

PATRISTIC SOTERIOLOGY: THREE TRAJECTORIES

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In this article I will attempt to outline what I think is a needed corrective to a common and influential way of discussing patristic soteriology. It is typical among some scholars to speak of two basic patterns in the patristic period for understanding salvation: a juridical or legal pattern (strongly represented in the Western Church) that focused on forgiveness of sins, and a more Eastern pattern that saw salvation as participation in God or deification. I believe that speaking of a single Eastern pattern, and therefore speaking of two major patterns overall, is misleading and dangerous, for reasons that I will explain. I think it is important to recognize that in the patristic period, there were at least two very distinct ways of understanding deification or participation in God, and therefore one should speak not of two overall patterns, but of at least three patterns. Furthermore, as I discuss these patterns, I will use the word “trajectories” to describe them. The reason for this is that in my opinion, as each of these patterns emerged, it plotted a course, a trajectory, that part of the Christian Church would follow subsequently. Later Eastern and Western soteriological developments can be seen as following one or another of the trajectories plotted during the patristic period.¹

I will argue my case in several steps. First I will give an overview of the “two-trajectory” approach to patristic soteriology and will explain some of the ways this approach has influenced our contemporary understanding of salvation. Then I will briefly examine some key soteriological passages from the writings of four important Eastern theologians, all of whom are said to follow a “participatory” pattern for describing salvation. Through this examination, I will attempt to show that there were two quite different patterns or trajectories represented among these writers, with one pattern showing up clearly in Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254) and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395), and the other appearing in Irenaeus (ca. 130–ca. 200) and Cyril of Alexandria

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¹ I should add that in this article, I will not deal with the issue of *how* salvation is achieved, and thus I will not address the atonement, the relation between faith and obedience, the interaction of divine action and human action in salvation, or the like. My subject in this article will be simply the question of *what* salvation actually is, according to each of the three patristic patterns or trajectories.

(ca. 375–444).² Next I will briefly address the fates of these different patterns in the later history of Christian theology, and at that point I will attempt to justify my use of the word “trajectories” to describe the patterns. Finally, I will offer some lessons I believe contemporary evangelical theologians can learn from these trajectories.

I. A TWO-TRAJECTORY APPROACH AND ITS PROBLEMS

In modern study of historical theology, several varied factors have coalesced to give rise to what I am calling a two-trajectory approach to patristic soteriology. One obvious factor is that dividing early Christianity into East and West, Greek and Latin, is a convenient and familiar way to conduct historical study. Another factor is that modern study of historical theology often focuses heavily on terminology, and so scholars tend to assume that Church fathers who used the phrase “participation in God” basically fell into the same camp, in opposition to Fathers who spoke of salvation with juridical terms. Perhaps another factor is that scholars have tended to gravitate toward the familiar: Westerners can readily understand juridical concepts of salvation, but the whole notion of participation in God is a bit foreign. So modern Western scholars tend to lump all participatory concepts of salvation together.

However much these and other general factors may have contributed, perhaps the most significant factor in the rise of this two-trajectory approach is the work of Adolf von Harnack, whose monumental *History of Dogma* (first published in German from 1885–89) has had a phenomenal influence on 20th-century interpretation of patristic theology.³ Harnack approaches his subject with a passionate and barely-controlled hatred for the Eastern Church, coupled with an almost reverential attachment to two Western Fathers, Tertullian and Augustine. Harnack writes:

Tertullian and Augustine are the Fathers of the Latin Church in so eminent a sense that, measured by them, the East possessed no Church Fathers at all. The only one to rival them, Origen, exerted his influence in a more limited sphere We can exhibit the superiority of Western to Eastern Christianity

² It is appropriate to mention here that my thinking on this issue was sparked by my correspondence some years ago with Thomas Torrance, as well as by his work *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975). Torrance writes on pp. 9–10 of that work that reconciliation between Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic Churches would need to focus on an Athanasian-Cyrrillian axis, rather than relying on the Cappadocians or on later Western developments, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. Torrance’s work helped me begin to probe the differences between Cappadocian and Athanasian-Cyrrillian patterns of soteriology and to consider the trajectories that those patterns followed through Christian intellectual history.

³ Writing in 1971, no less a luminary than Jaroslav Pelikan asserts: “Superseded but never surpassed, Harnack’s work remains, after more than eighty years, the one interpretation of early Christian doctrine with which every other scholar in the field must contend.” Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition [100–600]* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1971) 359.

at many points; we can even state a whole series of causes for this superiority; but one of the most outstanding is the fact that while the East was influenced by a commonplace succession of theologians and monks, the West was moulded by Tertullian and Augustine.⁴

As a result of this attitude, in Harnack's hands the history of Christian doctrine becomes a story of the way the Eastern Church lost the gospel virtually altogether as it developed the philosophical but unbiblical concept of human deification, whereas the Western Church preserved the biblical message as it proclaimed sin, forgiveness, and moral living.

More specifically, Harnack argues that patristic understandings of salvation followed two different patterns, which were sometimes intertwined but basically distinct. The Western pattern, he argues, followed the biblical depiction of salvation by focusing on the inspiring character of Christ's human life, the need for atonement from sin, the fact of human justification, and the coming of God's judgment. While Harnack admits that these elements were not missing altogether in the Eastern Fathers, he insists that they were subordinated to the ideas that humanity's major problem was death and corruption; that salvation consisted of escaping death by participation in God, that the incarnation itself (rather than the crucifixion) accomplished this salvation; and that all things would ultimately be restored to God (or even absorbed into God's being). Harnack writes of the Eastern Church:

The salvation presented in Christianity consists in the redemption of the human race from the state of mortality and the sin involved in it, that men might attain divine life, i.e., the everlasting contemplation of God, this redemption having already been consummated in the incarnation of the Son of God and being conferred on men by their close union with him: Christianity is the religion which delivers from death and leads to the contemplation of God.⁵

In contrast, he writes that Western Christianity was from the start more biblical and practical, as well as more ecclesiastical, because of its less speculative bent. Harnack affirms: "To this is attributed the fact that the West did not fix its attention above all on deification nor, in consequence, on asceticism, but kept real life more distinctly in view."⁶

To adopt my terminology, Harnack sees two basic trajectories for understanding salvation in the patristic period. The Western Church followed a biblical trajectory by focusing on the juridical aspects of salvation (sin, atonement, forgiveness, and judgment), whereas the Eastern Church followed a trajectory that Harnack believes to be unbiblical by focusing on deification, mystical participation in God, and the overcoming of human mortality and corruption. The biblical picture of salvation served as the basis for the Western juridical trajectory, but to the East the biblical depiction was largely an irritant that hindered the Church from moving even further along its mystical trajectory.

⁴ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. from 3d German edition by Neil Buchanan *et al.* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1898) 5.14–15.

⁵ Harnack, *History of Dogma* 3.164. (Harnack italicizes this entire sentence.)

⁶ Harnack, *History of Dogma* 5.22.

