Spiritual Intelligence and Dementia: A Theological Reevaluation of the *Nous*

Petre Maican

Abstract: Discussions on spiritual intelligence make only timid references to the topic of intellectual disability. Questions such as what spiritual intelligence could mean for someone whose IQ has been medically assessed at 20 or what happens with the spiritual intelligence of persons who develop Alzheimer's are rarely answered. When this happens, we are presented mostly with an Aristotelian Thomistic notion of the soul (including intelligence) being the pattern of the body held in the memory of God. This approach, however, does not clarify how could it be possible for someone's soul to live in the memory of God without preexisting in God's mind before the existence of the world. This article suggests that a better and more inclusive approach rests with the reevaluation of the patristic notion of *nous* as the spiritual intelligence that preexisted in God, which links human beings with God irrespective of the state of their bodies.

Keywords: Sergius Bulgakov; dementia; disability theology; *nous*; spiritual intelligence; John Swinton

---

Petre Maican is Associate Researcher at The Institute for Eastern Christian Studies of Radboud University (The Netherlands). His current research interests lie at the crossroads between theological anthropology, intellectual disability, and Eastern Orthodox spirituality. His latest book, *Deification and Modern Orthodox Theology*, was published with Brill (2023).

Christian Perspectives on Science and Technology, New Series, Vol. 3,
Special Issue: Artificial and Spiritual Intelligence (2024), https://doi.org/10.58913/RLLA6585

Mass media and popular culture abound with references to dementia. The film *The Father* (2020), showed how difficult the life of a person with dementia can be for the person himself and for his loved ones. In 2021 it won two Oscar awards and was nominated for six. In the very first week of 2024, BBC published an article on the series of photographs produced by Helen Rimell that documented the "agony of slowly losing [her] mum"[1] to dementia. With almost 55 million people in the world touched by dementia and 10 million discovered every year,[2] there is no surprise the condition is so present in our lives and social imagination.

Disability theology has long caught on with the trend, with an impressive number of books and articles being published every year.[3] In these writings, dementia is regularly approached from three perspectives: practical advice; collection of data through interviews with persons with dementia and their carers; and systematic theology. In the latter case, the main question revolves around the notions of self

1 "Dementia: Photos Lay Bare Agony of Slowly Losing Mum," *BBC News*, 5 January 2024, sec. Wales, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-67762173.

2 "Dementia," https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/dementia (accessed 30 January 2024).

3 Kenneth L. Carder, *Ministry with the Forgotten: Dementia Through a Spiritual Lens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019); Ginnie Horst Burkholder, *Relentless Goodbye: Grief and Love in the Shadow of Dementia* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012); Albert Jewell (ed.), *Spirituality and Personhood in Dementia* (London: Kingsley, 2011); Peter Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia: A Review of the Research Literature, a Critical Analysis and Some Implications for Person-Centred Spirituality and Dementia Care," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 18:9 (2015): 765–76, doi:10.1080/13674676.2015.1094781; Peter Kevern, "What Sort of a God Is to Be Found in Dementia? A Survey of Theological Responses and an Agenda for Their Development," *Theology* 113:873 (2010): 174–82, doi:10.1177/0040571X1011300303; Kristin Beise Kiblinger, "Theology of Dementia and Caputo's 'Difficult Glory'," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 28: 2 (2024): 142–63, doi:10.1080/23312521.2023.2197424; Pia Matthews, "Changing the Conversation: From Suffering with Dementia through Dementia as a Disability Rights Issue, to a Deeper Theological Perspective," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 23:2 (2019): 149–65, doi:10.1080/23312521.2019.157720; John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); John Swinton, "What the Body Remembers: Theological Reflections on Dementia," *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 26:2–3 (2014): 160–72, doi:10.1080/15528030.2013.855966. These are meant to serve just as examples; the list is not exhaustive.

and spiritual identity. How can a person be saved or have a spiritual life if she does not know who Jesus is anymore?[4]

