




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Apocalyptic praxis in Evagrius of Pontus and Francis of Assisi

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## Abstract

The Christian mystical tradition approaches the apocalyptic *as praxis* – a way of living that renounces the world as it is, lives proleptically into a counter-world of God’s reign and practices indifferent freedom in the meantime to love God and neighbour. Although concerns about the ethical viability of such a disposition have merit, this essay demonstrates its constructive possibility through recourse to two archives: the writings of Evagrius of Pontus and the witness of Francis of Assisi. By recovering a scriptural distinction between world and creation, and by emphasising the posture of holy indifference, apocalyptic praxis offers a resource and guide.

**Keywords:** apocalypse; creation; indifference; praxis; world

Apocalypse, as lens and provocation, has enjoyed a recent surge in popularity. One could tell a longer story about the recovery of the apocalyptic in biblical studies, the terrible (some might say apocalyptic) advent of failed utopian world wars and doomsday-evoking nuclear weapons in the twentieth century, and the more recent turn to apocalyptic rhetoric surrounding climate change in our own time. But focusing for the moment simply on biblical studies, the last century has moved from Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann’s ‘discovery’ of the (embarrassingly) apocalyptic Jesus to a more recent recognition of the apocalyptic Paul.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgement of the historical Jesus’ distinctively apocalyptic orientation was initially reason to cordon off this strange vestige in the hopes of rendering the rabbi a wise teacher.<sup>2</sup> Yet

<sup>1</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, ed. John Stephen Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); Rudolf Bultmann, ‘New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation’, in Schubert Miles Ogden (ed.), *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 1–44; Beverly Roberts Gaventa (ed.), *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>See Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy* (London: SCM Press, 1972).

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more recent engagement with Paul has taken the apocalyptic not as a source of embarrassment but as a fount of wisdom for biblical scholars and critical theorists alike.<sup>3</sup> Philosophers like Jacob Taubes, Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou have found in Paul a subtle messianism that elicits political agency within a hegemonic late capitalist malaise at the end of history. Even Catherine Keller, erstwhile critic of apocalyptic excess from a feminist vantage point, seems to have warmed to the potent spiritual power of an apocalyptic focus.<sup>4</sup>

The reasons for such a resurgence are various and sundry: shifts in the methods of biblical studies, the increasing fragility of Christian hegemony in the cultural *Zeitgeist* of the North Atlantic, the recovery of political theology in the narrow sense as well as the cascading civilisational crises that have fractured the apparent stability of the global liberal order.<sup>5</sup> But to characterise the current interest in the apocalypse as a return is misleading. For the apocalyptic is a recurrent feature of the Christian theological tradition, or, as Ernst Käsemann famously declared in 1969, 'apocalyptic was [always] the mother of all Christian theology'.<sup>6</sup> What is true of Christian theology in general is also true of the mystical tradition. Historical theologian Bernard McGinn introduces the mystical tradition in his magisterial multi-volume work *The Presence of God* by emphasising the apocalyptic orientation of the Jewish font from which Christian mysticism sprang.<sup>7</sup> The late exilic emergence of apocalyptic eschatology developed by visionary prophetic texts was distinctive in this Jewish matrix. McGinn argues that the apocalyptic is the primary background for the development of Christian mysticism: it provided Christians a way to re-interpret Jewish scriptures, it was built on an account of heavenly ascent and it anticipated God's immanent presence within history. What McGinn largely neglects is the imperial political context of apocalyptic and the critical import of that context and the genre's function as a tool of critique, though this is a neglect easily corrected. Whether met with embarrassment or embrace, the vital energies of the apocalyptic have launched a thousand ships. Pseudo-apocalypses abound that take the vestiges of the scriptural tradition and deploy them in unexpected, sometimes terrible, ways.<sup>8</sup> What may have changed most significantly most recently is not the presence of the apocalyptic imagination but our orientation towards it as a productive tool rather than an embarrassment.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); John D. Caputo and Linda Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul Among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996); Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005); Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Catherine Keller, *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021).

<sup>5</sup>See Kyle B. T. Lambelet, 'The Lure of the Apocalypse: Ecology, Ethics, and the End of the World', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34/4 (7 July 2021), pp. 482–97.

<sup>6</sup>Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p. 102.

<sup>7</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), ch. 1.

<sup>8</sup>By 'pseudo-apocalypses' I simply mean forms of thinking, acting or narrating that draw selectively and in pernicious ways from the apocalyptic archive of scripture. One glaring example is to approach the apocalyptic as solely announcing destruction (e.g. calling the aftermath of a climate-amplified storm apocalyptic), rather than as also inaugurating a new heaven and a new earth. See John J. Collins, 'The End of the World in Biblical Tradition', Political Theology Network, 6 January 2023, <https://politicaltheology.com/the-end-of-the-world-in-biblical-tradition/>.

This essay builds upon the revival of a positive orientation towards the ambivalent but constructive possibilities of the apocalyptic. But rather than engaging apocalypse as a genre or ideology, as other scholars almost always do, I develop an account of what I call *apocalyptic praxis*: a mode of living within the end of worlds.<sup>9</sup> The payoff of such an approach is that, rather than embarrassment or embrace, apocalyptic praxis offers a resource and guide: a way of living with holy ‘indifference’ towards that which is passing away so that we might receive with joy the new creation that is already emerging.<sup>10</sup> Renouncing the world and living with indifference, on this account, do not allow an escape from ethics. Rather these practices enable a critical engagement with the world’s rapacious greed, spiralling violence and habits of domination and make possible a proleptic living into God’s reign.