Of course, the influence of this schema can hardly be overstated. Harnack has given a host of later scholars the basic pattern with which to interpret patristic doctrinal development. For example, writing in 1963 Hans von Campenhausen concludes a study of the Greek Fathers by displaying an attitude toward East and West that is remarkably similar to Harnack's. Campenhausen writes:

It is most striking that the new theological life that came into being in the West in the fourth and fifth centuries had no influence in the East, whereas the West was always open to the influence of Greek theology. Perhaps it was just this feeling of distance from its origins, the need to listen and grow in awareness of the genuine historical differences, which gave Latin theology its power of independent life, although to begin with it owed everything to the Greeks. But the latter had long since thought of themselves as having attained their final goal. Imprisoned in their own territorial and cultural confines, their Church rested upon its own perfection. It trusted in an unchanging and indestructible continuity with the apostles and Fathers of the past whose achievements it admired so much that it failed to observe the changing nature of the problems which faced theology. It preserved their intellectual inheritance without doing anything to renew it.⁷

Similarly, J. Patout Burns follows Harnack's basic characterization of East and West (but without such a pejorative attitude toward the East). Writing in 1976, Burns argues that the Western tradition (he names Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine) focuses on the work of Christ and the continuation of that work through the Church's sacraments, and thus that it limits salvation to those who are in communion with the Church. In contrast, Burns writes, the Eastern tradition (he lists Justin Martyr, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa) focuses on the human development of the potential inherent in creation, and sees salvation as available to all who will pursue the ascetic life and thus seek union with God.⁸

There are many problems with Harnack's two-trajectory schema, and because it has been so influential, its problems have been magnified by the directions in which the schema has led subsequent researchers. Some of these problematic directions are fairly well known,⁹ but I would like to focus in this article on one that is, I believe, less widely acknowledged but particularly dangerous for evangelical theologians. This problem, in a nutshell, is that Harnack's approach has given scholars an excuse to write off the vast riches of Eastern patristic thought. By neatly dividing patristic soteriology

⁷ Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963) 176.

⁸ J. Patout Burns, "The Economy of Salvation: Two Patristic Traditions," *TS* 37 (1976) 599–600.

⁹ The most widely-recognized problem is that Harnack has helped to inspire the contemporary quest to identify and root out all "Hellenized" elements of Christianity, in order to return to a more primitive, "Hebraic" Christianity that is supposedly more biblical. In the process, he has helped to foster a profoundly suspicious attitude toward "orthodoxy" and "dogma," an attitude that has led contemporary researchers to suspect that what was proclaimed as orthodoxy was not actually reflective of the Church's consensus but was simply the view that won out politically among many competitors.

into a biblical, juridical trajectory and an unbiblical trajectory focusing on deification and participation in God, Harnack has provided a rationale for all Westerners to laud the superiority of the Western tradition and to pay little attention to the Eastern understanding of salvation. When one adds to this the fact that the word “participation” sounds suspicious to evangelical ears, and the word “deification” sounds positively blasphemous, Western evangelical scholars become convinced that such a view of salvation must be a warmed-over version of Eastern monism or Neoplatonic philosophy (or both!), and thus it could not possibly have anything to teach modern Westerners. Such, I believe, is the problematic legacy of Harnack’s work and the two-trajectory approach enshrined in it.

II. A THREE-TRAJECTORY APPROACH: RE-THINKING PARTICIPATION/DEIFICATION

As I mentioned in the introduction to this article, I believe that the two-trajectory approach fails to account adequately for the fact that in the early Church there were at least two very different ways of understanding deification or participation in God. On one hand is an understanding that focuses primarily (almost never exclusively) on participation in what later Eastern theology calls God’s “energies” (corresponding to some degree, but far from completely, to what Western theology means by the “attributes” of God). In this understanding, salvation consists of sharing in God’s qualities or characteristics,¹⁰ and in particular, sharing in God’s incorruptible life so as to overcome human mortality and corruption. Because of the focus on sharing in God’s qualities, this soteriological pattern tends to be rather impersonal, and in some cases (but not all), this tendency toward impersonality is pushed to an extreme, in which the distinctions between individual believers are blurred, and, in the most extreme cases, even the distinction between believers and God is blurred. This understanding of participation/deification comes dangerously close to asserting that believers are absorbed into the being of God, and in the minds of most evangelicals, it is extremely problematic.

On the other hand, however, is an understanding of salvation that uses the same words—“participation” and “deification”—but understands these words primarily in personal terms. Church fathers who hold to this view still speak of salvation as sharing in God’s incorruption, but their dominant emphasis falls on our sharing in the personal communion between the persons of the Trinity. To be deified, in this view, is not to be absorbed into God in any sense whatsoever. Rather, it is to be adopted as God’s child, and therefore to share in the warm communion that the natural Son of God has with his Father. Here one should note that the juridical way of understanding salvation also emphasizes adoption, but that view understands the word

¹⁰ Throughout this article, I will use the non-technical words “qualities” and “characteristics,” rather than the anachronistic technical terms “attributes” or “energies.”

“adoption” primarily in a legal way, as an indication of the believer’s changed *status* before God. In contrast, the participatory understanding of adoption concentrates on the personal aspect of adoption/salvation—the believer’s sharing in the very fellowship that unites the Father and the Son.

For the sake of clarity, I will refer to these trajectories as “mystical,” “personal,” and “juridical.” I recognize that one could easily criticize this schema both because it is potentially misleading and because it is oversimplified, and I would like to address these two criticisms straight away. First, the word “mystical” can be used in a wide variety of ways, and in some uses of the word, it is not at all opposed to a personal understanding of salvation. In other words, a given theologian’s soteriology could quite easily be both mystical and personal. However, I will use the word “mystical” to refer to a view of salvation that focuses primarily on the impersonal aspects of union with God—sharing in God’s characteristics, overcoming immortality, and even being absorbed into the being of God. In this way, the word “mystical” does stand in contrast to the word “personal,” and characterizing participatory patterns of salvation as one or the other is useful, as I will argue in the latter part of this article. The second criticism that can easily be leveled against my schema is that it is a serious oversimplification, since rarely did a given Church father follow one of these patterns to the complete exclusion of the others. Much more commonly, patristic theologians combined elements of two or even all three of them. This is certainly true, but I suggest that in most cases, one or another of these predominated, and therefore the use of this schema is helpful even though it is admittedly oversimplified.

If one is willing to grant me a hearing in spite of these two potential criticisms, I suggest that the Western Church fathers did lean noticeably (but not exclusively) toward the juridical pattern, and that Eastern theologians tended toward either the mystical or the personal pattern. In this article, I will not deal with the juridical pattern, since I believe it is familiar enough to evangelical theologians. Instead, I will concentrate on distinguishing the two different participatory patterns, showing how Eastern Fathers plotted the mystical and personal trajectories for describing salvation.

III. PLOTTING THE PERSONAL TRAJECTORY: IRENAEUS OF LYONS

Although little is known about his life, and although his writings do not survive in Greek in their entirety, Irenaeus was surely the most important figure in second-century Eastern theology. His writing was occasioned by the Church’s struggle against Gnosticism, and as a result, he emphasized that salvation was not merely for the soul, but also for the body. As a result, his discussions of humanity’s sinful condition are often couched in the language of “corruption” (φθορά—see 2 Pet 1:4), and he sees salvation as freedom from this sinful corruption so that humanity (body and soul) may enjoy God’s incorruption (ἀφθαρσία). This emphasis is so strong in Irenaeus that Harnack and others have argued that he understood salvation to be little more than

the attaining of immortality for the human body.¹¹ To use my categories, it would seem at first glance that Irenaeus belongs in the mystical camp because he appears to focus so much on sharing in one of God's characteristics—incorruption.

