the infinite spirit; its inner self is called inherent being” and it “is the source of creatures’ existence.”

The Upanishads echo in declaring, “all things find their peace in their inmost Self . . . thus all things find their rest in Atman, the Supreme Spirit,” thus indicating a parallel between Atman and purusa as the pure, true self. In essence, the PCE may be described as the consciousness resting in itself.

Yet, the PCE is by no means limited to Hindu tradition, it finds itself in many Buddhist manifestations, particularly in the concept of sunyata, or nothingness. Specifically, the no-thought of Dzogchen in Tibetan Buddhism, like the aforementioned Hindu traditions finds this state of consciousness to be the natural, primordial state. Foreman even asserts that Meister Eckhart “discusses what he calls gezucken, a state of being enraptured without sensory or intellectual content” which he “understands as a transient encounter with what he calls the innermost within the soul . . . wherein God exists in purity.”

In his Mathnawi, Rumi presents a similarly inward approach to God, “O God, do Thou reveal to the soul that place where speech is growing without letters, That the pure soul may make of its head a foot (fly headlong) towards the far-stretching expanse of non-existence.” This state of consciousness is not necessarily associated with elative emotions like AUB, yet it is still accurately described as mystical; since the PCE is characterized by a lack of thought or distinction, it is inherently ineffable – it imparts knowledge about the nature of the soul and of reality, and this knowledge is of a reality unified through lack of distinction. Constructivist critics, however, have much to say on the matter of the Pure Consciousness Event.

33. Prasna Upanishad, fourth question (see note 26), trans. Mascaró, 72.
V. CONSTRUCTIVIST CRITIQUE OF THE PCE AND FOREMAN’S RESPONSE

Constructivists claim that there are no un-mediated experiences. What is here meant by “mediation” is actually two-fold; mediation of experience occurs on the individual level and, more broadly, on the cultural level. First, the individual interprets every perception and experience, forming mental constructs in the process. Secondly, cultural constructs and religious systems provide the language and concepts that the individual uses to interpret his or her experiences. Steven Katz describes these mediators as “forms of consciousness which the mystic brings to an experience” which “set structured and limiting parameters on what the experience will be.”36 He simplifies this, stating that “[p]re-mystical consciousness informs the mystical consciousness.”37

First, Foreman responds to the undecided issue that it is the language that comes before the experience, Katz may “be accused of committing the fallacy of post hoc ergo propter hoc,” and iterates that “[t]he relationship between experience and expectation may be contingent, not necessary.”38 In other words, just because a mystic’s experience of a PCE comes after a lifetime of culture and language, does not necessarily mean that those factors informed the experience. Though it may seem as though Foreman is somewhat dismissing the obvious impact of culture and language on one’s experience, there is actually good reason to stand his ground on this point. The very nature of a PCE is defined by a lack of distinction or discursive reasoning. No matter what language brings one to a PCE, ideally, it is the same experience.

Hans Penner echoes Katz’s point writing that “[w]e must remember that all we have for understanding mysticism is language, not experience” and that it “is not mystical experience which explains mystical traditions or languages, rather

37. Ibid.
it is mystical language which explains mystical experience.”\textsuperscript{39} Not only is Penner committing the same post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy as Katz, and assuming the language precedes the experience, but as someone who has experienced mystical states, Foreman can actually attest to mystical experience preceding mystical language. By declaring that language, not experience describes mystical phenomena, Penner, as well as Katz, are insisting that all purportedly mystical forms of consciousness are lodged within discursive reasoning. This simply is not the case where many mystical experiences are concerned, especially given the role that ineffability plays in mystical experience.

Foreman congratulates the Katz and other constructivists saying, “[t]hey have successfully removed the mystics from the perennialists’ borderless desert.”\textsuperscript{40} Yet, when Hans Penner declares “that mysticism does not refer to any particular kind of system or experience,”\textsuperscript{41} declaring the word itself to be what Totemism was to religion a century ago, he seems to think they have taken it too far. Hard-line constructivists appear to almost completely deny any possibility for common mystical threads between cultures.

However, Foreman regards the PCE as one such common thread which is made all the more common by the fact that it is supposedly Pure Consciousness, and hence, something we all experience the same underneath language or conception. Newberg and d’Aquili likewise consider Absolute Unitary Being to be a potentially universal trait in mystical traditions, contrary to mystical relativists such as Katz, Gimello, and Penner. Andrew Newberg’s neuroscience and AUB, as well as Robert K.C. Foreman’s PCE are quite possibly the last vestiges of mystical perennialism to be found in the modern academic debate. They serve as a reminder that it is not such a mistake to conceive of human experience as being the same underneath those mental constructs that divide people into culture.

Perhaps suggestions of universality are not at all unreasonable. In his book

\textsuperscript{39} Penner, “The Mystical Illusion,” in Mysticism and Religious Traditions, 91.
\textsuperscript{40} Robert K. C. Forman, Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 43.
\textsuperscript{41} Penner, “The Mystical Illusion,” in Mysticism and Religious Traditions, 95.
In Gods We Trust, Scott Atran artistically describes similarities in human evolution:

Think metaphorically of humankind’s evolutionary history as a landscape formed by different mountain ridges. Human experience that lies anywhere along this evolutionary landscape converges on more or less the same life paths, just as rain that falls anywhere in a mountain landscape converges toward a limited set of lakes or river valleys. This notion of landscape is a conduit metaphor in the sense that it serves as a guide for a multisided approach to the evolutionary riddle of religion.42

Relativism, constructivism, and pluralism are more than necessary to constructing an accurate understanding of human phenomena, but they can cause one to forget the overwhelming array of human similarities. From a constructivist standpoint, it is easy, and many times necessary, to tear down the perennialist treatment of mysticism. Surely it is at least as admirable an endeavor to unite experiences, traditions, and beliefs into categories that encourage accuracy and precision, rather than a hiding behind the negating curtains of relativism.

Jonathan Olson: American Pentecostal Scholars

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Jonathan Olson

THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY: AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SCHOLARS AND THE QUANDARIES OF ACADEMIC PURSUIT

INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SCHOLARSHIP FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the immediate wake of the 1906 Azusa Street revival, Pentecostal “saints” from around the country began to craft (both formally and informally) certain theological and ideological opinions that located them (both intentionally and inadvertently) on what many understood to be the fringes of the America’s professional academic community. Early Pentecostals anticipated the imminent return of Christ and, in so doing, invested little in the affairs of the “world,” including political reform and economic security. Education also fell to the wayside. Apart from a number of bible schools whose sole purpose was to instruct young Pentecostals in the ways of evangelism, missionizing, and church planting, most early “saints” viewed more formal instantiations of higher education (e.g. classic liberal arts training) as a waste of precious time at best, damaging to one’s spiritual vitality at worst. Imbedded in such a philosophy was not only an apocalyptic expectancy, but also a strong suspicion of the mind itself as a space easily occupied by diabolic forces; the mind was weak, carnal, and susceptible to the wiles of the devil. Thus, giving too much attention to one’s intellectual development through the acquisition of “human” knowledge was for many early...
Pentecostals a dangerous prospect that threatened or at least distracted from the cultivation of greater spiritual empowerment, what many considered to be both a “safer” and more valuable alternative.

