

# Ascetic Practices and the Mind Mental Healing in Eastern Christianity



March 1-2, 2024

Pryzbyla Center Great Room B  
The Catholic University of America



Institute for the Study  
of Eastern Christianity

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA



Neurological and psychological research has confirmed the effectiveness of monastic meditative practices in accomplishing mental healing. In ancient monasticism, these practices were adopted as preparation for the contemplative life, and they continue to be employed now in monasteries both east and west. This conference discusses the early Christian and Byzantine traditions of monastic training, gained over centuries of recorded experience. It then turns to investigating the application of these continuing practices to engage with current medical therapies derived from neurological research and therapeutic practice.

The Institute for the Study of Eastern Christianity expresses its gratitude to the following for their generous support of this conference:

**George & Judy Marcus Foundation**

**Roberta L. Tsempales in Memory of George Tsempales**

# PROGRAM

**Friday**  
**March 1, 2024**

- 9:00 a.m. Registration
- 10:00 Welcome - Opening Remarks
- 10:30 **Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB**, “Healing Enchantments: Therapeutic Psalmody in Early Christian Monasticism”
- 11:00 **Robin Darling Young**, “Sources for the Early Christian Understanding of Prayer and the Mind”
- 11:30 Discussion
- 12:00 p.m. Lunch Break
- 2:00 **Fr. Damaskinos Olkinuora**, “The Renaissance of Contemplative Prayer on Mount Athos in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”
- 2:30 **Fr. Chrysostomos Koutloumousianos**, “Contemplative Life and the Last Things in the Monastic Environment”
- 3:00 Discussion
- 3:30 Coffee Break
- 4:00 **David Elliot**, “The Western and Eastern Sources of Aquinas’ Asceticism”
- 4:30 **Fr. Steven Payne**, “Contemplative Prayer in the Carmelite Tradition: Ancient Roots and Contemporary Practice”
- 5:00 **Nathan Tilley**, “Contemplative Prayer as Therapy for Self-Knowledge in Isaac of Nineveh and his East Syriac Sources”
- 5:30 Discussion
- 6:30 Dinner (Speakers)

**Saturday**  
**March 2, 2024**

- 9:00 a.m. **Jennifer Herdt**, “Beyond the Therapeutic Mindset: Charting a Path for Empirical Study of Christian Contemplative Practices”
- 9:30 **Brother Theophan Miskovic**, “Theōsis in Light of Modern Neurobiology”
- 10:00 Discussion
- 10:30 Coffee Break
- 11:00 **Fr. Stephen Muse**, “Reflections on the Convergence of Ascetical Theology, Neurobiological Advances and Trauma Therapy in Clinical Practice”
- 11:30 **Carrie Frederick Frost**, “From the Monastery to the Living Room: A Cautionary Tale of the Laicization of Contemplative Practices”
- 12:00 p.m. Discussion
- 12:30 Lunch Break
- 2:30-4:30 **Clinics** (advance registration required)  
Contemplative Prayer: Byzantine Chapel (Crypt Level), Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception  
Iconography: Hannan Hall 108  
See descriptions below
- 5:00 **Closing Remarks & Vespers**  
Byzantine Chapel, Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
- 6:30 Dinner (Speakers)

## CLINICS

### **Contemplative Prayer**

Carrie Frederick Frost

This Contemplative Prayer Clinic will begin with a brief introduction to the history and methods of contemplative practices from the Christian East followed by the opportunity to experience these practices. The clinic will offer a combination of communal practice of the Jesus Prayer, times of silent prayer, and contemplative walking.

### **Drawing the Face of Christ: Following the Formula**

Colette Kalvesmaki (Many Years Iconography Studio, Leesburg, VA)

The Iconography clinic will be one where the participant takes part in drawing the face of Christ using paper and pencils. There was an expectation of how Christ, the Theotokos or Saint Peter and so forth, looked throughout the Tradition of the Eastern Church. It was not that there were distinct facial features but rather that there were and are patterns of measurement, items held, hair and beard type, color and categories of clothes which distinguish each saint. In this 2-hour class, Mrs. Kalvesmaki will show participants how to draw a “cartoon” of the face of Christ using the formula passed on in the Tradition of the Church.

