

## **The Cultivation of Spiritual Knowledge and Wisdom** Karen-Marie Yust, Christian Theological Seminary

### **Historical Background**

The question of what constitutes spiritual knowledge, and hence religious literacy and wisdom, is an age-old concern. Augustine wrestled in the fourth century with what should be known and how Christians should seek such knowledge. *The Confessions* chronicles his early fascination with the works of Cicero and other philosophers, whose ideas he eventually rejected as seductive and deceitful. He struggled to see in scripture the same measure of logic and wisdom he initially perceived in his philosophical studies; “they seemed to me unworthy to be compared to the stateliness of Tully” he says in Book III.<sup>1</sup> However, his conversion experience reoriented his pursuits. His opening words in Book X ask of God, “Let me know Thee, O Lord, who knowest me: *let me know Thee, as I am known.*”<sup>2</sup> He claimed God as his teacher and exhorted God to open the meaning of the scriptures to him. Both reason and wisdom become the provinces of God, places in which Augustine believed he and the Christians to whom he wrote could and should dwell. He described them also as the actions of God, God’s “eternal Reason,” which shapes the laws of the Universe, and God’s “Wisdom,” which Augustine believed constituted the spiritual insight that “gleams through me, and strikes my heart without hurting it.”<sup>3</sup> As Thomas Groome explains, Augustine’s “purpose is a quest for practical spiritual wisdom, and his method is based on an experiential/relational way of knowing.”<sup>4</sup>

In a similar manner, Pope Saint Gregory the Great described Saint Benedict in the second book of his *Dialogues* as one who “was truly wise, uneducated though he may have been.”<sup>5</sup> Gregory lauded Benedict’s decision to abandon the philosophical education intended by his parents, noting that the saint feared “that if he acquired any of [the world’s] learning he would be drawn down with [the other students] to his eternal ruin.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, Benedict chose the solitude of a cave in Subiaco as way of learning. Here and through his lifelong practice of the spiritual disciplines and commitments that eventually shaped his Rule for monastic life, he came to know what God was thinking. Gregory explained to his literary dialogue partner, Peter, that holy persons like Benedict “understand [God’s] judgments and can even pronounce them with their lips; for they keep their hearts united to God by dwelling continually on the words of Holy Scripture and on such private revelations as they may receive, until they grasp [God’s] meaning.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Gemme, trans., *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (New York: Airmont Publishing, 1969), 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 214-215.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Odo Zimmermann and Benedict Avery, trans., *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict (Book Two of the Dialogues) by Pope St. Gregory the Great* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press), 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Much later, in the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich explored the intersection of human reason, church teachings, and divine grace in the acquisition of knowledge of God and the Christian life. In one of the last chapters (Chapter Eighty) of *Revelations of Divine Love* she argues,

In this life [a person] is able to stand because of three things; by these same things God is worshipped, and we are helped, kept, and saved. The first is the use of [a person's] natural reason; the second, the everyday teaching of Holy Church; the third, the inner working of grace through the Holy Spirit. All three come from the one God. God is the source of our natural reason; God the basis of the teaching of Holy Church; and God is the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Julian was less suspicious of human reason than Augustine, perhaps because she did not experience the same temptations of philosophical study that sorely plagued the fourth century saint. Yet she was acutely aware of the tensions that can develop when Christians critically reflect on the being and work of God in light of their personal experiences and religious truth claims and are unable to reconcile the two. Vexed herself by questions of election in the face of human sinfulness, her appeal to God for help – “Lord Jesus, King of bliss, how can I find the answer? Who will teach me and tell me what I need to know, if I cannot see it now in yourself?”<sup>9</sup> – concretely reinforces her teaching of the primary role of grace within human understanding. Like the holy men about whom Gregory wrote, she dwelt with the revelations she received from God until God's meaning was made plain to her.