My argument unfolds in four steps: first, I introduce more fully what I mean by apocalyptic praxis; second and third, I explore two moments in the mystical tradition that exemplify in distinctive ways the recurrence of apocalyptic praxis evaluating their virtues and vices and then, fourth, I conclude by suggesting how late modern practitioners might learn from this recurrent feature of the mystical tradition. I am not recovering an essence of the apocalyptic that can pertain to all times. Nor am I suggesting a radical re-reading of these archives of Christian mysticism. Rather, the recurrence of apocalyptic praxis in these sources shines light on the prospects for apocalyptic spirituality in the present.

### Apocalyptic praxis

Apocalyptic *praxis* – as opposed to the apocalyptic genre, apocalypticism as an ideology or apocalyptic eschatology – is a set of repertoires or practices that enable one to live faithfully within the ending of worlds.<sup>11</sup> Apocalypse, first and foremost, is a disclosure, a revelation, an uncovering (as has often been pointed out the etymology of the term is derived from the Greek *apo* ‘away, from’ + *kalyptein* ‘to cover, conceal’, meaning to uncover, disclose or reveal). But while disclosure and divine action are fundamental components of any adequate account of apocalypticism, much apocalyptic reflection and retrieval has tended to be dominated by an ideational fixation.<sup>12</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, however,

rather than thinking of the apocalyptic as primarily ideational (whether as genre, narrative, ideology, or doctrine), [we should approach] apocalypse as a spiritual

<sup>9</sup>A few exceptions to this include the work of Ted Smith and Elizabeth Phillips in moral theology and Cláudio Carvalhaes in liturgical theology. See also the forthcoming works of Daniel Rhodes, Jerusha Neal and Matthew Elia.

<sup>10</sup>I use ‘indifference’ in the technical theological sense as *indiferentes* or *apatheia*; see below for further discussion.

<sup>11</sup>On the apocalyptic genre, see John J. Collins, ‘What Is Apocalyptic Literature’, in John J. Collins (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (New York: OUP, 2014), pp. 1–18. On apocalypse as an ideology, see Frances Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset* (London: Routledge, 2016). On apocalyptic eschatology, see Cyril O’Regan, *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2009); Brian D. Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (New York: Crossroad, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>One exception to this practical neglect is Catherine Keller, who throughout her work has wrestled with the political and ethical ambiguities of the apocalyptic lure. Yet while Keller moves from scripture through deconstruction and critical theory to the present, I aim to pluralise the historical resources available for developing an apocalyptic praxis.

exercise. We do better to retrieve a more practical construal of the apocalyptic, one rooted in spiritual disciplines for facing the end of the world. Apocalyptic practices are those spiritual disciplines that allow the reception of theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in the midst of world's ending.<sup>13</sup>

I do not mean to catalogue here all such practices – renunciation, lament, conversion, *askesis*, discernment, vision, praise, care and more – but I do want to emphasise the practical orientation of such an approach to apocalypticism. I am interested in the shapes of life, the repertoires of action, the spiritual practices that anticipate and respond to the apocalyptic event. In short, an apocalyptic praxis enables practitioners to live by renouncing the world, anticipating the coming reign of God and loving God and neighbour in the meantime. I will take each feature in turn.

First, an apocalyptic praxis *renounces the world*. I use 'world' here with a technical, theological specificity.<sup>14</sup> World does not mean the creation, the earth or the planet.<sup>15</sup> To renounce the world does not mean to disdain the goodness of the created order or to reject the grace of the body as a particular instantiation of that order. The New Testament suggests this distinction by the use of *kosmos* to refer to the 'world' of systems opposed to God and using different terms (*gē* and *ktisis*, respectively) to refer to the earth and to creation. The *kosmos* is mostly referenced in a negative valence, and when it is viewed as the object of God's positive regard (as in John 3:16) it remains something hostile. Within this scriptural lexicon, then, the world is the social imaginary that violently structures our distorted modes of relationship with one another. It is the economies of exchange and exploitation that determine our performance of identity and relation to given materials we encounter. It is the sinful powers that shape our engagement with creation both generating and manifesting disordered desires. The world is, in Thomas Lynch's account, the violent and inescapable divisions of class, race, gender and nature.<sup>16</sup> To renounce the world, to hope for the end of the world, to leave the world behind, is to reject the reign of sin. Such a renunciation makes little sense for those who are comfortable and well in the world as it is. But apocalyptic praxis is a resource for those dispossessed by the powers of the world.<sup>17</sup> A disdain for the world, in this sense, is recurrent in the Christian mystical tradition. To renounce the world is not merely an attitude, but involves a set of behaviours, paradigmatically expressed in Jesus' invitation to the young man seeking eternal life: 'You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me' (Mark 10:21).