In this paper, I would like to deepen one of the solutions proposed to this latter question. The solution comes from John Swinton, a renowned Scottish theologian. Swinton argued that all human beings have their identity established by God from eternity, or as he puts it quoting from Augustine, that all humans live in the memory of God. What I will claim is that, although convincing, Swinton's argument stops short of drawing the logical conclusions of its premise, namely that only if we postulate a faculty of spiritual intelligence that preexists our embodiment we can actually preserve our identity and live eternally in God's memory. This faculty, I will contend, is none other than the *nous* appearing in the writings of the Greek Fathers. Or to put it differently, I will suggest that the relationship between God and the person with dementia endures and even flourishes through the mediation of the *nous* or spiritual intelligence.

For the sake of clarity, I need to specify from the beginning what I mean by both these terms; preexistence and *nous*. In this article, I will use the word preexistence in order to emphasise that from the perspective of history as experienced by humans, the *nous* precedes human embodiment, even if from God's standpoint everything happens simultaneously. By *nous*, I understand the spiritual intelligence that comes from and connects humans with God, helping them to develop their spiritual identity throughout history. I render *nous* as intelligence instead of intellect following the lead of Rowan Williams, who prefers this option "on the grounds that 'intellect' has for most readers a narrower and more conceptually focused sense than 'intelligence'."[5]

I will develop this argument in three steps. First, I will provide an overview of Swinton's position, emphasising that his description of God's living and eternal memory presupposes the understanding of time as a spacetime block. Then, I will point out the main implication of

4 Swinton, *Dementia*, 188.

5 Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), 14 n. 7.

this view for anthropology, namely that the *nous* is created in advance and is united with a body only when entering human history. Finally, I will discuss the convergence of this position with some of the research already present in the science-theology dialogue regarding the relationship between the *nous* and human cognitive capacities.

Dementia and Theological Anthropology

John Swinton's book *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (2012) is one of the most influential in the field of disability theology. The book is impressive because it combines skilful storytelling and deep systematic reflection on human nature with a compassionate account of God's love towards us, regardless of the physical state in which we find ourselves. Its main premise is that human beings are more than their cognitive capacities or the web of social relationships they establish throughout their lives; they are persons. Swinton disagrees with the view that humans are persons only as long as they are able to give narrative shape to their memories and life choices. For him, this is sheer reductionism. Even if we do not see, hear, or engage with the person the same way as before, it does not mean we should assume they have lost their identity.

Swinton also challenges the definition of personhood as social relationships—that humans are persons because they always find themselves in relationships with others. For him, this definition ignores those who do not have friends or whose friends have been forgotten because of their dementia. Consider someone who at 90 years of age has outlived all her friends and family and continues to live alone in the countryside. It would be strange to claim that she is not a person simply because nobody visits her.

The proposal Swinton puts forward is profoundly theological. Personhood is indeed about relationships, but about the transcendental relationship with God. Commenting on the biblical text of Genesis (2:7) that mentions that after God moulded the human being out of clay he breathed life into her, Swinton notes that the biblical term for God's

breath over the human being, the *nephesh*, is simultaneously proof that all human beings are desired and loved by God and that God has made us persons from the moment of creation because we are placed in an eternal relationship with God through *nephesh*.[6] Without God's *nephesh*, humans lose not only their memory or sense of self, but they cease to exist altogether. It is the *nephesh* that preserves human beings ontologically.[7] To be a person, then, is to be brought into existence, sustained and loved by God through the divine breath, not for our capacities or our relationships with other humans, but for ourselves.

Nephesh does not serve only as the basis for personhood, but also for a distinction between embodied and spiritual identity. For Swinton, human beings are *nephesh*, animated bodies, who develop a sense of identity based on the embodied experience of their past, their preferences, their relationship with others, and their perception of the world. In a sense, *nephesh* is the life principle that animates human beings, allowing them to develop a sense of personal identity. This identity, however, is not the same as the one every human being has in God and which is bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit.

