

Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender

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This paper takes one kind of historical approach to the question of origins and meanings: it seeks to consider late antique asceticism in relation to a social context which in recent years, thanks to some brilliant and persuasive writing,¹ has become more clearly visible. It asks what ascetics were reacting against or refusing, what signals their lifestyles sent within a particular cultural range, whether late antique asceticism was an intensification of familiar practices, or a radical break from them. Christian ascetics in the fourth and fifth centuries were pioneers in working out what must be done by people who find the ordinary human concerns of household and city an intolerable distraction from their commitment to God. They experimented with styles and structures; tried out and competed with each other's techniques for strengthening the soul against harmful desires and demonic attack; and shared and analyzed their experience. Writers of the period—Athanasius, Jerome, Augustine, Basil—present the ascetic as hero or heroine, as the standard of true Christian commitment in an age when commitment was no longer tested by martyrdom. They suggest, and their writings also helped to create, an intense and widespread interest in ascetic practice.²

The source material is (in comparison with most aspects of Greco-Roman antiquity) unusually rich. There is a wide range of fourth- and fifth-century texts concerned with ascetic life and practices: exhortation; sermons; correspondence; rules for communities; lives of ascetics and collections of their sayings; and detailed spiritual guidance. Nevertheless, it is often unclear why exactly ascetics chose to do what they did, either in terms of individual motives for leading an ascetic life or in terms of invented or imitated ascetic practice. Some texts (for instance, the *Life and Teachings of Syncletica*) explain the purpose of fasting, discarding fine clothes, renouncing wealth; others merely admire or give an instruction. This is particularly true for women ascetics, since, as is almost always the case in Greco-Roman antiquity, women's voices are heard only indirectly. If women wrote any of the treatises and lives, their authorship is unacknowledged. They certainly wrote to spiritual advisers, but their letters are lost, whereas those of their male correspondents are preserved. Consequently, some of the most startling and most highly publicized ascetic practices of late antiquity are also the most difficult to interpret.

Women's asceticism, as practiced in late antiquity, is startling now because it is so extreme a rejection of family ties and female identity; and it was startling then simply because women did it. Christianity inherited standard Greco-Roman assumptions about women: that women in general are both physically and morally weaker than men; more dominated by the needs and desires of the body; and therefore less able to understand what is good and to hold fast what they know to be good. It also inherited the assumption which Greco-Roman philosophers made on the few occasions when they actually thought about the women they knew: that some women, at least, are capable of understanding and living by moral principles, and of being the moral equals, or even superiors, of men.³ This point was often made by praising an admirable woman for masculine courage or intelligence (a habit which persisted at least until the 1950s). Christianity transformed the lives of women by offering support for a wholly new option, the rejection of marriage and childbearing. It made individual women a subject for biography, because spiritual triumphs had become (for some readers) as interesting as military or political triumphs. But the lives of women celibates were still constrained by traditional beliefs about women—in particular, that women are responsible for the desire which men feel for them. So the asceticism practiced by women should provide one route into the origin and meanings of late antique asceticism. If the asceticism of women differed from the asceticism of men, why and how did it differ? Did it mean the same for a woman to be poor and a man to be poor, for a woman to be celibate and a man to be celibate? What aspects of their ordinary social lives did women refuse, and what was their vision of what life should be?

The fifth-century biographer of Melania the Younger begins with a standard acknowledgment that his *Life* does not tell the full story:

For who would be able to recount in a clear and worthy manner the manly deeds of this blessed woman? I mean of course her utter renunciation of worldly things, her ardor for the orthodox faith (an ardor hotter than fire), her unsurpassable beneficence, her intense vigils, her persistence in lying on the ground, her ill-treatment and ceaseless ascetic discipline of her soul as well as of her body, her gentleness and temperance that vie with the incorporeal powers, the cheapness of her clothing, and even more than these, her humility, the mother of all good things.⁴

This paragraph, and the *Life* as a whole, present a mixture of characteristics which, on first reading, range from the admirable to the baffling. Melania, the reader discovers, dressed in dark coarse cloth; it probably irritated her skin even when she did not wear a haircloth shirt underneath. She avoided washing. Once she stayed for the whole of Lent in her convent cell, sitting on a piece of sackcloth: when she emerged, and the sackcloth was shaken out, enormous lice fell out of it. She fasted for five days at a time, and went without sleep to read the Bible and all the theology she could lay her hands on—millions of lines of it, in Latin and Greek. She was heir to one of the greatest fortunes of Rome and married at thirteen to the heir of another. She asked him to live in chastity with her, and he was sympathetic, but refused to do so until they had produced heirs in their turn. A girl, dedicated at birth to a life of celibacy, died in infancy; a boy died in a birth which nearly killed

the mother too—very likely because she had kept vigil for a martyr's feast day the night before she went into labor. Her husband, fearing she would die, vowed chastity. They gave away their fortune in charity and in founding monasteries, fighting the protests of their city, their families, and the slaves on their many estates. At last, triumphantly destitute, they considered signing up on the welfare list of the Bishop of Jerusalem. A member of the community Melania founded once asked if she were not tempted to spiritual pride in her achievement. She said that she had not achieved much; but if she were tempted, she would think of those who fasted and slept rough, not from choice but from necessity. Why, then, had she made this choice and forced it upon her husband?⁵ What was the merit of poverty, hunger and dirt, the rejection of family claims and social responsibilities?

Voluntary poverty can be said to be required by the teachings of Jesus. "If you want to be perfect, sell all you have, and give to the poor, and come, follow me" (Mt. 19.21). This is the verse which, according to the *Life of Antony*, inspired St. Antony, around 270 CE, to pioneer the ascetic lifestyle in the Egyptian desert. But "sell all you have and give to the poor" is a much clearer instruction than "come, follow me." When Jesus said it to the rich young ruler, it meant "come with me now." Antony, according to the *Life*, took "follow me" to mean "devote your life to prayer and study of the Bible" but found that he could not do so unless he withdrew entirely from the distractions of village life and human contact. So he went away from the valley to the desert, where he could learn from the survival techniques of others who had gone "up country," *anachōritae*. These techniques necessarily included fasting and self-neglect.⁶ Antony's experience was publicized in the *Life of Antony* ascribed to Athanasius, and Egyptian ascetic practice was publicized by Athanasius during his exiles in the Western Empire; from c.370 CE on the *Life* was more widely available in a Latin translation by Evagrius. This is a simple historical sequence, but much more is needed to explain why Antony became the model for ascetic practice. The question is not just whether solitary asceticism is more or less beneficial than the communal model developed by Pachomius, though this was intensively discussed.⁷ The question is why Antony interpreted "following Christ" as solitary prayer and study rather than as evangelism or as help for his fellow villagers, and why his example was so impressive that people in very different circumstances withdrew to the desert, or tried to create their own.⁸