## PRESENTERS

**Robin Darling Young** is Ordinary Professor of Church History in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America. She works on the traditions of early Christianity in the Greek, Armenian and Syriac languages and has recently been chief editor and translator of *Evagrius of Pontus: The Gnostic Trilogy* (OUP 2024).

*Sources for the Early Christian Understanding of Prayer and the Mind*

To understand prayer and its obstacles, it is necessary to understand the human mind. Dedicated to scrupulous investigation of their own specifically Christian prayer, early Christians drew on common medical and philosophical research to anchor their own inquiries into the subject, and their understanding of the mind in prayer. This talk outlines how early Christians incorporated such research.

**Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB**, studied religion and medicine at the University of Southern California from 1970-1978, receiving his BA in 1974 and his MD in 1978. He was board certified in Family Practice after internship and residency at UCLA, and he joined the Benedictine community of Saint Andrew's Abbey in 1980, where he was ordained priest in 1986. He studied theology at Oxford University, receiving his D.Phil. in theology in 2000. He has published a book on Evagrius Ponticus and numerous articles on the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers. He has taught theology and biomedical ethics at a variety of institutions in southern California, and is currently chair of the theology department and professor of church history and moral theology at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo. He is co-chair of the Bioethics Committee at the Antelope Valley Hospital Medical Center in Lancaster, where he is a member of the medical staff.

*Healing Enchantments: Therapeutic Psalmody in Early Christian Monasticism*

By the mid-fourth century the practice of psalmody, that is private or communal chanting of the Psalter, was nearly universal in the Christian monastic tradition. Various authors including Athanasius, Evagrius Ponticus, and Cassian attempted to explain the ascetical and contemplative efficacy of psalmody. In this paper we will reflect on texts, chiefly by Evagrius, that make use of ancient medical vocabulary and theory to describe psalmody as an effective therapeutic remedy against both physical and spiritual maladies.

**David Elliot** is Associate Professor of Moral Theology at The Catholic University of America, and was Research Associate, Von Hügel Institute, St Edmund's College, University of Cambridge (2015-2022). He received his Ph.D. in moral theology at the

University of Notre Dame in 2014, and was awarded a 3-year postdoctoral fellowship as Research Associate in Theological Ethics at Cambridge University, coming to CUA in 2017. Elliot's research focuses on fundamental Catholic moral theology, virtue ethics, and the moral thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. He is the author of 18 journal articles and book chapters invited or already in print, as well as of *Hope and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

*The Western and Eastern Sources of Aquinas' Asceticism*

The extraordinary influence of St. Thomas Aquinas upon the Western Church is well-known, and he is rightly seen as a classic exemplar of Western theology. Yet he also had a remarkably keen interest and receptivity towards the Greek fathers that was unusual in his time. Moreover, Thomas also showed well above-average investment in the moral role of asceticism, or what he called spiritual 'training' (*exercitium, disciplina*). This paper outlines the confluence of these trends. In particular, I trace the impact on Thomas of St. John Cassian, a crucial bridge figure who sought to transplant the Eastern monastic tradition into the West, and whose influence on Thomas' rich but neglected asceticism was paramount.

**Carrie Frederick Frost** is an Orthodox Christian theologian who teaches at Western Washington University and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. She is the author of the recent book on women in the Orthodox Church, *Church of Our Granddaughters* (Cascade, 2023), Book Reviews Editor for *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies*, and Chair of St. Phoebe Center of the Deaconesses. She lives in the Pacific Northwest and is the mother of five and the grandmother of one.