> The Spirit forms and names the living soul, the *nephesh*-inspired body. The brain plays a part in this process of human development, but it is not definitive or determinative of it. It is God the Holy Spirit who determines who a person is; the brain as an aspect of the body simply participates in the movement of people towards their given goal. We do not actualise ourselves; rather, in some sense or another it appears that *we are told who we are*.[8]

For Swinton, this means that humans live their entire lives with a false or, in the best case, incomplete sense of identity. They believe they know who they are because they remember events from their past, but their memories are often inaccurate and fragmentary. Swinton

6 Swinton, *Dementia*, 184.

7 Swinton, *Dementia*, 165–68.

8 Swinton, *Dementia*, 175.

illustrates this point with a personal anecdote: when he is talking to his mother about his childhood, he remembers certain episodes she does not and vice versa. The difference lies in which episodes from his childhood he decided to integrate into his sense of self. "When I think back on my past, I remember some things about what I once was and where I've been. But my mother remembers other things, things that I don't recall. When she tells me, I graft them into my story, and eventually become a part of my memory system."[9]

Very rarely, we are those we think we are or who we unveil to our friends. Our true identity is found in God and it will be revealed to us only in the eschaton. This spiritual identity endowed upon us by the Spirit is not lost in dementia; it continues to exist in God, long after our cognitive abilities have been lost.[10]

To support the view that spiritual identity comes from God and remains in God for eternity, Swinton turns to Augustine's discussion of the nature of time from *Confessions*. Swinton borrows from Augustine two points: first, God is beyond time, and second, memory refers to the sustaining activity of God throughout history. For Augustine, God must be outside time in order to stress his omnipotence and impassibility. If God is affected by temporality, then God has to change, and change belongs only to creatures because it entails imperfection, lack, or suffering. For Swinton, only a God who is perfect and outside time can guarantee that human identity remains unaffected by the way we die or age.

Swinton also insists that memory is not a simple remembrance of things past, but the sustaining activity of God taking place throughout history. Where human memory forgets and mixes things up, divine memory is faithful, sustaining, and nourishing the person. To be remembered by God is not so much a claim about the past or the eschaton, but very much about the present.

9 Swinton, *Dementia*, 221.

10 Swinton, *Dementia*, 219.

> To be held and remembered by God implies some form of divine action towards the object of memory. It is not purely eschatological action; it is something that occurs in the past and in the present as well as in the future. God acts in particular ways towards people because of a previous commitment. In other words God remembers because he promises.[11]

There are, however, two matters that I feel Swinton does not clarify enough. The first one is the implication arising from Augustine's treatment of time, the preexistence of the souls. To live in the memory of God, where there is no past, present, and future, entails that the entire creation came into being and was completed through a single and eternal act of God, like a huge time-block inside which time unfolds in a succession of past, present, and future. If this is so, then it would also make perfect sense to think of humankind as being completed, with the *nous* or the spiritual intelligence of each human being already existing and only waiting to enter human history at their right moment.

This would make even more sense in light of the second matter Swinton left underdeveloped, the relationship between the period in which a person has dementia and her spiritual identity. Swinton's main concern is the preservation of the spiritual identity of persons with dementia in God, regardless of their cognitive capacities. The question that arises is whether the period with dementia contributes in any way to the spiritual identity of the person. If the answer is *no*, would it make sense to sustain euthanasia on compassionate grounds? If the answer is *yes*, then would one need to explain the link between the *nephesh*'s embodied identity and the identity bestowed by the Holy Spirit? How is the experience of dementia transferred to or relevant for the spiritual identity in God?

It seems to me that the notion of *nous* or spiritual intelligence created before our embodiment could provide answers to both these points. To support this claim, I will begin by explaining why the preexistence of the *nous* makes sense in a spacetime block identifiable with

11 Swinton, *Dementia*, 216.

the one described by Augustine and appropriated by Swinton. Then I will move to discuss the concept of *nous* and its relation with our bodies.

