

## A Different Twist to Conceiving Spiritual Advancement

In the middle 1980s—now so long ago sounding—I had spent considerable time and energy on the translation of the Commentary on the Song of Songs by St. Gregory of Nyssa which saw publication the following year. In addition to this work, I had done a number of other translations of Gregory's treatises, two of which were published as books and others in journals. Not long after the Internet became available, I was fortunate to have ended up with considerable material in my hand for posting. At this time I was fortunate to have collaborated with Professor David Salomon (now at Sage College, Troy, NY) to get most of this material prepared for the Gregory of Nyssa Home Page (it's linked with the lectio home page) and later for the Gregory of Nyssa CD-ROM. As for this fourth century author, there's nothing like working with someone—word by word, line by line—over an extended period. Time seems to stand still engaged in such projects, especially true when working with Gregory's difficult Greek style. In addition, I had the opportunity to attend numerous meetings of scholars and people interested in the Church Fathers. While valuable, I discovered that such meetings were no substitute for “doing Gregory” in a monastic context which always had been his native soil. A monk may be relatively isolated in the enclosure, that is, not associated with a university where he can hone his skills through teaching. Nevertheless, the monastic environment is unparalleled for getting a feel for someone like Gregory. A monk may not be able to articulate his doctrine like a professional teacher, yet he has special insight from living a life with which Gregory would be in sympathy. As for those who've accessed the Gregory of Nyssa Home Page, a surprising number are sincere seekers interested in applying his teaching within their own lives. The best part is that they can take his writings, run with them and thus build their own spirituality best done under the guidance of a trusted spiritual director.

As for this document, it came into existence after reflecting upon those countless hours devoted to Gregory of Nyssa and attempting to reach a wider audience. So with this plan of attack in mind, let's take an idea or two taken from Gregory which allow a different spin on it though without distorting his original insights. This fourth century author is best noted for his sophisticated concept of advancement in the spiritual life which is inextricably bound up with growth in the moral life. For him and most Church Fathers the two are one and the same. The Greek word which best sums up Gregory's thought is *epektasis*, the continuous striving forward to deeper stages of the Christian life. It is best understood within the context of Philippians 3.13 which we find throughout Gregory's works: “Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it (perfection) my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward (*epekteinomenos*, a verbal form of *epektasis*) to what lies ahead.” This forward-looking view of the Christian life lies at the heart of Gregory's theology in that it represents a movement of perpetual ascent towards God whom we can never attain. We began it with out baptism, of being initiated into the Christian community. Once we've set out on this journey, never do we cease moving forward. According to Gregory, continually we fall short of ultimate unity and stability in the divine good yet never weary in reaching out towards it. This is a paradox which at first glance is unsettling. However, closer consideration proves otherwise.

At the same time, the more I have read Gregory of Nyssa, the less I have understood him. This seems to be in keeping with that paradox just noted; it is an inverse way of knowing, if you will, which creates more ignorance than knowledge. This isn't ignorance in the common sense of the term but a kind of unlearning of pre-conceived ideas. I don't comprehend this phenomenon fully—perhaps never will—yet at the same time have come to realize that it's a good problem with which to be afflicted. The more

you get into an author of some repute the less you know about him. What he has to say resounds within you in a special way, for his works have a transcendent quality which open up deeper levels...not entirely unlike the Ezekiel's chariot which contained a wheel within a wheel (cf. Ezk 1.16).

The question of advancement in the spiritual life according Christian tradition has a number of well-laid out paths, some of which are more familiar and trodden than others. It so happened that early on in life I had hit upon a lesser known path, one central to the Church though unfortunately not advertised as it should. By this I mean the fourth century, the Church's Golden Age, when so many things came together in the right way and under the right circumstances. It was a time when all the fundamental doctrines about Church, the Trinity and the like had reached a definitive form and were refined in later centuries. From there the tradition was passed on through the so-called Dark Ages where it assumed quite a different form. Next it achieved a more recognizable character (at least for Westerners) in the Medieval Period. Despite significant changes in her history, we continue to think of the Catholic Church in medieval terms. The same applies for monks, but by reason of having better access to their tradition, they are more exposed to lesser known though vital historical trends. After some years of initial enthusiasm over the discovery of the Church's fourth century treasures, unconsciously I thought yes, the particular form spirituality of that time must be typical of the Church today. Quite the contrary. There happened to be a whole slew of paths, most of which I had just a cursory acquaintance; in addition, many seemed oriented towards (or derived from) Carmelite spirituality. Its most popular representative is St. Therese of Lisieux or the Little Flower. She, in turn, was situated in the familiar Carmelite heritage of St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Obviously they are giants known to people earnest about the spiritual life. Most likely my classical training in college was instrumental in leading me down the path of the Greek tradition, having favored it over the Latin one. As for the latter, during the late 1960s an amazing re-discovery took place of authors belonging to the Cistercian tradition. That had set in motion a momentum of translations and studies which continue to the present.

While these multiple currents were nourishing generations of Christians over the past hundred years or so, quite a few members of the Catholic Church leaned more towards devotional practices, some of which have fallen from use. Then again, there has been a rediscovery of some of these practices, pretty much to fill the void of their abrupt departure. Monasteries ran more or less parallel to this trend and on occasion, older monks speak with fondness of that period. Also the formation prior to the Second Vatican Council was marked by training in scholastic theology. This was contrasted by encouragement to read devotional literature, chiefly authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nowadays the two seem they might clash, but for the most part they had fitted in seamlessly. Spirituality was pretty much pigeon-holed into devotion along with other parts of the monastic schedule; emphasis was upon action, either scrupulously performing the Divine Office or engaging in manual labor which in the years after World War II included the construction of "daughter houses." This environment produced holy men, few of whom now are active. Despite their valued presence, you get the impression that they have their roots in another world. The same might be said of younger, post-VC II monks when they get older, but perhaps won't run the exact same course. Despite differences between the two groups, the latter is "more modern" by contemporary standards, that is, more exposed to trends in society and culture which is marked by fluidity and constant change.

As for the post Vatican Council II days, monastic life—let alone the Catholic Church as a whole—was in considerable turmoil which consisted in a general questioning of why monks were doing what they had

been raised to do. It was a short period of few years, pretty much blotted out by subsequent developments which wanted to put that period firmly in the past. Monasteries have always been behind the times, so it took approximately five years for this turmoil to make its presence felt. If a similar event were to happen nowadays, the effect would be swifter, given the access to modern means of communication, notably the Internet. Some modes of communications were in place then but were more restricted; in addition, the culture as a whole had moved on far more quickly than anticipated. About five years after the Council people were still feeling their way, and plenty of mistakes were made. At this time—it could be extended to the end of the Viet Nam War in 1975 after which things tended to settle down—quite a few Christians, including monks, were exposed to traditions other than Christian ones; it was simply part of what was going on. It was an exciting period for many people but appalling to others. However, virtually all this experimentation had fallen by the wayside. Of course, not everyone partook of them but enough to make both participants and non-participants stop and think. On the other end of the spectrum it was a time of rediscovering the Cistercian heritage. Until then most monks barely heard of William of St. Thierry, Aelred of Rivaulx, let alone other Cistercian authors of the first century or two after the order's foundation. The rather sudden emergence of more exotic forms of Eastern spirituality tended to put the Cistercian one on the back burner. The reason? Despite its close connection with the patristic era, it seemed couched in traditional modes of expression...and the mood of the time didn't give this development much press. All this seems a bit immature some forty years later but was quite in vogue back then.

