Introduction

Anyone accustomed to reading early Christian theological texts would notice, on turning to those of modern Christian writers, a large and far-reaching difference. This difference concerns, not a single locus, or a culturally conditioned ideational supposition, or even a means or form of argumentation, but the broad temper of this theology, characterised by the ease with which early Christian writings move between discussion of technical theological matters and spiritual or ascetical ones. Even to describe this linkage as a movement perhaps overstates the matter, for these concerns weave in and out of each other with a seamlessness suggesting their authors did not regard them as distinct. Patristic writers reason from forms of prayer or liturgical practice to theological positions, and from theological data to principles of ascetical life, with a smoothness betokening the unstated presumption that these areas, far from being remote from each other – or indeed, even quite distinct – belong to the same sphere of discourse and concern.[1]

Modern theology makes no such assumption. Although one may find some appeal to liturgical or sacramental practice,[2] academic theology rarely mentions prayer or worship, much less ascetical disciplines such as fasting or control of anger. Conversely, contemporary works on

[1] Cf Wilken (2003), whose survey of early Christian thought opens with the claim that the Christian religion is inescapably ritualistic, uncompromisingly moral and unapologetically intellectual (xiii), a characterisation undoubtedly true of the period with which his book is concerned, but rather less true of some later ones. Louth characterises the patristic period as both Wilken and I do, but acknowledges a later separation of dogmatic and mystical concerns. He however sees signs of rapprochement between the two areas in the thought of Barth and Balthasar (1981, xi–xiii). The way I am describing patristic theology corresponds closely to Leclerq's characterisation of monastic theology, although the latter is largely concerned with medieval authors, and is at pains to distinguish monastic from scholastic theology (1961, passim, but esp. 5).

[2] There is, for example, a systematic theology based around liturgy, that of Wainwright (1980), but his methodological approach seems to have had little impact on the field as a whole. The sheer fact that its liturgical approach constitutes an 'approach', one which makes it stand out from other contemporary theologies, suffices to indicate it comes from an era whose theological temper differs markedly from that of the early Christian centuries.

spirituality are as bare of theological insight as theological ones are uninterested in spirituality: they float free of explicit theological grounding, some even actively discouraging intellectual engagement (though admittedly, few evince interest in ascetical disciplines, either). Indeed, a good deal of contemporary spirituality overtly suggests that thinking damages prayer, that modern people think too much in general, and that they need to unlearn the latter bad habit if they are to become prayerful or holy persons.[3]

The suspicion of cognition in modern spirituality points towards the factor underlying the difference in spirit of patristic and modern theological writing: a shift in the role of the intellect. The function of the intellect in patristic theology, especially in articulating the resemblance of humanity to God and a means by which we are able to grow towards God, allows for the exploration of key themes in dogmatic and speculative theology, while also inviting discussion of ascetical issues, such as the mind's regulation of the appetites. The emphasis on intellect as a divine attribute, a definitive human faculty, and a basis for human sanctification allows the theologians of the early church to write theology in a way scarcely envisageable today, in which both strictly academic or technical questions can be pursued alongside spiritual ones. One of the central contentions of this study is that the lack of tension, or even proper distinction, between these areas in patristic theologies is attributable to the systematic role of the mind within the theoretical framework as a whole. That role stipulates that the proper telos of the human person is intelligent adoration of God and that the proper function of Christian theology is to instantiate an act of such adoration. The theologies of the patristic period are therefore on this account quintessentially contemplative.

Part of the purpose of this study is to uncover the contemplative and spiritual dimension of works that might be read as sheerly dogmatic, indeed polemical, and part to make explicit the theological lineaments of texts that might seem solely ascetical. The fact that both kinds of texts emerge from this examination looking very similar in the complex of issues with which they are concerned suggests such genre distinctions mean little in this period, a fact that in itself attests eloquently to its theological temper. Tracing the role of the intellect in these texts requires that the reader attend to systematic connections within them: how the

[3] A typical example is De Mello's enormously popular (an in many respects, highly valuable) *Sadhana: a Way to God* (1984).

intellect is portrayed in relation to other constituents of human nature, such as the will and the body, and how the intellect grounds human growth in likeness to God. Tracing these themes, in turn, necessitates attending to their authors' conceptions of the spiritual life.

