

## Repentance, Transformation and Holiness

In this paper I explore certain aspects of the relationship between repentance and holiness. I do this from an Anglican perspective but one which assumes a common Anglican and Orthodox heritage. As the *Dublin Agreed Statement 1984* affirms ‘*The mind of the Fathers, their theological method, their terminology and modes of expression have a lasting importance in both the Orthodox and Anglican Churches.*’<sup>1</sup> The Church of England canons themselves root the revelation of God in the Holy Scriptures ‘*and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures*’.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will be drawing both on Anglican writers who consciously draw on our common patristic heritage and also some who do not but whose writings are nevertheless deeply redolent of a patristic understanding of personhood and holiness. Mystical Anglicanism does not see itself in ‘heretical’ isolation from but in continuity with and as an expression of the Christian Mystical Tradition in England. Macarius, for example, was an influence on John Cassian (360-435) who was himself a great influence on St. Benedict. Cassian, who had lived among the hermits and monks of Egypt and Syria, brought such a monasticism to southern France and in his *Institutes* and *Conferences* draws on Macarius’ teaching on holiness. Centuries later, John Wesley found in his father Samuel’s library a copy of Thomas Heywood’s ‘*Primitive Morality*’ 1721 in which Heywood is described anonymously as a priest in the Church of England. It is a translation of the *Spiritual Homilies* of St. Macarius, which inspired much of John Wesley’s teaching on holiness and the Holy Spirit and was an influence also on Charles Wesley’s hymnody. John Wesley was to write in his journal ‘*When I read Macarius, I sing*’.

There are many such patristic continuities in the theological and devotional writings of Bull, Hooker, Andrewes, Laud, Ken, Cosins, Taylor, Traherne and, in more recent centuries, Pusey, Ramsey and Williams - among very many others.

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<sup>1</sup> Dublin Agreed Statement 1984, 111.10(11)

<sup>2</sup> Canon A5, Canons of the Church of England.

## Holiness – the human vocation

*You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy.*<sup>3</sup>

*‘The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’*<sup>4</sup> The writer of the first letter of Peter picks this up: *‘As he who has called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’.*<sup>5</sup> St. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that their holiness as the Body of Christ transcends the holiness of the Jerusalem Temple: *‘Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.’*<sup>6</sup> Jesus, in the Farewell Discourses in the Gospel of St. John, praying to the Father, says: *‘For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.’*<sup>7</sup> The human vocation is to holiness.

There can be no transformation or holiness without repentance. The Gospel begins with a call to repentance. John the Baptist, heralds the advent of Messiah, with the words *‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’*<sup>8</sup> Jesus, the anointed one, begins his proclamation *‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven has come near, repent and believe in the good news.’*<sup>9</sup> When the crowds at Pentecost witness the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and ask *‘What must we do?’* Peter responds *‘Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’*<sup>10</sup> Soon afterwards Paul tells the Athenians at the Areopagus *‘Now he commands all people to repent for he has set a day when he will judge the world.’*<sup>11</sup> Later, with the elders at Ephesus, he tells them *‘I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.’*<sup>12</sup> So it is that John Wesley can write:

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19.2

<sup>4</sup> Lev.19.1-2.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 1.15-16.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor.3.16-17.

<sup>7</sup> John 17.19.

<sup>8</sup> Matt.3.2.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 1.15.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 2.37-38.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 17.30.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 20.21.

Repentance is the porch to religion, faith is the door to religion and holiness is the essence of religion.<sup>13</sup>

## Repentance

*There is no Christian life without repentance.*<sup>14</sup>

*No doctrine is so necessary in the Church of God as the doctrine of repentance and amendment of life.*<sup>15</sup>

This Scriptural call to repentance is reflected in Anglican liturgy and in the writings of Anglican Divines. Archbishop Rowan Williams, speaking to Roman Catholic Bishops on ‘The Word of God in Anglican Tradition’ in 2011<sup>16</sup> underlines the unique place of the Scriptures in calling us to repentance without which holiness is impossible, stressing the corporate liturgical dimensions of this.

From Richard Hooker (1554-1600), he infers that ‘*the point of reading Scripture is to provoke that self-awareness that leads to repentance and makes us fit to receive the sacrament.*’ He goes on ‘*Reading the Bible is an aspect of our self-offering to God in prayer: we come to hear the Bible read so that we may be open to God’s call to repentance and his promise of eternal life.*’ Both Morning and Evening Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer begin with a Scriptural call to repentance, followed by the words:

Dearly Beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness, and that we should not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly father but confess them...’.