The novelty of these experiments more or less ran parallel to traditional spirituality in monasteries which leaned towards devotion as I mentioned earlier, the chief representative being the Little Flower and writers such as Dom Marmion. With the exception of the former, Marmion and others authors have fallen from favor, some of whom aren't even known among younger monks. This devotional approach was accompanied by an unfamiliarity with the Bible; instead, devotion and commentaries on Scripture were favored which made the sacred text another step removed from familiarity. Although the monastic liturgy was built upon Scripture, it's difficult to gage how much or how little monks read the texts, even in the spirit of *lectio divina*. While this practice was firmly in place, approximately twenty years prior to the Second Vatican Council a lot of good books and articles on monasticism and *lectio divina* were being written in Europe both by Benedictine and Cistercian monks. At the same time, this material went under the unfortunate label of "intellectual" mostly because the approach was new, unfamiliar and done by scholars. Furthermore, communication among monastic communities was severely limited, and monks couldn't talk easily among each other. Nevertheless, a lot of ferment must have been brewing just beneath the surface which was a monastic herald of sorts to the larger stage of the Second Vatican Council.

In the decade prior to the new millennium a two-fold problem emerged: communities were aging, and the vocation boom dried up. Actually it had been simmering in the background a few decades earlier but went unnoticed amidst all the excitement of expansion. At one point suddenly the community seemed to have become older. Excluding monks in need of intense care, those who entered after World War II and the early 1950s started to slow down and require physical assistance. Suffice it to say that coming to grips with an uncertain future, indeed the ability of monastic communities to sustain themselves, will be a major issue into the indefinite future. Apart from the more obvious problems associated with an aging community, of chief concern is how to live the monastic life when the human life span is much longer and society offers so many options. Until several generations ago people (monks included) passed off the scene around forty years of age. Now at that age we are embarking on

the second half of our monastic journey and can expect to live at least another forty years. This takes place in the same place and with the same people which totals to around eighty to a hundred years. No small wonder that monks have a special dread for genetic engineering which could really extend their life spans! Also, it really would put to severe test Gregory of Nyssa's idea of *epektasis*.

Since this extended life span is a problem rarely discussed yet is in the back of most monks' minds, it may be helpful to explore some of its aspects as related to spiritual advancement. In the past (that is, prior to the Second Vatican Council) spirituality was primarily an individual enterprise or between the monk, his director and/or confessor and the Abbot. With dialogue, the whole community has come to play a role in each monk's life. Not that it supercedes the intimacy of one-on-one contacts but gives greater form to the way each monk comports himself. Even this phenomenon is relatively new and requires further exploration. It doesn't mean that people are looking over your shoulder. On the contrary, monks now rely upon each other more than in the past. Some of the older community members don't subscribe to this, but many have formed lasting friendships which hitherto had been frowned upon. Yes, the monastery is an amazing mix of people from several different—radically different—generations, and they don't learn to live together overnight. The advantage of the youngest group is that they can draw upon the experience of their seniors, and maybe they will come up with a new form of living the monastic life. Attention of the younger generation will shift once the community has transited the current stage characterized by care for the aging which pre-occupies everyone at the moment and promises to do so for over the next few years.

One more important point should be made with respect to that unique period of the post Vatican Council era. Although the years immediately after the Council were momentous, monasteries experienced a peculiar phenomenon ten years later which lasted only some five years. So few people had entered during this brief interval that their experience became lost in the community's collective consciousness. Still, something needs to be said about this time. Someone noted, perhaps by way of exaggeration but to make a point, that this period was second only in magnitude to the French Revolution. That crisis had decimated monastic orders because they faced a threat coming from without, whereas the second lacked such drama. Instead, the dangers came from within...not outwardly dramatic but unprecedented because monastic orders hadn't faced such internal confusion in their long histories. It was a unique combination of experimentation with novel ideas that gave rise to an amorphous feeling, hard to pin down, where people had no idea where they were going. Surely the commitment of many monks had been shaken, better, those formed before VC II when the Church seemed it would go on forever under its old guise. The tension sometimes got too much, and solemnly professed members were leaving at fairly a good clip.

Every anniversary—marriage, religious life, work or whatever—is significant and offers an occasion to reflect upon the past as well as the future. Such was the millennial year of 2,000 which formed a natural break in time to pause and reflect upon the last thirty-five to forty years from the end of the Second Vatican Council. On a personal level such as wedding anniversaries and even monastic professions, rounded off numbers are more momentous: ten, twenty, twenty-five, thirty and so forth. Amongst these the numbers twenty-five and fifty stand out as milestones of a person's commitment. But there's something about the number thirty which makes a break with the more "common" anniversaries preceding it. You're in a different league and instinctively know it. Anniversaries of monastic profession differ from others in that it means you've been a monk for such-and-such an amount of years in one abbey as opposed to having opportunity of moving around. For example, you

can be married thirty years, yet this has little to do with abiding in one physical place. By no means do the years accumulated detract from the commitment involved; it's the more stable nature of monastic profession which nowadays is quite unique. The advantage of this magical cut-off point of thirty years is a fairly good indication that you won't be moving on to something else. One monk who recently attained the forty year mark compared the number thirty with the so-called point-of-no-return of a jet flying across the ocean. About two-thirds out you have to keep on going, regardless. Applied to life, you're getting older and options reduce much more quickly from this juncture onwards. Another factor contributing to the monastery's timeless character is that when you step over the threshold, you enter a place which seems to have been in existence from The Beginning. All buildings have a date of origin, even the pyramids and further back, Stonehenge. So when you enter a special place such as a monastery you can't help but ask when the place was built and more importantly, who built it. A community which no longer has members present when the buildings had been constructed will naturally bring up the question, "Who built this incredible place, and what kind of men were they?" That's the same type of question you'd ask of the gods who undoubtedly would point to their forebearers.

The stable character of Cistercian monasticism—commitment to a specific community as opposed to the Order like other religious organizations—sets it apart from many forms of monastic life. Although Benedictines commit themselves to a given community for a lifetime, they move around quite a lot because they are engaged in teaching and parish work. As for Cistercians, they receive a unique form of training which cuts across all modes of life in that you don't have to be educated nor even require graduating from high school. This allows for a wider spectrum of candidates than you'd find in other places. Objectively speaking, the training is minimal; training tends to be equated with the acquisition of knowledge and techniques, but this doesn't apply here. A fellow who has just entered starts off by doing general household chores and isn't distinguished from a monk who has been around many years doing the same thing. Furthermore, the official training doesn't begin as it does on the outside, semester-style. The novices go through a prescribed series of talks and conferences about the particulars of monasticism, yet even here a newcomer can jump in at any time of the year. This amorphous character makes it hard to pin down the notion of education with respect to Cistercian monasticism. More importantly, it makes it harder to discern a person's vocation since the notion of objective standards are fuzzier than in other circumstances. Even the normal requirements (health, mental stability, freedom from personal debt) are so all-encompassing that they too are hard to put your fingers on. Yes, it is the very amorphous character which makes this way of life not entirely dissimilar to the earliest expressions of monasticism. In the long run, living in such an environment presents unique problems. Its fluid nature presents monks with a challenge to cultivate the spiritual life because they don't identify with their jobs, spouses nor ideology.