Class was also a factor. “Several were victims of abject poverty,” argues historian Robert Mapes Anderson. “Smith Wigglesworth and Frank Bartleman both described their families as ‘very poor.’” He goes on to note that another Pentecostal leader by the name of J. H. King “remembered his childhood as one of constant struggle and deprivation. His father, a tenant farmer with ‘no education, no money, no home and no horse,’ migrated frequently round about the South Carolina back country, dragging his wife and eleven children from one single-room log cabin to another.” Not only does King’s personal account invoke a deep sense of privation, it also reveals the poor agrarian setting to which many early Pentecostal leaders were born. Most were raised on modest farms, where hard labor and diminutive returns were commonplace. This rather dismal assessment of early Pentecostal economic standing is certainly not without its detractors. Historian Grant Wacker, in his book *Heaven Below*, argues that they were much more diverse than Anderson suggests. He claims that those belonging to the movement were not impoverished but instead “represented a cross section of the American population.” Only a minority were actually members of the lower class. Most, on the other hand, resembled average working-class Americans with the exception of a small group of affluent converts. Yet, in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially in the years during the Great Depression, corresponding to the national mean did not necessarily assure financial security. In fact, many early Pentecostals, though middle-class, suffered under the pressure of poor economic conditions. Even if Wacker’s theory is correct, we can still assume that the vast majority of early Pentecostals were anything but well-off. Under such fiscal restraints, few had either the time or


resources to pursue the kind of formal learning that would satisfy normative definitions of scholarly training.

Changes began to occur in the late 1940s. From the ashes of the Second World War emerged a strong period of economic growth in the United States that affected all corners of society. Pentecostals were no exception. During this time, they experienced a significant amount of upward mobility that positioned them firmly in the rank and file of an expanding and increasingly-professionalized middle class. Moreover, many Pentecostals had become, by the mid-century mark, disenchanted with notions of an imminent return of Christ and thus began to invest more heavily in their “earthly” existence. For some this included the development of one’s intellect, no longer viewed as a bane to one’s spiritual fortitude but instead interpreted by many as a useful tool for furthering the cause of the Kingdom of God. With the ratification of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act in 1944 (more commonly known as the GI Bill) many young Pentecostal men began to weigh more seriously the option and benefits of a college education. To quell the demand, Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God established its first liberal arts school in 1955 known as Evangel College. Other denominations followed suit by either establishing liberal arts institutions or increasing the degree offerings and overall academic rigor of existing bible colleges. Adding to the growth in higher education, the Society for Pentecostal Studies was formed in 1970, which continues to the serve as the movement’s premier academic organization. By the middle of that decade, the foundation of an American Pentecostal scholarly subculture was firmly in place.

Building on the advancements of prior generations, it appears that Pentecostal scholars today are beginning to make noticeable contributions to the wider fields of theology, church history, and biblical studies. Although many of these scholars still remain on the periphery of what many would consider America’s “Ivory Tower,” they form the backbone of a movement undergoing a visible intellectual growth spurt. In an effort to isolate the movement’s more formative players, a reputation survey was sent to 140 Pentecostal scholars from
around the country, followed by in-depth interviews with the thirteen names that appeared most frequently. What surfaced from this quantitative and qualitative data was a portrait of a subculture whose leading participants seem to occupy an interstitial space rife with apprehension and uncertainty, where each must negotiate how to pursue greater legitimacy in the larger academic community without somehow forfeiting a part of their Pentecostal identity. Yet, beyond such internal struggles lies a stratum of unique research, growing confidence, and a strong sense of optimism for the future of American Pentecostal scholarship or what sociologist Peter Berger would suggest is the beginnings of a new “plausibility structure” in which the label of “Pentecostal scholar” can exist as a viable and believable category.

QUANTITATIVE EXPLORATIONS: REPUTATION SURVEY

In early 2007, 140 Pentecostal scholars from around the nation received a brief survey. The questionnaire was divided into five parts. Part one asked respondents to list three of the most well known Pentecostal scholars. Part two asked respondents to list three of the most “cutting edge” Pentecostal scholars, and part three asked them to list three of the most influential. Part four asked respondents to list three Pentecostal scholars whom they had read the most and part five asked which three non-Pentecostal Christian scholars they had read the most (only recipients who classified their personal religious belief as “Pentecostal” were asked to respond to part five). Although the five parts of the survey were meant to offer unique perspectives, there was some overlap among the questions, as pointed out by some respondents who found it difficult to distinguish

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3. These scholars were chosen to participate in the reputation survey because they belonged to biblical studies, theology, or religion departments at their respective institutions. Since the disciplines in which Pentecostals are making the most impact in the larger academic world, namely biblical studies, theology, and church history, fall within these departments, these scholars were in a position to provide the most informative data. If I had surveyed Pentecostals in the fields of science, business, medicine, or even the social sciences, there would have been very little continuity between their responses. Their chosen fields are so vastly different. Plus, most of the Pentecostals in these fields would have had little knowledge of Pentecostal scholarship and therefore would have been unable to provide me with any usable data.
between the first three categories (most well-known, most “cutting edge,” most influential). This, however, was not necessarily a problem because all five parts of the questionnaire were weighed equally.

The primary goal of the reputation survey was to generate a list of America’s leading Pentecostal scholars by polling individuals who would be in a position to provide the most informative data, Pentecostal scholars themselves. Specifically, 140 scholars received the survey, 51 (36%) responded, and out of the 51 respondents 45 (32%) provided data. This means that 6 (4%) people responded but chose, for several different reasons, not to complete the entire survey. Thus, the rank was produced from the data provided by the 45 who answered most, if not all, of the questionnaire. Table 1 illustrates the initial findings.

Table 1. The Fifteen Leading American Pentecostal Scholars.
Based on the number and percentage of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amos Young</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel Robeck</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Macchia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinson Synan</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon Fee</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Thomas</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Wacker</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven Land</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veli-Matti Karkkainen</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary McGee</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley Burgess</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig Keener</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl Bridges-Johns</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James K. A. Smith</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the preliminary ranking in Table 1 is useful, it is not necessarily the most accurate representation. For instance, a scholar who was mentioned once by several people may actually have fewer nominations than a scholar who was mentioned multiple times by fewer people. Thus, it was more accurate to
determine rank based on total number of nominations as the Table 2 demonstrates.

**Table 2. The Fifteen Leading American Pentecostal Scholars.**
Based on the total number of nominations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of Nominations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amos Young</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel Robeck</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Macchia</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon Fee</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinson Synan</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Thomas</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Wacker</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven Land</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veli-Matti Karkkainen</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary McGee</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley Burgess</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miroslav Volf</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig Keener</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl Bridges-Johns</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James K. A. Smith</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley Horton</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick Moore</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the individual queries were just as revealing as the overall ranking itself. When asked to list the three most *well-known* Pentecostal scholars in the U. S., 22 (48%), named historian Vinson Synan, 20 (44%) mentioned historian Mel Robeck, and 19 (42%) respondents listed New Testament scholar Gordon Fee. These three scholars share two common characteristics: age and influence. Due to their longevity—all three are either in their sixties, seventies, or eighties—they have had a visible impact on the trajectory of American Pentecostal scholarship and have helped shaped the burgeoning subculture in unique and dynamic ways. For example, both Vinson Synan and Mel Robeck were among the first Pentecostal historians to research the beginnings of the movement with a level of objectivity respected by those in the larger academic
community, drawing innovative and in some cases controversial conclusions. In addition to being a prolific writer, Gordon Fee also has made an impact through his success in transporting Pentecostal biblical scholarship beyond the confines of the movement, enabling it to participate in broader academic conversations.