Article XXV of the 39 Articles in the Book of Common Prayer refers to the Book of Homilies as sermons instructed to be read in the parish churches of England ‘*diligently and distinctly, that they may be understood by the people.*’ Homily 19 of the 21 homilies is entitled ‘*An Homilie of Repentance and true reconciliation unto God*’. It begins:

There is nothing that the Holy Ghost doth so much labour in all the Scriptures to beat into mens’ heads as repentance, amendment of life and speedy returning unto the Lord God of hostes.’ It goes on ‘No doctrine is so necessary in the Church of God as is the doctrine of repentance and amendment of life.

This homily identifies four elements of true repentance, *all drawn from the Scripture*:

The first is the **contrition of the heart**. For we must be earnestly sorry for our sins and unfeignedly lament and bewail that we have by them so grievously offended our most bounteous and merciful God; who so tenderly loved us that he gave his only begotten Son to die a most bitter death and to shed his dear heart blood for our redemption and deliverance. A sacrifice to God is a troubled spirit, a contrite and broken heart, O Lord, thou wilt not despise. Ps.51.17.

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<sup>13</sup> John Wesley, *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explain’d*, London 1746, W. Strahan, p.69

<sup>14</sup> *The Scale of Perfection*, Walter Hilton,

<sup>15</sup> Homily 19 ‘Of Repentance’. *Book of Homilies*, Vancouver 2008, Regent College Publishing, p525

<sup>16</sup> Rowan Williams, *Address to Focolare Bishops*, 2011

The second is **an unfeigned confession and acknowledging of our sins unto God.**<sup>17</sup>

The third part of repentance is **faith** whereby we do apprehend and take hold of the promises of God touching the free pardon and forgiveness of our sins.

The fourth is an **amendment of life**, or a new life, in bringing forth fruits of repentance.<sup>18</sup>

Repentance and faith are inseparably linked in the Book of Common Prayer. All the Absolutions in the prayer books of 1549 and 1552 express God's forgiveness as a response to true repentance and faith.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them which with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto Him (Communion service)

Our Lord Jesus Christ who hath left power to his Church to absolve sinners which truly repent and believe in Him (Absolution of the Sick)

Almighty God... pardoneth and absolveth all them which truly repent and unfeignedly believe his Holy Gospel (Absolution in Daily Office, added in 1552)

In the Catechism, the answer to the question: '*What is required of persons to be baptised?*' is '*Repentance whereby they forsake sin; and Faith, whereby they steadfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that Sacrament.*' The answer to the question: '*What is required of them who come to the Lord's Supper?*' is:

To examine themselves, whether they repent them truly of their former sins, steadfastly purposing to lead a new life; have a lively faith in God's mercy through Christ... and be in charity with all men.

Amendment of life, or newness of life is seen not as the cause of forgiveness but as the fruit of repentance. The General Confession (1549 and 1552) includes '*Forgive us all that is past, and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee in newness of life to the honour and glory of thy name.*'

## **Continual Repentance: Confession**

It goes on: '*And although we ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sin before God yet ought we most chiefly so to do when we assemble and meet together...*' This recognition of the '*need for continued repentance and reformation throughout our Christian lives*'<sup>19</sup> is foundational to any growing in holiness. The Anglican Covenant Document asserts '*each church affirms in humility our call to constant repentance.*'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ps.32.5; 1 John 1.9.; James 5.16.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 3.7-8.

<sup>19</sup> *The Mystery of Salvation: Receiving the Gift*. Contemporary Doctrine Classics, London, Church House Publishing 2005, p.375.

<sup>20</sup> *The Anglican Covenant*. Section 2.1.3.

An essential dimension of this continual repentance is the confession of sins. But this is not always and only to be in the context of corporate worship. The daily prayer devotionals of Henry Bull (1530-1575), Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626), William Laud (1573-1645), John Cosins (1594-1672) and Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) are punctuated by acts of penitence, confession and contrition throughout each day. Such devotionals draw heavily on the Fathers.

