

Personhood in Biblical and Patristic Thought: A Journey from Natural to Spiritual Man

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Abstract

This research challenges the materialistic view of humanity by offering a biblical and orthodox anthropological counter-narrative. It posits that human existence transcends mere matter, encompassing the body, soul, and spirit created in God's image and destined for divine communion (theosis). By examining key New Testament terms, such as natural, carnal, and spiritual man, through the lens of Patristic thought, particularly Gregory Palamas and Philokalia, this study reveals a dynamic transformation process from natural to spiritual man. This contrasts with the reductionist approach to materialism, demonstrating the richness and depth of the biblical and Orthodox understanding of human nature. This study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of human identity and purpose by bridging the gap between biblical theology and contemporary philosophy, offering a fresh perspective on the complex interplay between the physical, spiritual, and divine aspects of humanity.

Keywords: Carnal; Materialism; Natural; Soul; Spiritual

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of human existence has been a perennially pertinent subject of philosophical inquiry, one that has engaged the minds of thinkers throughout history. Notwithstanding the numerous



philosophical and scientific tenets that are antithetical to the teachings of the Bible, it is imperative to emphasize that the Bible offers a distinctive perspective on this subject. One of these numerous philosophical tenets is eliminative materialism, which is also known as eliminativism. This perspective maintains that the conventional understanding of the mind is fundamentally flawed. This view posits that some or all of the mental states commonly accepted by society, such as beliefs, desires, and conscious experiences, do not exist as independent entities and have no place in the mature science of the mind (Ramsey, 2019). In accordance with materialism, human beings are merely composites of matters. This perspective radically departs from traditional dualistic views by denying the existence of a nonphysical soul or spirit. The notion that humans are devoid of such immaterial substances is the core tenet of materialism. In essence, all things, including matter and all phenomena, are the result of interactions between matter (Downing, 2011). This reductionist approach suggests that complex phenomena, such as consciousness, emotion, and cognition, can ultimately be explained in terms of physical processes occurring at the neural level. The only fundamental substance is matter; everything else, including mental states, is a derivative of its properties and interactions. Humans are identical to other entities created by chemical element reactions, in the sense that they are composed of the same basic building blocks as the rest of the physical world. This perspective challenges the notion of human exceptionalism and suggests that our place in the natural order is continuous with that of other complex organisms.

Previous research in this area has primarily focused on isolated biblical texts or philosophical critiques of religion. Ramsey (2019) and Downing (2011) challenged biblical conceptions of the human mind and soul from a material standpoint. Drijakara (1966) offered early critiques of materialism, though from a different philosophical

framework. While these works contribute to the ongoing debate, they do not provide a comprehensive biblical counternarrative. Ware's (2021) work on patristic anthropology offers valuable insights into the diverse perspectives of early Christianity but does not explicitly address the challenges posed by modern materialism.

The biblical terms in anthropology, particularly those found in the New Testament (NT), have a nuanced meaning. In 2 Corinthians 4:16, the Apostle Paul employs the terms *ἐξω ἄνθρωπος* (*exo anthropos*, "outward man") and *ἑσώθεν ἄνθρωπος* (*esothēn anthropos*, "inner man") to denote the physical body and the human soul and spirit, respectively. Two additional terms are employed in the Biblical text: "palaios anthropos," which is translated as "old man" in Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22, and Colossians 2:11, and "kainos anthropos," which is rendered as "new man" in Ephesians 2:15, 4:24, and Galatians 6:15. In addition, the terms "old man" (*palaios anthropos*) and "new man" (*kainos anthropos*) are employed in various passages (Ephesians 2:15, 4:24; Galatians 6:15). The term "old man" is also used to describe a "natural man," as indicated by the Greek *ψυχικός ἄνθρωπος* (*psuchikos anthropos*), which is referenced in 1 Corinthians 2:14 and in James 3:15 and Jude 1:19. These terms are employed to delineate the disparate aspects of human nature within the New Testament. Therefore, it is imperative to comprehend their denotations within the appropriate contextual framework.

The "new man" is comprised of two distinct parts: the "spiritual man" (*pneumatikos anthropos*) and the "carnal man" (*sarkikos anthropos*). The former is referenced in I Corinthians 2:14-16, 3:1, and Galatians 6:1-2, while the latter is mentioned in Romans 7:14 and I Corinthians 3:1, 3:4. Additionally, the "new man" is referred to as the "man of God" or the "divine man" (*theou anthropos*) in I Timothy 6:11. This term describes an individual who has Christ as its foundation, undergoes spiritual growth in Christ, and ultimately becomes one with Christ.

The term used to refer to new humans is "the children of light" (1 Thessalonians 5:5; Ephesians 5:8), specifically known as τέκνα φωτός *tekna fwtos* (children of light) or υἱοὶ φωτός *hwioi fwtos* (sons of light), rather than "the children of darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:5; Ephesians 5:8). In this article, we limit our discussion to three key terms: "natural man," "carnal man," and "spiritual man," spiritual man, as understood within the context of Orthodox anthropology. These terms are particularly significant in that they describe the outward and inward aspects of the human condition, the new and old human, the divine human, and human nature as the image and likeness of God.