However, this way of looking at Irenaeus misses the fact that his abundant mention of incorruption has to do more with the opponents he is fighting than with the actual centrality of that notion to his thought. Rather than being the centerpiece of Irenaeus's soteriology, incorruption is one of the results of salvation. It is a result that suits his purposes well, since the Gnostics deny this aspect of salvation, but it is still simply a result. The heart of his soteriology is the idea of adoption, understood in the sense of personal communion with God. As Trevor Hart (writing in 1989) correctly points out in opposition to Harnack, Irenaeus does not separate one's *being* from one's *relationships*. Thus, to participate in God is not merely to share in certain qualities (such as incorruption) that God possesses, but much more, to be adopted into his family, to share in communion with God. Hart writes further that our sharing in divine life consists of our receiving from Christ the grace of his own relationship to the Father.¹²

A key discussion in *Aduersus haereses* (written ca. AD 180)¹³ confirms Hart's assertion. Irenaeus insists (in opposition to the Gnostic distinction between the Logos and Jesus) that Christ *is* God the Son, and as he does so, he writes:

For if a human person had not conquered humanity's foe, that foe would not have been conquered justly. Conversely, unless it was God who conferred salvation, we should not possess it securely, and unless humanity had been closely united to God, it could not have become a sharer in incorruptibility (*particeps incorruptibilitatis*) On what basis could we be sharers in adoption as God's sons (*filiorum adoptionis particeps*)? We had to receive, through the Son's agency, participation in him. The Word, having been made flesh, had to share himself with us. That is why he went through every stage of human life, restoring to all of them communion with God.¹⁴

¹¹ See Harnack, *History of Dogma* 2.241. Here Harnack argues that for Irenaeus, immortality is both an attribute of God and his manner of existence. Therefore, God the Son, the possessor of incorruption and immortality, united humanity to himself so that those qualities could be transmitted to humanity by adoption. It is noteworthy that Harnack takes the word adoption in Irenaeus as a reference to our participation in God's immortality, not to our personal participation in his fellowship.

¹² Trevor A. Hart, "Irenaeus, Recapitulation and Physical Redemption," in Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell, eds., *Christ in our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World, Essays Presented to Professor James Torrance* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989) 165–66, 180.

¹³ We possess the complete text of *Aduersus haereses* only in an early Latin version, although there are substantial fragments of the Greek text preserved. The critical edition of the Latin version and Greek fragments may be found in SC 100, 152–53, 210–11, 263–64, 293–94. An English translation of the entire work may be found in ANF 1.315–567. The English translations in this article are taken from Richard A. Norris, ed., *The Christological Controversy* (Sources of Early Christian Thought; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Adu. haer.* 3.18.7 (SC 211.364; ANF 1.448; Norris, *Christological Controversy* 54).

Here Irenaeus describes salvation in three ways: as the conquering of humanity's foe; as our becoming sharers in incorruptibility; and as our becoming sharers in adoption as sons. Notice in particular the link between incorruption and adoption: both of these ideas are prefaced with the word "sharers" or "partakers." To participate in God or be joined to God is to participate in adoption as sons, and incorruption is tied to this adoption.

Shortly after this, Irenaeus addresses those who argue that Christ was a mere man, and he writes of them:

They are not yet in a relationship of sharing with the Logos of God the Father Being ignorant, moreover, of that Emmanuel who is born of a virgin, they are deprived of his gift, which is eternal life. Since they are not recipients of the Logos who is incorruption, they continue in the mortality of the flesh Without question he is addressing these words to those who do not receive the gift of adoption but on the contrary despise the incarnation constituted by the unstained birth of God's Logos The Logos of God became a human being, and the Son of God was made Son of man, so that humanity, having received the Logos and accepted adoption, might become son of God.¹⁵ The only way in which we could receive incorruption and immortality was by being united with them. But how could we be united with incorruption and immortality unless first of all they became what we are¹⁶

Here one should note that in Irenaeus's thought, the gift (described as eternal life, adoption, and incorruption) is connected to the Logos himself, to Christ. To be united to Christ is to share in *his* eternal life, his incorruption. Moreover, we again see that adoption lies at the heart of Irenaeus's soteriology. When we receive the Logos, the true Son of God, he makes us adopted sons and daughters, and then we are able to share in the Son's incorruption.

The centrality of a personal understanding of salvation in Irenaeus's thought is further illustrated by his later work *Demonstratio praedicationis apostolicae* (written ca. 190).¹⁷ As he introduces the three articles of faith (that is, the three persons of the Trinity), Irenaeus writes that the Son "became a man amongst men, visible and palpable, in order to abolish death, to demonstrate life, and to effect communion between God and man."¹⁸ Later, he writes of Christ's preeminence: "Thus, in this way, is the Word of God pre-eminent in all things, for He is true man and 'Wonderful Counsellor and Mighty God,' calling man back again to communion with God, that by communion with Him we may receive participation in incorruptibility."¹⁹ Here

¹⁵ Here Norris apparently misunderstands Irenaeus's logic, because his translation has the word "son" capitalized in this sentence. But Irenaeus's point is that through union with the true Son, human beings become sons and daughters of God. Thus "son" in this place should begin with a lower case letter, as it does in ANF 1.448. I have made this change to Norris's translation.

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Adu. haer.* 3.19.1 (SC 211.370-4; ANF 1.448; Norris, *Christological Controversy* 55-56).

¹⁷ This work survives completely only in an Armenian translation. There is no true critical text, but the closest approach to one may be found in SC 406. The English translation used in this article is from St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (trans. John Behr; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Dem. praed. apost.* 6 (SC 406.92; Behr, *Apostolic Preaching* 43-44).

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Dem. praed. apost.* 40 (SC 406.138; Behr, *Apostolic Preaching* 65).

one should note the order of the statements: communion with God is foundational, and incorruptibility is the result of sharing communion with God.

Even this brief look at Irenaeus should be sufficient to confirm Hart's findings. Participation, for Irenaeus, does not mean merely sharing in some qualities of God, and it emphatically does not mean virtual absorption into God's being. Instead, Irenaeus uses the idea of participation in a decidedly personal way: through our union with the natural Son of God, we become adopted sons and daughters, and thus we share fellowship or communion with God. Sharing in God's qualities (such as incorruptibility) follows from this primarily personal way of looking at salvation. By using the idea of participation in God to refer to adoption and communion, Irenaeus plots what I call a personal trajectory, which part of the Church will subsequently follow in describing salvation.