Apocalyptic praxis is not only oriented to the renunciation of the world as it is but *lives proleptically into a counter-world*: a new heaven and new earth, an *e/u-topia*, the reign of God. The vision of the reign of God is surprising and unexpected, even as it

<sup>13</sup>Lambelet, 'The Lure of the Apocalypse'.

<sup>14</sup>See James 4:4. See also David Elliot's helpful development of this conception of worldliness from the Johannine corpus to Thomas Aquinas in *Hope and Christian Ethics* (New York: CUP, 2017), pp. 160–68.

<sup>15</sup>Catherine Keller artfully makes this distinction by drawing on the poetry of Ed Roberson. She argues, "the world" signifies a collective schema: human self-organization inextricably entangled in the nonhuman. So "the earth" evokes the planet, the earth that presents – is there "to see" – in its critical difference'. Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

<sup>17</sup>Anathea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).

is built from the normal stuff of everyday life. As such, an apocalyptic praxis has a political edge. It concerns itself with bodies, with materiality in a basic way. But seeing this new world, envisioning and imagining it, is the work of parables: it is always partial and incomplete. The counter-world is found in the power of a mustard seed, a treasure hidden in a field, a wedding banquet with guests off the streets. Even though the counter-world is oriented towards the reign of God, announcing that the reign has come near, it is not its fulfillment. Apocalyptic praxis can go terribly (violently) wrong when it is assumed to capture the fullness of God's reign or when it is instantiated by human lights alone. Yet the proleptic remembering of the world to come involves concrete practices of hopeful manifestation and aspirational prefiguration. In apocalyptic praxis, to live into a counter-world is always an act of struggle and hope, never one of full realisation.

Caught between worlds, then, an apocalyptic praxis orients practitioners towards *indifference*. By indifference, I mean what Evagrius called *apatheia* or Ignatius called *indiferentes*: a freedom towards using created things without compulsion or affliction to pursue one's calling to love God and neighbour. The practitioner of the apocalyptic brings neither the end of the world nor the advent of the counter-world, but she does anticipate both ending and newness in her actions. She acts *as if* the new world were already here in fullness.<sup>18</sup> Such action is conditioned on an indifference towards the world as it is. One could use the material of this world or not, but the action of use is oriented towards the goals and aims of the counter-world. This praxis enables love without necessity: there is no need to produce the new world for it is coming. Rather, with thanksgiving and praise one can live in hopeful anticipation of God's coming reign.

Such anticipation has brought apocalyptic praxis under some suspicion by those concerned with this-worldly politics. To renounce the world, this account goes, seems at once depoliticising and ethically irresponsible. And it is exactly at this point, as we will see, that apocalyptic praxis as I have rendered it here becomes useful. By retrieving the scriptural distinction between the world and creation and thereby recovering a more fruitful orientation of indifference towards the world that enables a care for the earth, an apocalyptic praxis can become ethically useful for contemporary Christians. But rather than simply asserting that this is so, it is better to see how these recurrent patterns of apocalyptic praxis emerge in concrete ways in historical particularity. So we now turn to examples of apocalyptic praxis in the tradition of Christian mysticism. In what follows I explore how these patterns manifest into two distinct cases: Evagrius of Pontus' desert monasticism and the early Franciscan movement codified by Bonaventure. Both cases are far enough from the initial rush of immanent expectation of the first followers of Jesus to dispel any sense that apocalyptic hope was merely an early and temporary delusion. And both are distinct enough in historical and political contexts to give evidence of a set of recurrent and contingent repertoires of thought and action. To be clear, my interests are more constructive than historical.<sup>19</sup> I am not suggesting a radical re-reading of either of these archives of Christian mysticism. Nor am I recovering a pristine paradigm of the apocalyptic that can pertain to all times. Rather these sources offer something better: ambiguous traditions that reveal

<sup>18</sup>See also 1 Corinthians 7.

<sup>19</sup>I am taking methodological cues from Kathryn Tanner's approach to the constructive task of thinking (and acting) within a tradition. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

both possibilities and pitfalls, marked virtues and characteristic deformations.<sup>20</sup> Thinking and acting with the wisdom of the past, we gain resources for how to live now in this current apocalyptic age.

### Evagrius' apocalyptic praxis

In the late fourth century, Christianity had gained both cultural and political dominance in the Roman Empire. For some, like Eusebius, this was evidence of God's providential action and of the fulfilment of the eschatological hopes of earlier generations.<sup>21</sup> For others, like the desert monastics, the establishment of Christendom introduced corrupting powers into the practice of Christian life. Typified, if hagiographically, in Athanasius' *The Life of Anthony*, pilgrims disenchanted by the world fled to the Egyptian desert seeking a more direct and unsullied life with God.<sup>22</sup> One such pilgrim was Evagrius of Pontus.

According to Palladius' history, what drove Evagrius to the desert was not only a desire for a holy life, but scandal.<sup>23</sup> Born near the Black Sea as the son of a country bishop, early on Evagrius was formed theologically under the direction of the Cappadocian fathers: Basil of Caesarea ordained him a lector, Gregory of Nazianzus a deacon. His time in the company of the Cappadocians came to an end, however, when his affair with a married woman threatened to undermine the doctrinal struggles in which he and the bishops were engaged. He fled to the desert outside Jerusalem, and after a six-month illness was healed by Melania the Elder with a promise to take on the monastic life. From here, and with Melania's blessing, Evagrius moved to Egypt, where he set about collecting and codifying the wisdom drawn from his own experience and the desert tradition.