Not all Christians wanted to be perfect, or thought that perfection always requires renunciation of wealth. Some reassuring arguments have a long history: that Jesus was speaking to an individual who had a particular spiritual need, not necessarily to all Christians; and that, for most Christians, responsible use of money may well be more helpful. Clement of Alexandria, early in the second century, had reasonably asked what would happen if there were no Christians left who were able to give to the poor.⁹ Augustine's renunciation of a promising public career was triggered, according to the *Confessions*, by the story of Antony; but he was a bishop by the time he met Melania, early in the fifth century, and he tried to persuade her that monasteries were a better long-term investment than charitable donations. He wrote to another Christian who was worried by the story of the rich young ruler,

arguing that what matters is to give up not riches but attachment to riches: the church needs its supertax payers.¹⁰

Poverty, then, was not a necessary choice for a committed Christian, but it was a choice that some Christians felt they must make. It was also the most obvious message conveyed by ascetic dress and lifestyle. “Changing one’s clothes” became an immediately recognizable metaphor for “adopting the ascetic life” or for “entering a community.” There was not yet a monastic habit, a uniform that declared adherence to a specific order (these too were still in the experimental stage), but there was a common ascetic style that signaled renunciation: maybe not total renunciation of property, but at least renunciation of the lifestyle that went with it. Rich people—men and women both—wore fine wools and silks, brightly colored and enriched with gold. Men’s formal clothes declared their social status and also functioned as uniforms, advertising their public offices in embroidered or woven panels. Women held no public office, but their clothes declared social status and demanded attention for wealth and beauty. Working people wore dark, coarse cloth: the Latin word *pullati* (dark-clad) functioned like “blue-collar.” Really poor people could not vary their clothes for winter and summer but were lucky to have one all-purpose garment.¹¹

Other aspects of the ascetic life could also be interpreted as consequences of the choice of poverty: hunger, dirt, extremes of heat and cold. Poor people often went hungry: famine and crop failure were endemic, and when crops failed and taxation stripped the countryside, the country people drifted into town and starved in the streets. Welfare schemes and private charity were patchy at best, and the Roman government accepted no overall responsibility for welfare.¹² Some benefactors provided subsidized public baths, but really poor and shabby people were unlikely to get past the doorman. Dirt, bad smells, and infestation were part of their lives. They slept rough, in public places, improvised huts, or tombs. Fourth- and fifth-century writings often make the point that ascetic practices are much more difficult for those who had been used to comfort.

Voluntary poverty rejected a social identity defined by status, in a society where status entailed not just inherited social obligations, but financial commitments to the local community which were imposed by law. Emperors found it necessary to legislate on whether men who were ordained as Christian clergy could stop being *decuriones*, members of local councils who were responsible for the local budget and had to meet any shortfalls. Escape was allowed only if they renounced their property in favor of another relative, who would inherit the obligation. This release might be welcome, but there were worse consequences of being poor. The Christian virtue of humility needs to be understood in relation to the treatment the ascetic might receive by looking like one of the *humiles*, the lower orders. They had always been socially liable to neglect and contempt, but since the second century CE the *humiles* had been legally liable to beating and even torture, treatment formerly reserved for slaves. Such penalties were ordered by local magistrates: a political career usually required the infliction of violence, and renunciation of wealth made it possible for some people to avoid being part of the structures of violent oppression.¹³

But voluntary poverty, and an appearance proclaiming poverty, did not mean that ascetics renounced their wealth and status as an act of solidarity and identification with the poor. Antony made himself poor, but did not live among the poor of his village. Poor people often believed that ascetics could do them good, because their prayers could defeat the demons who were held to cause illness and crop failure; but ascetics often avoided human contact, seeking refuge in the desert or in monasteries from people who wanted them to use their spiritual strength to fight illness or to give advice.¹⁴ Some Christians chose to work among the poor in addition to giving alms. Jerome praised his friend Fabiola for her readiness to give nursing care to the sick; and this should not be underestimated, because the people who needed nursing care were those who had no home to provide it, and whose physical condition was often revolting. But, in fourth- and fifth-century texts, the focus is more often on the self-denial and endurance of the ascetic hero than on her or his good works. Ministering to the sick attracted less praise than patient endurance of one's own, perhaps revolting, illness.¹⁵ Ascetics were praised, not blamed, for seeking solitude and rejecting even their close family, for human company was a distraction from the life of prayer.

For male ascetics, female company, even the presence of a woman, was held to be particularly distracting. Years of hard spiritual struggle could be thrown away in a brief encounter, and even old and experienced monks were afraid. John of Lycopolis had not seen a woman for forty years when he said: "it is not in our interest to have our dwellings near inhabited places, or to associate with women. For meetings of this kind give rise to an inextinguishable memory, which we draw from what we have seen and from what we have heard in conversation." Similarly, a young monk said to his aged mentor, "Father, you are growing old. Let us now move back nearer to inhabited places." The old man said to him, "Let us go to a place where there are no women." His disciple replied, "Where is there a place where there are no women except in the desert?" So the old man said, "Take me to the desert."¹⁶

The construct of woman as sexual temptress, as desire personified, was apparently so powerful that even men committed to a life of prayer could not think of women as fellow human beings with the same commitment. An abbess once said to the monk who had carefully avoided her sisters, "If you were a perfect monk you would not have looked at us, and you would not have seen that we were women."¹⁷ She meant not that he would have gone beyond awareness of gender, but that he would not have paid any attention to the world around him. The downcast gaze expected of both monks and nuns avoided all distractions, especially sexual distractions. It was acknowledged that women ascetics also experienced desire for men, and that a man's look was dangerous to them.¹⁸

There was no general consensus that sexual desire is always dangerous or disgusting. Some fourth-century Christians argued that desire is God-given for procreation, and that married people can achieve a Christian life which is just as valuable as the life of a celibate; some believed that a celibate Christian woman and man can share a house without risk to their chastity, though this was generally held to be overly optimistic.¹⁹ But it seems to have been common ascetic experience that

sexual desire was both exceptionally strong and exceptionally persistent, a clear indication especially for men, who experienced involuntary erections and seminal emissions, that the body was still not reclaimed from its fallen state. Since the perceived danger to ascetics was so great, the precautions were only sensible. Even mothers were a hazard to be avoided, because (according to John Cassian) first you think about your mother or your sister; then about some religious woman you have met; then about some other woman.²⁰ The problem was not just sexual temptation. Women signified human contact and the ties of family and householding, the life from which the ascetic sought to escape into the desert, because women had no recognized role in life except to keep house and bear children—or to resist that role.