IV. PLOTTING THE MYSTICAL TRAJECTORY: ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

Active in the early third century, Origen was one of the Eastern Church's most monumental figures whose writings ran the gamut from exegesis to biblical criticism to theology to apologetics. His legacy was also more problematic than that of any other writer from the early Church, and he was eventually condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in AD 553 (a condemnation which led to the destruction of many of the Greek texts of his writings). One of the Eastern Church's primary tasks from the fourth through seventh centuries was finding appropriate ways to solve the problems created by Origen and/or his followers. Indeed, one of the reasons modern Western scholars have been so quick to write off the Eastern Church is that they have painted all Eastern theologians with an Origenist brush,²⁰ failing to recognize the degree to which many Eastern Fathers consciously distanced themselves from the great third-century Alexandrian.

Like Irenaeus before him, Origen writes in order to refute Gnosticism. But in Origen's case, the main target is not so much Gnostic dualism (its denigration of the physical realm in order to exalt the spiritual) as it is Gnostic fatalism (its insistence that people are born into one class or another, which renders human actions virtually meaningless). Irenaeus addresses this concern relatively briefly (in *Adversus haereses* 4.37–39), but Origen's entire system developed in his work *De principiis* (written prior to 231)²¹ is based on his robust defense of human freedom, a defense that leads him to believe that any differences in the way God treats people must stem from what those

²⁰ Notice that in the passage quoted above, Harnack writes that of the Eastern Fathers, only Origen is close to Tertullian and Augustine in stature. If one regards the East's most problematic figure as its most eminent Father, as Harnack does, then one will inevitably underestimate or disregard the significance of Eastern theology.

²¹ This work survives as a whole in a Latin version and in substantial Greek fragments. The critical text is in SC 252–53, 268–69, 312. The best English translation is in Origen, *On First Principles* (trans. G. W. Butterworth; London: S.P.C.K., 1936), and quotations in this article are from that translation.

people have previously done to deserve praise or blame.²² Commenting on God's love for Jacob and hatred of Esau even though neither had yet done anything worthy of praise or blame (Romans 9), Origen insists that their souls must have pre-existed, so God acted toward them based on the way their souls had acted before their physical conception.²³ This postulate of the pre-existence of souls becomes the starting point for Origen's grand (and *very* problematic) cosmology,²⁴ in which all human souls were pre-existent, and all but the soul of Jesus sinned in the pre-existent state. The fallen souls were then cast down into the physical universe created to accommodate them, and they were united with bodies so that in their embodied state, they could aspire to reunion with God from whom they had originally come.²⁵

Here one should recognize how sharp the difference between Irenaeus and Origen is, even though both are arguing against the same opponent, Gnosticism. Irenaeus's rejection of Gnostic dualism enables him to accentuate the importance of the whole person, body and soul. He is then able to describe salvation in personal terms, as the communion of a human being with God through adoption into God's family, with the result that the whole person shares God's incorruption. In contrast, Origen's rejection of Gnostic fatalism pushes him, ironically, toward somewhat of an *acceptance* of Gnostic dualism: he postulates a cosmos in which the very existence of the physical realm is a result of sin.²⁶ In such a cosmos, the pre-existence of the souls gives those souls a kinship with God that the bodies, created later, can never have. This, in turn, prevents him from seeing human beings as whole persons, and thus makes it difficult for him to see salvation in personal terms. As a result, in Origen's system salvation becomes the task of the human soul to achieve mystical union with God, and this soteriology bears an unmistakable resemblance to the Middle Platonic philosophy that had seeped into second-century Alexandrian Christianity through Philo and Clement.

This strong emphasis on salvation as the task of the human soul leads Origen to view participation in God primarily as sharing in God's holiness, wisdom, and other qualities, *not* as sharing in his personal fellowship. For

²² See *De princ.* 3.1.10 (SC 268.56–8; Butterworth, *First Principles* 172).

²³ See *De princ.* 3.1.21 (SC 268.134–6; Butterworth, *First Principles* 204).

²⁴ For an excellent treatment of the relation between Origen's defense of human free will and his emerging cosmology, see Rebecca J. Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius, and Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 59–81. Lyman argues on pp. 59–60 that Origen's postulate of the pre-existence of the souls is not so much an attempt to describe metaphysical reality as it is an attempt to account for inequalities in present human life. In this she is certainly correct, but the fact remains that Origen's cosmology was very problematic, even if the concern that pushed him to that cosmology was a genuine one.

²⁵ See *De princ.* 1.8.1 (SC 252.220–3; Butterworth, *First Principles* 66–68).

²⁶ Here I should note that Origen believes the physical realm to be redemptive, rather than evil. For Gnosticism, the physical realm is unequivocally evil, and the soul must be freed from that realm. For Origen, the physical realm was created after the fall of the souls, to provide a place in which the souls could work their way back to God. So there are great differences between Origen and the Gnostics here, but both are dualistic in that both see the spiritual realm alone as being ultimately redeemed. The physical realm, for Origen, is the place where redemption occurs, but it is not itself redeemed.

example, while discussing the activities of the three trinitarian persons, Origen writes:

God the Father bestows on all the gift of existence; and a participation in Christ, in virtue of his being the word or reason, makes them rational. From this it follows that they are worthy of praise or blame, because they are capable alike of virtue and wickedness. Accordingly, there is also available the grace of the Holy Spirit, that those beings who are not holy in essence may be made holy by participating in this grace.²⁷

Notice here that the participatory language is tied to qualities of God, and the personal element of participation that we see in Irenaeus is missing. Origen later develops his idea of participation by making a famous distinction between “image” and “likeness.” Noting that Gen 1:26 includes both of these words (“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”), but that the following verse includes only the word “image,” Origen asserts that human beings are given the image of God at creation but are called to aspire to the likeness of God.²⁸ He then cites John 17:21–24 (Jesus’ prayer that believers may be one, as he and he Father are one), and he explains what he understands this likeness to be: “Here indeed the likeness seems, if we may say so, to make an advance, and from being something similar to become ‘one thing (*unum*)’; for this reason, undoubtedly, that in the consummation or end God is ‘all in all.’”²⁹ Origen goes into a long discussion of what kind of oneness believers will have with God at the consummation of history. It is noteworthy that this discussion includes no element of personal communion at all. Instead, Origen focuses on the question of whether human beings will still have bodies in the consummation, and he concludes that we will *not* have bodies since the God with whom we become one is an immaterial spirit. In fact, a major part of his reasoning is his belief that immateriality is the dominant characteristic of God and thus the main thing that we will possess by participation in him.³⁰ For Origen, to participate in God, to acquire the divine likeness, has little to do with personal fellowship with God. Instead, it has to do with achieving union with God in his qualities, and in the process transcending the material nature human beings now possess.³¹

In keeping with his idea that union with God involves participation in his characteristics, Origen emphasizes that the paradigm for salvation is the transfiguration of Christ. He insists that on the mountain Jesus was not the one who changed, but rather that Peter, James, and John were raised

²⁷ *De princ.* 1.3.8 (SC 252.162; Butterworth, *First Principles* 38).

²⁸ *De princ.* 3.6.1 (SC 268.236; Butterworth, *First Principles* 245).

²⁹ *De princ.* 3.6.1 (SC 268.238; Butterworth, *First Principles* 246).

³⁰ *De princ.* 3.6.1 (SC 268.238; Butterworth, *First Principles* 246–47).

