

Origen and Scripture

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We saw how Origen linked our two ways of being, active and contemplative, with Mary and Martha, but later he refines this and distinguishes three stages, which he calls ‘ethics’, ‘physics’ and ‘enoptics’. Bishop Kallistos Ware in *Journey to the Heart* explains this as follows:

“‘Ethics’, the first stage, corresponds to the active life, the acquisition of virtues. The other two are both forms of contemplation, but Origen distinguishes between what he calls ‘physics’, which means the contemplation of nature, seeing God in His creation, seeing God in all things and all things in God and ‘enoptics’, which means the vision of God.....

We find this threefold scheme particularly in Evagrius of Pontus, a late fourth century Egyptian desert Father and Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century.

It is clear when we look carefully at the way Origen or Evagrius or Maximus speak about the threefold scheme, that it isn’t a question of successive stages, the one ending before the next begins. It’s rather a question of deepening levels which might overlap, which might be simultaneous rather than successive. In other words, you might advance from the active life to the contemplation of nature, but you would still have to lead a struggle to follow a moral life. And you might go further and have experiences of the direct vision of God, and yet you would still practise the contemplation of God in nature.

The starting point of *'praxis'*, the active life of *'ethics'*, especially according to Evagrius, is *'metanoia'*. This literally means a change of mind, that is, repentance. Repentance is not a paroxysm of guilt and self-hatred; repentance means changing your mind, a new way of looking at yourself, at your neighbour and God.

So that's where you start in the active life; then you seek purification from sinful acts, purging of evil thoughts. And at the end of the active life – and this is a point made by Evagrius rather than Origen – you reach what he calls *'apatheia'*, which does not mean apathy. It means passionlessness, being dispassionate. In a negative sense this is elimination of desires; in a positive sense the affirmation of purified and transfigured desires. It doesn't mean immunity from temptation, because we expect to face temptation right up to the end of our earthly life.

It is closely linked by Evagrius with the quality of love, having ceased to lust, we begin to be able to love. *'Apatheia'* is therefore not just negatively the elimination of sinful desires, but positively the replacing of our disordered impulses by a new and better energy from God. So it means health of soul, reintegration, spiritual freedom.

St. John Cassian, in presenting the teaching of Evagrius in the West in Latin, uses *'puritas cordis'*, purity of heart, instead of the word *'apatheia'*. That has the great advantage of being positive rather than negative in its form, and also of being scriptural.”

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