Evagrius exemplified the apocalyptic praxis of world renunciation. In his *The Foundations of the Monastic Life*, he took up the early stages of the spiritual life and the bodily disciplines related to food, sex, things, relationships and prayer.<sup>24</sup> The short treatise orients a *praktikos*, or Christian monastic, towards a life of stillness before God, leaving behind the busy distractions of the world in order to receive God's grace in quiet contemplation.

Leave behind the concerns of the world, the principalities and powers set over them [Eph. 6:12]; that is, stand free of material concerns and the passions, beyond

<sup>20</sup>Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>21</sup>Eusebius, *The History of the Church: A New Translation*, trans. Jeremy M. Schott (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), X.IX, p. 490. Eusebius, while reading God's providential action in Constantine's establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire, was not merely a triumphalist. See Aaron P. Johnson, *Eusebius* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

<sup>22</sup>Athanasius, *Vie d'Antoine*, trans. Gerard J. M. Bartelink, *Sources chrétiennes* 400 (Paris: Cerf, 2004); Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, ed. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). A recent and more complicated account of the back and forth between desert and city has challenged this rather paradigmatic picture of the early monastic movement. See David Brakke, 'Holy Men and Women of the Desert', in Bernice M. Kaczynski (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), pp. 35–50.

<sup>23</sup>My historical recounting follows William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2004). The primary ancient chronicler of Evagrius' life was Palladius. See *The Lausiatic History of Palladius*, trans. Cuthbert Butler (Cambridge: CUP, 1895).

<sup>24</sup>In the citations that follow I use Robert Sinkewicz's critical translation of Evagrius' corpus. See *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, ed. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: OUP, 2006).



all desire, so that as you become a stranger to the conditions deriving from these you may be able to cultivate stillness properly.<sup>25</sup>

The point of these material renunciations was to quiet one's mind for the purpose of prayer.

While Evagrius left the world behind physically in his orientation towards the desert, he also endeavoured to leave it behind psychologically through his battle against demonic thoughts. One of Evagrius' signal contributions to the Christian mystical tradition was his collation of the eight *logismoi* (passions or afflictive thoughts) that distract and disquiet the practitioner from the contemplative way. The vocation of the *praktikos* was to struggle against these *logismoi*, renouncing not only the world out there but also the world inside the Christian.<sup>26</sup> These renunciations of the mind follow on the prior renunciations of the material: 'the demons war with seculars more through objects, but with monks they do so especially through thoughts, for they are deprived of objects because of the solitude'.<sup>27</sup> Quieting the mind through attentive renunciation offered a gateway into contemplative union with God.

In light of his commendation of struggle against the *logismoi*, Evagrius could be read pessimistically as commending a life of unending purgation. However, pairing his ascetical teachings with his mystical writings, we find an orientation towards the world to come. For Evagrius, as with his fellow early monastics, the desert itself offered a counter-world. Leaving behind the 'world' (i.e. a concrete social system of urban life), monastics turned to the desert as a counter-world ordered to purification and spiritual ascent.<sup>28</sup> These early monastics formed nascent communities of isolated hermits. They facilitated, through their communities of accountability, a disciplined common life, moving towards but not fully realising cenobitic monasticism. Within this emerging communal context, for these practitioners the body was the primary site of spiritual struggle, the place from which one engaged the work of attending to God. Rather than a disdain for or hatred of the body, as some scholars have figured, there is in fact a coimbrication of body and soul in desert spirituality. 'The material conditions of the monk's life were held capable of altering the consciousness itself'.<sup>29</sup> It was through the body, Evagrius thought, that the practitioner could move towards mystical encounter with God. Thus, there is not only a rejection of the world, but also an embrace of a new community, a counter-community, oriented towards contemplative unity with God through bodily *askesis*.

All of this struggle to renounce the world as it is and turn towards a counter-world was aimed, for Evagrius, at contemplative union with God. Evagrius famously defined prayer as 'a communion of the mind with God'.<sup>30</sup> *Apatheia*, often translated somewhat misleadingly as 'impassibility', was the goal of these renunciations in the hopes of quieting the mind before God.<sup>31</sup> To put it another way, *apatheia* indicates an interior regime change from world to counter-world whose freedom results in the interim ethic of love

<sup>25</sup>Evagrius, *Foundations*, 3; in *Evagrius of Pontus*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup>Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 48; in *Evagrius of Pontus*, p. 106.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 217.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>30</sup>Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, 1; in *Evagrius of Pontus*, p. 193.

<sup>31</sup>'Go, "sell your possessions and give to the poor" [Matt 19:21] and "taking up your cross, deny yourself" [Matt 16:24], so that you may be able to pray free from distraction'. Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, 17; in *Evagrius of Pontus*, p. 194.

for neighbour and a more intense communion with God. With a quiet mind, then, the monastic could practice 'pure prayer' that moved beyond images. 'When you pray', Evagrius commended, 'do not form images of the divine within yourself, nor allow your mind to be impressed with any form, but approach the Immaterial immaterially and you will come to understanding'.<sup>32</sup> Evagrius' practice here was to renounce the world in order to embrace union with God. Material struggle served as a pedagogue toward union with an immaterial God.