The Spacetime Block of God's Memory

Swinton's interpretation of time in Augustine has a lot in common with the one provided by Paul Helm. Helm makes the same point: that for Augustine God is outside time and that the world was created at once, but he dwells a little longer on the implications of this creative act. Helm explains that there are two ways of understanding what Augustine means when he states: "In the sublimity of an eternity which is always in the present, you are before all things past and transcend all things future because they are still to come."[12] The first is to see time as a succession of events in a consecutive series, as defined by words like yesterday, today or tomorrow. "One can only refer to a particular day as yesterday from a standpoint within time; if 14th September is yesterday, then 15th September is today, and so on."[13] The second option is to understand time

> from an a-temporal perspective, by expressions such as earlier than and later than, before and after. Thus on the B-series view of time, Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo is earlier than Montgomery's victory at El Alamein; the event of the Battle of Waterloo occurs before that of El Alamein. But Napoleon's victory is only in the past from the standpoint of someone who exists later than that date; and only in the future from the standpoint of someone who exists earlier than that date.[14]

Helm excludes the first interpretation of God creating time as a series of successive events, not only based on textual evidence from Augustine's

12 Paul Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of the Two Standpoints," in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: Clark, 2004), 39.

13 Helm, "Eternal Creation," 39.

14 Helm, "Eternal Creation," 39.

work, but also for the same reason as Swinton; it would entail that "God is subject to the vicissitudes of temporal passage," something that is "incompatible with divine sovereignty, perfection and with that fullness of being that is essential to God."[15]

Moreover, this perspective would place God's memory on the same level as human memory, asking whether God does indeed remember everything and how.[16] Helm concludes that what we have are actually two different standpoints regarding time. From the perspective of the creature, time flows, but from God's perspective, everything happens at the same time. As he explains, "the Creator may be said to be continuously creating the universe, in that there is more universe today than there was yesterday, for the present builds upon and is made intelligible by the past. But from the divine standpoint what is created is one temporally extended or ordered universe."[17] Or as William Craig reformulates the position, "God is the Creator of the universe in the sense that the whole block and everything in it depend upon God for its existence. God by a single timeless act makes it exist. By the same act, He causes all events to happen and things to exist at their tenseless temporal locations."[18]

The Preexistence of the *Nous*

This view of time as a spacetime block is not foreign to systematic theologians. Most of them assume it without following it to its logical conclusion: the preexistence of spiritual intelligence. One of those who took this step was the Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944), probably one of the most creative Eastern Orthodox thinkers of the twentieth century and certainly one of the few who still fascinates, intrigues, and stimulates contemporary theological imagination. In

15 Helm, "Eternal Creation," 30.

16 Helm, "Eternal Creation," 40.

17 Helm, "Eternal Creation," 35.

18 William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 111.

the *Bride of the Lamb*, Bulgakov makes the same points as Helm and Swinton about God's timelessness, namely, that God exists above time—in what he calls "supratemporality"—and that creation is a spacetime block with our sequential perception of time being a result of our creatureliness.

> The eternal aspect of the creative act reveals in God himself the character of creation in all its fullness. God sees as existent even what has not yet occurred, for, in Him and for Him, it supra-eternally is as the creaturely Sophia. But in relation to time this supra-eternity of creation signifies its supratemporality in the sense that, for God, creation exists in a certain integral of all-temporality, whereas for creatures it is the unfurling scroll of the time of empirical being. This supratemporality is realized in the life of creatures, for they are created for time, but in a certain supratemporal mode of being.[19]

For Bulgakov, this view corroborates rather well with the testimony of Scripture about God resting on the seventh day. If God rests, then God has already created and completed everything, including the whole of humanity. If humanity is still being created, then creation is not completed, God does not rest and could even be surprised by what will take place in the future.[20] This option is of course excluded by a spacetime block. What we perceive as consecutive events is not a continuous creation, but "the unfurling scroll of the time," where generations of humans appear one after another in history, although they already exist in the supratemporality of God. "For humanity in particular, this signifies that, although in earthly beings, human generations are born and thus appear in time, as it were, this is possible only on the basis of the supratemporal creation of all of them."[21]

19 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI and Edinburgh: Eerdmans and T&T Clark, 2002), 112.