Although “well known,” Synan, Robeck, and Fee are not necessarily considered to be the most forward thinking. When asked about who they viewed as the most cutting-edge in their respective disciplines, 32 respondents (71%) nominated theologian Amos Yong, followed by theologian Frank Macchia with 15 nominations (33%), and Finnish-American theologian Veli-Matti Karkainen and philosopher/theologian James K. A. Smith tied with 6 nominations each (13%). What distinguishes these scholars is their willingness and even determination to transcend the customary theological and historical paradigms that have for decades dominated Pentecostal scholarship. Dynamic pneumatological approaches and ecumenical or even interfaith dialogue characterize much of their research. In the case of systematic theologian Amos Yong (who received more nominations in this category than the other three combined) involvement in Pentecostal-Buddhist dialogue, studies on pneumatology and science, and even research on the relationship between theology and physical disability are what mark his research as “cutting-edge.” Simply stated, the ability of Yong and some of his fellow scholars to stretch the boundaries of Pentecostal scholarship further than most of their colleagues gives them a certain respect within the Pentecostal scholarly community. To some extent, they even epitomize the movement’s scholarly emergence.

As a combination of the first two questions, the third question on the survey asked respondents to list whom they thought were the top three most

influential Pentecostal scholars. Not surprising, the lists generated by respondents corresponded with those already made. Of the top three, Mel Robeck came in first with 17 nominations (38%), Gordon Fee came in second with 15 nominations (34%), and Frank Macchia third with 13 nominations (34%). Also, both cutting-edge scholar Amos Yong and well known scholar Vinson Synan came in fourth and fifth, respectively. Likewise, question four asked recipients to list the top three Pentecostal scholars whose work they read the most. Based on the answers already given in the previous three questions, the names mentioned on this fourth question were not entirely surprising. With 12 nominations (27%) Amos Yong came in first, followed by Mel Robeck with 11 nominations (25%). In third place there was a tie between Gordon Fee and Chris Thomas, both with 10 nominations each (22%).

The fifth and final question on the reputation survey asked recipients to list three non-Pentecostal Christian scholars they read the most. This particular question was intended to trace the Pentecostal scholarly network beyond the boundaries of the movement itself, or in other words, to determine which scholars outside of Pentecostalism were/are influencing Pentecostal scholarship. Coming in first with 7 nominations (17%) was N. T. Wright. Second was a tie between Clark Pinnock and Mark Noll with 4 nominations each (10%) and there was a three-way tie for third place between Grant Wacker, Alister McGrath, and Harvey Cox with 3 nominations each (7%). The common denominator between these scholars is that they are all, with the exception of Cox, of the evangelical persuasion. This demonstrates that many Pentecostal scholars value and respect the work of evangelical scholars. It also suggests that many Pentecostal scholars are not looking beyond the scholarship of conservative Protestantism. It may be the case that they are comfortable with evangelical literature or are simply uncomfortable with the scholarship of mainline Protestants, Catholics, or the wider academy. Regardless of the specific reasons, it seems that many of today’s Pentecostal academics are choosing to read the scholarship produced by their evangelical “kin” instead of the scholarship generated by those outside the conservative Protestant tradition. Consequently, this information demonstrates
the insular qualities of American Pentecostal scholarship, a dominant theme (among others) in the subsequent interviews.

QUALITATIVE EXPLORATIONS: PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

The queries on the reputation survey, although insightful, provided only limited data. Composing a thicker description of the American Pentecostal scholarly subculture demanded the use of more qualitative methods. Using the survey’s ranking system, personal interviews were conducted with many of the nation’s leading Pentecostal scholars. The purpose of each interview was twofold: to collect information regarding each scholar, namely his or her upbringing, academic journey, and current situation and to extract each scholar’s perspective on the state of Pentecostal scholarship in general. The interviews began with some preliminary information such as the participants full name, job title, and age. Although the age-range between the youngest and the oldest scholar was quite significant, most were in their forties, fifties, or sixties, with an average age of 54. As far as disciplinary affiliation was concerned, five were theologians or philosophers, four were biblical scholars, four were church historians, and three were heavily involved in ecumenical studies. Another common denominator among these thirteen scholars was that they all taught at conservative Protestant institutions, ranging from liberal arts colleges to theological seminaries, with the exception of historian Grant Wacker who currently teaches at the historically-Methodist school, Duke University. Even though virtually all taught at conservative Protestant institutions, only half of the scholars interviewed (seven out of the thirteen) taught at Pentecostal-charismatic affiliated schools such as Regent University, the Church of God Theological Seminary, Vanguard University, and the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. The other half were connected to institutions that are welcoming to Pentecostals and charismatic Christians but are not overtly affiliated with the tradition. These schools consist of places such as Fuller Theological Seminary, Palmer Theological Seminary, Azusa Pacific University, and Calvin College. This cursory information (like their reading preferences) indicates that the
Pentecostal scholarly community, although burgeoning, is still quite localized.

The majority of the thirteen scholars agreed. “The limitations [of American Pentecostal scholarship], overwhelmingly, are its parochialism and fear of engaging the external academic world,” claimed Grant Wacker. He continued:

I find that very, very sad and I don’t see that changing very rapidly. I think it’s changing, but very slowly. There is still a paucity of Pentecostals at the AAR or the American Historical Association. Pentecostals retreat into their own little sanctuary, the Society of Pentecostal Studies. It started off as an academic society and what I think it has become, instead, is a safe refuge for people who often don’t have courage to enter the larger academic world. Those are strong words, but I stand by them. I feel this very strongly and I am very distressed by it. Just to see the timidity of Pentecostals, it’s inexcusable, there is no reason to be timid.5

Wacker is not alone in his convictions. James K. A. Smith, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, criticized Pentecostal scholarship for being “sectarian, tribalistic, [and ] enclavish,” while others suggested that it is limited in terms of academic discipline.6 Frank Macchia, Professor of Theology at Vanguard University, argued that biblical studies and practical ministry remain the only “appropriate” areas for investing one’s intellectual energies in many Pentecostal circles. Theologian Veli-Matti Karkkainen could not agree more when claimed that there is a penchant within the movement’s scholarship toward biblical studies and that there is an inherent lack of more conceptual or theoretical work.7

For some, these limitations have bred certain internal tensions that have, in turn, slowed the advancement of Pentecostal scholarship at large. Gary McGee, Distinguished Professor of Church History and Pentecostal Studies at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, suggested that fighting over the origins of the Pentecostal movement has been a hindrance, while James K. A. Smith argued that there is too much bickering over trite issues. “We have a lot

5. Grant Wacker, interview by author, August 18, 2007.
"We come from these hokie institutions and our conferences are still at [small colleges]. I think sometimes because of that, there is still a fair amount of weird in-fighting that happens in Pentecostal scholarship, so we lose energy on that, so we don’t have energy to be more outward looking."