But Anglicans have also recognised the significance of auricular or private confession, to avoid the twin perils of on the one hand what Hooker calls '*an over soft and gentle hand, fearful of touching too near the quick*' and on the other '*timorous scrupulosities and extreme discomforts of mind, from which we do hardly ever lift up our heads again*'.<sup>21</sup> Confession must be real and if the General Confession allows some to take refuge in the general at the expense of the specific, there needs to be other provision. Jeremy Taylor, referring to private confession, highlights the importance of the *particular*:

The Minister of Religion must take care that the sick man's confession must be as minute and particular and enumerative of the variety of evils which have disordered his life, his Repentance is disposed to be pungent and afflictive and therefore more salutary and medicinal.<sup>22</sup>

He goes on:

so to hear God's sentence at the mouth of the Minister, pardon pronounced by God's Ambassadors, is of huge comfort to them that cannot otherwise be comforted, and whose infirmity needs it.<sup>23</sup>

A form of auricular confession is included in the Book of Common Prayer in *The Order for the Visitation of the Sick*.

The traditional Anglican view of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is that '*All may, some should, none must*'.

## **Continual Repentance: 'Turning'**

*Christians experience a tension between the call to holiness and the power of sin, the struggle between 'flesh' and Spirit (Gal.5.17) which requires continual repentance and the assurance of God's forgiveness.*<sup>24</sup>

The way to holiness is the way of repentance. This repentance both embraces and transcends *confession*, whatever form that might take, whether it be sacramental, liturgical, corporate or simply personal. It is more a continuous turning (*metanoia*) away from sin and towards God. **Lancelot Andrewes**, in a sermon, describes this movement as:

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, VI.iv.7

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, ch.V.iv.10, Cosimo, New York, 2007, p475

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.p481

<sup>24</sup> Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue 1976-84 (Dublin) 1.43.

a kind of circling, to return to Him by repentance from whom by sin we have turned away.

It is

first a 'turn' wherein we look forward to God and with our whole heart resolve to turn to Him. Then a 'turn' again wherein we look backward to our sins wherein we have turned from God, and with beholding them our very heart breaketh. These two are distinct in nature and in name; one conversion from sin, the other contrition for sin. One resolving to amend that which is to come; the other reflecting and sorrowing for that which is past. These two between them make up a complete repentance; or (to keep the word of the text) a perfect revolution.<sup>25</sup>

Repentance emerges from what Richard Hooker calls a '*happy mixture*' of, on the one hand, '*a sense of our own unworthiness*' and on the other, a '*trust in the mercy of God through Jesus Christ*.'<sup>26</sup> Mother Julian of Norwich describes in similar vein the '*marvellous medley*' of wellbeing and unease that marks the inner life of all Christians in which '*we have in us our Lord Jesus Christ uprising and we have in us the wretchedness and mischief of Adam falling*.'<sup>27</sup> Henry Bull (1530-1575) in his theology of prayer also expresses something of this double movement:

For as repentance and faith are knit as companions together (albeit the one driveth us down with fear and the other lifteth us up again with comfort) so in prayer they must needs meet together.<sup>28</sup>

This requires of us the spirit of '*continuous but not unhopeful penitence*.'<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Taylor expresses this contiguity of repentance and holiness when he writes: '*A holy life is only the perfection of repentance and the firm ground upon which we can cast the anchor of hope in the mercies of God, through Jesus Christ*.'<sup>30</sup> For Mother Julian, it is this consciousness of our own frailty and sinfulness that, far from being an obstacle to holiness, humbles us and leads us to turn from our sin and to seek the mercy and grace of God. Because salvation is not about the avoidance of sin but the forgiveness of sin<sup>31</sup>, this '*turning*' is itself a mark of holiness. St. Isaac the Syrian writes:

When a sinner becomes aware of his failings and begins to repent, he is righteous; when a righteous man becomes aware of his righteousness and his conscience is persuaded of it, he is a sinner.<sup>32</sup>

Cranmer echoes the significance of this 'turning' or beginning of repentance:

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<sup>25</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, *Sermon 4 on Repentance, Ash Wednesday 1619*, Anglican history.org/lact/andrewes/v1/Wednesday4.html

<sup>26</sup> Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 5.47.4

<sup>27</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ch.52. Penguin London, 1966, p151

<sup>28</sup> Henry Bull, *Christian Prayers and Meditations*, Cambridge, Parker Society, 1842, ppx1x

<sup>29</sup> Robert Ottley, *Lancelot Andrewes*, 1905, Methuen & Co London, p180, words of Archbishop Alexander of Armagh

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, Cosimo, New York 2007, p238

<sup>31</sup> Matt.9.13; Mark 2.17; Luke 5.32.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Bulletin of Spiritual Edification 10<sup>th</sup> March 2013, Ecumenical Patriarchate, Archdiocese of Thyateira & Great Britain.