20 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 112–13.

21 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 112–13.

Thus, the preexistence of humanity in God should not be understood in what passes for the Origenistic way, where the *nous* has already been created and entered the material world after a cataclysmic event that forced it away from the contemplation of God. For Bulgakov, God created everything at once and the creation is already finished. It is only from the perspective of human history that we can speak of the preexistence of the *nous*. Humanity exists in God simultaneously as a concept and concrete individuality.

For Bulgakov, this double perspective on time allows us to explain the doctrines of the original sin and human redemption in Christ. Only if the entirety of humankind participated in Adam's sin it makes sense to speak about the Fall of humanity through Adam and their recapitulation in and redemption through Jesus Christ. If human beings are still being created, then they have not participated in Adam's sin, are blameless, and cannot be recapitulated in Christ's sacrifice. Bulgakov insists that humanity does not exist in Adam and Christ as an indiscriminate mass, but as individual centres of consciousness.

These centres of consciousness or *I*s are the ones that have been created before entering history and being united with their bodies. And although they are influenced and shaped by the body and the material world, the *I*s retain their atemporal, semiautonomous and semi-divine status.

> To be sure, this origination occurs not in time, for *I* itself looks down from its height at time, is for time an immobile sun, illuminating its movement. However, the creaturely *I* exists for and in time, is connected with temporality. But despite this, it is free of the discursiveness of time, composed of a series of separate moments or determinations, and is not at all exhausted by them. The creaturely *I* is never free of time but always belongs to it, is correlative to time, directs its light projector at time.[22]

22 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 85.

Bulgakov claims that the embodiment of the *I* serves two purposes. First, the *I*s with their direct relationship with God and relative independence from matter are meant to spiritualise the world, making it more transparent to God's love for creation and in this way prepare it for the fuller divine-human communion that will take place in the eschaton. Second, history functions as a training-ground for these spiritual centres of consciousness. The *I*s have to develop and fashion themselves according to a specific theme that God has designed for them from the beginning of time.

This idea can be better understood through analogy with the human body. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul explains that Christians are all called to fulfil different functions within the church. Some are called to be prophets, others are called to preach, and others to speak in tongues. This variety of gifts is to be expected because the church is similar to a body; it cannot function properly with just one type of organ. Diversity is essential.

Bulgakov gives the analogy universal proportions. The entire humanity was created in Adam and recapitulated in Christ, so each human being has a certain role to play in the proper functioning of the universal body of Christ. This function refers to the theme that each *I* has received from God. To fulfil it, the *I* has to guide the body and engage with the material world. In this case, human life represents the attempt to find one's pre-established place in the body of Christ. Or, to transpose this idea into Swinton's language, the identity of every human being exists in the memory of God, but this identity reaches its fulfilment only through the interaction of the *I* with the body and other human beings in history.

The main difference between Bulgakov and Swinton lies in their interpretation of Genesis 2:7. Swinton interprets God's breath as the principle of life that makes the human body move and exist in the world, while Bulgakov interprets it as referring to consciousness and intellectual capacities. The principle of life, he thinks, is the soul, which humans have in common with the entire creation, animals and

plants alike, while the spirit or the *I* comes from the breath of God.[23] It seems obvious why Swinton would want to avoid Bulgakov's interpretation. It sounds ableist. It sounds as if only those whose cognitive faculties are intact can be persons. To me, the opposite seems to be actually true. The *I* or the *nous* represents the link with God that allows for the identity of persons with dementia to be preserved and for their experience in the body to be spiritually meaningful.