In such a context, it is not surprising that women ascetics made a drastic renunciation of identity as women, or rather of identity with the construct of women as sexual and domestic beings. The first step was not to look desirable. Preaching to women standardly denounced their concern for how they looked, and this was not just a preacher's cliché: it was the area of major temptation for women. They could not openly exercise political power, so it was their dress and hairstyle and makeup which proclaimed wealth and status, demanded attention, and thereby stimulated desire. So "changing one's clothes" had even greater significance for women than for men. The ascetic woman's clothing was a refusal of status, but it also refused all power of sexual attraction. It did not correspond to the poor woman's rags—unless, that is, it is described by Jerome, who claims to have seen strategically placed "designer rips" and hair straggling out from under provocative veils.²¹ The cloth was dark or undyed, like the clothing of the poor, but the body had to be concealed, the hair hidden, and the head veiled. The hair might be cut short, provided that gender was not denied by uncovered head and cross-dressing. Male and female dress was similar, but cross-dressing perhaps seemed provocative, or presented dangers to men who would not realize they were associating with a woman.²²

A woman who led the ascetic life would not wish to provoke desire in men (especially not in ascetic men who were fighting the same battle as she was) or to stimulate her own desires. She had to suppress her own awareness of her body as attractive, so she was urged not to take care of it, to make it less obviously a female body, even to make it repellent.²³ Bathing was suspect, not because poor people could not afford it, but because it is an activity in which the body is on view and receiving attention. It was still predominantly a communal activity, often but not always single-sex. Great houses of the time sometimes had private baths, but even in them women would not be alone, and would also be aware of their own bodies. Melania, when still subject to her parents, bathed only her eyes, and bribed her attendants not to tell; Olympias went to the baths only on doctor's orders, and never bathed naked. Clothes too were not always clean. Augustine's rule says that the superior should decide when clean clothes are handed out, so that people (monks or nuns) do not become too concerned about clean clothes, but he did also require "proper hygienic care" of the body, including baths when necessary.

Jerome's friend Paula declared more bluntly that a clean dress is the sign of a dirty mind.²⁴

The refusal to look attractive or to attend to the body signified the refusal of sexual activity. Late twentieth-century interpreters may seem unduly preoccupied with the renunciation of sexuality by these ascetic women, but it was also a major concern for the fourth century. Women were confronted with one fundamental choice in life: to marry or to reject marriage, whether as virgin or as widow. The refusal to bear children in pain, to a husband who was a master, was at once an attempt to reverse the effects of the Fall as described in *Genesis* 3.16 and a rejection of a life socially determined by gender. Once the choice was made, there were established techniques for reducing sexual desire. Medical theory made the reasonable assumption that the body has available for reproduction the surplus which it does not use for maintenance. Men generally burned off much of the surplus in hard physical exercise or manual work: ascetics combined hard work with reduced food intake. Women were generally less active, and were trained to moderate their food intake: ascetics used extremes of fasting. The perceived connection between food intake and sexual feeling was reinforced by the story of the Fall, in which greed for the apple led to sexual awareness. Extreme fasting made the female body less female in appearance and probably, though this point is not made explicit, caused amenorrhea, so that the woman was not tied to a reminder of fertility and desire: menstruation was associated with desire on the analogy of estrus in other mammals.²⁵ If the aim is to refuse a female identity which is constructed in terms of weakness, negative qualities and unwelcome desire, it makes sense to become physically unattractive—dirty and smelly—or at least unnoticeable, an “old woman” even in youth.²⁶ Fasting to the point of anorexia and amenorrhea is still a survival strategy, though a self-destructive strategy, in adolescents who wish to deny their sexuality; making oneself repellent is still a strategy against rape.

But more positive interpretations are possible. It can be argued that Christian ascetics, far from wishing to negate the body, especially the female body, as being hostile to the soul, took embodiment with complete seriousness. They interpreted sexual feeling as the characteristic desire of fallen human beings to possess something which distracts them from good, and therefore hoped to replace sexual with nonsexual relationships. They recognized that it was extremely difficult for men and women to meet without any sexual awareness, and that sexual feeling was the most obvious and persistent sign of fallenness. But they thought it possible to transform the body together with the soul, freeing it from the constraints of life after the Fall and causing it to function differently.²⁷

For women as for men, renouncing sexual activity implied (except in some cases of postmarital chastity) renouncing the life of a parent and householder, and thereby renouncing a clear social identity determined by status and gender. The household, as Aristotle said, was the building block of society. The woman's role in the household, and in society, was defined by gender: her task was to marry, provide children, keep house, be faithful. But it was not immediately obvious what, having rejected

this role, she should do instead. Modest women were expected to live within the protection of a house, and only a few ascetic women are reported to have risked the solitary life in the desert. The lifestyle of some ascetic women has continuities with the lives of nonascetic women who were not sexually active. The as yet unmarried daughter living at home supplies a model for the dedicated virgin, living in seclusion and close to her mother, modestly dressed, weaving fabric for the poor rather than for the family. The poor widow supplies another model for the more independent celibate: dressed in black, free to visit other households or to trade in the marketplace, because she is socially invisible as a woman.

But there was no need for an ascetic woman to live in a traditional household. Fourth-century experiments included a range of possibilities. There was the individual ascetic living a restricted life within, or on the fringes of, a predominantly female household, like Asella and Lea in the household of Marcella, or Domnina in a hut in her mother's garden.²⁸ There was the all-female household of ladies and their women slaves, in which the social hierarchy was modified to the extent that the ladies shared the chores. There was the celibate household of man and woman, both committed to the ascetic life, which tended to be pulled back into traditional patterns of male/female pairing, both in sexuality and in structure.²⁹ There was the female community taking over a house or living in accommodation built for the purpose. In all of these, there was no reason for the lifestyle of women to be determined by gender or to differ from the lifestyle of men. Male ascetics had to learn to cope with domestic chores; only a few tasks, like heavy digging and building work, were deemed to be beyond the physical strength of women ascetics. Rules of life could apply both to male and to female communities—though there is a tendency to say that women will need more of whatever virtue is in question.