Thus on one hand the life a candidate will expect to lead is simple or uncomplicated yet at the same time he has to show willingness to adapt to a fairly rigorous daily schedule. Perhaps more will be expected of him than in the past because many communities are aging rapidly. That means a newcomer must be able to adjust to living with men who are the same age as his father, let alone grandfather. And so the requirements of joining aren't as clear-cut as elsewhere and are in line with the original aspirations that got monasticism going in the first place, all the way back to the beginnings of Christianity. It may be argued with justification that some form of monasticism was always present in other great religions, and that they all have remarkable similarities. Furthermore, you don't have to be specially gifted to become a monk. A quality those working in the vocational department look for is

persistence in seeking God which parallels the vow of stability. Fine but still nebulous because a person can seek God in other ways. You can always narrow down the focus more and more. Even here you can't get at the essence because it has nothing to do with your qualifications in the sense of looking at a person's résumé.

Each and every man who has walked over the monastery's threshold had an idea of staying there for good, vague as his intent might be. A common experience is that expectations get dashed—usually right off the bat—because people are people whether inside or outside a monastery. Human nature with all its irreducible paradoxes reveals itself and when we least expect it. One's intent gets sifted over time, the first three years being called the novitiate or mini-community within the larger community set apart for this specific goal. It's extended through several years of "simple" or "temporary" profession until the community deems the young monk ready to make solemn vows. Even then you're not in the clear, ready to coast for the rest of your life. Often a crisis emerges some ten years down the road which may or may not relate to the infamous mid-life crisis. Part of the reason is that the life remains the same (externally speaking), and it's difficult to say how this sameness impacts individual lives which are always developing. The essence of that ten year crisis revolves around a proven reality: a young monk wakes up to the fact that his field of activity is destined to be confined to this place and these men, most of whom are aging rapidly with few or no replacements on the horizon. It's not entirely unlike realizing that you have entered a nursing home, as more than one monk observed with regard to his infirmary which now is completely filled. Instead of ministering to their needs and then going home, in a monastery you both minister to them and live with them 7-24, as the expression goes. This is a bit extreme because a monk has plenty of other activities to keep him occupied. I mention it here because relating with older men—let alone personalities very different from your own—brings home the fact like no other that you're stuck in one place. The only other parallel would be prison or exile in the gulag. Better to jump ship now while young; other possibilities are available like at no other time in human history.

Another more subtle force is at work within the monastery which usually you don't find in other modes of life. Here you have a group of people among whom the burdens of keeping the place running are shared as equally as possible. It's done with a minimum of over-taxing each member, no small feat. One monk cooks, another works in one of the industries while yet another monk tends to the guest house. With all these tasks evenly distributed, you can end up with a lot of time on your hands even though some are more burdened than others. You have to keep in mind that a few monks aren't bothered by this; they are geared more towards work. Furthermore, monks don't worry about paying taxes nor having enough money for a comfortable retirement...and this excludes normal concerns like looking for the next meal or clean clothes for tomorrow. Everything is laid out there for the taking. Generally speaking, monks don't appreciate this as much during their earlier years. During the first half of one's career attention is taken up with adjusting to the life and carving a path through it. This is longer than you realize because the monastery is still new and you're learning the ropes of one department or the other plus reading and studying on your own. Later during the second half of your career the luxury of institutional living hits home. Often it comes to light when you meet your contemporaries in society struggling not only to make ends meet but their concerns about retirement.

This second phase of monastic life is a tremendous boon, for you have a greater sense of freedom to pursue things people in different walks of life can only dream of. Chief among them is having time to read a wide range of subject as well as reflecting upon them long and hard. Wishing that they could

live in a monastery is one of the things more thoughtful visitors long for. Even former monks or those who've only been with us for several months to a few years note this when they come back for a visit. Such leisure is our real treasure yet requires constant diligence to appreciate. Again, keep in mind that monks are stuck in one place, day after day, month after month, year after year. Extending it out for a lifetime can be a daunting task and reflects an ancient impulse which got monasticism off the ground, namely, perceiving it as a "white martyrdom." Early monks considered themselves as carrying on in bloodless fashion the witness of those who were really martyred for the faith.

In light of these observations, where does spiritual advancement fit in, the theme of this document? Surely awareness of one's inherent limitations, especially living in close quarters with other men, is no mean challenge. There's a constant dialectic going on between the monk as an individual and the community; both overlap in many subtle ways. An lesser appreciated observation may be pertinent at this juncture. Yes, monks live in community but on the practical, day-to-day level there's a lot of time for solitude. There is more solitude in larger communities because burdens are shared more evenly. Having time on your hands makes you think long and deep, more so when you're confined to a specific physical place. Disrupting events loom larger, larger than they really are. Greater access to modern modes of communication is helpful here; the same applies with having friends on the "outside." You know that people in society are generally worse off than you are in the monastery. They don't have time nor the luxury to reflect upon their situation.

So here we have twenty-first century monks who went through some rather earth-shattering events, most of which are just stories among younger members. They try to make sense of them, basically trying to see if they depict any kind of Grand Plan. It's a tendency we all have when it comes to crises and considered little when things are going well. "Am I (and my community) better off today than I was back in the late '60s?" could be a way of trying to come to grips with this. A misleading question, yet one we entertain in the privacy of our minds. It seems that the longer you're in the monastery the better you're able to discern trends both within or outside the cloister walls. However, common to both is the notion of progress so the question could be re-phrased as "Have we made progress since the late 60s?" It is so indelibly ingrained in our Western consciousness that we barely give it a thought. Progress is fine, but alternatives do exist. Does progress have to be so dominant and demand our allegiance? Is the only alternative chaos? Even contemplating the notion of progress implies its opposite—a vague, threatening disorder lurking some where out there. Instead of subscribing to it, we can step back, get a handle on it and see if other options are available. Such is the two-edged sword of what we may call "institutional freedom" where a monk is set free to do things others can't.

Now let's apply the notion of progress to a young man who just entered the monastery. The time (his actual entrance) doesn't matter, for he has entered a living community where such measurements count little. He has a legitimate aspiration that he will be better off at some point down the line, that is, compared with the day when he had stepped over the monastic threshold. Despite the usual ups and downs, he expects that his advancement will continue, the usual bumps-in-the-road being taken into consideration. Obviously things turn out differently, but better to have an ideal than none at all. It helps you through the initial rough spots. This has smoothed out in recent decades compared with the confused state of affairs right after VC II. Then it was much more difficult to have a newcomer's ideals concur with the real state of affairs with the community. Apart from the conventional struggles between pre-conceptions and reality, that short period of some five years challenged a newcomer like no other. Monks—even senior monks—were seriously and vocally questioning many aspects of the life.