The struggle to identify and cultivate spiritual knowledge and wisdom continues in our time. Religious educators, whether in congregations or seminaries, are generally perceived by outsiders – and at times by themselves – as persons responsible for facilitating student movement toward some established goal of orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy. Contemporary North American theological schools with mainstream Protestant ties have tended to link knowledge to the acquisition of information about particular subjects. While the so-called “banking” model of education, in which teachers “deposit” bits of truth into attentive students, is falling out of favor in many quarters, the legitimate desire to encourage transformation through an encounter with information about the histories, traditions, and psycho-social aspects of human and religious experience raises questions about the place of “information” in the cultivation of spiritual knowledge. Catholic seminaries (and some of their Protestant kin) have broadened the exploration of how information gathering might take place to include encounters with the sort of sensate knowledge gained through intentional faith formation. Still, curriculum revision conversations in seminaries and perennial curriculum selection debates in congregations suggest that contemporary religious educators continue to wonder about the nature and form of spiritual knowledge and its cultivation.

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<sup>8</sup> Clifton Wolters, trans., *Revelations of Divine Love* (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 204.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

## Contemporary Definitions of Knowledge and Its Relationship to Religious Literacy

Parker Palmer suggests that there are three general historic understandings of knowledge with which contemporary educators must contend. The first, born of curiosity, is “pure, speculative knowledge,” in which knowing something is the goal itself.<sup>10</sup> The second, rooted in control, is “knowledge as a means to practical ends,” or knowing something for utilitarian purposes. Palmer believes both these understandings are problematic because they tend to encourage amoral or corrupt passions. They promote the development of fact-based constructs, detached and objectified modes of theorizing, over-reliance on a concept of reality that prefers concrete objects and logic to intangibles, mythology and the arts, and the dismissal of passion as a moral good.<sup>11</sup> They seek to separate the knower from what he or she knows rather than to recognize, as in the work of Michael Polanyi, the ways in which knowledge emerges from a complex psychological and biological interaction between the knower and the subject he or she desires to know, even in the generally objectified realm of *scientia*, or technical specialization knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

The better way, he believes, is the third option he presents: “a knowledge arising from love” which has the goal of “the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds.” He finds this orientation toward knowledge represented in the writings of the fourth century desert fathers and mothers, who engaged in classical practices of prayer, contemplation, and solitude as the means by which they came to know that which exists “beyond the appearance of things.”<sup>13</sup> This is closer to the classical category of *sapientia*, or contemplative knowledge. His discussion suggests that contemporary religious literacy comes through engagement in relationships and communities of learning that constitute themselves for the purpose of practicing faithful obedience to truth. It is to become experientially and personally engaged with a religious tradition’s stories, rituals, and practices in such an interdependent way that the God who is in and beyond these experiences is encountered and known.

Elliot Eisner’s work on cognition elaborates on the historical and cultural definitions of knowledge as those have been influenced by analytic and positivist philosophy. He notes that conventional philosophical categories restrict use of the term to a “warranted assertion” that is either “analytic” or “synthetic.” The former “are propositions that are true by definition,” the latter “are assertions about empirical conditions that can be falsified through specific operations that a community of competent inquirers can employ.”<sup>14</sup> However, this conventional perspective fails to account for the sensory quality of much of the data and experiences scientists and philosophers use in making assertions.

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<sup>10</sup> All three understandings are identified and initially summarized in Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1983), 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Elliot W. Eisner, *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 31-32.

[T]o restrict the term *knowledge* and, by implication, *knowing* to what propositions about qualities can reveal is to exclude from the arena of knowledge all that propositions as a form of representation cannot embody. ... Shakespeare's rendering of jealousy in *Othello*, Picasso's revelations of the horror of Guernica, Schiller's "Ode to Joy" cannot be reduced to propositions.<sup>15</sup>

Eisner underscores the inescapable importance of both direct engagement and imagination in knowing. He objects to the separation of cognitive awareness from affective experience, arguing that "concepts initiate in the forms of experience that the senses make possible."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he observes that persons interact with the sensate world in a multiplicity of ways, rooted in personal preferences and past experiences, that affect what they know. One can easily transpose this argument to suggest that God and the spiritual life are also experienced through the senses and interpreted in different ways by different persons. Hence the development of religious literacy may depend in part on the "ability to experience the multiplicity of environmental qualities" that constitutes religious experience.<sup>17</sup>