Now since communities are not only of men but also of virgins, everything that has been said will be common to both. But one thing must be known: the way of life among women demands more and greater decorum, and correct use of poverty, quiet, submissiveness and community feeling, and care about access, and watchfulness over meetings, and conduct towards each other, and not having particular friendships. In all these aspects the way of life of virgins must be regulated with greater zeal.³⁰

It will simply be more difficult for them to live in stability, celibacy and harmony.

Once again, the lifestyles of late antique asceticism can be read negatively, as a fierce rejection of sexuality, marriage, childbearing, housekeeping, a life determined by gender and status. They can also be read positively, as an attempted return to paradise, living in friendship and dependence on God, undisturbed by greed or desire.³¹ The negative interpretation depends in part on a bleak picture of late antique social relationships. Twentieth-century interpreters have suggested that spouses were resentful of arranged marriages, and that both men and women were encouraged by medical and philosophical discourse to think of sexual activity as dangerous and depleting. Mothers, it has been said, were in any case indifferent to the children conceived against their wishes and cared for by household slaves, or else were eager to help their daughters escape their own fate by choosing virginity. People wanted to reclaim themselves from the relentless purposes of society.³² These

explanations are offered because it is so difficult to understand why late antique ascetics found it necessary, and right, to cut themselves off from family and society and to impose on themselves pain and deprivation. This is not a purely twentieth-century reaction: it was shared by fourth-century Christians and non-Christians, and something like it was presented to the elderly Augustine by the young Julian of Eclanum.³³ Why is all this rejection felt to be necessary? Why not live a moderate, self-disciplined life, giving generously to the poor, producing children in youth and abstaining when your family is complete, meeting your social obligations but making time for your religious commitment?

There was a recognizable and long-established lifestyle for doing just that. It was acknowledged that the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, should be able to cope with heat and cold and hard physical activity, should need little sleep and food, and should abstain altogether from luxuries including elaborate food, wine and non procreative sex. Philosophers must be tough, or how can they concentrate on wisdom without being distracted by minor discomforts? The traditional philosopher's cloak, ideally a single garment worn in both winter and summer, was a symbol that its wearer was committed to these ideals rather than to the advertisement of status and wealth; the Cynic philosopher, instantly identifiable by cloak, bag and stick, offered a dramatic role model for stripping down needs to the minimum. But, as Epictetus pointed out, the Cynic lifestyle is not suitable for babies. The philosophically trained Greek or Roman man was exhorted not to abandon his family duties; he might prefer to devote himself to philosophy without distraction, but he had an obligation to provide grandchildren for his parents, citizens for his city and worshippers for the gods. The choice of the philosophically minded Greek or Roman woman was taken for granted.

The first-century CE teaching of Epictetus neatly demonstrates the contrast between traditional philosopher and Christian ascetic. Epictetus had been a slave, and used his experience to point out to his audience of well-fed young Romans that if slaves can endure hunger, loneliness, hard labor, beatings, life as fugitives with every person's hand against them, those who are slaves to the comfortable life should be ashamed of themselves when they complain about a disciplined lifestyle and the hard intellectual work required by living as one ought. But he did not suggest that they should try to share the experience of a slave. The fourth-century Christian ascetic, by contrast, is praised for deliberately seeking deprivation. He, or she, triumphs over the needs of the ordinary human being for food, drink, warmth, comfort, sleep, company; and he or she may carry this triumph to the point of self-inflicted wounds, or of fasting so as to cause permanent illness—though several ascetics thought it wrong actually to damage the body.³⁴

The dominant philosophy of late antiquity was Platonism, and Platonism is often blamed for negative Christian attitudes to the body (as also for complex theological doctrines). But these attitudes were not shared by Platonists. Plato does seem to have distrusted, or feared, the needs of the body, and he does seem to be responsible for the discourse of body as opposed to spirit.³⁵ But late Platonist philosophers did not see any need to torment their bodies or to seek out suffering.

They aimed at the spiritual strength and discipline which would allow them to be unaffected, in their essential selves, not just by passing discomfort but by the loss of home and country and people they loved (even their children), or by suffering such as the philosopher Plotinus underwent in his final illness. This is the ideal of *apatheia*. It is not, of course, apathy or indifference, but something much closer to the conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of God: our reasoning souls, the part of us which is closest to God, can retain their link with God whatever happens in this transitory world.

There are two late Platonist texts, both (probably) from the fourth century, which offer examples of the admirable philosopher. Iamblichus, in his *On the Pythagorean Life*, presents Pythagoras as remarkable from birth: he has an exceptional intellect; his lifestyle is austere; he can become wholly absorbed in the pursuit and contemplation of wisdom; and his spiritual gifts include discernment, influence over nonrational animals, and even bilocation (two seminars on the same day on both sides of the Straits of Messina). His followers will not abandon his teaching even when their lives are threatened by a tyrant; one woman, in her last month of pregnancy, is told she will be tortured and bites off her tongue so that she will be unable to betray secrets even if torture overcomes her physical resistance. There is a case for saying that Iamblichus, in describing the communities Pythagoras (allegedly) founded, sets out to challenge comparison with Christian monasticism.³⁶ If so, he was aware of some very early manifestations of monasticism, since his book can hardly be dated even as late as the reign of Constantine. But whether or not he set out to make it, the contrast is there. The Pythagorean communities, as he describes them, include family groups and involve themselves in local government. Their lifestyle is temperate, and their diet is both moderate and restricted, but they show no signs of deprivation or of any need to work for a living. Ideally, their property is held in common, but it is undoubtedly there. They wear clean white linen, which demonstrates that they are ritually pure (dirt or bloodstains would show up at once) and ready at any time to make offering to the gods. Linen was expensive and is troublesome to clean, but Iamblichus is assuming that the slaves will do that. His Pythagoreans are a self-aware, self-disciplined spiritual and social elite.

Iamblichus himself became an example in Eunapius's *Lives of the Philosophers*. The subjects of Eunapius's brief biographies usually married into other philosophical families—like Christian ascetics, they tended to be interrelated anyway—and met the obligations of a prosperous household while adopting a disciplined lifestyle of temperance and study. They did not overeat, oversleep or indulge in nonprocreative sex. They could withdraw into contemplation without going off into the desert. The women of such households were themselves philosophers in that they lived by philosophic principles. They dressed modestly and declined to advertise wealth or to attract lustful attention. Like all well-brought-up women, they were trained to control their physical appetites: to eat in moderation, to drink little or no wine, not to take sexual initiatives. But they did not fast, or neglect the ordinary care of the body. Marriage partners were taught that sex should be used only for procreation, but they did expect to produce children. This applied even to the amazing Sosipatra, whom Eunapius found worthy of inclusion in a book about men. As

a child, she had acquired remarkable spiritual gifts from two mysterious strangers. She instantly recognized the only man worthy to marry her, and told him that they would have three sons. Marriage and childbearing did not interfere at all with her practice and teaching of philosophy. Eunapius said of her son Antoninus, "He made very rapid progress towards kinship with the divine. He took no account of the body and was liberated from its pleasures; he practiced a wisdom unknown to the many . . . everyone admired his perseverance, his unswerving and constant character."³⁷ But he did not engage in self-torment. The philosophical tradition of austerity and continence provides a context for late antique asceticism, but Christian ascetic practice cannot simply be located further along a continuum, as an intensification of philosophical *askēsis*.³⁸ It was a radical break, puzzling and repellent to non-Christians and also to some Christians.