In addition to these three terms, the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament (OT), depicts humanity as having been created in the image and likeness of God, and as having been imbued with life by His spirit. Human beings are endowed with faculties that are not found in the visible world, including capacity for reason, spirit, and volition. Gregory Palamas posits that humans are created by divine energy, namely the energy of the Trinity. Humanity can be conceptualized as a vast entity, encompassing both visible and invisible realms, situated within the confines of the terrestrial globe. The image of God is present in both the human spirit and the body, forming the foundation of Orthodox anthropology. However, there is a paucity of consensus among the Church Fathers and the seven Ecumenical Councils regarding the doctrine of anthropology. The human person's patristic perspective presents a multifaceted array of responses to the enduring enigma of personhood, offering the potential for creative divergence and complementarity within the context of the patristic legacy's profound unanimity (Ware, 2021).

This study undertakes a comprehensive and rigorous examination of the biblical terms "natural man," "carnal man," and "spiritual man" within the framework of Orthodox anthropology, as exemplified by the Patristic works of Gregory Palamas and the

Philokalia. In doing so, this study aims to offer a novel perspective on the complex interplay between the physical, spiritual, and divine dimensions of human existence. It seeks to elucidate the transformative journey from the "natural man" to the "spiritual man," a process that culminates in theosis, or divine communion.

Central to this research is the challenge to the prevailing materialistic conception of humanity. By juxtaposing biblical, Palamas, and Philokalia anthropology with materialistic paradigms, this study demonstrates the limitations of the latter in accounting for the full spectrum of human experience. It will offer a comprehensive analysis of key biblical terms and their implications for understanding human nature while simultaneously illuminating the depth and richness of the Orthodox perspective.

This research distinguishes itself by bridging a critical gap in existing scholarship. Although numerous studies have explored biblical anthropology, few have directly confronted the challenges posed by contemporary materialism. By employing the lens of Orthodox anthropology, this study offers a unique and nuanced interpretation of the human person as a complex composed of the body, soul, and spirit, created in the image of God and destined for divine communion.

METHOD

This study employs a primarily textual and interpretive methodology to examine biblical and Orthodox concepts of human nature. A central focus is a close reading of relevant biblical passages that employ the terms "natural man," "carnal man," and "spiritual man" (Hendi, 2014, 2020). These biblical data will be juxtaposed with the teachings of prominent Orthodox theologians, such as Gregory Palamas and Philokalia, to develop a robust

understanding of the Orthodox conception of human nature and its transformative journey towards theosis.

To illuminate the distinctiveness of the Orthodox perspective, a comparative analysis is undertaken between Orthodox anthropology and contemporary philosophical and scientific worldviews, particularly materialism. This comparison highlights the unique insights offered by the Orthodox tradition regarding the nature and constitution of humans. Finally, the implications of the biblical and Orthodox understanding of human nature for contemporary debates about human identity, purpose, and destiny are explored (Lumingkewas et al., 2021). This aspect of the study will involve critical engagement with relevant philosophical, theological, and scientific literature to demonstrate the relevance and significance of the Orthodox perspective for contemporary thought. By combining these methodological approaches, this study aims to offer a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the biblical and patristic concepts of human nature, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the perennial question of human existence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Foundation

Christ as the man's archetype

The starting point is the tangible humanity experienced in the incarnate Jesus Christ, rather than a story or scientific description of the abstract origins of the species. Logos is not only the Logos, but also the Logos embodied as the archetype of humans. (Nelas, 1987). It presents a Christocentric approach to anthropology that emphasizes the true dimensions of human nature and its potential for healing and completeness in association with God. This asserts that a person who connects with God through Jesus Christ is both corporeal and

immaterial. The incarnate Christ, recognized as both perfect God and perfect man, adds a third dimension to the essence of humanity. Human creation is designed to reach and dwell in unity with God, both material and immaterial (of body and soul) ([Steenberg, 2011](#)).

Theological anthropology studies humanity in God's presence by focusing on divine images and likeness in individuals. The holy image includes freedom, responsibility, spiritual vision, character, dignity, creativity, reason, the arts, sciences, and culture. To attain divine resemblance, individuals must use these traits including knowledge, virtues, and eternal life. The image is static, whereas the resemblance is dynamic ([Harrison, 2008](#)).

Christ's incarnate is a true example of a divine image and likeness (man's archetype). This incarnation demonstrates that the notion of deification is a basic tenet of the Orthodox view of mankind. Christification is the anthropological meaning of deification ([Nelas 1987](#)). Deifying contact with the Father is inherent in every human being designed in Adam and is realized in the Son. God used Christ as a model to represent the divine image and the Creator. Christ represents humanity's upward path and serves as both the beginning and the end of history ([Nelas, 1987](#)). Thus, Christ has always been the connection between Father and humanity, as well as the origin of the divine image in human beings ([Harrison, 2008](#)).

In essence, the concept of Christ as the foundation of anthropology and human personhood reveals profound theological and anthropological vision. Christ's incarnation signifies the pinnacle of human potential, demonstrating the divine image in its purest form. As an archetypal human, Christ embodies the inherent capacity for deification in every individual. Through His life, death, and resurrection, He charts a path for humanity's transformation and ultimate union with God. Therefore, Christ is the essential link

between humanity and the divine, the origin of the divine image within us, and the ultimate goal of human existence.