³¹ For an excellent discussion of Origen’s idea of salvation as participation in God’s qualities, see Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451) (trans. John Bowden; London: Mowbrays, 1965, rev. ed. 1975) 138–42. Grillmeier argues that Origen bases his cosmology and his soteriology on the titles of God (ἐπίνοια), the transcendent properties or qualities of the Father which are objectively real in the Logos. The Logos is therefore the fullness of all good things and can be the mediator through whom human beings receive participation in the ἐπίνοια.

up to the point that they could see him as he truly was. In his work *Contra Celsum* (written ca. 248),³² Origen writes of Christ:

And discoursing in human form, and announcing Himself as flesh, He calls to Himself those who are flesh, that He may in the first place cause them to be transformed according to the Word that was made flesh, and afterwards may lead them upwards to behold Him as He was before He became flesh; so that they, receiving the benefit, and ascending from their great introduction to Him, which was according to the flesh, say, "Even if we have known Christ after the flesh, yet henceforth know we Him no more." . . . He did not continue in the form in which He first presented Himself, but caused us to ascend to the lofty mountain of His word, and showed us His own glorious form, and the splendour of His garments And he who beheld these things could say, "We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."³³

Here again we see the advance of believers from the material realm to the spiritual realm. We see a focus on God's glory and on salvation as the ability to see that glory. Furthermore, the personal dimension of the transfiguration—the Father's statement that Christ is his beloved Son—goes unmentioned in Origen's discussion.³⁴

There are several ways in which Origen's understanding of salvation serves to plot what I am calling the mystical trajectory. His focus on the free human action to ascend to God, in contrast to a paradigm in which God's downward action is the primary focus, promotes a view of Christian life in which our action is the key to union with God. His depiction of salvation as participation in God's qualities, as purification so that we can *see* God as he really is, creates a climate in which the personal dimensions of salvation are underemphasized. And his insistence that the final state of believers (and indeed, of all creatures) will be immaterial paves the way for a view of salvation that comes dangerously close to blurring the distinctions between individual creatures, and even the distinction between God and all creatures. Furthermore, Origen's treatment of "image" and "likeness" and his way of handling the transfiguration will be followed later by much of the Eastern Church, as it travels the mystical trajectory in describing salvation.

V. FOLLOWING THE MYSTICAL TRAJECTORY: GREGORY OF NYSSA

After the fourth-century Arian crisis led the Church to recognize clearly that all creatures were created in time and thus not pre-existent, it was

³² The Greek critical edition of this text may be found in SC 132, 136, 147, 150, 227. The English translations quoted in this article are from ANF 4.395–669.

³³ *Con. Cels.* 6.68 (SC 147.348–50; ANF 4.604).

³⁴ I should note that personal elements are not missing altogether from Origen's portrayal of salvation. See, e.g., *De princ.* 4.4.5 (SC 268.412; Butterworth, *First Principles* 320) and *Con. Cels.* 3.28 (ANF 4.475). But even in passages such as these that do speak of adoption and/or fellowship with God, the personal element is overshadowed by the idea that salvation involves becoming incorporeal, as God is.

apparent to virtually everyone in the Eastern Church that Origen's cosmology needed significant modification. Gregory of Nyssa's work in the late fourth century can be regarded as a minimalist correction: he denies the pre-existence of the souls, arguing instead that each human soul was created in time, at the same time that person's body was created.³⁵ In spite of this corrective, Gregory continues to see through Origen's eyes in many ways. He argues that at creation, humanity was not differentiated into male and female, and in the consummation the current distinction between the sexes will be lost. Gregory then posits that since God foreknew humanity's fall, he divided humanity into male and female and placed human beings in the fallen world so that they could there work out their redemption. Thus, the undifferentiated state of humanity in Gregory's thought corresponds to the pre-existent state of the souls in Origen's cosmology, even though Gregory insists that this undifferentiated state was created in time. The idea that the physical world (as well as the physicality and sexual differentiation of humanity) are results of the fall is also similar to Origen's idea that the physical world was a result of the fall of the souls. Gregory has rejected the most obvious flaw in Origen's system, but he has preserved the same basic structure.³⁶

Accordingly, Gregory of Nyssa follows Origen in seeing salvation largely as the ascent of the human soul to God, in focusing on the soul rather than the whole person, in minimizing the personal aspects of salvation, and in viewing salvation primarily as mystical participation in the qualities or characteristics of God.³⁷ In *De officio hominis* (written ca. 380), Gregory affirms that to say God made humanity in his image is "the same as to say that He made human nature participant in all good (*παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ μέτοχον*); for if the Deity is the fulness of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance to the Archetype in being filled with all good (*ἐν τῷ πλήρει εἶναι παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ*)."³⁸ In this passage, notice that humanity's original participation in God, and thus by implication salvation as well, is described as

³⁵ See *De officio hominis* 29.1–2. The critical text may be found in *Sancti Patris nostri Gregorii Nysseni Basilii magni fratris: Quae supersunt omnia in unam corpus collegit, ad fidem codd. mss. recensuit, latinis versionibus quam accuratissimis instruxit et genuina a suppositiis discrevit* (ed. George H. Forbes; Burntisland: E typographeo de Pitsligo, 1855) 1.102–319. An English translation may be found in NPNF (2) 5.387–427. *De opif. hom.* 29.1–2 is in Forbes, 282–84 and NPNF (2) 5.420–21.

³⁶ See *De opif. hom.* 22.3–4 (Forbes, *Sancti Patris* 1.234–36; NPNF [2] 5.411–12).

³⁷ An outstanding recent treatment of these themes in Gregory's thought may be found in Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). On pp. 188–89, Laird argues that for Gregory, deification involves participation in God's characteristics. In fact, even when Gregory speaks of communion with God, Laird shows that he has in mind communion with God's qualities, not personal fellowship with God per se. Furthermore, Laird shows that Gregory's focus on divine light is also connected to participation in God's qualities. See also Jean Daniélou's introduction to *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (trans. Herbert Musurillo; New York: Scribner, 1961).

³⁸ *De opif. hom.* 16.10 (Forbes, *Sancti Patris* 1.202; NPNF [2] 5.405).

our being filled with all good things. In fact, God himself is understood as the fullness of good things, good qualities. Of course, one could argue that this is only part of the way Gregory understands God, not the fundamental way, and thus that this is not the fundamental way he understands participation in God. However, shortly after this passage, Gregory writes, “Thus there is in us the principle of all excellence, all virtue and wisdom, and every higher thing that we conceive: but pre-eminent among all is the fact that we are free from necessity, and not in bondage to any natural power . . .”³⁹ Clearly, Gregory understands participation in God primarily in terms of sharing in his qualities, of which the most important to Gregory (as to Origen) is freedom.