So why do it? Why subject the body to brutal regimes of near starvation, sleep deprivation, pain, loneliness, and neglect—tactics which are more often associated with agents of terror, not with holiness? There is a link here which was also recognized in the fourth century: a sharing of suffering not so much with the poor as with Christ and the martyrs. Jesus died as a victim of Roman judicial torture, having experienced hunger and solitude in the desert and dereliction on the cross. The ascetics of the late fourth century were only half a century away from victims of persecution under Diocletian. Victricius of Rouen, welcoming relics of martyrs late in the fourth century, points out the contrast: "We have seen no executioners, we have not known swords drawn against us, yet we set up altars of Divinity. No bloody enemy assails us today, yet we are enriched by the Passion of the Saints. No torturer has stretched us on the rack, yet we bear the Martyrs' trophies."³⁹ The legal penalties suffered by pre-Constantinian martyrs were not ancient history, but were still current in late Roman law codes: burning, condemnation to wild beasts, tearing with hooks. The Theodosian Code, compiled by the most Christian emperor Theodosius II and promulgated in 438, is notorious for its use of cruel and unusual punishments, including torture and specific mutilation. Some historians prefer to think that these are menaces rather than practices; but there is evidence that extremes of violence were still inflicted, in public and by lawfully constituted authority, in the fourth and fifth centuries. According to one Pelagian tract, they were ordered by magistrates who called themselves Christian.⁴⁰

The stories of martyrs were read to the crowds who came to their shrines on their feast days. Another interpretation of late antique asceticism invokes the wish to be a hero, fighting and dying gloriously for the faith. The wish might be particularly strong in women, since Christian women had died as martyrs, in public and on display, like an athlete or a gladiator. There were few opportunities for a woman to be a hero. The denial of gender can be read as a simple refusal to believe that femaleness has anything going for it. As a bishop once said to his deacon, who had asked about the remarkable woman Olympias, "Do not say 'woman': say 'what a remarkable human being,' for she is a man despite her outward appearance."⁴¹ If you live in a culture which has no role models for women except the virtuous wife and the temptress, it is not surprising for you to reject identity as a woman and to aim for identity as a hero.

The culmination of the martyr's story is the *passio*, the long accounts of what they suffered and how they continued to praise God in the midst of their torment, unshaken by the pain. It is difficult, now, to know how to read *passiones*, because it seems impossible that human beings endured such things undismayed, or even that other human beings could believe they had done so. But the stories should not be read as a simple report of what happened. The *passiones* are a declaration, a performance, of the Christian claim that extremes of human suffering, and all manifestations of evil, can be overcome by acceptance of God's love.⁴² Similarly, asceticism is the "long martyrdom," and the ascetic's constant prayer to God, from the midst of pain, dereliction and demonic assault, is an acting out of the central truth and thus advances the fight against evil.⁴³ So there was a reason for ascetics to seek out suffering. They could express in physical terms the condition of the human soul: chafed by sin as the ascetic was chafed by haircloth and lice, and assaulted by demonic forces of evil which worked through physical illness as they had once worked through Roman torturers, it is still able to cry out in praise of God.

This paper has offered a range of suggested meanings for late antique asceticism. They are all linked to a particular historical context; not surprisingly, they overlap and are inconsistent. If the voice most often heard sounds like that of a puzzled pagan, this too belongs to the context in which late antique asceticism developed. Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries included those who (perhaps) came too close to philosophical overconfidence in human ability to cope, and, perhaps, were also too ready to assume that ordinary human commitments must be respected. Pelagius, himself an ascetic, was not impressed by a woman who said that family life gave her no time to pray: all you have to do, he said, is set aside time each day. Syncletica's warning, "It is dangerous for someone who has not been trained in the practical life to teach," applies to all interpreters of asceticism.⁴⁴

NOTES

1. As the editors requested, this paper is only slightly revised from the conference version, but I have profited very much from the other papers and responses and from informal discussion. I should particularly like to thank Dianne Bazell, Averil Cameron, Elizabeth Castelli and Teresa Shaw. I am also indebted to Aline Rousselle, Peter Brown, Robert Markus and, of course, to Elizabeth Clark.
2. "Written *Lives* were mimetic; real ascetic discipline in turn imitated the written *Lives*." In Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 57.
3. There is an unusually positive statement of this position in G. Gould, "Women in the Writings of the Fathers." In *Women and the Church*, eds. Sheils and Wood. Studies in Church History 27 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 1–13.
4. Trans. E. A. Clark (1984), pp. 25–26.
5. "It is the powerful who express imitation of Christ as (voluntary) poverty, (voluntary) nudity and (voluntary) weakness." C. W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 34.
6. A. Rousselle, *Porneta* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 141–147, 160–178.
7. For Pachomius, see N. Russell, *Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford and London: Mowbray, 1980); H. Chadwick, "Pachomios and the Ideal of Sanctity." In *History and*