Transformational learning theorists, such as Jack Mezirow, Robert Kegan, Mary Belenky, and Ann Stanton work primarily with epistemologies (ways of knowing) and may comment only indirectly on the nature of knowledge itself. However, their adoption of a constructive developmental approach to meaning-making suggests a bias toward objective (or controlled) knowledge as the goal of maturation. Kegan notes that all ways of knowing involve negotiating the relationship between "the subject and the object in one's knowing." He writes,

That which is "object" we can look at, take responsibility for, reflect upon, exercise control over, integrate with some other way of knowing. That which is "subject" we are run by, identified with, fused with, at the effect of. We cannot be responsible for that to which we are subject. What is "object" in our knowing describes the thoughts and feelings we say we have; what is "subject" describes the thinking and feeling that has us.<sup>18</sup>

The goal of transformational learning, says Kegan and his colleagues, is to move what is "subject" toward what is "object" in such a way that one is no longer captive to one's way of knowing, but has control of one's knowing. On the one hand, this epistemology may encourage the reunion of the broken self that Palmer ascribes to compassion-generated knowledge, as it reintegrates thinking and feeling. On the other hand, the knowledge such an epistemology is likely to produce might also resemble the utilitarian form of knowledge Palmer identified with a desire for control. The lingering danger associated with knowledge forged in an educational process that constructively

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kegan, "What 'Form' Transforms? A Constructive-Developmental Approach to Transformative Learning" in Jack Mezirow & Associates, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 53.

emphasizes “contextual understanding, critical reflection on assumptions, and validating meaning by assessing reasons”<sup>19</sup> is that it may not be formed with a full appreciation for the subjectivity (Palmer’s “truth”) of knowledge itself. Nor, in the case of spiritual knowledge and religious literacy, may it appreciate the fundamentally unequal relationship between God and the one who seeks to know and be known by God.

Mary Belenky’s and Ann Stanton’s work attempts to moderate some of the potential dangers of transformational learning theory by exploring the various structures of women’s ways of knowing in relation to the idealized epistemology offered by Mezirow. She identifies five categories (one of which is split into two subcategories) of female knowers and their knowledge.<sup>20</sup> “The Silenced” have no sense that they have knowledge or are competent to seek or receive knowledge. They actually do acquire knowledge through concrete experience, but such knowledge is virtually invisible to them and they would not expect religious literacy. “Received Knowers” possess knowledge that has been, in their view, passed on to them by others who received it before them. Knowledge, then, consists of self-evident truths that go from one who has already been taught to one who requires teaching. A simplistic view of “passing on the faith” patterned primarily on the uncritical transference of religious data (creedal statements or spiritual practices) for literacy could fit this category. “Subjective Knowers” define knowledge in terms of their own opinions, intuitions, and insights. Religious literacy could consist of the formulation of ideas about topics of personal interest in theology and religious practice.

“Separate Knowers” are one half of the category “Procedural Knowers”. They dissect the knowledge of others, adopting for themselves either the ideas that survive their piercing scrutiny or an opposite proposition. For them, religious literacy might consist of a commitment to a reduced canon of acceptable narratives and practices that have met their tests for usefulness and defensibility. Their twin sisters, “Connected Knowers”, on the other hand, attempt to immerse themselves in the other’s epistemology so that they can know what the other knows in the way the other knows it. Although they may legitimize multiple and competing knowledge claims, they may also tend toward a harmonizing approach to religious literacy, in which all ideas will eventually come together in (or under) one unified truth. “Constructed Knowers” intentionally embrace processes of constructing knowledge that draw on multiple forms of engagement with the subject to be known. As described by Belenky and Stanton, “They stand back, question, take apart, and criticize points of view they see as partial, unfair, and/or destructive. They also move inward, see the whole, listen, understand, integrate, build up, and create.” They might consider religious literacy an ever-evolving and lifelong process of dialogue with established and emerging spiritual knowledge.

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Mezirow, “Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory” in Mezirow & Associates, 3.

<sup>20</sup> The following discussion is derived from Belenky’s continued reflections on the categories she and others first identified in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, which is included as a section of her and Ann Stanton’s essay, “Inequality, Development, and Connected Knowing” in Mezirow & Associates, 80-91. The comments on the implications of these categories for religious literacy are my own.

Transformational learning theory helpfully underscores the social nature of knowledge, both as that is experienced in the communal discourse that shapes the construction of knowledge and in the interaction between knower and what is known. However, as Peter Hodgson points out, several questions pertinent to the cultivation of spiritual knowledge and wisdom are left unanswered.