External tensions have been equally troubling. During the interviews, fond recollections of early “Pentecostal” experiences were overshadowed, on occasion, by equally indelible memories of parental disapproval. For most of the thirteen scholars, their parents were members of the lower middle class. They were blue collar workers who, although lacking a formal education, labored hard to supply their families with the usual necessities. To illustrate, Gary McGee commented that his father had been a plaster and dry wall contractor who at most had a ninth-grade education. He also recalled his father’s suspicion of his career-path in historical studies. “There is no money in history;” McGee’s father told him. If the parents of these scholars were not members of the blue-collar work force, they were clergy, most often ordained in some Pentecostal denomination. Of the thirteen scholars interviewed, six grew up with parents or grandparents who were Pentecostal pastors or missionaries. In some cases, an upbringing with parents or grandparents in full-time ministry fostered an expectation that they become ministers themselves. For many “saints” it was the highest vocation one could achieve and anything less, even becoming a professional academic, was somewhat of a disappointment. Grant Wacker reminisced about such a struggle:

My parents strongly wanted me to become a minister and when I decided to become an academic they were both disappointed. I think my mother continued to be disappointed for the rest of her life. It’s probably true of a lot of people who are supposedly destined for the ministry; it doesn’t win the approval of their peers.

For some American Pentecostal scholars parental attitudes toward aca-

Adversity also came from other directions. While some experienced practical issues such as financial trouble and unemployment, others endured more emotional frustrations. Cheryl Bridges-Johns, Professor of Christian formation and discipleship at the Church of God Theological Seminary, recalled how she would routinely feel stigmatized as a Pentecostal in various academic settings:

I always felt like any [academic] meeting you go into if say you were Pentecostal they lowered your IQ ten points immediately. You develop this sixth sense of how people look at you and how they think about you, and they don’t talk to you, and then you give your paper, and then everybody wants to talk to you, like, “Wow, I can’t believe you can give a paper, that’s amazing.” I had a German come up to me once at a World Council meeting, [where] I gave a plenary session paper, and say, “That was a fine sermon but I wouldn’t qualify it as an academic paper,” and I said, “Well why?” and he went on and on about what I didn’t do. You know, you get that kind of stuff.11

Not only did such adversity come from those outside the movement, it also came from fellow Pentecostals who viewed these scholars with suspicion and even trepidation. Mel Robeck, a Professor of Church History and Ecumenics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Los Angeles, remembered the criticisms he received from administrative figures in the Assemblies of God for his rather controversial research:

I have even been told by my General Superintendent that he would have been happy for me to resign my credentials and I said to him basically, “Well you know the system and how it works and if you feel that strongly about taking my credentials you go ahead and do that, but at least we’ll have a trial.”12

Similarly, Stanley Horton recalled visiting a small Pentecostal congregation in Boston one Sunday morning while attending nearby Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The pastor was not entirely enthusiastic about having a scholar in the crowd: “He saw me come in and he spent the whole sermon

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haranguing against higher education.” Tacit in these memories are feelings of “outsiderhood,” where one’s identity as either a scholar or Pentecostal immediately works to devalue the other.

To a large extent, the “incompatibility” between Pentecostalism and academia is rooted in the movement’s anti-intellectual stigma. When asked, over half of the scholars interviewed stated that this label was, indeed, warranted. While many admitted to Pentecostalism’s past anti-intellectual tendencies, most, however, looked toward the future with optimistic eyes. “I do think there is still an anti-intellectual strain within the Pentecostal movement that pervades the movement, but I think it’s changing,” said Frank Macchia. “I’m happy to say it’s changing. [However], I think it will be another generation, if the Lord tarries, that will be required before we see significant gains in this direction.” Likewise, New Testament scholar Craig Keener suggested that the anti-intellectual stigma of the past is slowly fading away. “I don’t think it is as anti-intellectual now as it used to be,” he remarked. “I think that we still have that heritage that we are dealing with and you can hear that in my own story, how that was a struggle for me. If it wasn’t for an intermediate generation of scholars . . . I wouldn’t have been able to do what I was able to do.”

However, others argued that Pentecostal anti-intellectualism is nothing more than a misnomer. New Testament scholar Chris Thomas pointed out that Pentecostals have had a long history of establishing institutions of higher education. He also noted that some denominations within the movement seem to struggle with this stigma more than others. “I think it may be truer of some branches in the tradition,” Thomas said. “When I hear scholars in the AG talk, it sounds like they just got the crud kicked out of them.” Although Thomas was among the minority of scholars who disagreed with the anti-intellectual image of past generations, he was not necessarily alone. Historian Grant Wacker

15. Craig Keener, interview by author, April 7, 2007.
also suggested that early Pentecostals were not anti-intellectual but were simply at odds with more established forms of higher education. In a similar sense, both Stanley Horton and Gary McGee disagreed that Pentecostals were anti-intellectual but, instead, contended that the larger academic community was simply anti-supernatural.

Regardless of what those interviewed thought about the movement’s anti-intellectual past, the fact remains that such a heritage still haunts (to greater or lesser degrees) the movement’s scholarly subculture. According to some, it has inhibited Pentecostal scholars from making any lasting impression on the larger academic world. Akin to Grant Wacker’s previous accusation of “timidity,” historian Mel Robeck noted that “right now [Pentecostal scholars] are not leaving much of a mark at all [on the broader academic community].” Robeck did, however, mention the names of a few individuals who were “leaving a mark”: Amos Yong, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, Keith Warrington, Allen Anderson, and Gordon Fee. “It’s a pretty small circle, to be honest with you,” Robeck lamented. “Sometimes it is a bit depressing to me. I have invested thirty years of my life in the Society for Pentecostal Studies and I wish there were more scholars who were significant.” Old Testament scholar Rick Moore agreed, but with an important caveat. He suggested that Pentecostal scholars are not leaving a lasting impression, but went on to argue that such a legacy should not be their primary concern. “I really think our agenda ought to be to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness,” Moore noted. “I think we’ll make a fatal mistake if we start trying to go after making an impact on the academic world. What impact did Moses have on Egypt? What impact did Paul have on Rome? I just think we ought to try to be faithful.

Indeed, remaining “faithful” was foremost in the minds of some who feared

that Pentecostal scholarship, and maybe the movement in general, was losing its unique Pentecostal identity. According to ninety-year-old scholar Stanley Horton, Pentecostal scholars today are disregarding many of the “distinctives” that made them Pentecostals in the first place, namely the doctrines of glossolalia and divine healing. “I don’t see the book of Acts in some people’s theology today,” Horton lamented.\(^2\)\(^2\) Chris Thomas agreed. He stated, “I think the bad stuff from my vantage point are people just content to be evangelicals who happen to be Pentecostals.”\(^2\)\(^3\) While Wacker and Robeck suggested that Pentecostal scholars in general seem to lack the courage to engage the larger academic community, Horton and Thomas argued that Pentecostal scholars seem to lack the courage to be “true” Pentecostals.