- Thought of the Early Church* (London: Variorum, 1982), paper 14; P. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
8. For the impact of the desert, as opposed to the world and as an alternative world, see Brown 1989:216–217; see also Meredith 1976; Ward 1987; Gould 1993.
 9. *The Rich Man's Salvation* 11–13, in Countryman 1980.
 10. Advice to Melania, *Life of Melania* 20. The letter is to Hilarius, *Epistulae* 157. Antony's role in Augustine's conversion, *Confessiones* 8.6.14.
 11. See, for instance, Paulinus of Nola, Letter 45.3 in Migne, *PL* 61.393. On ascetic dress generally, G. Clark 1993:113–118.
 12. On provision (or lack of it) for the poor, see Brown 1992:91–103.
 13. Cf. G. Clark 1991.
 14. Cf. Brown 1971 for a nuanced account.
 15. For vivid examples of illness, see Venantius Fortunatus, *Life of Radegund* 17 (McNamara 1992:77) on nursing the sick, and the *Life of Syncletica* 105–111 (Castelli 1990:307–310).
 16. Russell 1980:36; Ward 1975:Sisoës 3.
 17. Ward 1975:4.62. For the construct of femaleness, cf. Cameron 1991:72–73; for the perceived impossibility of friendship between the sexes, E. A. Clark 1979.
 18. The frankest acknowledgment came from Basil of Ancyra, who (like many educated men) had medical as well as philosophical training. Migne, *PG* 30.669–810.
 19. On cohabitants, see E. A. Clark 1979; see also Hunter 1987, 1989, and 1992 for the debate in fourth-century Italy on marriage and virginity. Cooper 1992 assesses praise of the married or celibate Christian woman.
 20. Cassian, *Collationes Patrum* (CSEL 13)
 21. Letters 117.7 (*PL* 22.957), 130.18 (*PL* 22.1122).
 22. Anson 1974; Patlagean 1981. On masculine and feminine appearance, see further Gleason 1990.
 23. The London *Independent* of 12 February 1993 reported on a community of nuns who had sought advice from a color consultant. The motive was to make their individual personalities an advertisement for God, and perhaps also to be free from any concern about how they looked, because they knew they looked right. It is a striking instance of social and religious transformation.
 24. For baths, see G. Clark 1993:92–93; and see now R. Ward 1992 with Delaine 1993.
 25. Medical background in Rousselle 1988 and 1991; on attitudes to menstruation, see G. Clark 1993:76–80; on the varied significance of fasting, Bynum 1987.
 26. “If you do not dress in youthful clothes, you will not be called ‘young woman’: you will be called ‘old lady’ and treated with respect as an older woman.” pseudo-Athanasius, *On Virginity* (*PG* 28.264).
 27. Brown 1989, esp. pp. 222–224; Markus 1991:81–82. On the physical effects of fasting, see Musurillo 1956, but his findings may need to be modified by recent work on endorphins. See William Bushell's paper in this collection.
 28. Jerome, Letter 127 (*PL* 22.1089); Theodoret, *History of the Monks of Syria* 30 (*PG* 82.1492). For the home-based virgin, see Shaw 1990.
 29. On these experiments, see E. A. Clark 1986.
 30. *Eiusdem sermo asceticus*, ascribed to Basil, *PG* 31.888A, trans. G. Clark; on rules applicable to male and female communities, see Elm 1991, Lawless 1987.
 31. Cf. Elliott 1987.
 32. Rousselle 1988; Brown 1989.

33. See on this debate E. A. Clark 1986.
34. The most famous case of self-destruction is Blesilla, Jerome Letter 39.6 (PL 22.472); Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom permanently damaged their health, Martin of Tours was forbidden by his bishop to continue fasting. For advice against damaging the body, see, e.g., the treatise ascribed to Athanasius (PG 28.264–265) in G. Clark 1993:93; and Basil of Ancyra, *On Virginity* 9–11 (PG 30.669–689).
35. These problems are discussed further in John Dillon's paper. For a wider perspective on dualism and the body, see Castelli 1992.
36. On the life of Pythagoras, see G. Clark 1989; Dillon and Hershbelle 1991. On the continuities between philosophical and Christian asceticism, see Bremmer 1992.
37. Eunapius, *Vitae sophistarum*, 471.
38. Cp. Rousselle 1988:131, and cf. Bremmer 1992.
39. *Praise of the Saints* 1, translated by Hillgarth 1986:23. Bibliography on asceticism and martyrdom in Gould 1993:2, note 8.
40. *On Riches* 6 (PL supplement 1.1385–1386). On torture in late Roman law codes, see further Grodzynski 1984.
41. Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom* (PG 47.56). For recent discussions of the "honorary man" and female inferiority, see G. Clark 1993:120–130; Harrison 1990; Hunter 1992.
42. I should like to thank the members of the Cambridge Classics Interdisciplinary Seminar, especially John Henderson, for their response to a paper on Prudentius that explored some of these questions; and to thank Elizabeth Castelli for her own explorations in her unpublished paper of 1992.
43. Cf. Jacob of Serug on Simeon. Harvey 1990.
44. Pelagius, *To Celantia* 24 (PL 22.1216) (ascribed to Jerome); Syncretica's warning: Syncretica 12 (PG 65.425). On the fourth-century debate, especially concerning women's asceticism, see Hunter 1992.

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Christian Asceticism and the Emergence of the Monastic Tradition

Samuel Rubenson

Christian asceticism has, since the fourth century, been closely linked to the monastic tradition. Ascetic practice is at the roots of monasticism, and most of the ascetic writings in Christian traditions stem from monks or nuns and have been produced, copied and read primarily in monasteries. At the same time, it is obvious that Christian asceticism does not originate in the monastic setting; it preceded it and goes back to a tradition older than the New Testament. It has its roots in a common heritage of the Hellenistic world, a heritage christianized in the first centuries. Tertullian and Origen, the most famous advocates of ascetic practice in the early church, both died decades before the first known monks established themselves in the desert.

Monasticism thus inherited an earlier tradition of ascetic theology and practice. A few decades into the fourth century, this heritage was developed and made the cornerstone of monastic tradition. While we have only scant evidence for monastic practice earlier than the 320s, it is obvious that the monastic theology and the sets of rules shaped before the 380s has remained the foundation of monasticism until today.¹ By the year 400 CE, monasticism was already firmly established throughout the Christian world; and, within the monastic setting, the theory as well as practice of asceticism in Christianity was provided with a place to develop. From the fourth century onward, Christian asceticism cannot be studied separately from monasticism.

For the understanding of the *Christian* ascetic traditions the rise of monasticism—namely, monastic theology as well as monastic practice—is of utmost importance. It is primarily in the making of monastic tradition in fourth-century Egypt that the forms and concepts of later Christian ascetic practices and theories are formulated for the first time. It is also here that the experiences of the first monks of the desert, negative as well as positive, are developed into a tradition of spiritual guidance. Behind the great systematicians of monastic thinking—John Cassian in the West and Evagrius of Pontus in the East—there is the tradition and experiences

of the Desert Fathers.² The unrivaled head of that school is (according to tradition) St. Antony of Egypt.