When Gregory is discussing the final state, his emphasis on participation as sharing in God’s qualities is even stronger than it is when he is discussing the original creation. In his *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (written ca. 380),⁴⁰ he emphasizes that all human beings will ultimately be saved. (Here he reflects Origen’s universalism.) Commenting on 1 Cor 2:9 (“Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love him”), Gregory offers this interpretation:

But this [that which God has prepared] is nothing else, as I at least understand it, but to be in God Himself, for the Good which is above hearing and eye and heart must be that Good which transcends the universe. But the difference between the virtuous and the vicious life led at the present time will be illustrated in this way; viz. in the quicker or more tardy participation of each in that promised blessedness.⁴¹

Here we again see God described primarily as the highest good, and so the good things promised to believers (and indeed to all people, since in Gregory’s thought all will eventually share in salvation) are to share in God as the highest good. Gregory is even more explicit at the end of the work, when he writes of the need to purge all the passions from the soul. He continues:

When such [the passions], then, have been purged from it [the soul] and utterly removed by the healing processes worked out by the Fire, then every one of the things which make up our conception of the good will come to take their place; incorruption, that is, and life, and honour, and grace, and glory, and everything else that we conjecture is to be seen in God, and in His Image, that is, human nature (τῆ εἰκόνι αὐτοῦ, ἣ τις ἐστὶν ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη φύσις).⁴²

Here we see quite dramatically that Gregory’s fundamental way of understanding God, and thus participation in God, is in terms of characteristics.

³⁹ *De opif. hom.* 16.11 (Forbes, *Sancti Patris* 1.202; NPNF [2] 5.405).

⁴⁰ There is not yet a critical Greek text of this work. The received text may be found in PG 46.11–160. The English translations used in this article are from NPNF [2] 5.430–68.

⁴¹ *Dial. de an. et res.* (PG 46.148a–b; NPNF [2] 5.465).

⁴² *Dial. de an. et res.* (PG 46.160c; NPNF [2] 5.468). Here I have modified the end of the translation. NPNF actually reads “and in His Image, man as he was made,” which does not make quite clear that what will be perfected is not any individual human being, but the undifferentiated humanity that was first created. See my discussion of this aspect of Gregory’s thought in the following paragraph.

The salvation that awaits all human beings is a participation in those qualities.⁴³

Another aspect of Gregory's thought that clearly shows his adherence to what I call the mystical trajectory is his belief that in the final condition, the distinctions between individual human beings will be lost. We have seen that Origen paved the way for this sort of understanding, and it is especially prominent in Gregory. In *De opificio hominis*, he affirms, "The man that was manifested at the first creation of the world, and he that shall be after the consummation of all, are alike: they equally bear in themselves the Divine image."⁴⁴ In light of Gregory's insistence that the distinction of humanity into male and female (and thus into *different* people) followed the Fall, this statement is striking. Humanity at the consummation will once again be undifferentiated, with no males or females, and indeed no individual people at all. Thus Gregory's (and Origen's) universalism entails not so much the salvation of all people as the loss of individuality: humanity is "saved" by becoming once again an undifferentiated whole. Similarly, in *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione*, Gregory defines the resurrected condition by writing:

We will say that the Resurrection is "the reconstitution of our nature in its original form" (ἀνάστασις ἐστὶν ἢ εἰς τὸ ἀρχαῖον τῆς φύσεως ἡμῶν ἀποκατάστασις). But in that form of life, of which God Himself was the Creator, it is reasonable to believe that there was neither age nor infancy nor any of the sufferings arising from our present various infirmities, nor any kind of bodily affliction whatever. It is reasonable, I say, to believe that God was the Creator of none of these things, but that man was a thing divine (θεῖόν τι) before his humanity got within reach of the assault of evil.⁴⁵

In this passage Gregory asserts not only that the sufferings attendant on fallen human life will be abolished in the consummation, but that the original, divine form (θεῖόν τι) of humanity will be restored. As we have seen, this divine form did not, and thus will not, include differentiation into individual people.

From this discussion we can see that Gregory of Nyssa follows Origen almost as closely as one can in the post-Nicea environment. He rejects some of the most troubling individual elements of his predecessor's cosmology, but the trajectory his soteriology follows adheres very closely to the course Origen has plotted previously. For both of them, salvation is primarily participation in God's qualities. For Gregory, moreover, the final state of humanity is one in which individuality is lost as the human race returns to its original, undifferentiated condition. Such loss of individuality virtually precludes a personal way of understanding salvation and marks Gregory out

⁴³ Once again, I should caution that as with Origen, so also with Gregory, personal ways of understanding salvation are not missing altogether. See Gregory's description of salvation as fellowship with God in *Oratio catechetica* 36. The Greek critical text of this work may be found in *The Catechetical Oration of Gregory of Nyssa* (ed. James H. Srawley; Cambridge Patristic Texts; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). An English translation may be found in NPNF (2) 5.473–509.

⁴⁴ *De opif. hom.* 16.17 (Forbes, *Sancti Patris* 206–8; NPNF [2] 5.406).

⁴⁵ *Dial. de an. et res.* (PG 46.148a; NPNF [2] 5.464).

as one of the most mystical of the Church fathers. Like Origen, Gregory stands in marked contrast to Irenaeus, for whom participation in God is primarily personal and only secondarily sharing in God's qualities or characteristics.

VI. THE HIGH POINT OF THE PERSONAL TRAJECTORY:
CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

As one attempts to chart what I am calling the personal trajectory in patristic thought, the natural choice after Irenaeus would be to examine the teaching of Athanasius.⁴⁶ However, I would like instead to turn to the greatest of Athanasius's followers, Cyril of Alexandria, who faithfully adheres to an Athanasian trajectory but develops his master's thought considerably. I suggest that Cyril represents the high point of the personal trajectory during the patristic period.⁴⁷

Like virtually all Church fathers, Cyril does see salvation as a participation in God's qualities: he emphasizes that God grants us to share in his own incorruption and holiness.⁴⁸ But like Irenaeus and Athanasius, and unlike Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, he places his dominant emphasis on salvation as personal participation. In fact, Cyril's treatment of this theme is more extensive than that of other patristic writers. He emphasizes that Christians receive both the status of adopted sons⁴⁹ and communion with the Father and the Son.⁵⁰ More important, Cyril develops technical terminology to emphasize that believers do not share in any way at all in the substance of God, but that we nevertheless do participate in the fellowship that the persons of the Trinity have with one another because they are of the same substance. By developing this terminology, Cyril guards against a mystical concept of salvation (in which the distinction between the saved person and God is

⁴⁶ See, in particular, Athanasius's extended treatment of the relation between the Son's natural sonship to the Father and believers' adopted sonship in *Contra Arianos* (PG 26.12–468; NPNF [2] 4.306–431), bk. 2, chaps. 51–61.

⁴⁷ The discussion of Cyril that follows is summarized from a much more lengthy treatment in chapter three of my book *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ See Cyril's *Commentarii in Iohannem* 4.2. The Greek critical text of this work may be found in *Sancti patris nostri Cyrilli archiepiscopi Alexandrini, in d. Joannis evangelium: Accedunt fragmenta varia necnon tractatus ad Tibersium diaconoum duo* (ed. P. E. Pusey; 3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1872). An English translation may be found in *Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church* (henceforth LF), vols. 43, 48. In *Com. Johan.* 4.2 (Pusey, *Sancti Patris* 1.450, LF 43.410), Cyril emphasizes that the Eucharist is the vehicle through which Christians receive life and incorruption. See also *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et ueritate* 12 (PG 68.785a; to my knowledge there is no English translation of this work), in which Cyril asserts that we are made holy in Christ when we become partakers of his divine nature.

