

ST CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

The Role of Will in Spiritual Progression.

How does the wisdom of the early Christian mystics apply to modern day spirituality and ways of life?

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Unity with God has been the focus of many of the wisdom figures that emerged throughout the history of Christian spirituality. There is currently an increasing awareness and interest in spiritual progression. The role of will in this process was expressed in detail by two wisdom figures, Saint Augustine and Marguerite Porete. This paper will explore key findings regarding their perspective regarding spiritual progression, free will and God's will. I will then apply this wisdom to a tool used for managing dilemmas. In this case the dilemma is relying on free will or God's will in spiritual progression. The aim of this paper is to provide insights that may be helpful in spiritual journeys taken in today's era.

Key findings will be extracted from historical wisdom expressed in Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* (Schaff) as well as Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*. These two figures provide insights that aid in the spiritual progression for both religious and free-spirit paths. Marguerite, a highly influential lay beguine, takes a more positive and loving approach in working to allow God's will to not only override free will but to completely annihilate free will. Augustine, a revered academic theologian, takes the approach that one must overcome the dark forces of evil, which he believes are a result of free will, in order to become united with God. Augustine never overcame his struggle to be one with God and was made a saint. Ironically, Marguerite outlines a detailed path to God but gets burned at the stake for heresy. Both have interesting similarities and contrasts regarding will and spiritual progression.

For modern applications, I will introduce aspects of spiritual progression which are influenced by Mayan Prophecy and reflect our current era. I will briefly explain why spiritual progression is important today. To round out this paper on the role of will in spiritual progression, I will apply *Polarity Management* (Johnson), a modern day tool used to manage

dilemmas which require the integration and dance between two opposing solutions. The compilation of these insights may complete a path that may be helpful for spiritual seekers today.

Why is a focus on soul progression important today?

It is curious that information regarding various approaches to attain a unity with God has been available to humanity for some time, yet it has not been at the forefront of mainstream consciousness. Perhaps it is by God's will or free will that consciousness is changing. We are currently in an age of transformation that was predicted by mathematical genius of the ancient Mayan astrologers. The Mayans predict December 2012 as the end of the world as we know it; but with this end comes the dawning of a new evolution of species, enlightened beings that act as co-creators of our reality. (Pinchbeck 238-242)

One of the outcomes that are predicted as result from the cosmic alignment of 2012 includes the illumination of our shadows and wounded aspects of our souls that when brought into balance will create a "non-dual cosmic consciousness" or unity with God. (Pinchbeck 241) It is believed that a critical mass of consciousness must achieve this state of consciousness before the astrological event in order for the world to turn right again, when we can return back to Eden. But to do this spiritual work do we rely on God's will alone or our free will to support our path? It may be that each person's journey is as unique as the freckles on one's face. However, I offer the following insights to enlighten a way.

Two Perspectives on Soul Progression

Marguerite Porete and Saint Augustine produce historic life works regarding spiritual progression. Augustine primarily sees spiritual progression as overcoming evil forces. Throughout his Confessions, Augustine describes his early years which provided vast opportunities to experience human desires. He admits "But I in my misery seethed and followed the driving force of my impulses, abandonin g you [God]." (Augustine 25) His later life,

however, was a struggle to overcome desires for lust and gluttony. He recognizes that carnal desires which are described in scripture lead him away from being united with God. He states “You lift up the person whom you fill. But for the present, because I am not full of you, I am a burden to myself.” (Augustine 202) After exploring his self and the wide riches of his work on memory Augustine (218) concludes that “I can find no safe place for my soul except in you [God].” Augustine later (278) pleads: “My God, give me yourself, restore yourself to me.” In this plea he recognized that God’s embrace will set his life right and free him from his self loathing.

Augustine acknowledges the benefits of spiritual progression and being united with God. He claims “In your gift we find our rest. There in you our joy. Our rest is our peace. Love lifts us there.” (Augustine 278) These statements describe the essences of peace, love and joy which he believes one can experience when united with God.