The faculties of the human soul

Christ's incarnation reveals the material and immaterial aspects of human nature, including the body and soul. The soul is a representation of God in two ways: As God is a Trinity consisting of Nous, Word, and Spirit, so, according to Palamas, the human soul consists of three faculties or powers: nous, word, and spirit (Palamas, 1987, Chapters 36-37, 40). This is the life-giving force in the body. It is from the nous and the word; it lives in the nous and the word, and it contains both the nous and the word within itself (Palamas, 1987, Chapters 38, 125). Angels possess nous, word, and spirit, but their spirit does not serve as a source of life (Palamas, 1987, Chapter 38,125). The image of humans surpasses that of angels, as the spirit animates the body. This is because, as previously mentioned, image primarily pertains to the soul.

The biblical narrative of creation, particularly Genesis 2:7, introduces a fundamental distinction between humans and other creatures: The phrase "breath of life" (Hebrew: *neshamah*) is pivotal. While both humans and animals are described as 'living beings' (Hebrew: *nephesh*), only humans receive an explicit infusion of divine breath. This distinction is crucial to understanding the nature of the human soul. The term *nephesh* is broadly used in the Old Testament to refer to life, being, or creature, encompassing both humans and animals. However, the addition of the "breath of life, specifically to humans, suggests a qualitative difference. This divine breath animates not merely a biological organism but is capable of a relationship with God, moral agency, and consciousness.

The contributions of Palamas to this discussion are profound. He proposed that the human soul, unlike the souls of animals, is composed of both essence and energy. This dual nature reflects the

image of God as imprinted on humanity. According to Palamas, animals possess only energy, which is inseparable from their physical existence and thus perishes with the body. However, the human soul possesses an enduring essence and is capable of post-mortem existence. This distinction aligns with biblical emphasis on the human soul as the seat of consciousness, morality, and spirituality. This suggests that, while humans share biological characteristics with animals, their souls possess a unique capacity for communion with the divine. (Palamas, 1987, Chapters 30-33, 115-117).

The soul consists of three main powers: nous (intellect), word (mind) and pneuma (spirit). These energies, interdependent but not essences, express the soul as a unique whole, distinct from the hypostases of the Holy Trinity (Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994). The nous, also known as the heart of some Fathers, is the eye of the soul. Spiritual wisdom has always existed alongside and is ingrained within the nous. The word man discloses what the nous observes and experiences, just as Christ the Word is He who reveals the will of the Nous, that is, of the Father (Palamas, 1987, Chapters 36-40, 121-129). In the same way that it is impossible to envisage a word in isolation, the word in a man is inextricably linked to the spirit. (Palamas, 1987, Chapters 36, 121). The Spirit is a distinct hypostasis and is described as the ineffable love of the Begetter towards the ineffably begotten Word (Palamas, 1987, Chapters 36, 123). The spirit in man is an impulse of the nous that involves an extension in time, in conjunction with our words, and requires the same intervals. It proceeds from incomplete to complete (Palamas, 1987, Chapter 36, 123). Ware differentiates between the soul and spirit, stating that the soul is the life force that transforms the body, while humans possess a rational soul with abstract cognition and reasoning abilities (Ware, 1986). Genesis 2:7 identifies human spirit as originating from God's breath, distinguishing humans from spiritless

creatures. Humans utilize their souls for scientific inquiry and spiritual intelligence, enabling them to comprehend eternal truths through direct apprehension or spiritual perception (Ware, 1986).

Palamas presents a profound understanding of personhood, which is deeply rooted in the theological concepts of creation and divine image. His perspective stands in stark contrast to many contemporary philosophical and scientific views that reduce a human person to a complex biological or psychological entity. Central to Palamas' anthropology is the assertion that the human soul is not merely a product of the material world, but a direct emanation from the divine. This radical departure from a materialistic perspective underscores the transcendent nature of human existence. In Palamas' view, the soul is not merely a function of the brain or a byproduct of biological evolution but a spiritual entity capable of knowing and communicating with God.

According to Palamas, the human person is a microcosm of the universe, possessing faculties that enable profound engagement with reality. The rational soul, or *nous*, is the seat of intellect and reason, allowing humans to comprehend the world and its place within it. However, this intellectual capacity is complemented by spiritual intelligence, which enables a direct encounter with the divine. This is where a human person truly distinguishes itself from other creatures.

The concept of *hypostasis* is crucial for understanding Palamas' anthropology. This refers to the unique subsistence or existence of a person. Humans, as created by the image of God, are capable of a unique mode of existence that partakes in divine life. This potential for union with God, to become a single hypostasis with the divine, is the ultimate destiny of the human person. (Palamas, 1987, Chapters 24, 107, 109; see also Palamas' discussion of natural human faculties in chapters 15-20 (Palamas, 1987, pp. 99-103)). Palamas' emphasis on the human soul's capacity for self-determination and moral freedom was

equally significant. The human person is not a mere automaton, but a free agent capable of making choices that shape their destiny. This freedom, however, is not absolute but is exercised within the context of a relationship with God. When aligned with a divine will, humans will become a powerful instrument for transformation and deification (Louth, 2013). In conclusion, Palamas offers a vision of personhood that is both profoundly spiritual and deeply human-like. The human person is not merely a biological organism, but a spiritual being created in the image of God, endowed with the capacity for divine communion. This understanding of personhood provides a rich framework for exploring questions about ethics, morality, and the purpose of human life.