Amid the frustrations and anxieties there exists a potent optimism. Grant Wacker referred to American Pentecostal scholarship as “vital, young, growing, and has the strengths of any adolescence,” while Pentecostal Latino studies scholar Arlene Sanchez-Walsh argued that is has “great potential.” She went on to note that the “future of Pentecostal scholarship is good” and that “Pentecostal scholarship is branching out of simply being denominational history, simply being theology; you’re getting ethicists, theologians, historians, so you’re getting people who are coming out of a lot of different disciplines.”\(^2\)\(^4\) Like Wacker and Sanchez-Walsh, James K. A. Smith also commented on the potential of the movement’s scholarship, especially in terms of the younger generation of Pentecostal scholars to which he belongs:

> There is a generation of scholars emerging who have done their PhDs in fairly mainstream institutions who know how things work in the broader academy, and are not just doing navel gazing scholarship. They want to talk to Pentecostals and they want to speak as Pentecostals.\(^2\)\(^5\)

Like Smith, Chris Thomas also envisioned a new generation of Pentecostal

\(^2\)\(^2\) Horton, 2007.
\(^2\)\(^3\) Thomas, 2007.
\(^2\)\(^5\) Smith, 2007.
academics who would bring the movement’s scholarship to a higher level:

I think we see a fourth generation emerging who don’t have an inferiority complex about being Pentecostal, who have a generation of Pentecostal scholarship to build on, and who really are taking their place in the arena. The best Pentecostal scholarship is that kind of scholarship that is unapologetic. When we are figuring out what our own categories are and going at our work as Pentecostals and not being beholden to other people’s categories.26

Encouraged by the younger generations, both Smith and Thomas anticipate a future were the labels of “Pentecostal” and “scholar” are no longer interpreted by the larger society or by American Pentecostals as mutually exclusive identities. Spurred by a similar sense of optimism, some interviewees went so far as to suggest that such a transformation was already taking place. “The Pentecostal academy is influencing other researchers and so forth,” wrote Gary McGee. “We are probably telling our story today more than we ever have before. There are lots of people in the academy and in churches around the world who want to know more about Pentecostals and what they believe.”27 He went on to affirm that “the Pentecostal academy today, limited as it may seem, is making its voice heard. Pentecostals are being invited into all sorts of contexts to speak, to present their story, or to interact on different things that would have been unthinkable thirty years ago.”28 In a similar fashion, Stanley Horton also suggested that Pentecostalism, as both a religious movement and a burgeoning scholarly subculture, is making its mark on the larger academic community. While conducting research in past decades, Horton found that most systematic theologians did not even mention the Holy Spirit or have at least one section on pneumatology. “That’s changed,” he remarked. “Due to the Pentecostal revival and due to the scholarship that we’ve developed, it’s caught their attention.”29

In the end, most American Pentecostal scholars seem eager to inform the larger

academic community and their fellow Pentecostals that they are, in the words of Craig Keener, “a legitimate voice.” However, as the qualitative data in this section has suggested, the road to such legitimacy is not without its share of impediments, especially when it comes to the conflation of identities popularly construed as antithetical. Many American Pentecostal scholars continue to be viewed by those on the outside as not fully academic nor fully Pentecostal, while movement out of this liminal state is for some a terrifying prospect. It means the possibility of relinquishing an integral part of themselves that they may never be able to fully repossess. For Wacker the “timidity” of American Pentecostal scholars may still be “inexcusabale,” but it is certainly understandable.

INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK: PETER BERGER’S “PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE” AND THE AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SCHOLAR

In his ground-breaking book, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Peter Berger explores the concept of plausibility and its relationship to the various realities to which religious institutions subscribe. Specifically, he argues that religious communities acquire a sense of “believability” through not only their own system of meanings but through the dialectical processes between that system and the organizing structures of the larger society. The “plausibility structure” forged in this dialectic comprises the foundation of reality for religious communities, serving as a framework that mediates and regulates what is and what cannot be understood as true and viable.

Within this paradigm, religious pluralism matters a great deal. According to Berger, it opens up spaces allowing for the emergence of a new, secularized view of reality that threatens the overall credibility of religious institutions. To put it another way, in a religiously pluralistic society (a label which Berger uses to characterize the United States) there exists a tension between the dominant social structures (defined by secularism) and religious communities who are at risk of losing their plausibility, especially when interacting with a larger world.

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that does not share its own definition of reality. In such a social setting there are two appropriate responses: accommodation or resistance. Berger comments that the “difficulty of the accommodating posture, reorganizing an institution in order to make it ‘more relevant’ to the modern world,” is reduced to the single question, “‘How far should one go?’” whereas those who subscribe to the posture of resistance, with its emphasis on “maintaining or revamping the institution so as to serve as a viable plausibility structure for reality-definitions that are not confirmed by the larger society,” must agonize over whether the “defenses” or “plausibilities” they actively build are strong enough to withstand the “undermining” operations of the dominant social structures.31 Simply stated, in a religiously pluralistic society, religious institutions experience a crisis of plausibility, which leads to a crisis of legitimacy that can only be rectified through either adaptation or further entrenchment.

In the past few decades, Berger’s theory of religion has undergone some intense scrutiny. Specifically, sociologists and historians of American religion (including Berger himself) have criticized his secularization thesis as nothing but wishful thinking and an inaccurate representation of contemporary American society. Despite these criticisms, Berger’s theory of plausibility structure remains a helpful paradigm for understanding the predicament of American Pentecostal scholars who aspire to be fully “academic” and fully “Pentecostal” at the same time.

To begin, their recent emergence into the mainstream academic world has produced a crisis of legitimacy not entirely unlike the experiences of religious communities whose plausibility structures have been weakened by religious pluralism. Like these communities, Pentecostal scholars today find themselves in the position of having to decide whether to accommodate or resist the dominant definitions of reality, where Pentecostalism and academia remain antithetical categories. As the interviews revealed, the decision is not simple nor is it uniform. For many, accommodation means greater legitimacy in the eyes

of the larger academy, but it also means surrendering at least a vestige of their Pentecostal identity, if not in their eyes than in the eyes of many of their fellow “saints” who have chosen to resist the dominant social structures themselves. On the other hand, if today’s Pentecostal scholars choose the path of many fellow Pentecostals and resist the prevailing “realities” of the broader academic community (including its epistemologies, hermeneutics, and so on) they may be able to assist in the construction of a uniquely Pentecostal plausibility structure but at the expense of any intellectual legitimacy, at least in the eyes of the larger society. The recent emergence of American Pentecostal scholarship sheds light on the deep and complex tensions that exist between the postures of accommodation and resistance in Berger’s model. In the case of Pentecostal scholars, their past inability to navigate these tensions has given rise to a visible hesitation within the subculture that remains a source of frustration for many. However, where some see failure, others see opportunity. Although abounding in timidity, the subculture also abounds in optimism. As some intimated, American Pentecostal scholars are beginning to negotiate more effectively the relationship between accommodation and resistance through a mutual commitment to both academic rigor and religious conviction. Moreover, it is possible that through these processes of negotiation, American Pentecostal scholars are beginning to construct their own plausibility structure in which the identities of “professional academic” and “Pentecostal believer” coexist with little or no friction. We see the evidence of this building process in the language theologian Frank Macchia who claimed that American Pentecostals are beginning “to develop a . . . heritage,” in which “intellectual pursuit” is “cherished . . . as a spiritual gifting.”


Or to reiterate the words of Chris Thomas, Pentecostal scholars are, for the first time, “figuring out” their “own categories” and are no longer “beholden” to the “categories” of others. If indeed such a structure is taking shape, it is doing so out of a multi-dimensional, dialectic process between the reality-definitions of American Pentecostal scholars and the reality-definitions that govern both the
CONCLUSION: THE QUANDARIES OF AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SCHOLARSHIP IN BROADER PERSPECTIVE

Through the dynamic research of some of its leading figures, the American Pentecostal scholarly subculture is beginning to penetrate the nation’s intellectual marketplace in new and unprecedented ways. Yet, such engagement is not without its costs. Attempts to bridge the long-standing Pentecostal/academic dichotomy has led to internal questions of identity and legitimacy that seem just as difficult to answer, as they are to pose in the first place. The external struggles are equally apparent. Many have experienced at least some form of denigration from those in the wider academy who doubt their intellectual rigor, and ironically have encountered a similar scorn from some of their fellow Pentecostals who question their commitment to the charismatic faith.