In his work, *The City of God*, Augustine describes a future world in which humanity is united with God, similar to the vision of the Mayan prophecy. In this future world he states that “wherever we shall look with those spiritual eyes of our future bodies, we shall then, too, by means of bodily substances behold God.” (Schaff 1147) In this state we shall have the ability to see God in all of God’s creation, including ourselves. It is at this point Augustine envisions that the existence of evil will abate and the peace of God’s grace shall prevail. (Schaff 1148) This vision is the ultimate end of spiritual progression in Augustine’s writings.

Marguerite provides more detail regarding our initial pursuit and the final unity with God as she outlines seven stages of spiritual progression. She acknowledges the beguine’s perspective that “love and knowledge each increase the capacity for the other both in spiritual progress and in the goal of transformation and union [with God].” (Porete 26) Both love and

knowledge require aspects God's will to deliver as well as free will to receive these gifts. But there is a turning point in Marguerite's stages that annihilate free will in order to live by God's will alone. The benefits of living in such a life include peace that "cannot be thought or spoken or written" along with an awareness that "God was completely everywhere." (Porete 168) These are similar traits that Augustine describes and we will use these as markers when we apply the *Polarity Management* (Johnson) tool.

Marguerite places a great importance on will in various stage of spiritual progression. The first stage is to be touched by God's grace which encourages one to begin on a spiritual journey and choose to do good works. This stage is initiated by God's will and free will accepts it. References to courage, love and a gentle heart are made regarding the soul's ability to reach this stage. While all of Marguerite's stages relate to God's will, free will, however, is at play until it is annihilated in the fifth stage. (Porete 189, 191-193)

The fifth stage is marked by a deep understanding that ultimate goodness comes from the Divine and that anything less than that Divine Goodness must be overcome. Here the soul sees that "the will must will the Divine Will alone without any other will". (Porete 191-192) Here the free will must be annihilated in order to live doing God's will alone. The essence of love turns into a sense of nothingness and humility takes over. The soul becomes part of the Trinity. This happens to be the stage that gets Marguerite in trouble for heresy. She believes the soul must follow God's will alone and that anything else including reason, virtues, and even sacraments should have no influence on the soul at this stage. (Porete 32-44, 191-193) Marguerite provides a path of spiritual progression which ultimately may lead one to a unity with God, yet it separates the soul from humanity including one's self. One might wonder if she held on to some free will

would she have found a way to better interact with other human beings. Could she have spared her life?

Marguerite's work provides more detail and a structure to be able to carry a spiritual seeker further down the path to a union with God. Augustine recognized he must overcome his carnal ways which keep him from being united with God. He then leaps from this point to his vision of the future in the City of God with no mention of a process other than relying on God to grant him grace. Both agree that a union with God is an ideal way of being.

Two Perspectives on Free Will

Marguerite's use of free will plays a different role than Augustine's perspective. While Augustine struggles to simply overcome the carnal ways induced by free will, Marguerite may overstep the process by annihilating the free will. Let's explore their works on free will.

Augustine reflects on his own life and his struggles to overcome carnal ways so that he might live in a life of grace. In his works he confesses "So my two wills, one old and the other new, one carnal and one spiritual, were in conflict." (Augustine 140) This conflict drove Augustine to search for its cause and a potential solution to overcome it.

In Augustine's search for the cause of evil he concluded that free choice of the will was the culprit. He tried to allow his mind to "see" this source of evil and deduced his conclusion based on some attempts to be illumination by God but mostly by his own experiences which he extruded by reason. Will was the cause of sin. He did not see the result of sin to be guilt but punishment. He sums it up as follows: "Free choice of the will is the reason why we do wrong and suffer your judgment." (Augustine 113-114)

Despite his desire to live a divine and virtuous life, his will remained untamed and unremitted to the wholeness of God's will. From the experiences of his life he could only

conclude that the solution lay outside of his power. “From the bad use of free will, there originated a whole train of evil... those only by exception who are freed by the Grace of God.” (Schaff 581) From his writings it seems as if Augustine only sees free will as the instigator of less desired outcomes of a spiritual seeker that keep one from being with God. Augustine’s conclusion would encourage one to believe that it is hopeless to even try to use free will to do good works. We must simply wait for God to grant us grace. But this is only one perspective.