Imageless prayer for Evagrius was scripturally formed.<sup>33</sup> And as such, it must be observed, imageless prayer issued forth into love of God and neighbour. 'Love is the offspring of apatheia, and apatheia is the blossom of the practical life'.<sup>34</sup> Evagrius is rightly remembered not as a solitary contemplative but as a teacher and spiritual director. Luke Dysinger summarises:

Evagrius often received visitors at his hermitage, both monks and laypeople who sought his advice... [H]e received monks on Saturdays and Sundays, and held discussions with them throughout the night; if any wished to speak privately with him he would see them individually in the morning. He also received up to six or seven pilgrims each day.<sup>35</sup>

Love of God and neighbour is the gift of the *apatheia* of one not afflicted by the world, and for Evagrius it issued forth in very specific acts of pastoral accompaniment. In sum, Evagrius' apocalyptic praxis included a renunciation of the world of objects as well as the world that comes to inhere within the mind, a turning towards the desert as a holy site to facilitate union with God, and the freedom that follows purgation and illumination to love God and neighbour.

While I find much to commend here, this exploration also reveals some of the dangers and characteristic deformations of an apocalyptic praxis. Immediately following his death Evagrius' corpus came under sharp criticism for his association with Origen and Origenist teachings that were ultimately condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553.<sup>36</sup> Two contemporary criticisms echo these earlier suspicions: that Evagrius failed to honour the goodness of creation, and that he ultimately prioritises knowledge over love.<sup>37</sup> Both critiques must be appropriately historicised, but they are nevertheless indicative of excesses peculiar to apocalyptic praxis.

We do not need to share simplistic critiques of bodily *askesis* to question Evagrius' denigration of the body. In its best form, Evagrius' orientation to the body is pedagogical. It provides a site for sacred, purgative struggle oriented towards union with God. In this way, Evagrius' commendation of *askesis* joins with the long tradition of care of the self.<sup>38</sup> But, the body only serves this teaching role, and in the end it is left

<sup>32</sup>Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, 66; in *Evagrius of Pontus*, p. 199.

<sup>33</sup>Columba Stewart, 'Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9/2 (2001), pp. 173–204.

<sup>34</sup>Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 81; in *Evagrius of Pontus*, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup>Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 14–15.

<sup>36</sup>See Harmless' account of the Origenist controversy in *Desert Christians*, pp. 359–63.

<sup>37</sup>Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), p. 50.

<sup>38</sup>Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Arnold I. Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).



behind. As Ann Conway Jones notes, 'For Evagrius, working within a Platonic framework, the body has no role in the world to come, and in pure prayer too the soul regains its primordial state of pure di[s]embodied nous'.<sup>39</sup> For Conway-Jones, then, Evagrius' approach represents an interiorisation of the apocalyptic, from an ascent into God that has material implications to an ascent in the mind that leaves the material world behind. This temptation, I would suggest, is peculiar to apocalyptic praxis insofar as the rejection of the world slips into a rejection of the goodness of creation in general and of the body in particular. As already noted, however, scripturally, *world* need not mean earth, planet or creation. That Evagrius failed to hold this distinction leads him to denigrate bodies, for which he is justly critiqued.

This first danger joins a second: the prioritisation of knowledge over love. I have lifted up what I take to be the constructive aspects of Evagrius' focus on the mental aspects of spiritual formation: the struggle against the *logismoi* and the ascent to pure prayer. Although Evagrius does gesture towards the centrality of love in the spiritual life, his theology and desert monasticism runs the risk of swinging free from the embodied, messy, 'harsh and dreadful' tasks of human sociality. One could argue, perhaps, that this is an error that is corrected in the later mystical tradition as eremitic monasticism shifts fully to cenobitic. Certainly, Benedict of Nursia restored love in community as central to the Christian life. Yet here I think Evagrius falls prey to a wider cultural influence, Platonic in character, which would prize mental ascent, especially insofar as that coincides with an apocalyptic temptation towards an indifference that yields apathy rather than love. Again, there are ways to guard against such excesses. However, our task here is simply to identify these dangers in the hopes that a constructive retrieval learns from past mistakes.

### Francis' apocalyptic praxis

Although Evagrius should be situated squarely in the first wave of mystical theology – he is rightly remembered as a forerunner of the later monasticism of Benedict and the early medieval period – Francis sits firmly within what historian Bernard McGinn has called the 'new mysticism'.<sup>40</sup> Francis' advent led to all forms of apocalyptic speculations (his approbation as a new model of Christ makes 'advent' a fitting term). Many of his contemporaries thought that Francis would play a starring role in the second coming of Christ, and his followers made subtle and not-so-subtle allusions to the same. Some of these hagiographic recollections were not sanctioned through incorporation into the Franciscan Order's more official accounts, but even Bonaventure begins his *Legenda maior* with an apocalyptic gesture to 'these last times' in which Francis' life may be instructive.<sup>41</sup> As Bonaventure recalled, 'To those who saw him he seemed like a man

<sup>39</sup>Ann Conway-Jones, 'Interiorised Apocalyptic in Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius of Pontus and Pseudo-Macarius', *Studia Patristica* LXXIV (2016), p. 196.