⁴⁹ See *De sancta trinitate dialogi* 2 (SC 231.288–90; to my knowledge there is no English translation of this work), in which Cyril affirms that the true Son, Christ, grants us the dignity of adopted sonship, so that we are ranked as God's sons. The word "dignity" (ἀξίωμα) indicates the juridical aspect of adoption, the status of being God's children.

⁵⁰ See *Com. Johan.* 9.1 (Pusey, *Sancti Patris* 2.453; LF 48.287), in which Cyril uses the word *κοινωνία* to describe the Christian's relationship to the persons of the Trinity.

blurred) and also affirms the most personal concept of salvation possible. I would like to examine a few of the passages in which he does both of these things.

Like Athanasius before him, Cyril uses the Greek words ἴδιος (“one’s own”) and ἰδιότης (“identity”) to denote the unity of substance between the trinitarian persons. For example, he calls the Son “the heir of the identity (ἰδιότητος) of the one who begat him,”⁵¹ referring to the identity of nature between the Son and the Father. Cyril explains Jesus’ statement that God is his own Father (ἴδιον πατέρα) to mean that the Logos is of the essence of God the Father.⁵² Cyril also insists that the Holy Spirit is the Son’s own, and here as well it is apparent that he has in mind an intimacy of substance. He writes: “For the Spirit is the Son’s own (ἴδιον), and not supplied from without as the things of God come to us from without, but exists in him naturally (ἐνυπάρχει φυσικῶς) even as in the Father, and through him proceeds to the saints, apportioned by the Father as is fitting for each.”⁵³

In the Greek language in general, the words ἰδιότης and οἰκειότης are basically synonyms, but Cyril (unlike Athanasius) makes a distinction between them in order to elucidate his concept of salvation. For Cyril, οἰκειότης refers to fellowship or communion between distinct persons. Thus, the persons of the Trinity share both ἰδιότης (that is, an identical substance or nature) and οἰκειότης (that is, the mutual fellowship and love implied in the names “Father” and “Son”). In fact, Cyril uses an even more pointed expression, οἰκειότης φυσική (“natural fellowship”), to indicate still more clearly that the fellowship between the persons of the Trinity is based on their identity of substance/nature.⁵⁴

Cyril uses this distinction between ἰδιότης and οἰκειότης to specify quite precisely what participation in God does and does not mean. He insists that we do not share in any way at all in the ἰδιότης that binds the trinitarian persons together. Instead, Cyril takes great pains to distinguish Christ, the natural Son of God, from Christians: we do not become God’s own sons (ἰδιοὺς υἱοὺς) in any ontological sense at all, because there is only one ἴδιος υἱός, the Son who is eternally begotten from the Father and who thus possesses the substance of the Godhead. But even though we do not share in the ἰδιότης of the Trinity, Cyril strikingly argues that Christians do participate in the natural fellowship (οἰκειότης φυσική), the warm communion and intimacy which the persons of the Trinity have as a result of their unity of substance. By grace we receive the natural communion (οἰκειότης φυσική) of the Godhead because the Logos has brought his own humanity into the fellowship of the Trinity, in order to share this fellowship with us as well. The most striking passage in which Cyril argues these points comes in his *Commentarii in Johanem* (written ca. 425) as he comments on John 1:9–13. He begins by explaining the sense in which we can be called gods:

⁵¹ *Com. Johan.* 2.1 (Pusey, *Sancti Patris* 1.190; LF 43.147).

⁵² *Com. Johan.* 2.1 (Pusey, *Sancti Patris* 1.207; LF 43.160).

⁵³ *Com. Johan.* 5.2 (Pusey, 1.692; LF 43.548).

⁵⁴ See, e.g., *De trin. dial.* 1 (SC 231.152), 3 (SC 237.12), 6 (SC 246.28).

Shall we then abandon what we are by nature and mount up to the divine and unutterable essence, and shall we depose (ἐκβάλλοντες) the Word of God from his very sonship and sit in place of him with the Father and make the grace of him who honours us a pretext for impiety? May it never be! Rather, the Son will remain unchangeably in that condition in which he is, but we, adopted into sonship and gods by grace (θεοὶ εἰς υἰότητα καὶ θεοὶ κατὰ χάριν), shall not be ignorant of what we are.⁵⁵

In this passage, he argues that true sonship cannot be shared. For us to become true sons of the Father would require that we *displace* the Logos as genuine Son. Cyril angrily dismisses this thought, since there can be only one true Son of God. Instead, he argues that even when we are called sons and gods by grace, we remain aware of what we actually are, that is, creatures. There is no question of our aspiring to the substance of God; Cyril recognizes that this is impossible and that it would be blasphemous even to consider it. With this idea clearly in place, Cyril then explains the difference between the way the Son is begotten of God and the way Christians are. He writes:

When he had said that authority was given to them from him who is by nature Son to become sons of God, and had hereby first introduced that which is of adoption and grace, he can afterwards add without danger [of misunderstanding] that they were begotten of God, in order that he might show the greatness of the grace which was conferred on them, gathering as it were into natural communion (οἰκειότητα φυσικήν) those who were alien from God the Father, and raising up the slaves to the nobility (εὐγένειαν) of their Lord, on account of his warm love towards them.⁵⁶

Here Cyril indicates not merely that Christians share οἰκειότης with God, but also that we share in his οἰκειότης φυσική. In light of how emphatically Cyril distinguishes us from Christ throughout all his writings, οἰκειότης φυσική cannot be the identity of substance which characterizes the trinitarian persons. Nothing could be more foreign to Cyril's thought than the idea that God would share his very substance with us in the sense that we lose our own personal identity and acquire God's. Rather, in this passage οἰκειότης φυσική must be the fellowship that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share as a result of their consubstantiality. Although we were foreign to God, his warm love for us has led him to raise us up to the intimacy of communion which characterizes his own inter-trinitarian relationships, and the only difference is that we possess that fellowship by grace, whereas the Son has it naturally. The idea that Christians can possess by grace the natural communion of the Trinity is a striking one indeed. The concept is tantalizingly paradoxical, and only Cyril's careful distinction between ἴδιος and οἰκειότης prevents it from being self-contradictory. But this arresting language shows the depth of God's self-giving as he graciously shares his own fellowship with us.

⁵⁵ *Com. Johan.* 1.9 (Pusey, *Sancti Patris* 1.110–11; LF 43.86, translation modified).

⁵⁶ *Com. Johan.* 1.9 (Pusey, *Sancti Patris* 1.135; LF 43.106, translation modified).

At this point it should be clear that Cyril of Alexandria represents the same trajectory as Irenaeus and Athanasius, but he is considerably more precise than either of them. He guards sedulously against any idea of mystical absorption into God, and he tirelessly promotes a personal concept of participation in which we share in the very love between the Father and the Son. Cyril also places a great deal of emphasis on our human inability to rise up to God, and thus on God's downward action through the incarnation and crucifixion in order to make us his adopted sons and daughters. These emphases stand in marked contrast to Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. Virtually all Greek Fathers use the words "participation" and "deification," but as I have sought to show, there are at least two quite different ways of understanding these concepts in the patristic period. And I believe that the personal participatory way of understanding salvation deserves a great deal of our attention. We should not let the problems of the mystical pattern lead us to write off altogether the concept of salvation as participation.