Marguerite agrees with Augustine that will is free to choose a less desired spiritual path. She states “The will is still free either to wander into perdition, or, through grace, to replace itself where it belongs in the divine will.” (Porete 32) This statement also provides a stark contrast to Augustine as she sees that free will can be used in conjunction with grace to choose a more divine path.

Also contrast to Augustine, Marguerite’s perspective regarding desire is to accept falls from grace as a part of life and know that every time you fall God lifts you up again, otherwise you would never be able to fall again. She also explains that the awareness of the stark contrast in our ways of life and the resultant good and evil and allows us to make better choices with our will. Though the body will still be prone to falling as long as it is in human form, the fall, in Marguerite’s later stages, does not lead to the loss of peace. (Porete 176-179) Marguerite has a more positive approach to actually using free will to support spiritual progress rather than seeing falls from grace as punishment as Augustine claims.

Marguerite lays the foundation for her spiritual path by having free will to choose God’s will to prevail. She declares “There is no greater life than always to will the divine will.” (Porete 169) To accomplish this, Marguerite discusses her concept of the annihilated soul and the adoption of God’s will as her own in the fifth stage of spiritual progression. The annihilated

soul must undergo the complete loss of free will, in order to achieve this stage of progression. She boldly claims that “The free rendering of the will back to God... is the goal of the spiritual path... The soul who has render her will freely to God is the annihilated, perfect soul.” (Porete 147) Like Augustine, Marguerite sees that free will leads us away from unity with God. In her stages, Marguerite describes three forces that need to adjoin in order to gain divine glory. These forces are the will, the nature of human temperament, and finally divine righteousness. When the three forces are in accord, one experiences the glory of God. Therefore one’s spirit must completely die in order to live in the glory of and the union with God. (Porete 137-138)

Saint Augustine and Marguerite Porete identify similar dynamics of free will, but see the role of free will from very different perspectives. Augustine sees it as a limitation to overcome in order to be one with God. Marguerite sees it as giving us the ability to surrender our earthy ways while supporting each step to a more divine perfection with God.

Two Perspectives on God’s Will

Saint Augustine’s writings clearly propose that one’s spiritual path to find union with God is solely based on God’s grace, which will be given to us upon God’s will. He acknowledges “For what I know of myself I know because you grant me light, and what I do not know of myself, I do not know until such time as my darkness becomes ‘like noonday’ before your face. (Isa. 58:10)” (Augustine 182-183). He understands that God can grant him wisdom to help him on his journey. Even though Augustine seems to acquire many pieces of knowledge that could help him progress, he was not able to apply this wisdom to change his life and/or he neglected to use free will to move him forward.

An example of wisdom that strikes the heart of his internal conflict comes in his reflection on the immutability of God and the omnipotence of God’s knowing he deduces that “God in His

goodness created him [humans] good, yet had already foreseen and arranged how He would make use of him [humans] when he became wicked.” (Schaff 497) Augustine feels God knew that humans would fall from grace and that he would intervene with a punishment to correct this. Augustine also extracted from scripture that when evil is chosen “You ‘fashion pain to be a lesson’... you ‘strike to heal’...” (Augustine 25) Augustine’s struggles with his carnal ways were clearly painful and seemed a punishment in order to learn and practice better ways of life. From these quotes he could have recognized that God may be showing him an opportunity to heal, yet he was not bestowed the wisdom regarding how to do that. He continued to rely on God’s grace to determine if and when God will allow his healing to occur.

Similar to Augustine, Marguerite quotes “God allows some evil to be done for the sake of a greater good which must be birthed from it afterward... And there the wound is opened in order to heal.” (Porete 188) Marguerite’s positive perspective, however, allows her to work with God to choose a better path.