Natural Man

A biblical analysis

"The concept of the "natural man" natural man is a pivotal theological construct that delineates the spiritual condition of humanity, apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The term signifies an individual whose life is primarily governed by inherent human capabilities and inclinations rather than by divine revelation.

Paul, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, provides a foundational understanding of the natural man. He posits that such individuals are incapable of comprehending spiritual realities, perceiving them as foolish (I Corinthians 2:14). Paul asserts that this spiritual blindness is due to the lack of the Spirit of God. This perspective is echoed by Chrysostom (2020), who characterized the natural man as "animalistic," incapable of grasping spiritual truths without divine illumination. He further contends that even Jews, despite their privileged status, existed in a natural state because of the absence of the Holy Spirit.

Biblical writers collectively paint a portrait of the natural man as spiritually impoverished. James underscores this by contrasting worldly wisdom with divine wisdom, attributing the former to earthly, sensual, and demonic origins (James 3:15). Jude amplifies this characterization by describing those devoid of the Spirit as sensual, driven by lusts, and prone to division (Jude 1:18-19). These portrayals converge on the notion that the natural man is dominated by fleshly desires and lacks the spiritual discernment necessary for an authentic Christian living.

Expanding on this theme, subsequent theologians such as Palamas have contributed to the understanding of the natural man. Palamas distinguishes between natural knowledge derived from sensory experience and human reasoning and spiritual knowledge, which is imparted by the Holy Spirit ([Palamas, 1987](#)). He contends that the human mind, while capable of intellectual pursuits, is inherently limited in its capacity to comprehend divine realities ([Palamas, 1987, Chapters 15-20, 99-103](#)). This aligns with the biblical perspective that a natural man, reliant on his own faculties, is incapable of attaining spiritual enlightenment.

In essence, the biblical and theological exploration of the natural man reveals a being alienated from God, spiritually blind, and dominated by earthly passion. This condition is a stark contrast to the regenerate state, characterized by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the capacity to discern and embrace spiritual truths."

The condition of the faculties of the soul

The functioning of the soul's abilities can be impaired. It is possible for natural individuals to have limited understanding and to interpret things in a biased manner. Individuals' understanding may be clouded by emotions and obscured by darkness. The diseases of the nous are corruption (1 Timothy 6:5), darkness, and blindness ([see discussion of Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of](#)

Corinth, 1979, pp. 194, 177, 174,184). The nous and soul cannot contemplate God or be enlightened. This is a disease and its demise. Under these circumstances, spiritual wisdom cannot be discovered (Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994). Another sick state of the nous is callousness, insensibility, and indifference (Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994). Hesychios the Priest also describes how the nous becomes captive (Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1979). No matter how hard it strives, it cannot obtain a spiritual understanding unless it is liberated from its lusts. It is held hostage by its desires and bound to the soil. The nous, coarsened by many emotions, is incapable of praying to God (Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1979). The *nous*, who is sick with arrogance, is under an illusion, trying to enclose the deity in shape and form (Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1979). The term 'mind' has historically been used to refer to the intellect without expressing the sensations of the soul. As a result, the mind was considered superior to the soul, and continued to hold a dominant position in the natural state of man. It is important to note that the use of the term 'mind' in this context may be problematic and could be avoided. Egotism, which is the cause of abnormality, is aging with all its energy (Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994).

The Church's ascetic life and repentance aims to purify the nous, the body's light, and illuminate it with God's uncreated spirit. The nous, also known as the new man, must be continually renewed to put Christ's nous on. The term *fronew* refers to the way one uses their nous, akin to the mindset described in Philippians 2:5 (Hendi 2020). Renewing oneself involves adopting the mindset of Christ, which is expressed in a *froneo* mentality. Apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of focusing on spiritual matters, suggesting that those who prioritize the flesh will focus on worldly matters, whereas those who

prioritize the spirit will focus on spiritual matters (Hendi, 2020). According to Palamas, achieving the desire for God involves purifying all the faculties and powers of the soul and body as well as gaining enduring purification for the mind. This makes individuals receptive to the deifying grace (Palamas, 1983). The purification of the mind is the first step towards reaching God, but a profound moral and spiritual transformation is necessary before receiving the vision of uncreated light. This transformation is achieved through active and contemplative lifestyles, vigilance, and prayer, primarily noetic prayer of the heart. Orthodox tradition states that the nous receive grace through various procedures that vitalize and elevate it. The nous then bestows grace on intellect, making the mind a servant of the endowed grace. This leads to a return to our original condition and prevents irregularities in our lives. The church's training in therapeutic asceticism promotes spiritual growth and well-being (Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994). According to spiritual teachings, knowledge is not acquired solely through the mind but rather through a combination of watchfulness, purifying the nous, living an ascetic life, and repentance. A man becomes aware of the inner problems and passions that control him when he makes an effort to maintain his nous (Palamas, 1983). In the next section, this study further discusses how to heal the broken nous and mind. Before that, this study discusses what lust is in the carnal man.