Such quandaries are by no means limited to Pentecostal scholars. Professional academics in the wider evangelical world have faced similar dilemmas. In the post-war era, American evangelicals began to construct an elaborate intellectual subculture comprised of academic societies, refereed journals, and publishing houses. Similar to Pentecostals, this subculture offered an alternative to “secular” academia, in which “born-again” Christian scholars could present and publish their research in an amicable environment. As sociologist Alan Wolfe argues, by the early 1960s “conservative Christians with roots in American fundamentalism [had] created a life of the mind broader and more imaginative than anything previously found in their tradition.” Yet, many non-evangelicals in the wider academy remained unconvinced. Some, like historian Richard Hofstadter, upheld the notion that evangelicalism carried with it an inherent anti-intellectualism that not only disqualified them from “real” academic conversation—conversation based on an epistemology of scientific

empiricism—but also had a damaging effect on American society at large.35

Evangelical scholars looking to extend their voice beyond the parameters of the evangelical scholarly subculture met, and in some cases continue to meet, certain forms of resistance or have been at least received with an unspoken skepticism. As Pentecostal scholars have begun to discover and what many in the broader evangelical community already know, the anti-intellectual stigma is difficult to shed. On the other end of the spectrum, a sizable portion of modern evangelicals (especially those in the middle and lower classes, which includes many Pentecostals) tend to hold populist sentiments in which professional academics, regardless of religious affiliation, are viewed as untrustworthy elites and are thus treated as outsiders. Similar to the experiences of the Pentecostal scholars discussed throughout this article, some scholars in the wider evangelical world (and even in certain Catholic and Mormon circles) are forced negotiate their way through an interstitial space wrought with tensions. The global considerations of this study are also worth mentioning. In the words of Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, Pentecostalism is “a religion made to travel, and it [seems] to lose nothing in the translation.”36 At least when it comes to the movement’s recent academic expansion, such an observation appears to ring true. Not only are we witnessing a transformation in Pentecostal scholarship and higher education in the United States, but various Pentecostal communities throughout the world are also beginning to establish colleges, universities, and seminaries that are more “mainstream” in terms of their academic scruples. Indeed, historian Joel Carpenter goes so far as to say that “virtually anywhere in the world that a significant Pentecostal, charismatic, or other evangelical movement has taken root, it is now engaged in higher education beyond the training


of church workers.” More and more, Pentecostal scholars aboard are thinking beyond the pragmatic topics of indigenous church planting and pastoral ministry, and are making strides in areas such as systematic theology and biblical criticism. Whether or not these scholars experience the same quandaries as their fellow “saints” in the States remains uncertain. What is clear is that Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity is growing rapidly throughout the global South (Asia, Africa, and South America) and according to historian Philip Jenkins it tends to be more theologically-conservative and supernatural in orientation than the movement’s manifestations in the West (Europe and North America). It is quite possible, then, that the difficulties experienced by domestic Pentecostal scholars are only exacerbated at the global level, where the supposed gap between charismatic beliefs and practices and the epistemologies associated with the mainstream academy is likely viewed by those at both ends of the spectrum as even more impassable than in the American context. In the end, it appears that for Pentecostal scholars (regardless of geography) to succeed in cultivating a level of legitimacy in the eyes of their detractors, they must continue to find creative and innovative ways of navigating the mine field of stigmas that persists in limiting their impact on the wider academic and Pentecostal worlds.


In her first book Lila Corwin Berman, Murray Friedman Professor and Director of Feinstein Center for American Jewish History at Temple University, explores Jewish self-identity between World War I and the Civil Rights Era. Writing to both a scholarly and general audience, Berman seeks to explores how Jews explained themselves to non-Jews between 1920 and 1960 and “how the meaning of Jewishness became inseparable from their explanations” (2).

Rather than focus on “everyday” Jews “on the ground,” Speaking of Jews analyzes Jewish intellectuals’ public discourse about Jewishness and American identity. After World War I, Berman argues, American Jewish intellectuals purposefully began to explain Judaism and the place of Jews in American public life to non-Jews. They did so by cleaving to the emergent field of sociology, creating a vocabulary of “Jewishness” that did not rely on biology or race. In the process, Berman asserts, American Jewish intellectuals refashioned Jewish identity for other Jews. By the Civil Rights Era, Jewish intellectuals had successfully placed Jews at the center of American public life and popular understandings of American democracy. Jewish self-identity had successfully changed over time; yet Jewish intellectuals managed to continually explain “Jewishness” as the epitome of American identity. Thus, Berman concludes, “the Jewish story was a metonym
for the American story” (10).

According to Berman, the larger purpose of Speaking of Jews is to contribute to “a larger historical and political discussion about how people, communities, and nations have encountered the tension between humanism or universalism on the one hand, and particularism or distinctiveness on the other” (7). With American Jews as her example, Berman offers a glimpse at a group of people who “were forced to be self-conscious of their differences” yet they were “given the freedom to eradicate many of those things that made them different” (7). It is important to keep in mind that Berman’s subjects are primarily elite Jewish (Reform) intellectuals who despite their insularity and small numbers, Berman argues, are responsible for crafting the nation’s understanding of Jewish identity and status in American public life. Accordingly Speaking of Jews contains the markers of an intellectual history, with a source base of magazines, newspapers, transcripts, speeches, and other printed material written or articulated by elite, male Jews. To balance the narrative, Berman also includes material on select popular subjects like Marilyn Monroe and experiences of other Jewish women garnered from sociological research.

Together these sources reveal that the emerging field of sociology and Jewish intellectuals mutually benefited from a vocabulary that encouraged the preservation of community (often through endogamy) yet avoided biological or racial claims to Jewish identity. Jewish intellectuals crafted a message to non-Jews that was heard primarily by other Jews: Jews are part of a unique tradition that has much to offer American democracy. In fact, these intellectuals claimed, Jews epitomized American liberalism with their commitment to individual liberty (especially volition) and group identity. Liberal Judaism reflected American liberalism—both, for example, made claims to universal good while defining themselves according to the exclusion of others (17). Consequently, Jews supported American liberal individualism while they also retained their unique outsider status. By the Cold War, Berman asserts that Jews were essential to refashioning American democratic ideals to support unity through religious and cultural diversity. America thrived because minorities like Jews could thrive in America.
Implicitly, Berman seems to suggest that America is an exceptional place that affords Jews the liberty to construct their identity in whatever manner they chose rather than Jews being particularly exceptional for applying their own volition in this manner. This seems to hold true as the tensions within liberalism—of maintaining individual choice while also asserting group cohesiveness—intensified in the Civil Rights era when Jews increasingly married non-Jews, eroding Jewish sociological cogency according to the very tenets rabbis purported.

Berman does an excellent job of connecting shifts in American Judaism to larger trends in American history. American Jews are fully a part of political discourse—and perhaps directing it—between World War I and the Civil Rights Movement (rather than an addendum to “mainstream” America). Unlike John Sarna or Leonard Dinnerstein, Berman does not draw attention to antisemitism as a major contributing factor to individual American Jewish identity or the American Jewry as a community. Instead, Berman asserts that Jews not only contributed to but also developed American liberalism in the twentieth century. Berman makes an excellent case for Jews (rather than middle-class white Protestants) benefitting from Cold War rhetoric of “faith in faith.”