At this point, we might well pause to question the application of the term 'systematic' to patristic theology in the first place.[4] Is patristic theology not presystematic? are the first Christian systematic theologies not the *summae* of the medieval schools? The answer to the first question is no, even though the answer to the second is arguably yes – though no more than arguably, given a case can be made for Origen's *De principiis*, Damascene's *De fide orthodoxa* and, as a miniature, Nyssen's *Catechetical Oration*. Even if we discount these, though, we would have shown no more than that *a* systematic theology is hard to identify in the patristic period, and that is quite a different matter from the systematic nature of its theology. The first term (*a* systematic theology) designates a single work presenting a comprehensive set of loci in orderly fashion; the second idea concerns the forms of reasoning exhibited in a text (movement from a point established in one locus to another, for example, from the doctrine of God to anthropology), as well as in concerns for coherence, both internally and externally (with Biblical or liturgical data, for instance). In this second sense, patristic theology is highly systematic, showing its authors' relentless awareness of their reflecting a whole – a picture of the cosmos and of human life *coram Deo* – whose origin lies in the divine mind and which therefore must be orderly and intelligent, even if human beings are only imperfectly able to grasp its content or design. The systematic awareness of patristic theologians reflects the role of the intellect in their theology: they expect in what they write to reflect the divinely ordained order of the cosmos. The *ratio* of theology, subsistent in its systematisation, reflects the divine *ratio* and the divinely given human *ratio* which is able to grasp both, and so to adore.

The systematic quality of this theology is thus intrinsically linked to the role of the intellect within it. The assumption that all that exists is either identified with divine wisdom (that is, is God), or is created by this

[4] That patristic theology is systematic is denied both generally and on the occasion of specific authors and works. In regard to the latter, see Crouzel's judgement of Origen's *On First Principles*, cited in ch. 3. In regard to the former, cp. Young: 'During the early Christian period there was no such thing as systematic or scholastic theology' (1997, 681); note the linking of 'systematic' and 'scholastic'. She later acknowledges that one of the leading features of patristic theology is 'intellectual comprehensiveness', which she glosses as 'the disciplined drive to account for all reality . . . in relation to its divine creator' (688–89), which is in significant part what systematic theology is, assuming that its comprehensiveness is taken to include cohesion, or at least non-contradiction.

wisdom, stipulates a *ratio* underlying every possible object of contemplation. If the rational harmony of creation has been disrupted by the Fall, no human action could overthrow the divine design completely: the cosmos and all that is in it still reflects the divine creative and sustaining intelligence. The insistence on human reasonableness, even in its post-lapsarian state, follows from the assertion of its origin in divine wisdom; to impugn the former would, in the Fathers' view, necessarily impugn the latter. Their relatively sanguine estimation of human intellect thus differs fundamentally from any Enlightenment exaltation of Reason: not human dignity and autonomy is celebrated, but the beauty of divine Mind, reflected in creation. Equally, however, because rightly glorifying God entails acknowledging the human capacity for rational reflection, the Fathers cannot slide into a pessimistic apophaticism holding that the order of the universe, or indeed divine nature itself, lies entirely beyond human ken. Again, to impugn our capacity to know God, at least dimly, would amount to claiming God had deliberately left us bereft of the only means to good, happy and purposeful lives, and would deny, therefore, any conceivable telos to creation. Inasmuch as theology purports to state what is the case about God, the cosmos and the relation of the two, it must reflect both divine *ratio* and the divinely-given human capacity to grasp this *ratio*, and must, therefore, be in itself systematic, that is, logical, orderly and coherent.

The order and coherence of patristic texts are of a specifically theological kind, and as such, the very nature of the texts rules out some of the approaches that might have been taken to the general complex of questions which are the matter of this study. This is not an investigation of patristic epistemology per se, although it necessarily touches on a variety of epistemological questions. Whether in the view of the Fathers we know by remembering what was once imprinted on our minds but which we have for some reason forgotten, or by manipulating the residue of sensory experience left in our minds (phantasms), or by some other means altogether, is not the question this study seeks to explore. It would in any case be difficult to determine the answer, since the Fathers rarely address such issues directly; for all that they operate with philosophical presuppositions, some of which are made explicit, they are finally not philosophers but theologians, and the questions they pursue are thoroughly theological, explored using theologians' tools. Their interest in the mind focuses not on how it acquires and processes information generally, but in its role in ordering the relation of God and humanity.