The *Nous* in the Early Greek Patristic Tradition

When Bulgakov speaks about the *I* coming from God, he only reinterprets in a modern key a very old concept, that of *nous* or intellect. The early Greek Fathers took for granted that the *nous* was part of the constitution of human beings, the divine spark that made humans in the image of God. Although sometimes linked with cognitive capacities, the primary function of the *nous* was to help humans recognise and contemplate God. Without the *nous* that comes from God, humans could have never been able to recognise the divine. The ontological gap between creatures and God is so wide, that without this spark of divinity in them, they would not be able to think God exists, contemplate the divine presence in the creation, or even recognise Jesus as God. Only like can recognise like.

For Maximus the Confessor, the *nous* represents the highest part of the human soul, being capable of "circling around God in a manner beyond knowledge."[24] In paradise, humans lived by contemplating God through their *nous*, while the soul acquired the natural principles of creation and the body drew pleasure from the joy of contemplation. The fall destroyed this harmony: the *nous* lost its direct access to God and became disturbed by the sensations of the body; the body ceased

23 Sergii Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), ebook, 183–84.

24 Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas, vol. 1, 28–29 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 163.

to find pleasure in contemplation, so it fed the soul with powerful and pleasurable sensations coming from its interaction with the world, making the soul refuse the right principles and ignore the intuition of divine realities coming from the *nous*.[25]

At the end of her survey of the concept of nous in the early Christian tradition, A. N. Williams concluded in a similar key that the *nous*

> functions as a connector, the medium by which we relate to God, the ordering principle of our relation to the complex that is ourselves, and the director of external relations, inasmuch as our moral existence stands at its command; our relation to self and world can be no better than is indicated by our powers of discernment and judgement. The human mind locates us in relation to every other creature, as well as the Creator, and relates every other human faculty and organ to the whole that is the human person.[26]

What I argue here is precisely that the *nous* is better understood as the spiritual intelligence that comes from God and supports human identity-formation through history. The *nous* preexists our temporal embodiment and—although autonomously from the body and its cognitive capacities—uses the embodied experience in order to develop itself into the specific part of the body of Christ designated by God at its creation. What I mean by this is that the growth of the *nous* is not necessarily mediated by conscious cognition. This mediation can become conscious if we learn to pay attention to our thoughts and sensations through various monastic practices, as for instance watchfulness but, for the most part, the *nous* can absorb these sensations bypassing conscious cognition. As Rowan Williams explains,

25 Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, trans. Maximos Constas, The Fathers of the Church 136 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 91–93; Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 1: 163.

26 A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 234.

> Human awareness is initially and primitively just the registering of the image of an object without either meaning or craving attached. So what watchfulness entails is awareness of the moment at which this bare "human" consciousness becomes diabolical, becomes bound to the acquisitive mode of perception.[27]

What this means in the case of persons with dementia is that those moments when they seem to regain awareness, particularly when they receive the Eucharist, hear a certain hymn, or have to recite a certain prayer or even a poem,[28] are moments when the *nous* absorbs the outside stimuli and attempts to order the movement of the bodies in the direction of the ultimate goal of the person: deification. If we follow Maximus' scheme, we can say that when the rational side of the soul fails to fulfil its role for various reasons, from sins to impairment, the *nous* steps in, supplementing its role as much as possible, and attempting to consolidate human spiritual development in the achievement of spiritual identity.

On the one hand, it can be said that intelligence does not exist disembodied in God's memory, because everything happens simultaneously in God so the distinction makes sense only from our human standpoint. On the other hand, we should be able to assume that intelligence can exist in a disembodied state in God, if we take seriously the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions when speaking about the life of the soul after death and until the second coming of Christ.

That the *nous* can be interpreted in this way seems to me highly compatible with the work of Christopher Knight.[29] For Knight, "The

27 Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 14–15.