*From the Monastery to the Living Room: A Cautionary Tale of the Laicization of Contemplative Practices*

Contemplative practices—including meditation and prayer—were born in monastic contexts in both Buddhism and Eastern Christianity, but they have recently moved from the monastery to the “living room;” they are now widely practiced by non-monastic lay people. The laicization of Buddhist contemplative practices over the last fifty years has been influenced by secular, consumer, and health-related concerns that have altered the practices themselves and their aims, whereas laicization for Eastern Christian contemplative practices is a more recent and ongoing process on which the influence of these concerns is not yet clear. Through this interfaith comparison, I will consider what the Eastern Christian tradition might learn from close observation of the laicization of Buddhist contemplative practices.

**Jennifer Herdt** is Gilbert L. Stark Professor of Christian Ethics at Yale University Divinity School. She has published widely on virtue ethics, early modern and modern



moral thought, is a member of several editorial boards, and served as the 2020 President of the Society of Christian Ethics. She is the author, most recently, of *Assuming Responsibility: Ecstatic Eudaimonism and the Call to Live Well*. Her 2019 book, *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition*, was supported by a research fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Among her other books is *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*, selected as a Choice Outstanding Academic Title. From 2013-2021, she served as the academic dean of Yale Divinity School. From 2020-23 she researched the animal dimensions of human moral agency as a senior member of a Templeton-funded research grant supporting science-informed theological anthropology.

*Beyond the Therapeutic Mindset: Charting a Path for Empirical Study of Christian Contemplative Practices*

The blossoming of interest in spirituality in contemporary late modern Western cultures has paid far less attention to the deep resources of the Christian tradition for contemplative practices. Very little empirical research has been done to date on the psycho-social effects of Christian contemplative practice, as compared with Buddhist-derived mindfulness meditation, although this is starting to change. In turning to empirical study, however, it is important to be clear about what psychological and neuroscientific studies can and cannot accomplish. This talk seeks to chart a productive path forward for such research, in a way that can avoid reduction to a therapeutic mindset.

**Fr. Chrysostomos Koutloumousianos** is the abbot of the Holy Monastery of Phaneromeni in Naxos, Cyclades. He has lived on Mount Athos (Koutloumous Monastery) for thirty five years. Having read English Literature at the University of Athens he pursued BA, MA, and PhD studies in Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessalonica. He conducted post-doctoral research at the Royal Holloway and Heythrop College, London. He is currently a research fellow at the *Cambridge Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies*. He has published on monasticism, patristics, and literature, and his forthcoming book is a dialogue between St Romanos the Melodist and John Donne. He lives permanently in his monastery while visiting other places for lectures or pastoral activities.

*Contemplative Life and the Last Things in the Monastic Environment*

Contemplation in the monastic environment is not merely a vision of God but is also a mode of being that includes the whole of human existence. This mode is not rooted in various ethical and philosophical elements; it is instead derived from the eschatological reality, the coming Kingdom. Which is anticipated in this present life, and as such profoundly affects all the spiritual and bodily senses of those imbued with it. The nurturing of this mode of being involves an unceasing work

that principally takes place in the ‘nous’, sometimes termed the ‘deep’ heart. The paper explores the therapeutic role of the presence of the eschaton in monastic life, as witnessed in patristic writings, and evidenced by the experience of contemporary monastics.

**Brother Theophan Miskovic** was formerly a research Scientist at X: The Moonshot Factory, previously known as Google X, the semi-secret research and development facility whose aim is to invent and launch radical new technologies aimed at making the world a better place. Prior to that he was an assistant professor of Psychology and Integrative Neuroscience at Binghamton University (SUNY). His research has examined the interplay of emotion, attention, and motivation, the function and development of spontaneous human brain dynamics, and human brain neuromodulation using electro-magnetism and ultrasonic methods. In 2016 he was honored with the Rising Star Award bestowed by the Association for Psychological Science. The prestigious award recognizes early career scientists who have made significant contributions to psychological science. In 2023, Brother Theophan entered New Skete Monastery as a novice monk.