No more does this study set out to give an account of the Fathers' lexical usage as it pertains to word fields, such as 'mind' or 'knowledge'. The latter enterprise would be doomed by the almost total absence of definitions in patristic treatments of mind or intellect (the two terms will be used in this book interchangeably). The fact that the writers examined here do not define *mens* or *nous* or that the Greek writers do not specify how the latter is to be distinguished clearly from *gnōmē*, for example, constitutes only part of the problem. Another part of it lies in the fact that much of what is relevant to determining the patristic conception of the intellect does not spring from the usages of individual words: if one claims we know God in such-and-such a way, what one says has significance for one's account of how our mind apprehends God, even if the word 'mind', or some analogous term, is not being used. Likewise, to maintain that we can envisage God with the aid of scripture but not through logic alone is implicitly to make a claim about the limitations of human deductive reasoning, even if there is no talk of mind as such. I have from time to time noted parenthetically the Greek or Latin word or phrase lying behind texts to which I refer, when the particular term used seemed significant; but for the most part, the subtle variegation of shades of meaning among closely-related terms has little bearing on a study of this kind, which is concerned with the systematic interactions of theological loci and themes.[5]

Because of the absence of definitions of key terms pertaining to the intellect in patristic texts, and because even if these existed, they would still not render the fullness of the relevant concepts, we are seeking the way in which several broad areas of concern in this thought intersect. The most important of these connections we are pursuing is that between the divine and the human intellect. This nexus is important for Christian theology for two quite different reasons. The first is that, although the Fathers more often assume mind in God than take pains to stipulate it specifically, they are concerned to associate the imago Dei in humanity with mind or the rational faculty in degrees varying from virtual identification to the simple assumption that the capacity for thought is an

[5] The basic attitude towards terminology which I take here thus differs from that of Louth, who insists on the untranslatability and non-correspondence of the key terms in English and Greek (1981, xv). I would not incline, to the extent he does, to separate *nous* from the activities of discursive reasoning (though it is of course by no means confined to such activity) and although the essential thrust of this study is to underline the much broader meaning that it has in patristic literature than 'mind' has in contemporary English, I do not share his qualms about translating it as 'mind' or 'intellect'. The reader is invited to stretch her view of mind, rather than to subscribe to a belief in the untranslatability of certain words.

essential part of what it means to be made in the image of God. This move is necessarily relational; one of the definitive features of Christian anthropology is that it declines to define humanity in solely human terms. On the Christian account, one can only understand what it means to be human by looking to the non-human, to the divine creator and source of life, a procedure which entails not only making certain assumptions about our relation to the persons of the Trinity, but also certain assumptions about divine nature itself, for humanity's imaging of the latter entails at least some form of similarity. All talk of the imago Dei is therefore at once talk of humanity, talk of the divine nature reflected in the image, and talk of humanity's relation to the divine. Or, to put the matter another way, any doctrine of the imago Dei is a systematic theology in miniature.

The relationality of the human intellect pertains not only *ad extra*, towards the divine, but *ad intra*, to the other constituents of human nature, notably, the will and the body. For although the Fathers, following Genesis, took our similarity to God as the cornerstone of their anthropology, they also followed Genesis in taking our divinely-given bodies to be constitutive of our nature. No anthropology that would qualify as Christian can omit the body or regard it as a temporary nuisance or ill, an obstacle to salvation or the knowledge of God, a point on which the supposedly Platonising Christian tradition parts company with most varieties of Platonism. However much a Christian theology stresses the mind and its apprehension of the divine, it must simultaneously state this mind's relation to the body in a way which neither does violence to either element, nor impugns the creative intention behind their being yoked together.

The mind's relation to the body portends its broader role as the head of the 'household' that is the human person, and is an indicator of the will's significance to the schema, for without the latter, what the mind envisages could not translate into action, body or no body. Equally, however, actions in which there is no element of deliberate intent are not properly speaking willed, so the will moves at the mind's behest and is therefore in some sense always secondary to it. This necessary and systematic relation of mind and will indicates a further relationship: that of contemplation to ethics, of theology to ascesis.