Marguerite’s spiritual stages give more detail regarding the “how to” than Augustine’s path. Marguerite Porete would agree with Augustine that God’s will is vitally important to advance the soul through her seven stages of spiritual progression. She claims “I am what I am by the grace of God.” (Porete 145) Her acknowledgement and integration of free will with God’s will, however, gives one more hope that each one has some ability to choose their destiny.

At the fifth stage, though, one adopts God’s will as a replacement of their human will and free will must be abandoned at this point in order to continue spiritual advancement. She sees that the loss of free will and an adoption of God’s will leads to an even greater freedom. God speaks to Marguerite through an identity of Love and shares, “This Soul, says Love, is free, yet more free, yet very free, yet finally supremely free... She responds to no one if she does not wish

to.” (Porete 160) This freedom is not only a freedom from internal carnal desires but the freedom to not follow societal rules. Even though she gets in trouble with the church for this premise, she remains true to her union with God.

According to Marguerite it is worth foregoing free will and submitting to God’s will regarding this transformation and spiritual progression. Marguerite argues, “it is no longer her will which wills, but now the will of God wills in her; for this Soul dwells not in love which causes her to will this through desiring something. Instead Love [God] dwells in her who seized her will, and Love accomplishes Love’s will in her.” (Porete 85) This is Marguerite’s end of the ultimate spiritual quest while one remains on earth. This results in an ultimate peace with all earthly matters. (Porete 168-169)

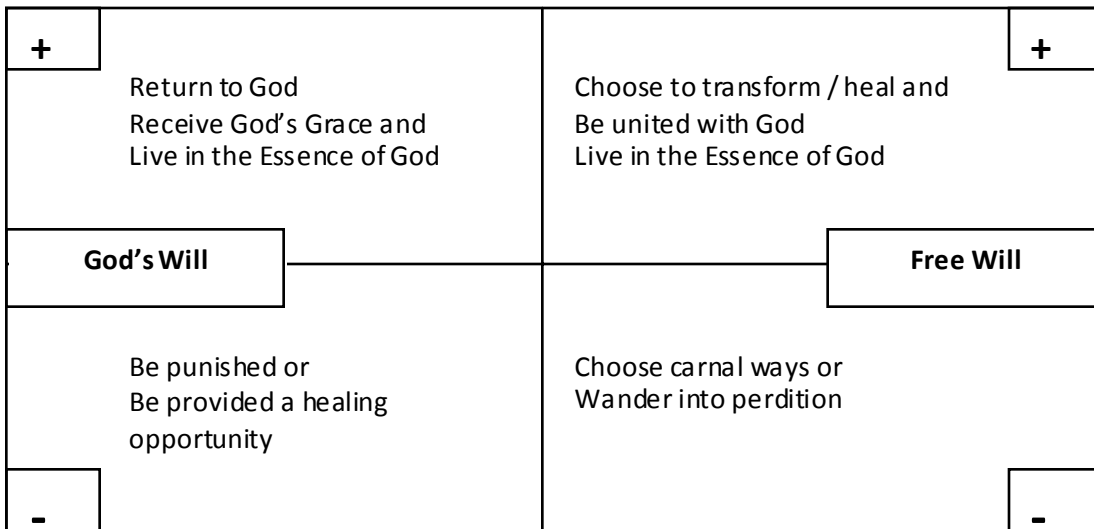
Saint Augustine and Marguerite Porete had similar views regarding God’s will in Spiritual Progression. Regarding God’s will, both Augustine and Marguerite claim that the spiritual journey is initiated and supported by the grace of God. The ultimate end is to do God’s will and overcome your own will. The differences, however, are in the perspectives and personal paths of these two journeyers. For Augustine, God punishes him. For Marguerite, God supports her.

Applying Polarity Management of Free Will vs. God’s Will to Spiritual Progression

Johnson describes polarity management as a “both/and” approach vs. the traditional power struggle over an “either/or” right answer (Johnson 45). Johnson suggests that problems, which are not solved by either opposing solution alone, may actually be dilemmas to manage, as both opposing yet interdependent poles need to be managed together on an on going basis. The struggle of selecting a spiritual path by using God’s will or free will can fall into this type of dilemma.