St. Antony and the Elusive Origins of Monasticism

The precise origins and earliest development of monasticism, here defined as the creation of a community permanently separated from ordinary society, is still a matter of scholarly dispute. The roots of Christian monasticism have been sought in Egyptian religion, Judaism, Greek philosophical schools, and Manichaeism, in relation to gnosticism; in social and political circumstances (taxation, repression, national protest); in ecclesiastical developments (as a protest against the secularization of the church); etc.³

The choice among different factors behind the rise of monasticism is naturally influenced by the image of the earliest monastic tradition, an image partly shaped by theories about its origins and partly by sources emanating from a later stage in its development. In order to avoid both circular reasoning and dependence upon later sources, we have to study the historical setting and intellectual environment of the first monks and review later material critically. We cannot take for granted that the image given of the first monks in writings produced in the late fourth century describes the actual situation, motives and thoughts of the first decades of that century.⁴

Although it was Pachomius, and not Antony, who created the first monasteries in the sense of walled centers of communal living, it is Antony who stands out as the author of monasticism, even in the Pachomian sources.⁵ In the *Apophthegmata*, the collection of sayings of, and anecdotes about, the Desert Fathers, he is the most prominent authority. In the main sources about Egyptian monasticism from the end of the century, the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (Rufinus) and the *Historia Lausiaca* (Palladius), as well as in the historical works of Socrates and Sozomenos, he is the “father” of the tradition.⁶ Although his importance was greatly enhanced by the biography allegedly written by St. Athanasius, the *Vita Antonii*, it is clear that his fame was not the result of the *Vita* but rather its cause.⁷

The main sources for St. Antony are the *Vita Antonii*, the sayings attributed to or mentioning him in the *Apophthegmata*, and the *Letters of St. Antony*. Of these the *Vita* has been the most prominent through the centuries and shaped the image of Antony and of monasticism in general. At the end of the last century, the historicity of the *Vita* was, however, strongly challenged by Helmut Weingarten; and, although the most far-reaching criticism was rejected, the *Vita* has never regained its credibility as the true story of Antony’s life, thoughts, speeches, and deeds. The *Vita* is today generally seen as a literary composition presenting an ideal of monastic life in the shape of an historical person whose image is reworked according to the interests of the author, whether Athanasius or someone else.⁸ The credibility of various parts of the *Vita* must thus be checked with help from other sources.

With the work of Wilhelm Bousset (1923), the *Apophthegmata* emerged as a major historical source for the desert fathers. His faith in the credibility of the

sayings was widely accepted and to many scholars the sayings remain the primary source, almost the genuine reproduction of what the first monks thought, said and did.⁹ In his major study on St. Antony, Hermann Dörries made the sayings on St. Antony the basis of his investigation into the *Vita* as an historical source.¹⁰ Dörries's conclusions and his critique of the traditional image of St. Antony based on the *Vita* has generally been accepted. Thus, the image of an hero of the church fighting demons, philosophers and heretics has given way to the image of a penitent monk fleeing into the desert.

Common to both these sources is the image of Antony as a simple, uneducated, even illiterate, man. The *Vita* repeatedly states that he had no education; he was taught by God alone. He is said to have gone directly from his seclusion in his home into the seclusion of his monastic cell; to have spoken only in Coptic; and to have rejected all contact with worldly rulers and with Greek philosophy.¹¹ This fits well into the general picture of the fathers in the *Apophthegmata* and is strengthened by their rejection of worldly education and theological speculation. The fact that the *Vita* actually presents Antony as engaged in discussing philosophical concepts and writing letters is either overlooked or regarded as unhistorical.¹²

The third source, the letters, has not received the same amount of attention. The reason is partly the difficult and unsatisfactory transmission of the text and partly the fact that the letters can hardly have been written by the person emerging from the *Vita* and the *Apophthegmata*. Thus they have either been overlooked or regarded as spurious. The credibility of the attribution of the letters to Antony should, however, not be compared to that of the *Life* or the *Sayings*, since the presentation they make of Antony is open to doubt. In the first major study of the letters, I was able to show that they must be regarded as genuine and as the main source for the teachings of St. Antony; and I will not repeat here my arguments based on the manuscripts, numerous other sources and internal evidence.¹³

The main problem with the authenticity of the letters and the image of St. Antony presented by them is that they challenge much of what has generally been said about the nature of early Egyptian monasticism. This is also the main argument put forward against an attribution of the letters to Antony. They cannot have been written by a simple illiterate Coptic peasant fleeing into the desert with only a rudimentary and fanatic biblical faith. In order to reject the arguments against the authenticity of the letters it has been necessary not only to show that the later sources, the *Vita* and the *Apophthegmata*, have their reasons for presenting Antony and the early monks as uneducated, but also that there is positive evidence for a rather different view of the setting of early monastic tradition.

Asceticism and Theology in Egypt, c.300 CE

Egypt was at the beginning of the fourth century a land characterized by a variety of religious forms and experiences. Besides the traditional cult, largely merged with Greek and to some degree Roman cults, there was the cult of the emperors, the so called mystery religions, the Greek philosophical schools, Manichaeism and various forms of Judaism, Christianity, and gnosticism. Egypt was also the place of far-

reaching cultural exchange, a bilingual society in which Greek and Coptic culture had long lived together. The third century brought a deep economic crisis affecting the entire society and restructuring social life by creating a new mobility and driving numerous peasants from their land.¹⁴

In this social upheaval, this mixture of traditional cults and new ideas, this contact with various cultural traditions, Christianity, gnosticism and Manichaeism spread rapidly. The papyri show beyond doubt that this spread of ideas and writings was not confined to the larger cities, nor to the Greek population. Religious writings, like parts of the Bible, Manichaean hymns, and gnostic apocrypha found their way into the countryside. In the second part of the third century the need for Coptic translations becomes evident. Literacy was not something restricted to those who went through the Greek gymnasias and fulfilled the standards of Greek education; many would have been able to understand and even read simple Greek, though not able to converse fluently or write literary Greek.¹⁵

Christianity spread in this society primarily as a philosophy, a taught way of life based on a special interpretation of sacred texts. The earliest pieces of evidence for Egyptian Christianity give numerous references to schools, to reading, interpreting, and working with texts—even to what must be termed scholarly work.¹⁶ Although there is no proof for, and little credibility in the opinion that, Egyptian Christianity was thoroughly heterodox until the fourth century, it is evident that there was no strict form of orthodoxy applied everywhere. In the papyri from the third and fourth century the gnostic and other heretic texts are very few compared to the ones accepted as orthodox. Besides the biblical texts the most common writings seem to have been the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Paschal Homily* of Melito of Sardis, the *Acts of Paul*, and the homilies of Origen.¹⁷ It is within this tradition that one could expect to find the heritage that shaped a young Christian seeking spiritual guidance.