*Theōsis in Light of Modern Neurobiology*

In the classic Patristic understanding, human beings can be described as animals who are in the process of deification. In this talk, I rely on concepts and findings drawn from contemporary neurobiology and cognitive neuroscience to sketch a vision of how Patristic anthropology finds numerous points of agreement with today’s scientific understanding of the human mind. Christian anthropology offers to the modern world a stunningly optimistic view concerning our potential for overcoming habitual modes of functioning and recovering a transcendent dimension of experience and being that is not to be discovered within purely secular worldviews. Specifically, I will review contemporary neuroscientific findings in terms of their implications concerning an automatic mode of functioning that canalizes and restricts human cognition, emotions and behavior leading to maladaptive outcomes characteristic of the “fallen” mode of human existence (what Metropolitan John Zizioulas called our 'biological hypostasis'). Asceticism will be reviewed as a powerful set of therapeutic modalities for regaining neural plasticity and achieving a radical transformation (metanoia) of the human mind, and more broadly, of the entire human psycho-physical organism, resulting in the increased transparency of human consciousness. When it is pursued over a lifetime, the combination of inner asceticism and a life of sacraments results in a dynamic process that is best described as theōsis or deification.

**Fr. Stephen Muse, PhD, LMFT, LPC** is a bi-vocational priest who directs the Clergy-in-Kairos program at Pastoral Institute in Columbus, Georgia, a personalized

week-long crisis intervention, stress and wellness intensive retreat for clergy (and spouse) renewal. He holds joint appointments as a clinical Professor in the Departments of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science and Bioethics and Medical Humanities at Mercer University School of Medicine and is faculty with the St. Francis Hospital Psychiatry Residency Program serving on the Clinical Competency Committee. He has authored or edited a number of books for both adults and children. His work has been translated into Russian, Greek, Swedish, Serbian and Romanian. He served on the Assembly of Canonical Bishops Pastoral Praxis Committee, and the OCA task force on Spiritual Abuse. He is past president of the Orthodox Christian Association of Medicine, Psychology and Religion and serves on their Advisory Board.

*Reflections on the Convergence of Ascetical Theology, Neurobiological Advances and Trauma Therapy in Clinical Practice*

Recent advances in understanding neurological substrates of trauma and its treatment implications, complement the phenomenological observations of the Philokalic Fathers regarding psychosomatic unity, stillness and watchfulness as foundational for sobriety and prayerful attentive presence. Author reflects on how these two domains converge in clinical practice and implications for training and formation of psychotherapists.

**Fr. Damaskinos Olkinuora** is a hieromonk of the monastic brotherhood of Xenophontos (Mount Athos, Greece), and a University Lecturer in Systematic Theology and Patristics at the University of Eastern Finland. His research interests include Byzantine liturgy and chant, as well as monastic devotion to the Theotokos, and he is actively working on patristic and liturgical translations into Finnish and Estonian. Recently, he has also undertaken the role of spiritual father and re-founder of the Convent of St Andrew the First-Called and John the Baptist in Saaremaa, Estonia.

*The Renaissance of Contemplative Prayer on Mount Athos in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*

Contemplative prayer was in the center of the Hesychast controversy in the 14th century, and Mount Athos played a pivotal role in it. The interest in this period, as well as the teachings of the desert fathers during the millennium preceding it, became more intense in the 18th and 19th centuries thanks to the Kollyvades movement. Because of the difficulties caused by political restlessness of the early 20th century, many monasteries fell into decay, but from the 1970s onward there has been a continuous renaissance of reorganizing the monasteries and making contemplative prayer more consciously a part of the everyday life of each Athonite monk. The present talk also discusses contemporary practices and teachings of Athonite elders on contemplative prayer.