To put the matter in this last way is to indicate the mind's role in two areas of central concern to the Fathers: theology and prayer. One of the chief signifiers that these are related in patristic theology in a very different way from that of some later periods is that in patristic texts, either

sort of activity may be what is designated as *theōria* or *contemplatio*, contemplation. While the rigorous pursuit of intellectual questions and difficulties often leads the Fathers into a controversial mode which seems remote from the adoration that is prayer, the questions they pursue – the nature of trinitarian relations, for example – are in essence contemplative, inasmuch as they lead orator and listener, writer and reader, to ponder and gaze upon divine nature and divine things. The sheer fact that a complex theological discussion holds the mind's attention on the things of God indicates the possible functioning of this discussion as at least the preliminary to prayer, if not as prayer itself. Patristic texts not only display their authors' awareness of this fact, but enact it, holding the reader's gaze upon God even as they expose the theological conditions of the possibility of such gazing.

The act of contemplation is nevertheless always ripe for disruption. The monastic texts we shall consider especially reveal a powerful awareness of this fact, and if in them we find a particularly strong emphasis on the struggle against the passions, then this is not only because the monastic is supposed to be virtuous in a general sort of way, but equally because the passions particularly assail the mind at prayer. The monastic and ascetical texts do not, therefore, display their authors' interest in ascesis because ascesis is a worthy or superior substitute for intellectual activity, but because the latter is infeasible without control of the emotions and bodily desires. Significantly, however, the difference between monastic texts and others lies not in the presence of an interest in ascesis in one versus its absence in others, but simply in the strength of focus on matters of spiritual discipline. In one sense, ascetical theology cannot be said to exist in this period, not because such concerns do not figure in its thought, but because they are never cordoned off and separated from other theological issues, and consequently never become the exclusive province of certain kinds of writers.

Following what the Fathers have to say of the mind, therefore, necessarily leads the reader to see various kinds of unity in their writings. The inseparability of what we now call theology from spirituality (in both theory and practice) is one such unity. Another is the psychosomatic unity of the human person, and another, the unity in knowledge and love of the human person and God. The likeness to God we are given in virtue of the imago is the dynamic basis of that evolving likeness of holiness which comes from ascesis and contemplation. We might put the matter in a slightly different way: the personal union of the Trinity with human persons is reflected in two methodological unities, one at the level of

systematic theology (the unity of the doctrine of God and theological anthropology) and the other at the subdisciplinary level (of theology proper to ascetical theology or spirituality, as well as to ethics). The treatment of the intellect is not the only means by which the Fathers hold all these together coherently, but it is one of the most powerful and important ones. Because the themes under consideration converge on such questions, the study is as much an investigation of the nature of Christian theology, as illuminated by the mind of the early church, as it is in inquiry into particular theological loci. Evagrius wrote: 'The spiritual knowledge [gnōsis] of God is the breast of the Lord; the one resting upon it will be a theologian',[6] and in a way, this study represents nothing more than a detailed exposition of what he means.

Grasping these unities is vital if we are to understand the complex relation of this theology to the philosophical systems which preceded it, or, as in the case of neo-Platonism, developed alongside it. Studies of patristic theology, church history and the cultural history of the ancient world often assume an immediate connection between ancient philosophy of one variety or another and early Christian theology. Any talk of ascent is taken to be neo-Platonic, for example, and appeals to reason as the ruling principle frequently traced to the Stoic notion of the *hēgemonikon*.[7] The difficulty with such assumptions lies both in their unverifiability and their too-easy assumption of causality; one can certainly show similarities between one assertion and another, but with much greater difficulty does one establish that the reason for the similiarity lies in influence. In part, the problem lies in our having little firm evidence about what particular patristic writers had and had not read (though of course some absorption of philosophical views may have come from *ouï-dire*). Even more importantly, however, the simple fact that writer X read writer Y does not in itself establish that X adopted view Z because it was found in Y's work. If Platonists assert the soul's ascent, so do the psalms frequently speak of going up to find God; if the Stoics think in terms of a *hēgemonikon*, the Old Testament also extols guidance by wisdom and right understanding. To point to a similarity between the

[6] Monc 120.