When the ungodly turn, immediately all their sins are forgiven.<sup>33</sup>

Holiness is a mark of the humility that recognises its own frailty and sinfulness. Charles Simeon, Vicar of Holy Trinity Cambridge for 54 years, understood the criteria for all preaching as being ‘*Does the sermon humble the sinner, exalt the Saviour and promote holiness?*’ As the parable of the Pharisee and the tax gatherer reveals it is only in the place of humility or even humiliation that we can be right before God. Simeon longed to be in this place of ‘dust’, the only safe place for a Christian.

Repentance is in every view so desirable, so necessary, so suited to honour God, that I seek that above all. The tender heart, the broken and contrite spirit are to me far above all the joys that I could ever hope for in this vale of tears. *I long to be in my proper place, my hand on my mouth and my mouth in the dust. I feel this is safe ground. Here I cannot err.*<sup>34</sup>

As each person is ‘ashed’ in the Anglican Ash Wednesday Liturgy, he or she hears the words spoken to them personally ‘*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return, turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.*’ As George Herbert (1593-1632), in his poem *Love*, writes:

Love bade me welcome; but my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.

Holiness is fashioned from this penitent humility. So Simeon can speak of ‘the happy condition of the self-condemning penitent.’<sup>35</sup> John Donne, poet and Dean of St. Paul’s, writes:

Without humility no man shall hear God speak to his soule. But if God bring thee to that humiliation of soule and body here, he will emprove and advance thy sanctification *abundatius.*<sup>36</sup>

## Repentance and seeing

*Now my eyes see you, therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.*<sup>37</sup>

The ‘*true repentance*’, that Anglicans pray for in the Litany, is *God’s* work in us and prompted by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth; ‘*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*’<sup>38</sup> If we see truly, we will repent. We need the Holy Spirit to help us truly to see<sup>39</sup>, as God sees.<sup>40</sup> When Isaiah experiences the holiness and glory

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<sup>33</sup> Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance*, Oxford OUP 2000 p189, from CGC 11,219v

<sup>34</sup> H.G.C.Moule, Charles Simeon (London 1956) p133-4.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Simeon, *Horae Himileticae*, xx369

<sup>36</sup> Evelyn Simpson, *John Donne, Selected Prose*, 1967, p362 quoted in Moorman, ‘*The Anglican Spiritual Tradition*’ London DLT 1983, p89

<sup>37</sup> Job 42.6

<sup>38</sup> 1 John 1.8

<sup>39</sup> John 3.3

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 36.9(b)

of God in the Temple, he sees the stark reality of his own sinfulness and that of his people and repents.<sup>41</sup> When Job finally *sees* God after having *heard* so much of God, he cannot but repent. *'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.'*<sup>42</sup> As Bonhoeffer put it *'We can only see the problem when we have been grasped by the solution.'* To be called to holiness is to be called first to *contemplation*, that is, to see things as they really are. Walter Hilton (c. 1340 - 1396) writes of:

the very needful work of *contemplation*. That is for a man to enter into himself, to know his own soul and the powers thereof. By this inward sight thou shalt come to see the nobility and dignity that naturally it had in its first creation; and thou shalt also see the wretchedness and mischief which thou art fallen into by sin. From this sight will arise a desire with great longing in thine heart, to recover again that dignity and nobleness which thou hast lost.<sup>43</sup>

Repentance, for Hilton, is about recovering the 'soul's dignity' or the image of God. But this restoration of God's image in humanity is not a function simply of human repentance but of the grace and mercy of God.

But that reforming could not be made by any earthly man, for every man was in the same mischief, and none was sufficient to help himself and so much less another man. Therefore it needed to be done by Him that was more than man, God alone.<sup>44</sup>... The passion of our Lord and this precious death is the ground of all the reforming of man's soul without which man's soul could never be reformed to the likeness of Him.<sup>45</sup>

For Thomas Traherne (1636 -1674), it is also *sight* that leads to repentance and particularly the seeing of the blessedness of the state from which we have fallen.