<sup>40</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

<sup>41</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, Prologue.1; 'Major Life of St. Francis', trans. Benen Fahy O.F.M., in Marion Alphonse Habig (ed.), *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 4th rev. edn. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1991), p. 631. For the original Latin text see Enrico Menestò and Stefano Brufani (eds.), *Fontes franciscani*, Medioevo francescano 2 (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 1995). For English translations, I have used Bonaventure, 'Major Life of St. Francis'. For another, more popular, translation see *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert H. Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978).

from another world as, with his gaze fixed on heaven where his heart always dwelt, he tried to lift their thoughts on high'.<sup>42</sup> In Francis' example, Bonaventure suggests, lovers of holy poverty might 'forego completely irreverent thoughts and worldly appetites' and like Francis be lifted 'from the dust' and be called 'out from the world' in order to 'prepare a way...of light and peace'.<sup>43</sup> Bonaventure has justly been accused of taming the radical edge of Francis' *vita apostolica*. Even Francis himself rode the wave of earlier social movements, the *pauperes Christi*, giving them an orthodox rendering with ambiguous results.<sup>44</sup> Still, the core of Francis' life was both spiritually and politically revolutionary. In this way resonant with Evagrius' earlier turn to the desert, Francis can be seen as initiating a radical break with the world as it is. In so doing, Francis introduces another model of apocalyptic praxis: renouncing the decadence of the world of ecclesial power, embracing a new world of mendicant community, and living with holy indifference oriented towards love of Christ's poor.<sup>45</sup>

In Bonaventure's telling, Francis performs his conversion from the ascendant middle-class mercantile life of his father to holy poverty as a renunciation of the world. What translators render 'world' in Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* is a theologically specific term (the Latin *mundus*) that draws on the scriptural rendering of the world as a social imaginary distorted by sin. Bonaventure introduces several colourful metaphors for the world – a 'shipwrecked world' and the 'desert of the world' – that evoke both earlier desert monasticism as well as the scriptural precedent.<sup>46</sup> It is this world that Francis renounced in his conversion.

Bonaventure's colourful narrative of Francis' conversion bears recounting. While in prayer in the dilapidated church of San Damiano he heard a voice: 'Francis, go and repair my house. You see it is all falling down'.<sup>47</sup> Francis took this rather literally to mean he should repair the church of San Damiano, and therefore he attempted to commit some of his family's funds to the cause. But his father objected, to the point of imprisoning Francis in chains. After his escape, the relationship degenerated to such an extent that his father dragged him before the bishop in order to compel him to return any remaining funds. On Bonaventure's telling, 'Francis was more than ready to comply and he willingly appeared before the bishop. There he made no delay – without hesitation, without hearing or saying a word – he immediately took off his clothes and gave them back to his father'.<sup>48</sup> Following Jesus' injunction to give not only his tunic but his cloak also, Francis, 'this despiser of the world' renounced all his worldly possessions and turned to the Lord's service (cf. Matt 5:40). In this way Francis offers a different rejection of the world than Evagrius. Rather than turning to the desert as an

<sup>42</sup>Bonaventure, *The Life of Saint Francis*, IV.5.

<sup>43</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, Prologue.1; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 631.

<sup>44</sup>See Brian Hamilton's dissertation for one compelling development of this argument: '*Pauperes Christi: Voluntary Poverty as Political Practice*' (Ph.D. diss., South Bend, IN, University of Notre Dame, 2015), <https://curate.nd.edu/show/mg74qj74z81>.

<sup>45</sup>Unlike Evagrius, the documentary record for Francis is limited, and so contemporary readers must engage him largely through the writings of his near contemporaries. For the purposes of this essay, I will engage especially Bonaventure's account of Francis in his *Legenda maior* or *The Life of St. Francis*.

<sup>46</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, II.4, VII.9; 'Major Life of St. Francis', pp. 643, 686. On the latter, I find Cousins' translation a truer rendering of 'mundi desertum' as 'the desert of the world'. See Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, p. 246.

<sup>47</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, II.1; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 640.

<sup>48</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, II.4; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 642.

interim locale for monastic practice, Francis oscillates between certain stable places and the world, thereby demonstrating how to live in the world but not of it.

A Franciscan renunciation of the world on Bonaventure's telling was by no means a renunciation of creation or the earth. In fact, a renunciation of the world required a greater dependence on the gifts of the created order, which is why Francis was also attracted to the faith of the poor. Bonaventure relays several stories in his hagiography depicting Francis' dependence on the gifts of creation, recounting the birds who responded to his call, the unnatural light that guided his way, even his reverence and gratitude for 'Brother Fire' that cauterised a wound.<sup>49</sup> 'Not only did all creation obey his slightest wish; by his providence God himself condescended to his will'.<sup>50</sup> Francis in his own words in 'The Canticle of Brother Sun' praises God's goodness in the gifts of creation from Brother Sun to Sister Moon and even Sister Death.<sup>51</sup> Francis' rejection of the world was by no means a rejection of the goodness of creation. Francis' turn to the counter-world, therefore, included a turn to the goodness of creation.