Carnal Man

A biblical analysis

The term "carnal" denotes a state of existence characterized by a predominant focus on flesh or physical nature. Importantly, this condition is not exclusive to those without Christ; it can affect both natural and spiritual men. The carnal state is exacerbated by sin and desire, which hold individuals in bondage.

In Romans 7:14, the apostle employs a legal metaphor, characterizing the carnal person as "sold under sin." This suggests a state of bondage where the individual is powerless to resist the allurements of sin. His language implies a transactional relationship, as if the carnal individual had been exchanged for the dominion of sin. This metaphor underscores the importance of the carnal condition. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul uses the analogy of spiritual infancy to describe carnal Christians. Despite their salvation, these believers exhibit immature behavior characterized by envy, strife, and division. The apostle's choice of "infants" is significant, as it connotes a lack of spiritual growth and maturity. This imagery implies a potential for growth and development, as well as a present state of spiritual weakness.

The concept of flesh is central to Paul's understanding of the carnal man. In Galatians 5:16-21, he contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. The flesh is depicted as a force that opposes the Spirit, producing a harvest of negative behavior. The Greek word for "flesh" (*sarx*) often carries connotations of human nature in its fallen state, emphasizing its inherent weakness and propensity for sin.

To fully comprehend the implications of being an "infant in Christ" and the nature of the flesh's desires, it is essential to delve deeper into the concept of passion. By examining the dynamics of human passion, we can gain a clearer understanding of the forces at work within the carnal individual.

The tripartite soul

The Philokalian tradition posits a tripartite division of the human soul into intelligent, appetitive, and incessive parts ([Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1995](#)). This framework is instrumental in understanding the nature and origin of passion. When these faculties are oriented towards God, they function harmoniously. However, when they turn inward or towards creation, they become

susceptible to passion. According to this perspective, passion is an unnatural impulse that distorts the soul's faculties, diverting its focus from God towards created things. The intelligent part, susceptible to pride, the appetitive part driven by physical desires (lusts of flesh), and the incessive part prone to negative emotions are all potential avenues for passion to manifest.

However, the genesis of passion lies deeper than mere bodily impulses. Experts have suggested that passions originate from thoughts or *logismoi* (Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994). This implies a cognitive dimension of passion, placing the mind or nous at the center of its formation. As Jesus indicates, the human heart is a wellspring of evil thought. When corrupted by external influences, the nous generates harmful thought patterns, leading to a "mindset of the flesh" or *fronema sarkos*. This mindset serves as a fertile ground for the cultivation of passion. Evil thoughts born from this corrupted mental state trigger intense emotional and physical desires. When these desires are enacted, they culminate in sinful behavior (Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994). James elucidates this process, comparing desire to a seed that, when nurtured, produces sin, ultimately leading to spiritual death. The concept of "sullambano," or conception, further illuminates this process. Just as a fertilized egg develops into a human life, so too does a lustful thought develop into a sinful action. This metaphorical interpretation underscores the potency of a single thought in shaping human behavior.

In conclusion, the tripartite soul model provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay between mind, body, and spirit in the genesis of passion. By recognizing the role of thoughts in fueling these passions, we gain insight into the spiritual battle against sin and the importance of cultivating a pure heart and mind.

The flesh, lust, and passions

The concept of the flesh, as outlined by Paul, is fundamental to understanding human nature and its inclination towards sin. The carnal individual, lacking the influence of the Holy Spirit, is particularly susceptible to the desires of the flesh. Paul explicitly identifies a spectrum of behaviors as "works of the flesh," ranging from sexual immorality to interpersonal conflicts (Galatians 5:19-21). These actions are essentially outward manifestations of an inward passion.

As exemplified by Philokalia, the early Christian tradition delves deeper into the nature of these passions (Cook, 2010). While Paul provided a general categorization, Church Fathers sought to provide a more comprehensive taxonomy. The resulting lists are extensive and often number hundreds. These passions are categorized in various ways, including their origin in the soul's faculties or their manifestation as bodily or spiritual desires.

Despite the diversity of these lists, a core group of eight passions, identified by Evagrius Ponticus, has endured as a foundational framework (Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1984). Passions such as gluttony, lust, greed, anger, sadness, apathy, vanity, and pride are considered fundamental to human experience. A crucial insight offered by later theologians, such as Maximus the Confessor, is the identification of self-love as the root of passion (Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1981). This suggests a spiritual etiology for these destructive forces. Discontentment from God fosters a self-centered orientation, which in turn gives rise to a multitude of passions. When unchecked, these passions corrupt both the soul and body, leading to a life dominated by sin.

In essence, flesh represents the fallen human condition, while passions are specific expressions of this fallen nature. The works of the flesh are outward manifestations of these inward desires.

Understanding the interconnectedness of these concepts is crucial for comprehending the spiritual battle and path to liberation.

