Spirituality of the Early Church

1. Spirituality of the Church Fathers: Studies
2. Spirituality of the Church Fathers: Classic Texts
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**1. SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHURCH FATHERS: STUDIES**

Note: The Church Fathers rarely discuss “spirituality” separate from biblical interpretation or doctrinal debate or liturgical mystagogy. For them, Christian theology was all of a piece. The split between doctrine (or exegesis) and spirituality is essentially a medieval invention—whatever one thinks of the result. Nonetheless, one can study the Fathers’ “spirituality.” The books listed below are limited to studies of spirituality and mysticism; see the “Bibliographies of Early Christianity & Patristic Theology” for a more complete listing of books on the Church Fathers, their biographies, theological writings, and historical context.


John Peter Kenney, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2005). An important revisionist interpretation of Augustine's mysticism. Studies of Augustine as mystic have tended to miss the mark largely because of the tendency of modern scholars to impose modern psychological understandings of mysticism onto ancient authors in general and Augustine in particular. Kenney
brilliantly avoids such pitfalls and brings his special expertise on Plotinus and Neoplatonist thought to show how unique Augustine's approach was: that for Augustine contemplation was not an end in itself.


John Peter Kenney, Contemplation and Classical Christianity: A Study in Augustine, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York; Oxford University Press, 2014) hardcover, $80. NEW.


2. SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHURCH FATHERS: CLASSIC TEXTS

Augustine, Confessions, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World’s Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). The Confessions is Augustine’s long meditation on his life and conversion (Bk. 1-9) on his interior life at the time he is writing (Bk. 10) and on the opening verses of Genesis (Bk. 11-13). One of the masterpieces of Western literature. Another useful translation is by Maria Boulding (New City Press, 1998).

Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Everett Ferguson & Abraham J. Malherbe (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). Gregory was not only one of the architects of Trinitarian doctrine but was also a mystic. Here he allegorizes the Exodus story, treating it as the story of the journey of the soul to God. Whatever
one thinks of it as biblical interpretation, it is a brilliant analysis of the mystical journey to God.

Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). A fine selection of Origen’s works: it includes *On First Principles*, Book IV—his classic defense of allegorical interpretation and a summary of his controversial views on Trinity; it also has Origen’s *On Prayer*, the earliest Christian treatise on prayer—and one of the most influential; while essentially a commentary on the Lord’s Prayer, this work also addresses the problem of why one should pray even though God already knows what we need.


3. THE DESERT FATHERS & EARLY MONASTICISM: STUDIES

William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). 4th-century Christians moved in droves to the deserts of Egypt and, in the famous words of Saint Athanasius, made the desert a city. In so doing, they captured the imagination of the ancient world. They forged techniques of prayer and asceticism, of discipleship and spiritual direction, that have remained central to Christianity ever since. Seeking to map the soul’s long journey to God and plot out the subtle vagaries of the human heart, they created and inspired texts that became classics of Western spirituality. These Desert Christians were also brilliant storytellers, some of Christianity’s finest. This book introduces the key texts of early monasticism: Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*, the *Lives of Pachomius*, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, the writings of Evagrius, Palladius, and John Cassian. Along the way, readers are introduced to path-breaking discoveries—to new texts and recent archeological finds—that have revolutionized contemporary scholarship on monastic origins. Included are fascinating snippets from papyri and from little-known Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopic texts. Interspersed in each chapter are illustrations, maps, and diagrams that help readers sort through the key texts and the richly-textured world of early monasticism.

Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Cassian probably did more than anyone else to translate the desert experience for the West. Following his teacher, Evagrius Ponticus, he stressed wordless prayer and the
mystical journey of the soul. St. Benedict, in his Rule, would make Cassian’s memoirs required reading in all his monasteries. This is a superb of Cassian’s spirituality.

Hilarion Alfeyev, The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian, Cistercian Studies 175 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2001).


Gabriel Bunge, Despondency: The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius of Pontus (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012).


Daniel Caner, Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 33 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002).

Augustine Casiday, Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) hardcover, $99. NEW.


Marilyn Dunn, The Emergence of Monasticism (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). A recent survey that charts movements in Late Antiquity and shows how they coalescence in the early Middle Ages.


4. THE DESERT FATHERS & EARLY MONASTICISM: CLASSIC TEXTS

Athanasius, The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). Athanasius’ Life of Antony was one of the earliest Christian best-sellers and was responsible for popularizing the
desert ideal throughout the ancient world; it would go on to shape all later lives of the saints.

*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection [= *Apophthegmata Patrum*] trans. Benedicta Ward, Cistercian Studies 59 (Kalamazoo, WI: Cistercian Publications, 1984). The *Apophthegmata Patrum* (“Sayings of the Fathers”) has fascinating anecdotes about and one-liners from the simple, unlearned, and often eccentric leaders of the early desert movement. It has come down to us in three basic forms: the Alphabetical Collection, the Anonymous Collection, and the Systematic Collection. The Alphabetical gathers the various stories and sayings under the names of prominent monks and arranges these according to the Greek alphabet. It contains some 1,000 sayings or brief narratives, grouped under the names of over 130 “abbes.” Appended to these named sayings are hundreds of additional sayings without a named authority. These comprise the so-called Anonymous Collection.


The Systematic contains many of the same sayings and stories, but gathers them under themes such as “quiet” or “unceasing prayer.” The Greek version has just been translated into English for the first time:


In the 6th century, an early version of the Systematic Collection was translated from Greek into Latin by two Roman clerics, the deacon Pelagius and the subdeacon John (who perhaps became the later Popes Pelagius and John). This version deeply touched the spirituality of Western monasticism. This Latin recension is also available:


Robert E. Sinkewicz, ed., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek A...* Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Evagrius was the first great theoretician of the spiritual life. He stressed the centrality of wordless, imageless prayer, and his writings display a fondness for brief, oracular sayings. Within a year of his death, his friends and disciples—Palladius, Cassian, Rufinus—were persecuted as “Origenists” and run out of Egypt. Evagrius was condemned 150 years later, and his works circulated under others’ names. This edition offers the first attempt by a single translator to make the bulk of Evagrius’ writings available to the English-speaking public.


5. BYZANTINE SPIRITUALITY: STUDIES

Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series (reprint: New York: Continuum, 2002). Denys the Areopagite (also called Pseudo-Dionysius) was a 6th-century Greek-speaking Syrian monk writing under the pseudonym of St. Paul’s Athenian convert. He composed a set of treatises that powerfully shaped mystical currents both in the Greek East and the medieval West; they even influenced the development of the Gothic cathedral. Louth offers a valuable introduction.


### 6. BYZANTINE SPIRITUALITY: CLASSIC TEXTS

Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, Early Christian Fathers Series (London: Routledge, 1996. Maximus was a 7th-century Byzantine monk and a brilliant theologian who was brutally tortured because of his devotion to Chalcedonian christology. He lived in exile in the Latin West and became one of the last to bridge the gap between East and West. This is a good study of his life and work and includes a valuable selection of his works.

*The Pilgrim's Tale: Russian Spiritual Literature*, Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. Aleksei Pentkovsky, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000). This classic of Russian Orthodox spirituality, popularized some years ago in J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, brings alive the experience of praying the Jesus prayer. The Jesus prayer is the Eastern Christian tradition of ceaselessly repeating the name of Jesus, usually with a phrase such as “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This popular piety, similar to—yet simpler than—the rosary, flows from a concern to fulfill the Pauline admonition: “Pray without ceasing.”