The sociality of that counter-world was manifest most acutely in the emergence of the Franciscan movement itself. Bonaventure's goal in his hagiography was to strengthen and authorise the emerging movement. The rebuilding of Christ's church came to mean much more than repairing San Damiano. Rather Francis' humble movement of minor friars aimed to rebuild the church at large. 'Then like a good father he gathered all his sons about him and spoke to them at length about the kingdom of God and the need to disregard [*contemptu*] the world and do penance, renouncing one's own will'.<sup>52</sup> It was a rebuke of the decadence of the ecclesial powers of his day, even as Francis (and certainly Bonaventure) presented the movement within the structures of orthodoxy.

The goal, therefore, of Franciscan piety was to call others into a life of holy poverty that enabled freedom to love God and neighbour. Drawing on earlier sources in the mystical tradition, the Franciscans aimed to renounce the world for the purpose of freedom. Bonaventure reports,

They possessed nothing that belonged to the world; they loved nothing, and so they feared to lose nothing. They were free from care, with no anxiety to disturb them or worry to distract them. Their hearts were at peace as they lived from day to day, looking forward to the morrow without a thought as to where they would find shelter for the night.<sup>53</sup>

This indifference towards the world issued forth in acts of solidarity with the poor. Francis and his followers gathered alms, preached the good news, cared for lepers and comforted the dying. They were freed to such acts of mercy because they lacked attachment to the world as it is. And, it is in this orientation to indifference that an important limit even on bodily mortification can be identified. In a telling story, Francis learned that a brother was fasting to the point of ill health. He called the brother

<sup>49</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, VIII.9, V.12, V.9; 'Major Life of St. Francis', pp. 695–6, 670–71, 668–9.

<sup>50</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, V.11; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 669.

<sup>51</sup>*St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, pp. 130–31.

<sup>52</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, III.7; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 649.

<sup>53</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, IV.7; 'Major Life of St. Francis', pp. 657–8.

to him, set bread before them and ate the bread with him (lest the brother feel embarrassment).<sup>54</sup> The point of the story for Bonaventure was to highlight Francis' charity: that even his commitment to bodily *askesis* could be overcome by his care for others.

Franciscan spirituality has flourished in recent years, in part due to Pope Francis' recent retrieval of this tradition. Yet for all that commends it, the Franciscan moment with its radical intensity (an intensity that Bonaventure was at pains to tame) introduces some other dangers and limitations of an apocalyptic praxis. A first danger echoes one already identified in Evagrius, but in a new key: Francis' mortification of the body and romanticisation of suffering. Like Evagrius, Francis retains an orientation to the body as primarily pedagogical. As Bonaventure reports 'he was an exile [*peregrinum*] from the Lord's presence as long as he was at home in the body, and his love of Christ had left him with no desire for the things of this earth [*terrena desideria*]'.<sup>55</sup> Francis does not retain as direct a Platonic influence as does Evagrius, but rather is likely drawing on the Pauline denigration of the flesh combined with the inheritance from earlier spiritual traditions. What Francis adds is the centrality of suffering *after the model of Christ*.

I thank you, my Lord and God, for all the pains I suffer and I beg you to make them a hundred times worse, if you want to. Nothing would make me more happy than to have you afflict me with pain and not spare me. Doing your will is consolation enough, and more than enough for me.<sup>56</sup>

In this he draws on the *pauperes Christi* and their *vita apostolica*, which represented a damning critique of the ecclesial decadence of their day. While Francis retains the suffering and bodily mortification of these preceding movements, he largely domesticates their political critique.<sup>57</sup> These dangers resonate in contemporary theological discourse as scholars wrestle over the place of suffering in relation to the spiritual life. They take on a particular hue, though, when viewed in an apocalyptic light. I suggest there is slippage here, as in the case of Evagrius, between world and creation, flesh and body. Retaining a strong distinction between the component terms of these pairs would help address the dangers of apocalyptic practice, and in fact the Franciscan legacy on the goodness of creation itself provides a corrective here.

A second danger follows on the first: the temptations of messianism. Francis' stigmata both served to set an example for bodily mortification and to authorise his unique sanctity and charisma. This danger, viewed apocalyptically, is one of instantiating God's coming reign now in a fully realised eschatology. For Bonaventure and other followers, Francis' stigmata were not to be questioned, but were only something to celebrate and at which to marvel: 'No true Christian could oppose it, and no one with any humility could make little of it, because it comes from God and deserves to be welcomed [*omni acceptione digna*]'.<sup>58</sup> Placing Francis in such an exalted position introduces temptations to charismatic authoritarianism, temptations perhaps Francis himself would have resisted. Rather than inspiring others to take on the *vita apostolica*, such

<sup>54</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, V.7; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 667.

<sup>55</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, X.1; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 705.

<sup>56</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, XIV.2; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 738.

<sup>57</sup>Hamilton, 'Pauperes Christi'.

<sup>58</sup>Bonaventure, *Life*, XIII.10; 'Major Life of St. Francis', p. 736.

charismatic authoritarianism runs the risk of requiring unquestioned obedience.<sup>59</sup> Instead of inspiring holy indifference, it can diminish freedom altogether.