When knowers enter into union with what is to be known through a construction of it, what actually *is* known? Where and what is truth in this process? ... Is the process of constructing meaning in an interactive, intersubjective nexus in some way a mirror, or speculum, of an ultimate relationality that pervades all that is, including God? Is truth to be measured more in its pragmatic effects than in its disclosure of the being of things?<sup>21</sup>

Hodgson seeks the help of Bernard Meland in suggesting an approach to knowing that respects the commitments of developmental constructivism while addressing the theological and religious education concerns embedded in these questions. Meland characterizes religious knowledge as truth emerging from a process of religious thinking that involves a level of “imaginative interpretation” combined with and extending beyond analytic and constructive thinking to help persons in religious meaning making. (In his invoking of the imagination, he echoes Eisner’s concern for moving beyond epistemologies that presume a purely representative concept of propositional knowledge.) Such imaginative interpretation “has an aesthetic quality”<sup>22</sup> Hodgson finds critical to the “insightful seeing or envisioning of what shows or presents itself” that he calls “Wisdom”.<sup>23</sup>

### **Letting Past and Present Critically Shape One Another**

How then, do we navigate among the many issues raised historically and currently about knowledge, epistemology, spiritual knowledge and wisdom in a constructive and theologically coherent way that contributes to the formation of contemporary people in Christian faith? I propose that we invite an historical guide, St. Diadochos of Photiki, to direct us on the journey. This spiritual director can lead us into a discussion of what might be essential elements of contemporary Christian epistemologies and teaching models, whether in the congregational or theological school setting.

St. Diadochos, a fifth century Greek bishop, approached the question of spiritual knowledge with at least two assumptions: 1) that such knowledge is necessary for human salvation and sanctification, and 2) that mystical experience (particularly through the practices of prayer and contemplation) is essential to faithful perception of religious truth. His short treatise, *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination: One Hundred Texts*, provides guidance for exploring the relationships among divine inspiration, knowledge

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Hodgson, *God’s Wisdom: Toward a Theology of Education* ( Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 68-69.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Hodgson, 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

and wisdom, and intellectual perception and mystical experience, and for considering the ways in which our understandings of these relationships shape our teaching.

In the customary manner of the time, the full title of Diadochos's treatise describes the work's theological perspective and educational purpose:

On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination, Explaining what kind of spiritual knowledge we need in order to reach, under the Lord's guidance, the perfection which He has revealed, so that each of us may apply to himself the parable of deliverance and bring to fruition the seed which is the Logos: One Hundred Texts<sup>24</sup>

This statement sets up a progression from spiritual knowledge to divinely-assisted perfection. The parable referenced (identified by the editors as Matthew 13:3-8) is that of the sower whose seed falls on various types of soil with predictably different results. Diadochos's title, then, suggests that spiritual knowledge is analogous to "good soil" in which the Word of God can grow easily and abundantly.

Diadochos quickly established a link between spiritual knowledge and free will, defining the latter as the ability to choose to what end the soul will direct itself and then identifying "true knowledge" with "the power to discriminate without error between good and evil."<sup>25</sup> His treatise clearly states that this knowledge is not self-generated; rather, it is God's gift. "Nothing," he wrote, "is so destitute as a mind philosophizing about God when it is without Him."<sup>26</sup> At the same time, he understood that the human mind could be rightly engaged and satisfied by theological reflection if God inspired a person's intellectual perceptions. He advised his readers to make themselves "a dwelling-place for the Holy Spirit. Then we shall have the lamp of spiritual knowledge burning always within us."<sup>27</sup>

Diadochos, then, guides us initially into an exploration of spiritual knowledge that reinforces Palmer's third option. The constructive role he assigns spiritual knowledge in the process of sanctification can coexist with Palmer's emphasis on spiritual knowledge as a means for redressing human brokenness. His attention to right moral discernment as a mark of spiritual knowledge is also compatible with Palmer's claim about practicing obedience to truth. These early Texts thus can easily be read as supporting an epistemology focused on the development of *sapientia* in line with the kind of knowledge Palmer identifies as rooted in compassion. But Diadochos carries his epistemology further.