At the same time, Berman is careful to also demonstrate how these shifts in popular political discourse can be less than helpful to religious groups. Berman, like her subjects, relocates “religion” to the realm of group identity. In this telling, religion is not what you believe or what you do; it is who you are. That individual focus of identity, however, is shaped by the articulation of group identity. As a result, Berman provides an interesting contrast to Ann Taves’ work in Fits, Trances, and Visions. Whereas Taves delineated individual religious experience from explanations of religious experience, Berman demonstrates how religious identity and explanations of religious identity are woven together and, perhaps, cannot be separated. Consequently, Speaking of Jews supplies fruitful points of discussion for those interested in Jewish Studies and American Religious History in particular as well as Religious Studies more generally.

Cara L. Burnidge, Florida State University
In welcome and original scholarship, Andrew Finstuen has reverted historians’ gazes towards theology. Analyzing the unlikely trinity of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich, Finstuen demonstrates the existence of a “theological revival” occurring in America during the post-World War II era. While many histories and analyses of American religion in this time period focus on the “captive revival,” in which Protestantism is beholden to a middle-class, suburbanite ethos (Norman Vincent Peale’s theology of “positive thinking” is the quintessential case study of this), Finstuen focuses on the popularity and accessibility of countercultural theology amongst Christian theologians and their lay readers while utilizing the doctrine of original sin as a window into this second revival.

In establishing the existence of this revival, Finstuen analyzes the thoughts of Niebuhr, Graham, and Tillich on the nature of sin. While Niebuhr is often envisioned as the neo-orthodox prophet, Graham as the common man’s evangelist, and Tillich as the vanguard of correlative theology, and hence they represent three disparate tracks of American Protestantism, Finstuen successfully connects the three through their largely critical views of humankind and society. Niebuhr, in Moral Man and Immoral Society, dismissed the liberal Protestant notion of societal progress and perfection, furthering his critique of human sin in The Nature and Destiny of Man. Graham, informed by his Reformed evangelical heritage, naturally saw Christ as the only escape from a life and existence plunged in sin. Similarly, Tillich discussed human “estrangement” from God as the root cause of humankind’s existential crisis, relabeling traditional doctrines with new, arguably relevant terminologies while attempting to preserve the core of the doctrine. In Finstuen’s analysis, Tillich’s radicalness is correctly balanced with an acknowledgment of a conservative influence, providing a fresh interpretation of the often misunderstood theologian. Together, these theologians served to balance to Norman Vincent Peale and the “captive revival,” advocat-
ing an alternative theological perspective which was consumed by lay readers, whom Finstuen labels “lay theologians.” Finstuen’s analysis is made more persuasive by his inclusion of Billy Graham, whose popularity and surprising theological similarities with Niebuhr and Tillich grant further credence to the existence of a “theological revival.”

Central to this book’s contribution is Finstuen’s theoretical usage of the “lay theologian,” who appears as the fourth major character under investigation. In order to demonstrate the relevance of Niebuhr, Graham, and Tillich beyond the academy, Finstuen utilizes correspondence from readers to the theologians, demonstrating serious interaction with theology by lay members. In effect, Finstuen successfully counters the scholarly relegation of theology as a matter of the elites. Instead, we find a housewife writing detailed letters to Paul Tillich, thanking him for providing her with a theological voice. Another woman, independently studying Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*, developed a 49 page commentary of notes and comments. Finstuen provides countless examples of literary exchanges between “lay theologians” and Niebuhr, and likewise mines the resources of Graham’s “My Answer” column for many accounts of lay Protestant interactions with these preeminent theologians. Finstuen’s assembled evidence does not only substantiate the existence of the “theological revival,” but it also provides a promising theoretical framework for historians of American religion seeking to properly account for theology within the historical narrative. Theology, alongside class, race, regional identity, and other factors, should be taken seriously, as perhaps lay church members are more theologically engaged with academic theology than previously thought. The non-elites maintain agency as they freely interact with the texts, sometimes vehemently disagreeing with them, but thoroughly interacting with them nonetheless out of their own volition. As Finstuen demonstrates, lay people are theological creatures too..

Adam Brasich, *Florida State University*

C. Julia Huang’s study of the Taiwanese Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Merit Society uses the story of Venerable Cheng Yen and her followers to explore the role of charisma and globalization in the development of contemporary religious movements. While the work is guided by the narrative of Tzu Chi’s development, the focus clearly lies in more general theoretical and methodological questions of the role of charisma in the development and institutionalization of religious movements. Huang’s work is aimed at developing “a new ethnographic approach,” which, in its consideration of charisma, “allows emotion into the theory of practice, and enables nonverbal corporeality to be taken seriously as cultural construction and symbolic interpretation” (5).

The work can be viewed in two parts. The first four chapters deal with Tzu Chi’s origin, institutional organization, and practices. Chapter one introduces Ven. Cheng Yen, discussing the ways in which hagiographic accounts of the founder’s life enable followers to rationalize and routinize the charisma of the founder. Chapters two and three discusses this “routinization of charisma” further, arguing that the organization’s structure establishes Ven. Cheng Yen as the sole source clear hierarchical authority, whose charismatic authority is reinforced both in the leader’s monthly tour of Taiwan, and by “homecoming” visits to the Tzu Chi headquarters made by devotees. Chapter four discusses two primary practices seen among Tzu Chi members—crying/weeping and “hand-language song”—that reflect “opposite ends of a continuum of emotions between ecstasy and formalization,” both equally important in the routinization of charisma.

Huang provides in these chapters a clear portrait of both the function and structure of Tzu Chi’s organization, as well as the form and context of practices undertaken by the group. Especially clear is Huang’s discussion of the various contexts in which crying can be witnessed among Tzu Chi members, and the gendered “performances” reflected in the act of crying in the context of both
Taiwanese culture generally and Tzu Chi specifically. This section is, however, lacking a clear theoretical framework, especially in regards to her focus on “charisma.” While Huang engages briefly in the introduction with several theories of charisma (including the work of Max Weber and Thomas Csordas), the term is not employed with the same level of critical analysis throughout the work. More often, charisma is described in vague and generally unhelpful terms such as “appeal” or “magnetism.”

The second half of the book outlines the rapid growth of the movement experienced in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as its evolution into an international NGO, discussed in terms of the development of local and global “personhood.” Huang highlights how Tzu Chi’s close relationships with both the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party have allowed the organization to flourish, but does not discuss how attempts of the government to “recapture Tzu Chi by collaborating with, if not riding on the coattails of” the organization has affected Tzu Chi policies or practices (209).

Huang seems to overemphasize the “globalized” and “transcultural” nature of the organization. Although Tzu Chi has surely become “global” insofar as its influence has spread throughout the worldwide Taiwanese diaspora, “localized” or “indigenous” forms of Tzu Chi appear to have only developed in Malacca, Malaysia, and then only in a limited fashion. Huang does not question why Tzu Chi has had such little impact on or appeal outside Taiwanese and Chinese communities, despite having centers in Tokyo, New York and Boston. While she is quick to point out that Tzu Chi provides English subtitles for videos of sermons and performs sign language singing in English, she does not address the fact that such forms of outreach have had little effect.

While this volume may be useful to students and scholars interested in contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism in its vivid description of Tzu Chi’s organization and practice, it does not provide a useful theoretical model for scholars interested in global Buddhism.