VII. SUBSEQUENT PATHS OF THE THREE TRAJECTORIES

The presence of two very different concepts of participation/deification in the patristic period implies that (as I stated in the introduction to this article) there were at least three major trajectories overall, which I am calling mystical, personal, and juridical. Once again, I should emphasize that many Church fathers combined two or perhaps even all three of these ways of understanding salvation. In particular, we find noteworthy juridical elements, as well as personal, in both Athanasius and Cyril; and Augustine is by no means exclusively juridical in his understanding. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to assert that most patristic theologians leaned primarily toward one or another of the emphases, and thus it is fair to speak not simply of three intertwined soteriological emphases, but of three trajectories that were at least partially distinct.

What then were the subsequent paths of the three trajectories I have described? It seems to me that as contact between the Greek and Latin regions of the Roman Empire declined in the early part of the Medieval/Byzantine period, the Western Church followed a more and more exclusively juridical trajectory. The rise of the penitential system and the notion of the Mass as a re-sacrifice of Christ at the beginning of the Middle Ages, the Anselmian revolution in atonement doctrine in the 11th century, and the crystallizing of the sacramental system in the 12th–13th centuries all served to solidify this juridical soteriology, in which salvation was seen as a state before God. Furthermore, it seems to me that the Reformers did little to reverse the juridical trajectory of the Western Church. Granted, the Reformers gave a radically different answer to the question of *how* one attains a right standing before God, but most of them did not fundamentally alter the general idea that salvation is primarily juridical in character. Perhaps Calvin's focus on union with Christ should be seen as an exception to this, but it is the exception that demonstrates the rule. It was left to the rise of Pietism in the 17th

and 18th centuries to re-capture a more personal understanding of salvation, and I suggest that this personal dimension was more influential in pietistic/evangelical *spirituality* than in *theology* per se. (I will return to this idea in the conclusion of this article.) And mystical concepts of salvation have generally belonged to the fringes of Western Christianity, not to the mainstream. For the most part, the Western Church has been primarily juridical for the bulk of its history.

If one turns to the East, it seems to me that what I am calling the mystical trajectory was the one that gained preeminence during the Byzantine period. The emphases of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa were echoed prominently in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius early in the sixth century. Later, Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662) launched an extensive critique of Origen's cosmology, allegedly solving once-for-all the problems inherent in it, but in my opinion he did not significantly depart from the overall vision of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. This trajectory may be traced further through Gregory Palamas (ca. 1269–1359), who crystallized the distinction between God's essence (in which we do not share) and his energies (in which we do share through salvation). With Palamas the Eastern Orthodox Church was locked onto a trajectory in which salvation consists more of participation in God's qualities, his energies, rather than participation in a relationship.

What then of the personal trajectory? It seems to me that the understanding of salvation as participation in the natural communion of the trinitarian persons has been seriously underemphasized in the history of Christian theology, in both East and West. The Church has appropriated a great deal of Irenaeus's polemic against Gnostic dualism, of Athanasius's trinitarian arguments against Arianism, and of Cyril's exposition of orthodox Christology against Nestorianism. But it seems to me that the Church has paid a good deal less attention to the heart of the soteriology underlying their theological statements. To a degree, the personal trajectory appears to have reached a dead end sometime during the transition from the patristic period to the Medieval/Byzantine era. Again, I should emphasize that this is an oversimplification. There have always been people in both East and West who have echoed Cyril's concept of personal participation, but if I am reading the big picture correctly, the Eastern and Western Churches have largely followed the mystical and juridical trajectories, not the personal one. And this brings me to the final thing I would like to do in this article: suggest a few implications of these trajectories for contemporary evangelical theology.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS FOR EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

One could well argue that evangelical soteriology has an appropriately personal emphasis, but I am not so sure. Just above I made a distinction between theology and spirituality, and it seems to me that evangelical *theology* is almost largely juridical in nature. Evangelicals, more than most Christians, use justification as our primary theological motif for describing salvation *and* insist that justification is a purely forensic, juridical category. Evangelicals, more than most Christians, focus our *theological* thinking

almost exclusively on our status before God, on guilt and forgiveness, and so on.⁵⁷ Our desire to root out from our theology anything that might smack of works salvation leads us to place virtually all of our emphasis on the beginning of faith, on the moment of justification, and to interpret this largely as a change in a person's status before God. Of course, evangelical *spirituality*, the typical concept of Christian life present among the people in evangelical churches, is abundantly personal. We focus on Jesus as our friend. We speak about "a personal relationship with Christ" or "knowing God personally." Evangelical sermons and Bible studies stress that Christ is there for us, pulling for us. But I fear that this personal spirituality is often rather distantly removed from the primarily juridical theology common in evangelicalism. Most laypeople—and perhaps even many pastors—are unable to connect the juridical and the personal aspects of evangelical faith, and these aspects remain in separate boxes in people's minds, relegated to separate sermons from evangelical pulpits.

In addition to this apparent divorce between a juridical theology and a personal spirituality in much of evangelicalism, I think another problem worth mentioning is that when evangelicals do speak of salvation in personal terms, we do not sufficiently ground this personal understanding in the life of the Trinity. Evangelicals speak and preach of *a* relationship with God. But what is the basis of this relationship? Most fall silent when confronted with this question. But Jesus tells us that the love with which he has loved his disciples is *the very love* with which the Father has loved him (John 15:9). And in his high priestly prayer, he prays that believers might be one *in the same way* that he and the Father are one (John 17:21–24). Conservative Christians read this latter passage and balk, for we wonder how we can possibly be one with each other or with God *in that way*. But as Cyril has shown us, there are two kinds of oneness: unity of substance (which God does not share with us at all), and unity of fellowship (which is the heart of what he *does* share with us). Jesus here is speaking of the second of these, and his words show us that the basis for *our* relationship with God and with other believers is the relationship between the Father and the Son. We are called to and granted not just *a* relationship with God, but a share in *the very same* relationship that God the Son has enjoyed from all eternity with his Father.

This is a far more deeply personal way of describing salvation than evangelicals typically employ. It is rooted in Jesus' self-understanding in John's Gospel; it formed the basis for the thinking of some of the early Church's greatest theologians; and it enables us to connect our evangelical soteriology more directly to the life of the Trinity. Furthermore, speaking of salvation in this way enables us to recognize that, for all the importance of juridical categories, forgiveness of sins *is* simply the negative side of salvation. It

⁵⁷ One may find a bit of anecdotal support for this contention in the fact that numerous evangelical sermons are preached on Eph 2:1–10, and virtually all of those sermons focus on justification by faith, even though the word "justification" does not occur in that passage and the primary images there are death and life, not guilt and justification.

removes the barrier that prevents us from sharing in the Son's relationship to the Father. Removal of this barrier is absolutely crucial, but God did not remove it just so that we could have a new status before him. He removed it so that we could share in the deepest personal relationship there is, his own relationship between the persons of the Trinity. Perhaps it is time for evangelicals to see a robust revival of the personal trajectory which part of the patristic Church followed in describing salvation.