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<sup>24</sup> G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, eds., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, vol. I (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 253.

<sup>25</sup> To facilitate conversation across different edited volumes, I will identify ideas and quotations from the treatise by the numbers assigned to the statements. This quotation comes from Text 6.

<sup>26</sup> Text 7.

<sup>27</sup> Text 28.

Spiritual knowledge is also connected to wisdom, both in their shared origin in God and in the latter's role as an outward expression and augmentation of the former. Diadochos believed that some receive spiritual knowledge, which illuminates the inner life, and a few receive spiritual knowledge and wisdom, which gives one the ability to interpret to others the "energy of love" experienced in one's life. His use of the term "wisdom" is associated with persons who teach or "speak about God" as he is doing.<sup>28</sup> In the latter sections of the treatise, he also refers to "the gift of theology" (also characterized as a "gift of contemplative vision"), which is the movement in internal spiritual knowledge to complete and inseparable communion with God.<sup>29</sup> We might term this a form of wisdom in which the self interprets its experience to itself rather than the external world.

Implicit in Diadochos's gifts of wisdom and theology is a kind of negotiation between what we can and cannot say about what we know that is at stake in the epistemologies developed by Mezirow and his associates. But whereas transformational learning theorists imagine a progression from subjectivity to greater objectivity, Diadochos guides us to consider the possibility that what we can say about what we know is dependent on how thoroughly the subject of our knowing, God, has us. Within Diadochos's system, we are no longer responsible for gaining control of our thinking and feeling, but for practicing an obedience to God that leaves us subject to God's all encompassing love.

For this fifth century saint, the divine gift of spiritual knowledge comes to those who sit with God in prayer. Only in silencing the noisiness of external and internal demands on one's time and energy can persons encounter the fullness of God's love that unites the human soul with the divine.

Those pursuing the spiritual way must always keep the mind free from agitation in order that the intellect, as it discriminates among the thoughts that pass through the mind, may store in the treasuries of its memory those thoughts which are good and have been sent by God, while casting out those which are evil and come from the devil.<sup>30</sup>

This work, assisted by the Spirit, creates space for a "faith energized by love" and opens up the possibility that God might also give one the gift of wisdom if the soil is right. Hence, the lifelong work of the Christian is to prepare the field of her or his life through prayer and study, for "spiritual knowledge comes through prayer, deep stillness and complete detachment, while wisdom comes through humble meditation on Holy Scripture and, above all, through grace given by God."<sup>31</sup>

Diadochos warned, however, that the mind may prefer study over prayer because of the human interest in philosophical speculation and the perceived rewards of public

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<sup>28</sup> Texts 7 and 9.

<sup>29</sup> Text 67.

<sup>30</sup> Text 26.

<sup>31</sup> Text 9.

acclaim and personal satisfaction associated with knowledge acquired through study. His counsel is simple: pray more, study less.

...we should spend most of our time in prayer, in singing psalms and reading the Holy Scriptures, yet without neglecting the speculations of wise men whose faith has been revealed in their writings. In this way we shall prevent the intellect from confusing its own utterances with the utterances of grace, and stop it from being led astray by self-esteem and dispersed through over-elation and loquacity.<sup>32</sup>

Once again, the emphasis in the latter sections of the treatise is not on a separation of intellectual perception from mystical experience but on the union of heart and mind through divinely-inspired insights.

Here Diadochos directs us to attend to the importance of Eisner's claim that genuine knowledge involves direct and imaginative engagement with a subject as well as rational analysis. He also encourages us to appreciate Eisner's emphasis on the multi-sensory quality of seemingly empirical data and its interpretations. For Diadochos, God reveals Godself through devotional reading of the scriptures and through critical theological analyses of the same texts read in tandem. He warns against overdependence on the latter for much the same reason that Eisner challenges the epistemologies of analytic and positivist philosophy: the danger of over-reliance on human objectivity and disinterestedness in a world in which our environment and experiences unavoidably shape our perceptions.