28 Swinton, "What the Body Remembers," 161–62.

29 Christopher C. Knight, "Science, Theology, and the Mind," in *Orthodox Christianity and Modern Science*, ed. Vasilios N. Makrides and Gayle E. Woloschak (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 149–61, doi:10.1484/M.SOC-EB.5.116862; Christopher C. Knight, "The Human Mind in This World and the Next: Scientific and Early Theological Perspectives," *Theology and Science* 16:2 (2018): 151–65, doi:10.1080/14746700.2018.1455265; Christopher C. Knight, *Eastern Orthodoxy and the Science-Theology Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), doi:10.1017/9781009106009; Christopher C. Knight, "Have a Bit of

notion that we nowadays tend to think of as constitutive of our minds and personalities—our discursive rational faculty and memory—may in fact be no more than servants, in this world, of something more central to our being: what in Greek is termed *nous*."[30] Knight even goes as far as to suggest that, in the eschatological state, humans might not use their cognitive capacities to think, but that they

> may simply *know*—directly and intuitively—in the way that mystics, in their most sublime moments, are said to *know*. Our eschatological state in its mental dimension will not simply be a continuation of our personalities and mental properties as we experience them now. Rather, it will involve true continuity in our existence as unique persons, it will involve a transformation of our whole being.[31]

Knight helps expand Bulgakov's interpretation of the patristic tradition, namely that a certain part of the human being—our spiritual intelligence—is not fully determined by our embodiment and even by our cognitive faculties. This also clarifies and enriches Swinton's account of how human spiritual identity can exist in God and is bestowed upon us in the Holy Spirit: it is the spiritual intelligence that interacts with our embodied identity and that guides us to the fulfilment of our identity in Christ even during one's period with dementia.

To me, this last point is important for its ramifications for a closely related debate: the euthanasia of persons with dementia. If the theological response is simply that we should keep living in order to remain in relationship with God, but without explaining how and why it is important to remain in this relationship, then the question that follows is why this relationship has to continue here and not in the afterlife. Being in a temporal relationship with God when our bodies

Nous: Revelation and the Psychology of Religion," in *Mutual Enrichment between Psychology and Theology*, ed. Russel Re Manning (London: Routledge, 2020), 47–60.

30 Knight, "Science, Theology, and the Mind," 161 n. 35.

31 Knight, "Science, Theology, and the Mind," 161 n. 35.

and cognitive faculties are irremediably decaying does not make too much sense if we could continue this relationship in the afterlife, where we will be remembered by God with our true identity, our cognitive capacities restored, our bodies in perfect shape, and surrounded by our beloved friends and family. By talking about the *nous* as the spiritual intelligence that guides us towards the full development of our spiritual identity in Christ, even when our cognitive faculties are impaired, it can be then contended that even the period with dementia can have the potential of being spiritually formative and for this reason, we should leave it to follow its course until God considers that our *nous* reached its full development in this temporal life.

Conclusions

What I wanted to do in this article is argue that the metaphor of living in the memory of God used by John Swinton in order to defend the personhood of those who develop dementia entails more theological presupposition than one might think. It entails the creation of human *nous* at once with the beginning of time and its gradual entry into history, as well as the existence of a spiritual faculty that keeps us in relationship with God irrespective of the state of our cognitive faculties or our bodies, and which then uses the information it receives from these for the development of our spiritual identity.

Deepening Swinton's metaphor also provides a clearer understanding of how our relationship with God continues during the period with dementia and provides a more robust grounding for rejecting the euthanasia of persons with dementia or profound intellectual disabilities.

I am sure there is much more to be said in support of my argument, as there are many more adjacent areas I did not have the space to cover at length, as for example: the interrelationship between *nous* and the body or the materiality of the world more broadly conceived, or the advantages or disadvantages of euthanasia.

My intention was not to be exhaustive, but rather to bring into conversation several theological threads that usually ignore each other. Science and theology, disability, and Eastern Orthodoxy tend to be treated on their own and, in my opinion, they can be the source of some exciting insights if brought together.

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.
Received: 01/02/24 Accepted: 07/07/24 Published: 04/03/25