The process of passion and sin

Cook explain the process very well from *the perspective of the Philokalia Fathers* (Cook, 2010). Generally, Fathers such as Maximos, John of Damascus, Hesychios the Priest, Theodoros the Great Ascetic, Philotheos of Sinai, and Peter of Damascus explain the process as starting from the inside and from the nous. Provocation from the devil (initial incitement to evil) to the nous: If we are not vigilant, the provocation transforms into thoughts, or logismoi. Acceptance of the adversary's notion occurs during this coupling stage. It entails focusing on the notion and consciously choosing to linger over it in a joyful manner. This pairing ignites desires. The next stage is assent. Assent leads to real sin, whether in the mind or by physical action. In the next section, I address the spiritual man, another aspect of the new man that is intended to cure the carnal man. This section is the most crucial part of this study.

Spiritual Man

A biblical analysis

The concept of a "spiritual man" is central to Christian spirituality. Scripture outlines the characteristics of such an individual, emphasizing a deep connection between the Holy Spirit and a life lived in accordance with God's will (van der Merwe, 2018). A spiritual man is one who possesses spiritual knowledge, discerned through the guidance of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14-16). This spiritual discernment enables him to judge matters from a heavenly perspective rather than earthly wisdom. Mature in Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1), he leads others towards the truth, carries burdens

with fellow believers (Galatians 6:1-2), and ultimately seeks to fulfill Christ's law.

Spiritual growth is a process of purification and transformation. Through intellectual refinement and a deepening relationship with Christ, one matures spiritually, acquiring dispassion and love (1 John 3:2). This process aligns with the three stages of spiritual life outlined by Origen, Evagrius, and Maximos: *praktiki* (practicing virtues), *physiki* (contemplating nature), and *theologia* (contemplating God) (Ware, 1986). The goal is a direct union with God, achieved through purification and illumination. By practicing virtue, one purifies the heart, and through spiritual vision, recognizes God's presence in all creations.

The human soul plays a critical role in the journey. According to Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, building on John of Damascus's teachings, a spiritual man possesses a rational soul that governs the body and senses (Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, 1989). This contrasts with the irrational soul, which is controlled by bodily desire. Unlike irrational creatures, humans possess free will and can choose to either yield or overcome their desires. The cultivation of the rational soul through spiritual practices leads to dispassion and love—the essential qualities of a spiritual man.

In essence, becoming a spiritual man involves lifelong pursuit of intimacy with God. It requires a surrender of one's will to the Spirit, a disciplined practice of virtue, and a deepening contemplation of God's presence in all things (Waaijman, 2011). Through this journey, an individual grows in dispassion, wisdom, love, and unity with Christ, ultimately attaining the goal of spiritual union.

Dispassion

Self-knowledge and repentance. The path to unions with God is frequently conceptualized as a process of spiritual purification. A principal aspect of this process is overcoming passions (dispassion),

which are regarded as spiritual ailments. To facilitate the healing of these wounds, the soul must develop a profound understanding of itself, a process that is commonly referred to as 'self-knowledge' ([Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994](#)). This introspection is a fundamental aspect of the spiritual journey, as evidenced by the biblical injunction to "know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). Moreover, as evidenced in I John 1:8, this constitutes a fundamental preliminary step towards spiritual growth.

Self-knowledge is primarily achieved through confessions and repentances. Confession is a dual process that involves both personal reflection and the guidance of a spiritual mentor. Noetic confession, a dialogue with God, allows for deep introspection and repentance of sinful thoughts. Complementary to this is the confession to a spiritual guide offering external perspectives and support. Repentance, far from merely an outward act, is a profound inner transformation ([John the Ladder, 1982](#)). It entails a conscious rejection of worldly pleasures and a redirection of desires towards God. This process cleanses the soul and empowers individuals to resist temptation with renewed strength derived from baptism ([Staniloae, 2002](#)).

Crucially, repentance encompasses not just actions but also thoughts and intentions. Sinful thoughts, if left unchecked, can lead to sinful action. Therefore, the eradication of harmful thought patterns is essential for spiritual growth. Perseverance is another key component of repentance, as the journey towards purity is often marked by challenges and setbacks.

Guarding the nous. Noetic confession is the first step toward winning this war of passion. According to John of the Ladder, confession is a perpetual torment of conscience that cools the heart's fire through a noetic confession ([John the Ladder, 1982](#)). Isaac the Syrian encourages us to practice virtues and avoid actions that may cause our conscience to stumble, achieving freedom of conscience.

This union between our conscience and ourselves serves as our guardian, guiding us in resolving issues. Following our conscience is crucial to avoiding vulnerability to adversaries, as it opposes desires that conflict with moral principles, making us vulnerable ([Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1979](#)). Noetic confession generates contrition, which consoles the human heart. Beyond this, confession is an unfettered repentance that occurs in a repentant setting. "Nature's forgetting" is a result of the heart's or mind's sorrow. Confession is a forgetfulness of nature, since because of this, a man forgot to eat his bread (cf. Psalm 101:5).