It was the first time we know of when it was done so intensely. Since dialogue was just beginning to make its presence felt in Cistercian communities, it was a shock to many to hear what was seething under the surface after living under one roof for quite a few years. Thus you had this extra burden imposed on newcomers. Those seasoned monks engaged in the questioning process were too caught up in the excitement to realize the impact of their words and actions.

Sometimes a view from the outside sheds clearer light on the monastery's inner state of affairs. Let's say a retreatant or person familiar with the abbey had stopped by during that tumultuous time. He would find the place lovely as usual and the liturgy flawlessly performed. If he had been coming for a while, perhaps he would have recalled that only several years earlier the liturgy had been sung in Latin and was considerably longer. This person would continue visiting the monastery over the ensuing years and apart from minor variations, would perceive little difference between the immediate post-VC II years and right now...and by right now I mean the actual present. "Timeless" is not an infrequent term you hear from such people, and in many ways they are correct. However, on the inside a huge transformation undetected by the naked eye was under way. This tends to stand out when the community just experienced a major event, an abbatial election, for example. After having exited the chapter room where the voting had taken place, you attend Vespers in the abbey church. The Office proceeds as the day before and the day before that one, and anyone in the side chapel wouldn't have the slightest clue as to what had transpired in the chapter room. This illustrates a point. Visitors have an unconscious expectation that monks not only live in a timeless world but are immune (or almost) to what plagues humanity. These issues were always present well before the post-VC II years and are present now; this keeps in line with the sameness of the monastery's external appearance. Such an optical illusion, if you will, is normal. It can be inverted in that monks can think that the world-right-now is pretty much the same as it had been the day they entered. Even though they have been outside the enclosure and in contact with people in real life situations, it does little to alter this view. After all, the monastery is a world unto its own. Thus in the monastic context the ideas of spiritual advancement and progress in the modern sense can be tricky to get a handle on. On one hand you have the relative sameness of life within the enclosure and on the other, society's constant changes.

All these details may be boiled down to two traditional modes of discerning the passage of events, liturgical and secular. Broadly speaking, we can use the more familiar division of sacred and profane, a division which many people agree is becoming increasingly sharper, a sense echoed by St. Augustine centuries ago with his two "cities." While you're in the monastery and have a minimum regard for pressing external needs, the sacred tends to dominate simply by the atmosphere. From time to time you get glimpses into the other half—the profane—which has virtually no idea of the sacred. A simple example: let's say that a monk goes outside, not just outside on a regular day but on a holy day. This doesn't include the major ones of Christmas and Easter but big in the sense that they are important for monks and less so for other folks. An example may be the Assumption, August 15. On the outside people transact their business just like on other days which is fine. Nevertheless, being inserted within this profane (I use the term literally, as before-the-temple) environment is disconcerting. Although you wouldn't admit it, you almost expect everyone else out there to be in tune with the day's special meaning. In fact, few seem to have a clue about it. Obviously that give rise to a perception of how relative are all things. But if you press further and examine many lives in this "profane" environment, you'll find little that tempts you to jump in.

Monks attend the Divine Office which is celebrated seven times a day. A little appreciated fact about



the Office consists in pervasiveness of scriptural and patristic readings that immediately is evident. If you look more closely, they all have constant appeal to exhortatory words as “should,” “must” and “let us.” That is to say, every time a monk attends one of the Offices a reading is prodding him to improve in this or that way and to become better a Christian. This relentless exhortation can wear down a monk’s attention coupled with a familiarity concerning the texts being read. Somewhere lurking in his (un-?) consciousness is a contrast between one’s frailty/sinfulness and an ideal. And this ideal is more often than not identified with the person of Jesus Christ. Of course, the saints are thrown in for good measure who can seem more remote than Jesus himself. Thus there’s a daily measuring-up and comparison at work in the Divine Office. Most of the time it passes unnoticed but then again, it becomes painfully clear when you’re having a bad day. Just like other folks, monks alternate between periods of exultation and depression which may be more vivid than in other ways of life.

It’s interesting to consider the ramifications of such daily exhortations to self-improvement over a monk’s lifetime. One opportunity for this is when a monk has just died. This includes the monk on his deathbed as well as the time afterwards which consists of wake, funeral Mass and burial. Compared with a lot of people, monks live exemplary lives and have had plenty of time to prepare for death, so it comes as no surprise to him. Quite a few have died “in the odor of sanctity,” to borrow a familiar phrase. His death offers an opportunity to reflect back on his life both in its individual and collective aspects. Contrary to what you’d think, it’s a joyous occasion. Over time, the nature of monastic life somehow removes the sting or fear of death, and this is self-evident when monks get together to reflect upon their recently deceased brother. The reason I bring this up is that you can take a monk who just died—apart from the all too familiar accounts of his human frailty—and see the operations of divine grace. It all works quietly behind the scenes because monks aren’t usually favored with lightning-bolt revelations nor exalted states of contemplation. Their experience parallels that of many other people, and sometimes you have to look hard and deep to discover what had given them impetus over the years. Invariably you try to see where the monk had made progress...advancement...in the spiritual life. Again, all this is hidden or more precisely, obscure, so you have to be careful about your conclusions and even more careful when you apply them to your own life.

Earlier some concrete examples were presented with regard to the notion of progress in the spiritual life during a particular historical period and within the monastic way of life. During turbulent times it is helpful to use our imaginative faculty as a tool for advancement in the spiritual life, for that enables us to externalize ideas and view them as forms which we can better comprehend. Not that the spiritual life can be reduced to mere imagery, but the process makes use of our creativity. Also, times don’t have to be turbulent for this. As every spiritual master acknowledges, we humans must come face-to-face with our inner conflicts which plague us constantly. Thus the images we come up with are a sure guide and made all the more so when shared with fellow travelers on the spiritual path. We can come up with lots of images, but all are based upon three which are basic to most cultures: square, triangle and circle. The first is representative of the four elements of earth, air, fire and water or the four basic elements which comprise the creative realm. In the monastic context, the square can be representative of the enclosure which separates “us” from “them” and therefore acts as protection.

Within Christian theology, the triangle is an image of the Trinity or Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even though the Trinity transcends this image, if we’re honest with ourselves, we conceive the Three Persons as some kind of isosceles triangle in the sky. The representation may be more subtle than that but same form is inescapable. Finally we have the circle, the most basic image of them all. It is a natural

representation of perfection and eternity regardless of the variations. Each image contains a center; the triangle least of all with the square coming in second. Finally we have the circle which has a clearly recognizable center where every point on the circumference is equidistant to this center. If we stood dead center in the circle the circumference would be equidistant from our position as it moved around us. For a circle to remain a circle it's critical for the two to be in exact harmony, other wise it would loose its shape. This is the draw-back of a circle, for it intimates a tension or maintaining constant balance between circumference and center. If somehow the center were to move from its natural center, it'd be eccentric, literally so. The same applies to the square but not as much and even less so with the triangle. Nevertheless, all three images—so fundamental to infinite manifestations of cultural creativity—are bounded and have a center. All three images of circle, square and triangle aren't found in nature. They are constructs philosophers, theologians, mathematicians and architects to make sense of a chaotic world, and we follow in their train when attempting to bring order into our lives.