Zac Johnson, Florida State University
Since the Church of Christ, later known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was founded in 1830, there have been hundreds of divergent Mormon communities. For the most part, mainstream scholars publishing in university presses have neglected to probe the intricacies of other Mormonisms beyond the LDS Church, the RLDS Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strang), and very recently, Mormon Fundamentalist branches. Polygamy on the Pedernales is only the second time that a university press has published a treatment of Lyman Wight who in 1845 established the first Mormon colony in the Republic of Texas. For that reason alone, this is an important volume.

In 1844, a heated succession crisis followed the death of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church. Numerous claimants emerged to continue or to correct Smith’s vision of primitive Christianity. Most adherents to Mormonism sided with the succession claims of the twelve apostles with Brigham Young at their head. Under Young, the esoteric theology and ceremonial practices introduced to only a very few during Joseph Smith’s lifetime were institutionalized. Of course, this included the controversial early Mormon practice of polygamy. A number of dissenting bodies formed to rival Young’s interpretation of Mormonism. What makes Lyman Wight such an interesting figure is that he was one of the twelve apostles, sided with Young’s idea of Joseph Smith, theology, and polygamy, yet questioned Young’s policies relating to colonization and the restructuring of ecclesiastical leadership.

Immediately after Smith’s death, Lyman Wight relocated with a group of two hundred Mormons first to Wisconsin and then to Texas, in order to fulfill an assignment he had received from Joseph Smith to establish a colony in the area. Once in Texas, Wight and Young had a falling out based around public statements disparaging the other’s actions and new developments occurring in the other’s absence. Within a few years, the die had been cast and Wight’s excommunication resulted in closed doors between the two communities.
Michael Scott Van Wagenen’s *The Texas Republic and the Mormon Kingdom of God* provided a fair overview of the colonization efforts undertaken by Lyman Wight as part of a larger project of contextualizing early Mormonism’s flirtation with nationalism and subsequent interest in Texas. *Polygamy on the Pedernales* was also preceded by Jeremy Benton Wight’s self-published *Lyman Wight: The Wild Ram of the Mountains* which provided the first full biographical work of Lyman Wight for a sympathetic Mormon audience. That being said, *Polygamy on the Pedernales* is the first published full-scale treatment of Lyman Wight’s community by a professional historian.

As can be expected, Johnson has brought a number of strengths to the table. First, his acute probing of the primary sources has resulted in a number of fresh and exciting insights. This is particularly apparent in his discussion of the role of plural marriage in the community and the subsequent history of Wight’s descendants. Concerning polygamy, Johnson describes how the practice strengthened ties between members of the community. He also ably demonstrates the secretive nature of polygamy in the community – something not always apparent in the source material – through discovering that the colony attempted to hide polygamous relationships in the 1850 census.

Johnson corrects the mistaken idea that an equal portion of Wight’s descendants ended up as members of the polygamy-supporting LDS Church as did in the polygamy-rejecting Reorganized Church. Instead, he discovered that, following the death of Lyman Wight and the collapse of his community, the “majority, including the wives of Lyman Wight and most of the other polygamists and former polygamists, joined the RLDS church in the Upper Midwest” (197). Those that joined the RLDS Church attempted to re-write the community’s history denying the existence or prevalence of plural marriage in the community. Specifically, Johnson suggests that a number of documents preserved by Wight’s descendants and later donated to the RLDS archives have turned up missing, while those sympathetic to this policy were in charge.

As can be expected with any such work, there are weaknesses. First, I should
note that I have stumbled upon a few factual errors in the work, albeit largely minor ones. On page 42, Johnson quotes a letter from Lyman Wight to Brigham Young, the cite checker unfortunately missed at least one line of text from the quotation and as a result the quote is both inaccurate and misleading in regards to Wight’s relationship with the larger movement. More importantly, I think the text would have benefited from a more thorough positioning in Mormonism’s esoteric Nauvoo history. Thus, I would recommend this work be read alongside D. Michael Quinn’s still excellent *Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*. 

I worried about the title of this work, since it seemed to me that someone was trying to employ a marketing strategy of linking Lyman Wight’s brand of polygamy in antebellum Texas with the recent relocation of Warren Jeffs’ Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to El Dorado, Texas. Whereas, Johnson’s urge to draw parallels are limited to his introduction and conclusion, I tend to think it is not overly gratuitous. He does, from his vantage point in 2006, make eerie predictions of a confrontation between Jeffs’ community and “Lone Star law and customs.” Johnson astutely identifies the now missing component that allowed for Wight’s survival in the antebellum and the impending crisis at El Dorado: the frontier, which the FLDS simply don’t have to their advantage.

Despite its flaws, *Polygamy on the Pedernales* is an important work in the history of Mormonism. I would recommend the volume to scholars and students of religion in the American West, as well as Mormon Studies proper. My hope is that this volume will inspire further academic endeavors on Wight’s community and other sectarian forms of Mormonism that have multiplied over the past 150 years.

**Christopher Blythe, Florida State University**

In Honoring Elders, Michael D. McNally produces an ethnographical study and history of age and eldership in the Ojibwe people, a Native American group indigenous to the upper Great Lakes region in North America. McNally’s goal is two-fold. First, he wants to identify the religious nature of eldership, and second, he argues that age should be elevated as a category of academic analysis on a level with ethnicity or gender. Drawing from diverse sources such as missionary journals, travel narratives, transcribed oral narratives, and ethnographic fieldwork, McNally highlights the significance and authority of old age in Native American Ojibwe tradition. Eldership, McNally argues, is a constant, yet evolving, source of religious, spiritual, and political authority. This evolution is rooted in historical developments that are characterized by overlapping patterns of interaction with Europeans settlers, including periods of trade, treaty negotiation, warfare, coerced assimilation, and Christian missionizing. McNally is particularly interested in the period after the 1970s, when political decisions by the United States government resulted in new possibilities for tribal cultural self-determination, allowing the Ojibwe to reclaim and reconstruct their history and culture through the lens of modern sensibilities. This resulted in a reformulation of the authority of the elders, who assumed new roles in the communities as sources of wisdom and knowledge in the Ojibwe’s ongoing search for sacred learning, spiritual maturity, morality, and communal vitality. McNally concludes that eldership is a persistent source of power, but one whose authority and significance is subject to change relative to larger socio-historical factors.

In his attempt to elevate age as a category of scholarly analysis, McNally draws from an existing anthropology and historical study of age. He is in conversation with various historians, but the work of cultural historian Thomas Cole is particularly important. Cole traced the de-meaning of age in American cultural history where old age became a “problem” best addressed by science.
McNally embraces Cole’s emphasis on age and its relationship to historical trends and then applies it to the Ojibwe. Sociologically, McNally draws from a range of classic and current sociologists, beginning with Max Weber’s insights on authority. Weber marked a turn from an objective approach to authority in favor of a theory of authority as situationally constituted in social life. McNally synthesizes Cole and Weber as he traces the authority of eldership and its evolution as embedded in larger, competing discourses.

*Honoring Elders* is a well-written and fascinating work that insightfully recognizes eldership as a position of authority that is both socially constructed and evolving, subject to internal and external impulses. However, McNally’s romanticized view of eldership leads him to develop a potentially contradictory theory of eldership in his contention that it is both evolving and timeless. Furthermore, McNally’s assertion that elders are religious authorities equal to shamans and priests is also problematic, as it assumes a *sui generis* religious space that is questioned by both the academy and apparently the Ojibwe as well (see p. 48).

**Brad Stoddard**, *Florida State University*