Finally, the danger of charisma links with a third peril: that of speculation. The belief by some that Francis heralded the second coming of Jesus launched soothsaying speculations about the end of days. It was the Spiritual Franciscans, the *spirituales*, that especially adopted this approach. Drawing on the work of the apocalyptically oriented Joachim de Fiore, they understood Francis as the ‘angel of the sixth seal of Apocalypse 7:2, “ascending from the rising of the sun and having the seal of the living god”, that is, the marks of the stigmata upon him’.<sup>60</sup> In light of Francis’ apocalyptic role, members of the *spirituales* announced the date of the coming of the age of the Spirit (Gerardo di Borgo proposed 1260) and argued that the Franciscan way of life was the forerunner to this age. Realised eschatology here takes a problematic turn insofar as the Franciscan way excludes all other possibilities. While the *spirituales* attempted to remain true to the radical legacy of Francis, committed to poverty and unchastened by ecclesial authority, the other wing (what McGinn calls the community party) called for submission to obedience like other religious orders. Bonaventure was drafted into service as the minister general of the Franciscans precisely to mediate and resolve this conflict (to this extent the critique that he tamed the radical elements of the early movement rings true). But most important here is simply the point made by many cynical critics of the apocalyptic orientation, namely, that the anticipated end never came.

These three dangers – romanticisation of suffering, authoritarian messianism and soothsaying speculation – all have an apocalyptic flavour. Although naming them here, I do not aim to resolve them, only to suggest that by exploring them we can gain a sense of the dangers and the resources for engaging these temptations constructively. And such a constructive engagement for purposes of retrieval is where I wish to conclude.

### Constructive (and chastened) uses of apocalyptic praxis

An apocalyptic praxis is a mode of living that proleptically anticipates the reign of God by disinvesting from the world as it is (i.e. as marked by exploitation, domination and violence) and living with anticipation of the new world that is already coming. As our current world seems to stand on a precipice, the good news of the mystical tradition is that the end of this world is not the end. We can anticipate even now the new world that is breaking in among us. These traditions provide practical resources for embracing this new world. The recovery of these traditions is not without complication. In fact, as we have seen, precisely in their apocalypticism, these two mystical archives reveal pitfalls: the temptation to denigration of the body, the prioritising of knowledge over love, authoritarian messianism and soothsaying prediction. It is not by sloughing off the apocalypticism, however, that we might best come to recover the wisdom of these traditions. Instead, through acknowledging their apocalypticism we can begin to see their gifts. Rather than denial of the body, we can propose a rejection of the world that enables disciplined training of bodily desire towards that which truly satisfies. Rather

<sup>59</sup>For more on the dangers of authoritarian charisma, see Vincent W. Lloyd, *In Defense of Charisma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). See also Kyle B. T. Lambelet, *¡Presente! Nonviolent Politics and the Resurrection of the Dead* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), ch. 5.

<sup>60</sup>Bernard McGinn, citing Bonaventure’s Prologue, in McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, p. 73.

than mental ascent, we learn to see without exploitative recourse to fantasy and consequently orient ourselves towards an indifference that enables the freedom to love. Rather than messianic authoritarianism, we can cultivate a hope in the advent of God who is always coming among the poor, the broken and the dispossessed. Rather than soothsaying prediction, we can affirm with Jesus that ‘about that day and hour no one knows’ (Matt 24:36), and therefore, keep awake. What Evagrius and Francis provide is a praxis of attentiveness to God’s inbreaking presence.

Our world, marked as it is by exploitation, domination, violence and death (i.e. what the Christian tradition names sin), deceives us by pretending to be all that there is. The temptation represented by the world is totalising and hegemonic; it broaches no exceptions. But this is a fantasy, and an apocalyptic praxis rejects this fantasy as false consciousness. Both Evagrius and Francis rejected the world in this sense. The phenomenal world, the world that constructs our relations with one another, that governs our buying and selling, that determines the shape of our desires – this world is passing away. An apocalyptic praxis distinguishes between this fantasy ‘world’ and the goodness of creation and our material condition. An apocalyptic praxis lives proleptically by rejecting the world of fantasy and anticipating the coming reign of God. The reign of God is the order announced by Jesus’ teaching ministry, especially the parables, in which the dispossessed are brought into the heavenly banquet. This is no mere pie in the sky when you die: it is a radical reordering of our societal affections towards alternative sites of gracious receptivity. It is there in the desert and among the poor, following the witness of Evagrius and Francis, that God seems to have chosen to dwell most intensely. Following Jesus in this way has personal, spiritual, political and material implications.

Shaped by attentiveness to this inbreaking presence, we can act with indifferent care and loving concern. Our task is not to save the world. Rather, our task – one with significant political implications – is to endure the world and care for one another in the meantime. Caught between worlds, then, an apocalyptic praxis orients practitioners towards freedom from afflictive attachments for a specific purpose: so that she can freely love God and neighbour. The practitioner of the apocalyptic is caught between these two worlds. She does not bring the new world, but she does anticipate its reality in her actions. Crucially, she acts as if the new world were already here in fullness. Such action is conditioned on an indifference towards the world as it is. One can use the material of this world or not, but any such use is oriented towards the goals and aims of the new world. This praxis enables love without necessity: there is no need to produce the new world for it is coming. Rather, with thanksgiving and praise one can live in hopeful anticipation of God’s coming reign.<sup>61</sup>

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