Should you decide to make a survey of Christian literature going all the way back to the Church's beginning and proceed forward to the present, stop and consider the imagery used throughout. More often than not, it's circular in one form or another; even the circle seems better than the (Trinitarian) triangle as an image of perfection. The square is left on the sidelines because its intimations of things earthly makes it suspect. A side bar, if you will: several images in the Roman catacombs have squares instead of halos. Apparently this meant the person was considered a saint while still alive. On the positive side, consider the dimensions of the heavenly Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation. The city is a perfect cube where the number twelve (divisible by two, three, four and six) plays a dominant role. As for the circle, other images may be thrown in along with it: the sun's disk, the notion of a spiral, hierarchical ascendancy (one thinks of Dionysius and Dante among others) and in the monastic context, the liturgical cycle. Should we take up a position on the circle's circumference, we would continuously be aware of the center. It acts both as an attractive force and one of repulsion, that is, in the gravitational sense. Such focus by the circumference upon the center is therefore at the heart our ideas concerning spiritual advancement; the same applies regarding the center.

Perhaps an alternate geometrical form to the square, triangle and circle exists, one more apropos to real life experience which usually doesn't dovetail with our pre-conceived notions of perfection. For that reason I propose an ellipse. For the sake of discussion, let's say this ellipse is squished on top and bottom and bulges out to the left and right. We could follow our instincts and automatically look for a center as we do with the square, triangle and circle. By their very natures, all three images compel us in this direction. Nothing wrong with that, but a now familiar representation of the solar system from the astronomer Kepler alters that a bit. That is to say, the center of gravity tends towards one side or towards one side within the ellipse. For example, let's situate ourselves on the left side. This solar system image is one we'd when standing on the outside or on the edge of our immediate celestial neighborhood. Each planet circles around the sun. At one time it reaches a perigee or point closest to the sun and at the opposite end, an apogee or furthest distance from the sun. If I recall correctly, larger celestial bodies such as galaxies and galaxy clusters—local and no so local—operate in the same fashion. The planets (sticking with them since they're more manageable) technically rotate around the sun though it might be better to say they sling-shot themselves around the sun. Let's take ourselves on the planet earth. At one point we are traveling away from the sun, and this trajectory is more lengthy, like a spread-out line or arc continuing for considerable time and distance. Then at some mysterious point we bend around as though bending around some mysterious body which is absent and make an similar arc-like trip back. Both the outward bound and homeward bound journeys are of equal length and arc

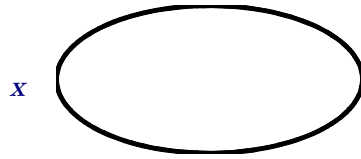
or bulge ever so slightly. Once the earth approaches the sun, it goes around a tight corner, if you will, certainly tighter than the fairly extended outward and homeward journeys. At this point we are closest to the sun which counters the other pole of our apogee or point when we were furthest away.

Such a model makes us posit the following question. If we acknowledge our ex-centric position as situated off in one corner of the ellipse, is there another mysterious object out there around which the departing arc bends and then returns home? Perhaps this question reveals a tendency to look outside for a solution, whereas the solution lies within the place we've always possessed. This is not unlike an Australian boomerang. The boomerang goes out from the person who cast it and makes an arc around that other invisible center before returning home. Obviously the boomerang's shape has something to do with creating an ellipse; it may be closer to how things work in the world as opposed to the more rigid figures of a circle, square or triangle. Then again, this image may reveal how memory works instead of that cyclical motion already alluded to. Images we fabricate don't have to tie us up in circles, if you will. Rather, they can go out fairly straight, make an arc and then return to us with a refreshed picture of the world. Thus our memories may be said to assume the shape of a boomerang, not a circle. This elliptical image is stretched out to some degree in order to delineate its four parts of perigee, apogee, outward and homeward arcs. To make the ellipse work, by necessity we are not at the center but are ex-centric, that is, enough off dead-center of the ellipse to effect this particular shape. We could extend this image of the earth's elliptical order to the earth's yearly tilt on its axis which gives us the four seasons. Supposedly the earth is more pear-shaped than round. If we were situated in space above either the north or south pole and look down upon the earth, we'd see this elliptical motion tilting just enough to produce the four seasons. We move from summer to autumn to winter to spring and back to summer. In other words, the earth's tilt gives us the impression of circular movement which has no real beginning nor end. Thus the seasonal/circular rotation is embedded within the elliptical/axial rotation and in a sense is illusory.

And so it seems that elliptical motion is more natural than the other three images of square, triangle and circle. We find more familiar examples in nature which assume the general form of an ellipse: swarms of fish, flocks of birds, deciduous trees, bushes, rocks, raindrops and cumulus clouds. They all have centers of gravity but they are more difficult to perceive. Applying the image of an ellipse to human affairs, consider race tracks (car or otherwise). Nobody races in a circle but in an ellipse. You would soon get dizzy and confused if you ran on a circular racetrack. Now let's apply this most natural of all images to the realm of spiritual advancement. Experience indicates that we alternate more between presence and absence; it isn't far off the mark to say that we go around in this fashion. Such traditional terminology has been applied throughout the ages. The only problem is that we depict this alternation as a dichotomy along the lines of shifting from one place to another and then restoring our lost balance. At the heart of such descriptions lies our old friend, the circle. Putting it somewhat wryly, maybe here is where that expression aptly applies, "going around in circles."

Elliptical motion parallels that of a circle in that both move in a circuit or both go around. In the latter, movement is always perfectly equidistant from the center. In the former, the center of gravity must be eccentric (keeping in mind we situate it towards the left simply for illustration; the center of gravity can equally be towards the right, top or bottom). If we take our experience of prayer, contemplation or whatever word we prefer, we alternate between highs and lows, periods of exultation and depression, presence and absence. No small wonder that some image representative of a dichotomy materializes, of that shift I noted in the last paragraph. Getting more specific with regards to this image of an

ellipse, we could say that a particularly strong presence of God is located during that period when the ellipse is making a sharp turn around our axis as this simple diagram illustrates:



The  $x$  is our position, and the ellipse may represent those experiences—regardless of content—to which we are subject. According to this diagram, any given experience gets closer and closer to us (let's say the rotation is clockwise according to the two arrows) until it makes a sharp turn around us (the  $x$ ) who are located at the ex-centric axis. Sometimes we see the event...and I include both external or internal ones...coming towards us but more often than not, it jumps upon us from out of nowhere. Before we give it a second thought, our attention becomes focused upon the “bend” or contracted energy, an insight applicable as well to intense experiences of joy which, if we're objective enough, contain the same basic energy. Not long afterwards this pent-up energy departs from us, sling-shot like, and we're left wondering what had happened. Both the arrival and departure occur so quickly we can't get a handle on the process, and we're left bewildered. Such is the nature of distractions in the spiritual life which often have assumed personal forms (demons, for example) and rightly so due to their intensity.