Given his assumption of the need to balance prayerful and critical engagement with the divine and his belief in the relative rarity of wisdom, Diadochos recognized the need for spiritual teachers to speak from, but not out of, their experiences of mystical union with God and cautioned those among the unilluminated who might be tempted to teach that their attempts would fail out of ignorance. He noted that in the former case, speech is not possible, for everything else falls away when the soul is caught up in the love of God, and in the latter case, the emptiness of the teacher's experience provides nothing to interpret. Instead, we teach from a middle place between our experiences of what we do not know and our experiences of the joyous embrace of God and the spiritual knowledge given in those times. "This balance confers a certain harmony on our words glorifying God; as we speak and teach, our faith is nourished by the richness of the illumination and so, because of our love, we are the first to taste the fruits of knowledge."<sup>33</sup>

Diadochos also recognized the ease with which the lifelong work of prayer and study could be disrupted by interpersonal discord, addiction, depression and the other psychosocial ills of fifth century (and contemporary) cultures. He wrote, "When the soul is disturbed by anger, confused by drunkenness, or sunk in deep depression, the intellect

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<sup>32</sup> Text 68.

<sup>33</sup> Text 8.

cannot hold fast to the remembrance of God no matter how hard we try to force it.”<sup>34</sup> He noted that Christians are similar to young children, novices in prayer who struggle with distractibility and require divine redirection. He pointed out that the activity of spiritual knowledge within us can work to reorient our relationships by bidding us to view all persons “with an overflowing of compassion in our soul.”<sup>35</sup> He also believed that some emotions, such as anger over injustice, are signs of spiritual progress toward a higher level of theological understanding. To deal with the disruptiveness of these emotions, we must turn our anger into a lament over “the insensitivity of the unjust,” “since when hatred is present in the soul spiritual knowledge is paralyzed.”<sup>36</sup>

It is on this point that Diadochos directs us to the useful aspects of Belenky’s and Stanton’s work. Persons in the epistemological categories of “The Silenced,” “Received Knowers,” and “Subjective Knowers” can be interpreted as individuals whose life circumstances deprive them of sufficient opportunities for the remembrance of God. “The Silenced” and “Received Knowers” do not recognize themselves as persons capable of a responsible relationship with God in a freely chosen obedience. While God’s illuminating love may shine on them, they do not experience the energy and warmth of God’s presence. “Subjective Knowers” suffer from an addiction to their own perspective, and God’s light of illumination may “recede” from them because they do not make room in their hearts or minds for divine inspiration.<sup>37</sup>

“Procedural Knowers,” on the other hand, are more aware of God’s illuminative presence, but they may suffer from the imbalance between critical study and contemplative prayer of which Diadochos warned. They may become caught up in theological speculation about the nature and will of God without the necessary corrective of an intimate relationship with the divine. When this happens, it is difficult for the grace of God “to paint the divine likeness over the divine image in us,”<sup>38</sup> for we do not spend sufficient time in the artist’s studio for the work to be completed.

Diadochos underscores for us the possibilities for cultivating spiritual knowledge and preparing the soil for the gifts of wisdom and theology among those Belenky and Stanton call “Constructed Knowers.” But even with this group he reminds us that the passions that can flare in response to injustice can obscure the remembrance of God. And the confidence of “Constructed Knowers” in their ability to negotiate among the various steams of data they admit for consideration may hinder their ability to rely on the grace of God as the orienting and unifying energy at work in their discernment process.

Thus, Diadochos bids us seriously consider the questions posed by Peter Hodgson and the partial answer Hodgson finds in the work of Bernard Meland. While the fifth century saint would have us value religious imagination as a form of divine inspiration – he even celebrates the potential for our dreams to reveal God and fill our souls “with

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<sup>34</sup> Text 61.

<sup>35</sup> Text 92.

<sup>36</sup> Text 70.

<sup>37</sup> Text 86.

<sup>38</sup> Text 89.

spiritual gladness”<sup>39</sup> – he is also adamant that we recognize the limitations of even our God-given creativity. His own work characterizes the danger of the religious imagination in terms of demonic activity and the susceptibility of the human intellect to suggestion, as well as the way in which “as a result of the primal deception the remembrance of evil has become as it were a habit.”<sup>40</sup> Belenky’s and Stanton’s description of the “Subject Knower” whose knowledge exists in his or her own opinions without regard for the merit of those ideas in relation to some process of accountability may be a more palatable explanation for why the imagination remains suspect in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the conundrum continues to exist: religious imagination is essential to the cultivation of spiritual knowledge and is itself insufficient to guarantee an encounter with God and the development of spiritual wisdom.