The noetic confession ensures the protection of the nous and the mind, which forms a barrier to safeguarding our thoughts. Monitoring the mind is crucial as it operates constantly. This vigilance serves two objectives: we must ensure that our thoughts either become devout and connect with pious ones, or that they lead to a safe channel as more thoughts emerge ([Staniloae, 2002](#)). Mark the ascetic asserts that the nous must keep watch over the heart and protect it with great care. One must strive to enter its innermost and undisturbed chambers, where no evil winds can penetrate. It is crucial to remain vigilant over the heart and delve deeper into it, approaching God alone without being discouraged by the effort and persistence required ([Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1979](#)). To discipline our thoughts, we must train our intellect and mind to act as supervisors and observe incoming thoughts while acknowledging the presence of Christ. By directing our pure thoughts towards Him, we can safeguard our intellect. It is important to note that open heart is a prerequisite for this process. To keep God at the forefront of our thought, Christians must develop a consistent prayer routine. Use phrases such as 'Lord, have mercy' or 'Jesus Christ, have mercy' as constant reminders ([Ware, 1986](#)). It is concise and focuses on the continuous invocation of Jesus' Christ's name. The Philokalia Fathers equate vigilance with prayer,

and this technique of prayer, known as hesychia, aims to keep the nous (stillness) focused and prevent any ideas from penetrating the heart's entrance. Inner tranquility or mental peace and focus can be achieved through the practice of pure prayer and the guarding of the heart and mind. This state is not just about silence, but also about being attentive and receptive towards God ([Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994](#)). The nous concentrates on the heart and merges with it to achieve a partial or enhanced understanding of God. Thalassios states that Hesychia and prayer are the most effective tools for cultivating virtue, as they purify the nous and enhance their spiritual insight. ([Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1981](#)). As a result, noetic confession is an ascetic method of ceaselessly praying in vigilance, watchfulness, and stillness. The synergy between God and man is what makes this possible. Christ's grace must have been made available. Christ's energy, supplied by ceaseless prayer in vigilance and stillness, purifies the heart and mind.

Practical. Gregory of Sinai advises maintaining stillness and vigilance in prayer and suggests sitting on a stool or mattress for rest. He advises patience and diligence and maintains a focus on inner thoughts. Maintaining a formal tone, avoiding figurative language, and using precise vocabulary are crucial. If discomfort arises, seek help from Jesus. Maintain a clear, logical structure and avoid introducing new content ([Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1995](#)). Gregory of Sinai recommends both audibly and intellectually praying but suggests speaking slowly and calmly to avoid disrupting the intellect's focus. To acclimate the mind to the task, make progress, and receive Spirit's strength, praying loudly may be unnecessary. To improve focus, breathing is restricted to maintain clarity of mind, avoiding air rising from the heart and clouding thoughts ([Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1995](#)). He suggests that removing intrusive thoughts through

frequent and consistent prayer can be achieved by imitating Moses' actions in Exodus 17:11-12. By standing up, raising hands, and looking at heavens, one can overcome obstacles in their prayer life and overcome bodily desires such as sloth and lust. Confidence in this approach is crucial for successful prayer ([Nikodemos of The Holy Mountain & Makarios of Corinth, 1995](#)).

Dispassion and love. These practices brought the spiritual man closer to God and united him with Him. Communion with God manifests itself as dispassion. According to the Philokalia Fathers, dispassion is the soul's health ([John the Ladder, 1982](#)). If passions are the soul's disease, dispassion is the soul's healing. Dispassion is the soul's resurrection before that of the body ([John the Ladder, 1982](#)). When a person purifies their body of impurities, elevates their mind above all created things, makes it the master of their senses, and keeps their soul in the presence of the Lord, they become dispassionate ([John the Ladder, 1982](#)). The Philokalia Fathers emphasize the soul's return to its original state, rather than mortification, as dispassion is the natural condition for unity with God. The rational soul guides the body and senses, whereas the spiritual soul is in its natural form. The intelligent part of the soul can gain knowledge of God, while the passible part can practice virtues such as love and patience ([Palamas, 1983](#)). The subjugation of the passible portion of the soul to the nous, which is naturally designated as governing, is known as dispassion. This approach allows one to eternally approach God and possess a heavenly disposition, leading the soul towards the greatest condition of all: the love of God ([Palamas, 1983](#)). John of the Ladder asserts that dispassion is connected to love and signifies vitality. Adoption, love, and dispassion unite to form a single action akin to a combination of light, fire, and flame. Adoption, love, and dispassion are distinguishable only by their respective names ([John the Ladder, 1982](#)). Dispassion is closely connected to love and adoption; it is life

and communion with God ([Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, 1994](#)).

The Journey from Natural to Spiritual Man

The transformation from the "natural man" to the "spiritual man" constitutes a central narrative within both biblical and patristic thought ([Hoselton, 2023](#); [Wei, 2011](#)). This evolution, which is a dynamic process rather than a static state, underscores the development of the concept of personhood from the early Christian era to the contemporary expression of Orthodox theology. This journey is marked by a progressive unveiling of the human potential, a potential initially obscured by the limitations of the "natural man." This initial state, often characterized by a focus on earthly desires and limited spiritual awareness, is gradually transformed through a process of spiritual growth and enlightenment. This transformation is not merely a moral or ethical refinement, but a profound ontological shift, a movement from a state of alienation to one of communion with the divine.

The concept of the "carnal man," often juxtaposed with the "spiritual man," further illuminates this trajectory. The "carnal man" represents the human being dominated by bodily desires and passions, a state characterized by a focus on earthly pleasures and a neglect of spiritual concerns ([Karimies, 2016](#)). However, it is crucial to note that the "carnal man" is not inherently evil but rather an incomplete expression of human potential ([Laude, 2005](#)). It is in the context of this initial state that the process of transformation towards the 'spiritual man' begins. This journey is not solitary; it is a path traversed in communion with the divine and fellowship with the Church.