[7] As a particularly stark example, we might take the claim of Festugière: 'Quand les pères "pensent" leur mystique, ils platonisent. Tout n'est pas original dans l'édifice'(1936, 5). The response of this study is that it is precisely the 'tout' which is original. Stead maintains with equal economy that the patristic concept of mind derived from Platonism (1982, 40), even though he had previously just acknowledged that it is Aristotle who described God as Mind (39), and later maintains that many of the Fathers were untouched by Platonism (52) – these, it would seem, must therefore have been operating without any concept of Mind.

two bodies of thought does not in itself establish a causal connection, if only because the content of the thought may be equally, indeed perhaps more plausibly, attributable to another source. Even in cases where an idea expressed in a patristic text seems distinctively that of a particular philosopher or school, it must still be remembered that the Christian writer was under no obligation to adopt any of these. The ancient world offered a smörgåsbord of philosophical options, making any one of them rather less than inevitable, and Christians always maintained a certain critical distance from philosophy, mingled as it frequently was with views in one sense or another religious. Given the range of options available, the adoption of any philosophical datum represents a choice on the theologian's part, a choice that at least precludes the ascription of any mechanical notion of influence.[8]

Perhaps the most widespread claims of influence pertain to the supposedly pervasive shaping power of the various Platonisms, and there are some undoubted parallels between the latter and patristic theology in its many varieties. The image from the *Phaedrus*, for example, of the charioteer struggling to control his horses, one of which is virtuous and obeys its master, the other of which is unruly and disobedient,[9] is echoed by many early Christian theologians as they describe the struggle in the human person between the forces of rationality and irrationality, the mind's attempt to guide the soul with its passions. That the echoing is a deliberate borrowing from Plato seems clear enough from the closeness of the parallel; whether it demonstrates influence is another matter. One need know no Plato to be aware of the tug-of-war between reason and irrational desire – any well-fed person considering a second helping at dinner knows it. Plato's image vividly evokes a perennial fact of the human condition, but it would be absurd to suppose it commended itself because of Plato's authority or because his philosophy was widely taught in the ancient world: it commends itself because it points to a truth any human being has experienced in daily life. What is being taken from Plato is not this insight, depressingly mundane as it is, but a vivid image that memorably encapsulates the perennial situation.

[8] A case in point is Armstrong, who points to the verbal parallel between passages in Plotinus, Basil and Nyssen, which indicate the last two must have borrowed from the first in rejecting the existence of *hylē* (1979, 8.428). Armstrong however offers no explanation of why they should have borrowed the idea, even though he admits that in doing so, they stand apart from the patristic tradition (8.429). We are left with the simple fact of a parallel, which raises questions of the relation of bodies of thought more than it answers them.

[9] 246 a–b, 253 d–e.

Obviously, this interpretation of influence assumes we properly speak of it only when a view is adopted in significant part because it is commended by the authority of the writer advocating it. Influence in this sense would tend to exert itself, by definition, in more than piecemeal fashion: if one adopts Plato's views because they are those of a thinker whose stature is such that his views are accorded an almost indubitable rectitude, then presumably that thinker's views would merit adoption as a whole, or at least in large part. This kind of wholesale adoption of any Greek philosophy is precisely what we do not find in patristic theology. Take the Platonic tradition again as a case in point. Plato's epistemology goes hand in hand with his metaphysics. Plato's notion that we acquire knowledge through anamnesis presupposes not only forgotten knowledge, but an earlier existence, and hence some form of pre-existent soul, if not necessarily a full-blown doctrine of reincarnation. It also presupposes that real knowledge is not of the sensible, but the intelligible, since knowledge of what is most real is not acquired by gathering information through the senses. This epistemology correlates to a metaphysics, in virtue of which what is deemed most real are the Forms, whose immutability guarantees both their intelligibility and their utter distinction from matter, and which are therefore the proper object of human knowledge, sensible instantiations of these Forms being real in only a pale and derivative sense. The distinction of the sensible and the intelligible thus serves, not only to divide objects of knowing into two different categories, but to identify one of these as the proper object of knowledge and the philosophically more important.

The writers we shall survey appeal frequently to the distinction of the sensible and the intelligible, and one might be tempted to consider that they think in these terms because of their respect for Plato. The immediate difficulty with taking that position is that none of them adopted the theory of Forms; in other words, if prompted to make free use of a distinction employed in Plato's epistemology, they felt equally free to disengage the latter from his metaphysics. They also declined to adopt a central contention of the creation myth of the *Timaeus*, namely the notion that the Craftsman uses the Forms as patterns according to which he shapes the pre-existent matter he has to hand. This picture will not mesh with either of the creation stories in Genesis, and it was the Bible that the early church held to be theologically normative. Disengaged from the metaphysics and an hypothesis about the origin of particulars, Plato's sensible–intelligible distinction does no more than label a fact about the way human beings know. To know what an orange tastes