'Till you see the world is yours, you cannot weigh the greatness of sin, nor the misery of your fall, nor prize your Redeemer's love... for the greatness of sin proceedeth from the greatness of His love whom we have offended... none of which can be seen till Truth is seen.'<sup>46</sup> 'To have fallen from infinite glory and blessedness is infinite misery but cannot be seen till the glory of the estate from which we have fallen is discovered.'<sup>47</sup>

Traherne then cites from Revelation<sup>48</sup>, words from the message to the Church in Ephesus 'Remember from whence thou art fallen and repent'.<sup>49</sup> It is this *seeing* that leads to repentance.

Put simply, true self-knowledge or *sight* will lead us inexorably to repentance and to compassion for others also in need of God's mercy. In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Isabella pleads to the judgemental Angelo for the life of her brother:

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<sup>41</sup> Isaiah 6.5

<sup>42</sup> Job 42.5-6

<sup>43</sup> Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, London, John Philp 1870, Part 111.ch.1,p49

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.p114

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p116

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Traherne *Centuries of Meditations*, Second century, Cosimo, New York 2007, p80.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p81

<sup>48</sup> Revelation 2.5

<sup>49</sup> Ibid p81

**Angelo:** Your brother is a forfeit of the law, and you but waste your words.

**Isabella:** Alas, Alas!  
Why all the souls were forfeit once;  
And He that might the vantage best have took  
Found out the remedy. How would you be,  
If He, which is the top of judgement, should  
But judge you as you are? O think on that;  
and mercy then will breathe within your lips,  
Like man made new.<sup>50</sup>

This mercy is of God and a mark of human holiness. It is the merciful who receive God's mercy<sup>51</sup> and in showing that mercy, God's image is revealed in them. As William Blake writes:

And all must love the human form  
In heathen, Turk or Jew  
Where Mercy, Love and Pity dwell  
There God is dwelling too.<sup>52</sup>

It is the apprehension of the love and mercy of God and the consequent recognition of our need of it that leads to repentance. St. Benedict in his *Prologue* to the *Rule* quotes St. Paul:

Do you not know that God's kindness is to lead you to repentance?<sup>53</sup>

For Cranmer, repentance is always a *response* to what God has done in Christ.

True repentance is the movement of the Holy Spirit in the human heart, constantly drawing us back into the life of the Holy Trinity. So it is that Gregory of Nyssa can say:

When you turn to him, you become that which he is himself.<sup>54</sup>

## Holiness

*Turn me and I shall be turned, for you are the Lord my God.*<sup>55</sup>

Holiness can only truly be a characteristic of those who do not recognise it in themselves, of those who are continually 'turning' to God and acutely aware of their need of God's continuing mercy and the completion of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Sanctity is, therefore, not a static or a fixed state but *dynamic* involving continual self-

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<sup>50</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act 11, scene 11.

<sup>51</sup> Matt.5.7,Luke 6.37

<sup>52</sup> Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, OUP Oxford 1967,pl.18

<sup>53</sup> Romans 2.4.

<sup>54</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Second Homily on The Song of Songs* PG.44,765, quoted in Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, New City London, 1993 p79

<sup>55</sup> Jeremiah 31.18

giving *to* and recreation *in* God. T.S. Eliot, deeply influenced by Lancelot Andrewes, reflects something of this when he writes:

From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit  
proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire  
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.<sup>56</sup>

As J.H. Newman writes of the Church '*it changes always in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.*'<sup>57</sup> This must be the case as holiness is not and never can be a matter of human achievement but rather a continuing co-operation with the grace and mercy of God, whose mercies are '*new every morning*'.<sup>58</sup>

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) writes in his hymn, *Love Divine, all loves excelling*:

Finish then thy new creation  
pure and spotless let us be;  
Let us see thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
till in heav'n we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee  
lost in wonder love and praise.

Sanctification, or the growing in holiness, is life-long. There can be no end to this turning to God in this life. Isaac the Syrian writes:

And there is no limit to the process of perfection, because the perfection of the perfect is indeed endless. Therefore repentance is not restricted either in seasons or in actions, even till death.<sup>59</sup>

Change - from glory into glory - is a characteristic of life lived in the Holy Spirit. Paul writes:

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.<sup>60</sup>

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August 2013

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<sup>56</sup> T.S.Eliot, *The Four Quartets, Little Gidding*, 11.4

<sup>57</sup> J.H.Newman On the Process of Development in Ideas s.7

<sup>58</sup> Lamentations 3.22-3

<sup>59</sup> Isaac the Syrian, d.700 *Mystic Treatises* 55

<sup>60</sup> 2 Cor.3.18