**Fr. Steven Payne**, a Discalced Carmelite priest, holds the Endowed Chair of Carmelite Studies in the Center for Carmelite Studies at The Catholic University of America. He has previously served as Principal of Tangaza University College in Nairobi, Kenya and Director of its Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation. He has written and taught widely on Carmelite topics. His publications include *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church* (Alba House, 2002) and *The Carmelite Tradition* (Liturgical Press, 2011).

*Contemplative Prayer in the Carmelite Tradition: Ancient Roots and Contemporary Practice*  
Carmelite mysticism is generally regarded as a paradigmatic expression of Western Christian spirituality, and contemporary scientists exploring the neurobiology of religious experience often cite its best-known representatives, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. This paper will begin with observations on some lesser-known links between Carmelite spirituality and Eastern Christian traditions, before moving on to consider briefly what Carmel might contribute to ascetical practice and neurobiological research today.

**Nathan Tilley**, Ph.D., is Visiting Assistant Professor of Early Christian Studies at the Catholic University of America with an appointment in the Department of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures. His research examines the intellectual history of late ancient eastern Christianity broadly (Syriac, Greek, Arabic, Coptic), with a focus on the East Syriac theological tradition.

*Contemplative Prayer as Therapy for Self-Knowledge in Isaac of Nineveh and his East Syriac Sources*

Due to its significant influence on the history of spirituality, study of the ascetical theology of 7th c. East Syriac writer Isaac of Nineveh has often focused on his analysis of kinds of prayer, especially meditative prayer, pure prayer, and spiritual prayer (non-prayer or “wonder”). But less noticed is how Isaac understands self-knowledge as an important site of spiritual progress. This study examines how Isaac contributes to a late ancient tradition of reflexivity by depicting contemplation and meditative prayer as therapies for self-knowledge. According to Isaac, as ascetic practice suppresses the passions of the soul, the mind begins to see itself and the gap between its weakness and its natural beauty as receptive of true knowledge of God. Contemplation then enables an ascetic to filter the mind so that self-awareness increasingly becomes only a recollected self-knowledge of the soul's pure nature. Finally, Isaac describes how a few ascetics during this life may come to the threshold of pure self-knowledge and through spiritual insights be carried beyond themselves into an ecstatic state of wonder. For Isaac, then, self-knowledge is a penultimate, but crucial stage of the soul's progress through

contemplation towards unity with God. We conclude by briefly noting how Isaac's notion of contemplation as therapy for self-knowledge builds on the foundation laid by earlier East Syriac adaptations of the eschatological ideas of Evagrius of Pontus as description of the stages of earthly ascetic progress. In this, Isaac offers a robust, East Syriac account of how contemplative prayer enriches an ascetic's subjectivity on a path towards full union with God.



### Mission Statement

For nearly 130 years, The Catholic University of America has studied intensively the literary, philosophical, and theological creations of eastern Christian culture. Founded as a graduate research institution, Catholic University quickly established the Institute for Christian Oriental Research, building a library known worldwide as a center for the study of the languages and cultures of the region. Scholars in departments of the schools of Arts and Sciences, Theology, Philosophy, and Canon Law have studied continuously the languages, texts, and histories of these linked cultures since the founding of the University. Yet not only the ancient or medieval history of Eastern Christianity has attracted the attention of generations of scholars; the University has welcomed and fostered the study of these communities in the present. Eastern Christian scholars have been trained here as scholars, and Catholic University still encourages and welcomes representatives of these communities as professors and scholars.

The Institute for the Study of Eastern Christianity aims to foster and focus the study of eastern Christianity, in all its expressions. It encourages course offerings; offers an undergraduate certificate program; sponsors a student organization for all eastern Christians; welcomes lecturers and sponsors conferences on related topics; and acts as a hub in the Washington, D.C. area, for community engagement. Building on its long history of teaching and scholarship, it makes the University's research available for the benefit of all who are interested in this ancient and living culture.

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# NOTES