One way of dealing with these experiences is to mentally come up with some kind of image. It at least allows us to get our bearings and situate our true self from things that assault us. Not untypically, our first impulse is to visualize a circle with us at the center. This is symptomatic of our attempt to establish (or to re-establish) our center. Then again, these attempts often flounder because in essence, we want to be centered. Failed efforts result in our becoming ex-centric with the circle revolving around us out of wack. Not that the circle is out of wack but our location respective to it. As noted earlier, the same process can apply to a square or triangle, but the circle is usually the one to which we have recourse. Watching these experiences come and go is a dizzying experience, but it doesn't necessarily have to be so. We can adopt the figure of an ellipse. Here events, etc., arrive with the same suddenness yet because of our ex-centric position, they bend around us with the same intensity and head off in the other direction. Consider these experiences in light of circular motion just posited. Again, the image of going around and around is so common for a confused state of mind and a never-ending cycle of the same old stuff. Not entirely unlike Ecclesiastes' “round and round” observation applied to the human condition. The same applies to evil which seems both circular and binding. If we substitute the image of a circle with that of an ellipse as soon as we can when something disturbing hits us, it can dissipate the negativity all the more quickly. I might add, “all the more naturally” because as noted earlier, an ellipse is the most natural figure in creation whether on the micro or macro level.

In Ephesians 3.18 St. Paul comes up with a statement which at first glance doesn't apply to an ellipse but of a square: “(that you) may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth.” Its beauty lies in geometrical symmetry, easy to grasp. After all, a square is an ancient symbol of creation, and the Ephesians quote can seamlessly though implicitly be transferred to a circle or perfection. Applied to an ellipse, the breadth, depth, height and length are

more flexible; each dimension feeds into each other. Related to this insight is the Church's liturgical cycle. Should we conceive the progress of liturgical events within a given year as elliptical, the image at first may be strange. Closer examination shows that the necessarily ex-centric center is Easter as well as the sacred days preceding it. From this brief period the Church's life flows outward. Most of the liturgical year consists of "ordinary time" or time after Pentecost until Advent; some of it is also inserted in between the end of the Christmas season and beginning of Lent, Ash Wednesday. This lengthy period may be visualized as constituting one or both sides of the ellipse compared with the brief, intense Easter period. An image that comes to mind and is found in much spiritual material is that of waiting which, in turn, can easily apply to the lengthy period of Ordinary Time.

So what does all this have to do with Gregory of Nyssa whom I claimed in the opening paragraph this essay would deal with in light of monastic-related experiences already outlined? Any person can familiarize himself with the basics of the monastic route within a few weeks. You know what to do, when to do it, using the community as a constant reference point in these matters. In approximately six months you have it down pat. So you're faced with a very stable and predictable environment where everything is taken care of. All you have to do is to show up and participate. So while on one level things remain the same...and are bound to remain so for basically your entire life...quickly you're confronted with how to deal with this repetitive ordinariness. That's where Gregory of Nyssa's insight into *epektasis* comes in handy, actually a lifesaver. In brief, *epektasis* is a continuous forward movement begun in this mortal life and continues forever after death. Almost too good to be true. Gregory not only provides the right terminology, but he backs it up with solid theological and philosophical reflection almost as though they were tailor-made for monastic life, this being formulated some 1,600 years ago. Fortunately Gregory takes many of his ideas from Platonism, the dominant philosophy of his time. Plato, in turn, deals with forms which automatically brings to mind our three geometrical patterns of circle, square and triangle. In fact, he touches upon them in his writings. Just like his predecessors and successors, Gregory takes up Platonism and Christianizes it, perhaps unconsciously falling in line with these three basic shapes. Then I wonder if we might be able to view his imagery of spiritual advancement—obviously circular—in elliptical terms, so to speak. Hopefully the remainder of this essay will clarify all this, so we'll give it a go.

The just mentioned three geometrical shapes as central to both theological and philosophical speculation offer a background to the alternate geometrical figure of an ellipse, so familiar yet overlooked. Apparently the three common geometrical figures of circle, square and triangle are man-made, whereas an ellipse is natural. Consider yet again both the micro- and macroscopic worlds: raindrops, trees, swarms of fish, flocks of birds, planetary and galactic motions. They all have an elliptical shape. When considering this basic figure, you gradually realize that despite the appeal of the three familiar geometrical shapes, they are artificial and pose a dichotomy between us and the world. The world never lives up to any of the figures but approximates them in one way or another. The same can apply to spiritual methods and ideas founded upon circular motion. Not to say they are deficient, but a new figure might help us acquire a new vision. Should you move off center from either a circle, square or triangle, you become by definition eccentric or better, ex-centric. Yet the very shape of an ellipse requires that we be off center. On top of that, we have another center located at the opposite end necessary to keep an ellipse being an ellipse, else it'd degenerate into a teardrop shape. This is the perigee or furthest point from our ex-centric position which endows a special appeal to elliptical motion. We are both ex-centric yet have a shadow center opposite to us both known and unknown.

With this elliptical motion in mind, we can see if the figure of an ellipse has any value as a model or outline for the spiritual life. However, Christian tradition does not employ the image of an ellipse to describe our spiritual ascent; the same is applicable to other major religions. On the other hand, it's easy to find the image of a circle throughout spiritual literature as the paramount image of perfection (the square and triangle are present but to a lesser degree). With this in mind we can use elliptical motion as a tool to get a better handle on some ideas discussed by Gregory of Nyssa. While Gregory doesn't subscribe to ellipses, I think his subtle terminology—which reveals an equally subtle appreciation of philosophy and theology—may fit into the elliptical pattern as briefly outlined. It's just a hunch that will be pursued for the remainder of this essay.

One issue people like to discuss when visiting monasteries is the presence of God, a theme which assumes numerous guises within the Christian tradition. Familiar catch-words associated with it are prayer, contemplation, meditation and perhaps the most well-know of them all, St. Paul's injunction "pray always." These ideas roll around in a monk's head taking one form now and another form later. After all, prayer is what monks are supposed to be about; in practice there are as many approaches to prayer as there are members of a given community. On top of it, you have a venerable tradition of prayer extending all the way back to the Desert Fathers who had set the tone for later centuries. They left everything and disciplined themselves to finding God, more often in solitude than in communities (which were formed later). Records show that they were fond of frequent recitations or ejaculations of biblical phrases, the Psalms, fasting and extreme penance. Contemporary authors—most of whom are the desert dwellers themselves—loved to point out their foibles, especially when dealing with a monk who's been at it a long time. Invariably something comes along which upsets his efforts. Keeping in line with a theme of this essay, we may call these unexpected events instances of moving away from the center of a circle and becoming eccentric, negatively speaking. Such eccentricity is the inability to integrate the raw experiences that suddenly befell the poor monk; the lesson almost always imparted is humility. At the heart of all this is the image of a circle which represents perfection and is operative in the background, although the monk may be unaware of it. People of all ages can identify with these desert characters from the distant past simple because the accounts that have come down to us are written in a vivid and unadorned style.