Johnson (1996, pp. 4-5) describes each opposing solution as having an upside and a down side. He suggests that these quadrants are first mapped out, as demonstrated in Figure 1, in order to begin the process to effectively manage the dilemma. The positive aspects of utilizing God’s will include a return to God, receiving God’s Grace and we may live in the essences of God as previously described by both Augustine and Marguerite as peace, love, joy, knowledge as well as having the ability to behold God. (Augustine 278, Schaff 1147, Porete 26,168) The positive aspects of using the opposing free will in our spiritual progression is that one can choose to actively heal and transform which can result in greater union with God and possess the ability live in the essence of God.

Figure 1:



(Adapted from Johnson 17)

When polarities are not effectively managed, there is a focus on one polarity, while neglecting the other. Johnson coins this phenomenon as the “Polarity Two-Step” (Johnson 11). When this happens, it is inevitable that the dynamic will slip into the negative aspects or downside of the existing polarity. This encourages a change in focus to the opposing polarity, in

an attempt to create a more positive experience. A focus on the shifted aspect will continue until the downside of this aspect is experienced and the flip-flopping or two-step dance continues.

To use this concept in a practical application we may notice that a loss of the essences of God may be an indication that we fell out of this alignment with our spiritual progression. If one is only focused on free will and is ignoring the integration of God's will, the down side of free will may be experienced. This may lead one into wrongdoing according to Augustine (113-114) or we may wander into perdition according to Marguerite (32). If one is only relying on God's will, a fall from grace may seem like a punishment or that we are given an opportunity to heal and transform.

Augustine clearly believed that the only way to ascent to God is through God's will if and when God wills it. (Schaff 108-1089) Perhaps if Augustine used his free will to heal and transform he may have overcome his self-loathing. Marguerite saw that the path to God required an annihilation of the free will. (Porete147) Due to the fact that she was burned at the stake, one might wonder if she might have met a more desirable outcome if she retained some of her free will to heal and transform in order to be in a more agreeable relationship with God's creations on earth. If Marguerite met her demise while holding the essences of God, it may indicate that her death was indeed God's will.

Johnson's model tells us that the both/and approach requires a balance of both free will and God's will to stay on the path of spiritual progression. Our modern day, Mayan experts, claim the same as they state: "Clearly the shift to a higher consciousness could not happen passively... To accomplish this would require the complete engagement of our will."

(Pinchbeck, 244) We always have a choice. We can choose to wallow in our poor choices and

feel victim to God's judgments or we can choose to heal and transform to move closer to a unity with God and experience the essences that come with that union.

To conclude, both Augustine and Marguerite see that there must be a coming together of polar opposites in order to advance in spiritual progression. Augustine describes overcoming the disparity between the good and evil aspects of the will in order to have power to move forward. Marguerite describes the three forces (will, nature and righteousness) that must come together to step ahead. While Augustine offers no clear path to achieve this, Marguerite suggests the annihilation of free will and reflection of falls to further advance her desire to be one with God's will.

Seeing and mapping out a more complete picture can be helpful for each spiritual seeker. From there planning and acting to focus on the upsides of using both free will and God's will, can allow for the best possible outcome. Successful polarity management will result in the "best of both opposites while avoiding the limits of each" (Johnson xviii). If one finds they are experiencing the downside of free will, one can focus on the upside of God's will to find balance and continue with spiritual progression. If one finds they are experiencing the downside of God's will they can engage in the upside of free will. In this model, as our Mayan experts agree, effective self management in spiritual progression includes the use of both free will and God's will. Marguerite encourages us to continue our spiritual pursuit. Even when we fall we can get right back up. (Porete 176-179) Greater awareness of our selves along with the wisdom compiled from the experts highlighted in this paper can help us to stay on the path of spiritual progression to be united with God.

May we realize peace on earth and good will for all.

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