What, then, does Diadochos offer us that these other epistemologies and their definitions of knowledge do not? He invites us to consider an epistemology that recognizes God and union with God as our primary way of spiritual knowing, a third way that is even more radical than that proposed by Palmer because it moves beyond both *scientia* (technical knowledge) and *sapientia* (practical knowledge) to *mysterium*,<sup>41</sup> a mystical knowledge that must be experienced and cannot be taught in the usual sense of the word. This is the kind of knowledge that the anonymous author of the fourteenth century *The Cloud of Unknowing* had in mind when he designed his exercise of forgetting all else and gazing on God so that we might “leave [God] to act alone.”<sup>42</sup> Diadochos wants us to understand that “our power of perception shows us that we are being formed into the divine likeness; *but the perfecting of this likeness we shall know only by the light of grace.*”<sup>43</sup> Hence, “we should try always to face towards the life-creating and purifying wind of the Holy Spirit”<sup>44</sup> so that we are hospitable to the divine gift of mystical knowledge.

The implications of this emphasis on *mysterium* for our teaching for spiritual knowledge and wisdom are at least twofold. First, as teachers, our spiritual knowledge comes from our personal experiences of God and God’s self-revelation. Recall that Diadochos positions the teacher’s speech at a midpoint between the blissful experience of divine illumination (where words are impossible) and the void of ignorance that tempts us to make unholy speculations. The safeguard that prevents our teaching from slipping into the void is an ongoing contemplative relationship with God that continues to invite new experiences of illumination. While we do not control God’s actions in this relationship, we create a contemplative space in our lives (through various spiritual practices of prayer, worship, solitude and study) where God may chose to enter and draw us into communion.

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<sup>39</sup> Text 37.

<sup>40</sup> Text 83.

<sup>41</sup> One standard definition of this Latin term is something that transcends mere human intelligence, as in its ecclesial usage in reference to the Eucharist, Mass and Incarnation of Christ. I propose this name for mystical knowledge as a means of reclaiming a place for such knowledge in philosophical discourses about epistemology.

<sup>42</sup> James Walsh, S.J., ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 119.

<sup>43</sup> Text 89, emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> Text 75.

Second, our role as teachers of an “unteachable” form of knowledge is to guide others into the spiritual exercises (disciplines, practices) that render their lives hospitable to God’s self-revelation as well. This includes modeling the balance between contemplation and critical readings of the scriptures and their theological commentators and providing opportunities for our students to practice this balance as well. We will need to keep in the mind the descriptions of various knowers provided by Belenky and Stanton and develop teaching strategies that provide students with the skills to become “Constructive Knowers” without obscuring their need also to become “Mystical Knowers” who simply gaze on God and wait for God to illuminate their understanding. This may mean, for instance, that we must prod “Received Knowers” to question the authority of texts and “Subjective Knowers” to submit their interpretations to the scrutiny of their peers. We may need to insist that “Separate Knowers” reckon with the scriptural canon as a whole rather than a collection of discrete parts to be accepted or rejected on individual merit and that “Connected Knowers” acknowledge and struggle with the paradoxical nature of Christian theology. And we may need to prompt the voices of “The Silenced” into speech even as we encourage them to experience a different kind of silence more freely chosen. In every case, we need to challenge our students to experience theological (religious) education as a spiritual practice that points beyond itself to our need for divine illumination if we are to know God and not simply to know about God.

If we permit Diadochos to guide us, the cultivation of spiritual knowledge and wisdom becomes a personal and professional spiritual concern for religious educators. We cannot teach for mystical knowledge if we do not continually “taste the fruits of knowledge”<sup>45</sup> ourselves through spiritual illumination and the exercise of the divinely given gifts of theology and wisdom. And we cannot rely on our own intellect or our gifts of wisdom and theological acumen to develop spiritual knowledge or wisdom in our students, for that is God’s work. We are limited to the work of spiritual midwifery, sharing the divine gifts we cultivate under God’s guidance and encouraging our students to welcome the same action of God in their own lives.

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<sup>45</sup> Text 8.