Behind these ancient accounts is a singular characteristic which has survived the vicissitudes of time. In a nutshell, it is a fairly sharp distinction between God "up there" and us "down here." How sharply this distinction was at work depended upon the culture. Most favored maintaining the distinction quite rigidly, and to one degree or another we are heirs of this fundamental dichotomy. We can sum up this image in terms of us "down here" who are required to make heroic efforts to predispose ourselves for receiving divine grace from "up there." The distinction between God and us finds its roots in the Bible and has remained fairly constant throughout history. It may be better to say that Genesis was interpreted in terms of a fall, a term you don't find in the text itself.

Obviously it's a generalization to say that the ancient world relied exclusively upon the geometrical figure of a circle to express its philosophy and theology. That image had been handed down through authors such as Plato and Aristotle and then passed on to the Middle Ages. One application with roots in the related image of a triangle is that of hierarchy present from the start of the Christian church. Reality is composed of various rings or layers of being in ascending order. This notion was transferred into the ecclesiastical structure, and the term "hierarchy" remains with us today. Thus a geometrical image and attendant insights were very much alive and associated with the official Church, usually

perceived in term of power and control. Then along came the Second Vatican Council which saw the Church as the People of God. Here is a completely different way of viewing things but fraught with its own dangers. Perhaps we're still too close to this new image for it to take shape; it may take several more generations to sink through.

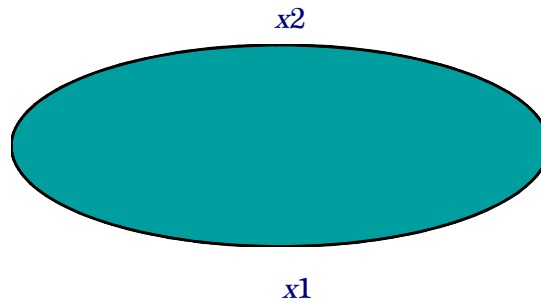
An important feature of an ellipse is that in addition to its rotation around our ex-centric position (by necessity it has to be ex-centric), upon completion of a given rotation it takes a different pitch before heading off on another rotation. For example, consider the heavens. The earth assumes a slightly different pitch around the sun each and every time it fulfills a rotation as at the completion of a year. Then the next elliptical cycle starts according to the same pattern but with a different pitch. These pitches take place on a horizontal plane with a slight "up" here followed by a slight "down" later on. Apply this to the practice of spirituality as mirrored by the Church's yearly liturgical cycle. We go around one given liturgical ellipse (not a cycle!) and then another followed by one more and so forth. Each time we complete one rotation and begin anew, the oncoming liturgical year begins its "pitch" ever so slightly on another plane. It thus offers different perspectives on the mysteries of Christ about to be celebrated.

This notion of a pitch essential to elliptical motion is a supplemental image in order to shed more light on how we handle difficult situations or when things jump upon us with vehemence and suddenness. When they do, we haven't the slightest clue as to their source. They are lurking out there somewhere. Should we follow the circular model, we see that they throw us off center before we realize what had happened. Efforts to restore our balance invariably are couched in circular or perhaps square-like imagery. A closer look at the general nature of trying experiences reveals that they actually "bend" around us. Instead of constantly being equidistant to us and enslaving us, this bend is a relatively short period of time compared with the full course of an elliptical figure. Under the influence of a circular model, we perceive negative experiences with much greater force, sometimes the force of fate or necessity. When so constrained, we feel compelled to follow either the impulse, habit, addiction or allegiance without reflecting upon its source. Clearly the circle model demonstrates that we've been thrown off center and can't find our way back to it. But if we view ourselves as the eccentric center of an ellipse, we get quite a different picture of the same negative energy. Here the energy bends more sharply around our center. They come more quickly and depart with equal swiftness. Thus the "down time" of their actual presence to us is that much shorter.

Another way of putting this is that when we consider the ellipse as a whole and not that part or "bend" closest to our eccentric center, negative energy takes up a considerably smaller part of the whole figure. On the other hand, a circle has this energy revolving around us always at equal distance and at equal intensity. Here's where the popular expression comes into play, "going around in circles." If we can grasp the elliptical model even for a second, our center is located off to the left, as it were. It allows three things: 1) as pointed out, the experiences "bend around" us more quickly. 2) the ellipse's bulge allows us more time to see them coming towards us and 3) we behold their departure fading off with the same speed and distance as when they approached us. In both #2 and #3 there's an identity, pretty much the same of our experiences, only one is coming and the other is going.

At this juncture keep in mind the bulging nature of an ellipse (we're looking at it horizontally, maybe the easiest way of grasping this image). It bulges out both on top and down to the same degree. The high point of each bulge creates a horizon, if you will, as the diagram demonstrates (points x2 above

and  $x_1$  below):



Both points  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  are horizons which divide the ellipse into two equal parts, left and right while not splitting the figure in two. Given our position as off to the left side, only this half is visible or that which lies left to point  $x_1$  and right to point  $x_2$ . The other half is the “dark side” or that which lies beyond our perception. Therefore awareness of one half gives rise to the insight that most likely there’s another half which runs according to the same pattern. Another way of putting is that if our ex-centric position is on the left, there must be a parallel ex-centric position somewhere off to the right. Thus both sides balance each other off. Not that there are two centers vying for dominance but two centers required to maintain the elliptical shape. If we had in mind a circle, square or triangle (let’s keep with the first as the most common one representative of perfection), dividing the circle in two from top to bottom cleaves it and abolishes the center, thereby destroying the geometrical form. At this point we’re setting ourselves up for a dualistic way of viewing reality.

Troublesome experiences which hit us out of the clear blue with no warning signs demonstrate all this. We’re caught off guard and flounder helplessly (again the expression or as others like it, “going around in circles”). On other hand, points  $x_2$  and  $x_1$  or points above and below the ellipse allow us more time, if you will, to see these experiences coming towards us and departing from us. We can see—using this term figuratively—their approach and gathering of intensity until they make a sharp bend around us and loose their force as they depart. The interesting point is that both their arrival and departure are of the same intensity and duration. In this way we can better situate the “bend” of such sudden negative energy as around our eccentric position, knowing full well that there’s a certain sameness in their coming and going. This similarity or perhaps even identity concerning the nature of arrival and departure with respect to negative (as well as positive) experiences is tantamount. Again I stress the importance of having in mind the right geometrical figure on which we can cast our experiences. Due to its naturalness, the ellipse is the obvious candidate. Play around for a while and see if it works. No harm will come of it. Then compare the ellipse with use of the circle. More likely than not, we’d find that we have used this figure to describe our experiences and lack of balance. Usually we’re more attracted to, even fascinated by, negative experiences which is why I brought them up a few paragraphs ago. The same can be applied to positive experiences, for they have an equal “bend” with respect to our eccentric position on the ellipse. Keep in mind the points  $x_2$  and  $x_1$ , points above and below our elliptical model. These favorable experiences come, bend around us and depart according to the same pattern as negative energy. They arrive and depart at the horizon points of these two points. At first glance, from there it’s anyone’s guess as to what lies on the other side of these two horizons. Nevertheless, we have intuited the form of our experiences as elliptical.