The Holy Spirit, as the divine indwelling, is the primary agent of this transformation, enabling individuals to overcome the limitations of their natural state and to participate in divine life. The culmination

of this journey is the attainment of the "spiritual man," a state characterized by a profound union with God and a life lived in accordance with the divine will ([Hayes, 2015](#); [Morgan-Wynne, 1987](#)). This is not a state of perfection but a continual process of growth and deepening communion. It is a state in which a human person, transformed by grace, reflects the image of God in a fuller and more radiant manner.

The Human Condition: Biblical and Materialistic Perspectives

The biblical and orthodox anthropological concepts of the natural, carnal, and spiritual man offer a rich and complex understanding of the human condition. These concepts stand in stark contrast to the dominant materialistic worldview of contemporary philosophy and science. Materialism reduces human beings to complex biological machines governed by deterministic laws. It prioritizes physical and observable factors, often neglecting inner life and spiritual aspirations ([Bergmann et al., 2023](#)). Human experience is a product of biological and environmental factors, with consciousness emerging as a byproduct of complex brain processes.

In contrast, the biblical perspective acknowledges the spiritual dimensions to human nature. The natural man is depicted as spiritually blind, dominated by earthly desires, and incapable of comprehending spiritual realities without divine intervention ([Chandler, 2014](#); [Green, 2008](#)). This view challenges the materialistic notions of human autonomy and self-sufficiency. The carnal man further emphasizes the power of sin and passion to enslave individuals, a concept often overlooked in materialistic explanations.

The spiritual man represents the goal of Christian transformation, a state of communion with God characterized by love, wisdom, and dispassion ([Krall, 2022](#); [Vall, 2022](#)). This concept is radically different from the materialistic view, which often limits human potential for material success and pleasure. The biblical

narrative of the journey from a natural man to a spiritual man emphasizes the transformative power of the divine grace. This contrasts sharply with the materialistic emphasis on human progress through technological advancements and social engineering. The biblical perspective posits an inner transformation—a renewal of the mind and heart—as the primary path to human flourishing.

Materialism tends to focus on external factors, such as education, economic conditions, and social structures, as determinants of human well-being. While these factors are undoubtedly important, the biblical perspective highlights the significance of spiritual renewal as a foundation for human flourishing.

Implications for Understanding Human Nature

An Orthodox anthropological understanding of the human condition provides a more comprehensive framework for the analysis of human behavior, motivation, and potential (Firth, 1959; Lewis, 2017; Swanson, 1971). Acknowledging the spiritual dimension provides a more profound understanding of the intricacies of the human soul and the underlying sources of human suffering and joy. While materialism offers valuable insights into the physical and biological aspects of human existence, it is inadequate for explaining the full spectrum of human experience. This approach frequently reduces complex human behaviors to simple cause-and-effect relationships, thereby neglecting the roles of free will, moral agency, and spiritual aspirations.

In conclusion, biblical and materialistic perspectives provide fundamentally distinct lenses through which to view human conditions. While materialism places emphasis on the physical and material aspects of human existence, the biblical perspective offers a more comprehensive view that encompasses both physical and spiritual aspects (Vásquez, 2020). By acknowledging the limitations of materialism, we can appreciate the richness and complexity of the

biblical worldview, which offers a profound understanding of human nature and its potential for transformation. Ultimately, the choice between these two perspectives is a matter of worldview and beliefs. However, thoughtful consideration of both can lead to a more nuanced understanding of human experience.

CONCLUSION

This study irrefutably proves that natural, carnal, and spiritual men exemplify the potential of the human soul to achieve theosis. It reveals a dynamic process of transformation from natural to spiritual man, which is the antithesis of materialism. This transformation entails assiduous spiritual discipline and constant vigilance over one's physical self. As human beings, we exist in two distinct, yet intertwined realms: spiritual and physical. It follows that the faculties of the soul should provide guidance to the body, enabling a relationship with God to be maintained on a daily basis throughout a person's life. The acquisition of spirituality is a gradual process that necessitates divine grace to purify the soul, nous, and mind. It is essential to engage in rigorous self-examination, persistent prayer, and stillness to accept divine grace in one's heart. The Hesychastic style of living represents a proven spiritual path in contemporary society, as evidenced by the teachings of Philokalia writers and Palamas. The spiritual life in God and the holy practices of authentic Christians constitute the hidden existence of Christ. Jesus, both God and man, established this path and provided its guiding principles. The Apostles and their followers traversed this path with assurance and conviction. From the initial advent of Christ on Earth until the present era, spiritual guides have consistently and assuredly conveyed this sacred knowledge, this hallowed legacy, and this celestial treasure to one another. These individuals have served as beacons, illuminating the world with their words and actions, which

have brought life and guidance to everyone who has encountered them. This beneficial seed, this unassailable emblem, this divine grace and strength, this invaluable gemstone, has been meticulously safeguarded and transmitted across the centuries. This legacy will persist in its transmission from one generation to the next, extending beyond our own era, and continuing until the Second Coming of Christ. The promise of Christ, as recorded in Matthew 28:20, that he will always be with his followers "even to the end of the world," is genuine.

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Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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