We are now familiar with our ex-centric location with reference to points  $x_1$  and  $x_2$ . Not only that, we are familiar with it as reflected in nature and can transfer its symbolism into how we comport ourselves as human beings. Based on this insight, we may expand the figure's meaning. A note of caution: seeing ellipses around us is one thing but quite another when it comes to things we can't visualize. After all, the events which hit us from the clear blue must hang around somewhere out there, crouching at the door of our awareness. It may not be far off the mark to conceive knowledge of this unknown in terms of prophecy which has its roots in the ellipse's "other half" or opposite to our ex-centric position. Better, prophecy consists in intuiting the similarity of advancing and departing events and energy with respect to the two horizons points,  $x_1$  and  $x_2$ . These events have to "come from" somewhere, affect us and then return...at least this is one way to conceive their elliptical path. Prophecy here doesn't mean predicting the future, soothsaying nor anything of the like. Because it consists in intuiting the essential sameness of everything which we encounter (point  $x_1$ ) and later reflect upon as it departs (point  $x_2$ ), we come to a better understanding of events.

There's a latent danger in perceiving this sameness or "prophecising" about it. We can have a genuine intuition into sameness which leads to saying something like, "all is one and one is all" (or in terms of this essay, "everything is elliptical"), an expression not unfamiliar among mystics. This, in turn, can foster a type of misdirected transcendence and even in more extreme case, to pantheism. Such dangers are present when other great religions are compared with Christianity. Prophecy understood in terms of perceiving the essential sameness of those events which befall us is one half of the story, perhaps the most attractive and easiest feature to describe. As we know, real life is different and composed of a jumble of chaotic elements. The real test of prophecy is intuiting sameness in multiplicity which leads to its practical implication, not being swayed by the chaos out there. Obviously a delicate task. What we're trying to do here is simply see if there's an alternative way to mirror our experiences other than the conventional geometric figures of circle, square and triangle. Should we practice with the figure of an ellipse, we have a better map, as it were, of how to comport ourselves. After all, behind our muddled attempts to make sense of both positive and negative experiences lies that geometric tendency so basic to our human nature. This almost unconscious option sets the stage for the emergence of language and metaphors which later become crystallized. From there it's a relatively small step to the construction of a philosophy and theology to interpret our experiences.

Hitherto I have dealt with the left side of the ellipse and rightly so, for that is where we are "located." It includes our range of perceptions, the bend that events take around our ex-centric position and the horizons of  $x_1$  and  $x_2$ . By nature we desire wholeness and have an inkling that there's more to our range of perceptions despite our inability to put a finger on them. The desire for completeness is at the root of why we're unhappy and wish fulfillment. Yet again the elliptical model is helpful in that it maps this unknown reality. Not that it reveals this reality in the sense of figuring something out but as an aide to know our true nature. Familiarity with one half of how reality works (referring to our ex-centric position) allows us to cast this same familiarity onto the other half of the ellipse. After all, the geometrical figure needs to be fleshed out, and we do this by extending awareness of that familiar part of the elliptical pattern already available. Here we have a "just as-so" situation. I.e., just as the world seems modeled after an ellipse to which we can apply our experiences of reality, so what we do not know probably assumes the same shape. Better, just as the world/experiences form one half of an ellipse, so does the unknown take a similar form, namely, the other half.

Referring back to points  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  or where our perceptions of reality come into being and then leave us, we wonder, almost childlike, that they must exist in some kind of far-off mysterious land. From time to time they visit us god-like...or no so god-like (usually the latter is the case). The word "god" is not inappropriate due to the mysterious and sudden arrival/departure of these entities. It is akin to the Greek *daimon*. They are certainly real—not imaginary—as we know from the "bend" they take around our ex-centric position within the ellipse. A physical analogy is the dark side of the moon which until one of NASA's space voyages, had remained a complete mystery. We had thorough knowledge of the moon's front side and assumed its other half was similar. At the same time we didn't really know what was behind there until astronauts had seen it for themselves and could report back to us earthlings. Furthermore, during the time these astronauts were on the dark side they were completely cut off from communication. They had gone beyond a familiar horizon and were out of touch until coming around to the other familiar horizon, the moon's right side (so to speak).

Familiarity with one half of the ellipse thus leads to a hunch that the other half exists. Such a hunch is founded upon a geometrical projection where we wish to flesh out the full form. We may call it faith in the existence of this unseen half. "Faith" may not be an exact word, yet it does say (keeping in mind two paragraphs above) that just as we have an ex-centric position with respect to the ellipse's bend, so a counter point must exist...a counter ex-centric center...directly opposite us. This other half lies beyond our sight over the horizon of points  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  or before we see something coming towards us and departing from us. In other words, this stuff must come from somewhere before it hits us and must return somewhere afterwards. Actually much of our problems consist not so much in negative experiences per se but in wondering about their origin. From there we can questions like, "Does God exist?"

What gives us a clue that we're dealing with an ellipse in its total form (despite our partial vision) is faith in the elliptical form itself. This stems from our perceptions of elliptical shapes in every aspect of nature. Thus the question is: if we intuit one half of the ellipse as it applies to the way we comport ourselves, from where does our "faith" in the other half derive? Is it a figment of our imagination, a projection or wishful thinking? I don't think so, simply on the basis of how pervasive elliptical shapes are in nature. We can use our "just as-so" formula in another way by saying—and this is more abstract—just as an ellipse is the most natural shape of them all, so does it work on levels of human experience not perceptible to the eye. By that I mean our intellectual and spiritual endeavors.

As for the other invisible half of the ellipse, we don't move out physically towards it or towards the other "bend" around which that invisible half curves. Paradoxically we perceive it when moving inwards through making a gesture of remembrance or recollection. Since we're born elliptically (for lack of a better way of putting it), we have an inherent memory of this pattern which remains with us. Here we're not considering memory in the conventional sense but in the more technical definition of *anamnesis*. We shouldn't think of this as remembering an ellipse which parallels the misunderstanding of Plato's form, an ideal horse somewhere out in space and to which physical horses are just a shadow. Rather, our *anamnesis* may be conceived as perceiving the pattern of our soul, of how it operates. Since we're elliptical by nature (again, not adequately stated)...almost boomerang-like...making an inward gesture to see that stuff of which we are made removes us from the orbit (circular!) of those things which are external to us. Traditional teaching on prayer and spirituality call them by various names such as distractions, the world, the flesh, the devil and so forth. They don't form part of our *anamnesis*-nature despite our temptations at times to think this way.