There is, furthermore, no evidence that Christianity primarily attracted the lowest level in society. From the papyri and other evidence it seems that the literate middle classes of the towns constituted the majority in the church. There is also ample evidence of Christians from the upper class. By the early fourth century, the church had accumulated considerable wealth and was deeply engaged in trade and cultivation of land. The office of bishop, and thus governor of this wealth, soon became very attractive, as evinced by the warnings uttered by Origen and Athanasius, and the fact that the church soon decided to appoint monks as bishops.¹⁸ From this background in society and church, it becomes more difficult to imagine that the leading monks of the first generation were illiterate peasants; they were, rather, educated and prosperous leaders of a certain social standing. Their motive for leaving society behind and settling in isolation was not flight from oppression or fanaticism, but the result of a philosophical or religious quest combined with an aversion to the disruption occasioned by the worldly concerns of property, social obligation, and the material side of the emerging church. Even on a theoretical level, it is hard to imagine that a movement with such a rapid growth and permanent effects should have come out of a number of insignificant and illiterate individuals' simply fleeing society.

The Monastic Interpretation of Ascetic Tradition

St. Antony as a spiritual teacher handing down his teaching in a series of seven letters, written in Coptic and full of biblical quotations marked by the exegetical and theological tradition of Origen of Alexandria, is no unlikely figure in the 330s. The earliest archives of Egyptian monasteries show that the monks had some education and were deeply involved in studies and correspondence.¹⁹ The lists from and recoveries of early monastic libraries show that Origen played an important role in the shaping of the minds of the first monks. The opponents of Origen, like Epiphanius, Theophilus of Alexandria and Jerome, as well as his followers, like Palladius and Rufinus, attest to the impact Origen's writings had made on some of the leading monks of the fourth century and to the existence of an "Origenist network" of Nitria.²⁰ Most probably it is even the Origenism of the tradition rooted in St. Antony that lies behind the attempts of the author of the *Vita* and the *Apophthegmata* to rework the image of St. Antony, making it to a large degree incompatible with the letters.

The seven letters of St. Antony are important not only as the major source for St. Antony himself. They are also, together with the strange letters of Pachomius, the first major writings of Egyptian monasticism and most probably the first original writings in Coptic, although preserved only in Arabic, Georgian, and Latin.²¹ Given the significance of Antony for the monastic tradition, they can be regarded as a major source for the later development of monastic theology. A comparison of Antony's letters with the letters of Ammonas, Macarius and the writings of Evagrius will also show a common tradition.²² It thus seems safe to regard the letters as our main source for what can be termed the School of St. Antony, shaping lower Egyptian monastic theology.

Probably the most striking feature of the letters is their emphasis on *gnōsis* (knowledge). Exhortations to know and understand recur throughout the letters and are clearly rooted in a theology for which knowledge is at the center. Knowledge is necessary in order to be saved—that is, to return to God. This knowledge is primarily self-knowledge: one must come to know the self in order to know God; one must return to self in order to return to God. Knowledge of God is possible since humans participate in God, a participation found in a person's *ousia noera* (intellectual substance). The body must be cleansed and made subject to the spirit so that it does not tie one to what is material and passing. The redemption brought by Christ is the granting of the power to return and become again a spiritual unity. Behind these notions lie, no doubt, a Platonic understanding of the human being and as is evident in some passages an Origenistic interpretation of Christianity.²³

Asceticism in Antony's letters is a necessary first step in the human being's return to God. The human being is torn apart by passions attacking through the senses and ideas attacking through the mind. He or she has no power over self, but has become a seat of unclean motions and demons. The latter must be driven out and the body and the soul cleansed. Ascetic practice is the method of cutting short the influences of the motions and demons. There is, however, no specific teaching about various ascetic practices in the letters, only an emphasis on the need to purify each

member of the body, and the need to be guided and strengthened by the spirit. A very important aspect of Antony's teaching is his emphasis on the natural condition of human beings.²⁴ Virtue is nothing foreign to human nature; on the contrary, salvation is the return of the human being to a natural state. Nature is not fallen and should not be rejected. God thus calls human beings primarily through the natural law laid down in their hearts. The written (scriptural) law, and the teaching of the Holy Spirit, those other ways in which God calls human beings, do not contain anything new. The coming of Jesus, his presence, reveals what is already laid down in creation—it reestablishes the unity that once existed. It is worth noting that the same emphasis on the natural goodness of human beings reappears in the sermon attributed to Antony in the *Vita*. (Actually, there are numerous similarities between the letters and the teachings put forward in the *Vita*.²⁵)

In the letters of Ammonas, his disciple, we find very little of Antony's emphasis on God's calling and his dispensations and on what the human being is expected to give in return. There is also no specific teaching on ascetic practice. But it is clear that Ammonas shared Antony's philosophical background of strong dualism between matter, division, and temporality on the one hand and spirit, unity, and eternity on the other. Ammonas is, however, more concerned with mystical experience, with what God grants everyone who puts aside this world. He describes the joy, power, and revelations that come to anyone who endures the ascetical struggle. Asceticism is not a goal in itself, not a merit, not a punishment or suffering; it is a way to open oneself to what God wants to give. While Antony put his stress on God's wrath and the struggle to be liberated from the demons and return to oneself, Ammonas has added an important dimension to monastic tradition: the longing for God and the pleasures of a communion with God.²⁶

After Antony and Ammonas, the tradition settles in Nitria and Scetis, where some of the disciples of Antony, such as Macarius and Pambo and their disciples, create the setting of the *Apophthegmata patrum*. Rufinus, who visited Nitria in the 370s, and Palladius, who lived there in the 380s and 390s, both attest to the role Antony played as the authority of the past and the importance of Origen's writings for the monastic community. The latter is also confirmed by Epiphanius, who accuses the monks of Nitria of being followers of Origen. From Palladius we even gain an image of the leading monks as highly literate and engaged in philosophical problems.²⁷ Although the *Sayings* tends to downplay this aspect of the monks, there are also here numerous examples of books being read, copied, or written, and even of highly allegorical interpretations of biblical texts being discussed.²⁸

It is thus clear that Evagrius did not settle in the desert as the great philosopher in the midst of illiterate peasants. He emerges from his own writings as a pupil of the masters of the desert.²⁹ What he did was to collect the wisdom and to systematize the teaching of his own masters. He is the first writer to incorporate a collection of sayings in his own writings, and his later works are generally written as series of aphorisms, or *kephalaia* (chapters).³⁰ This is not the place to speak about Evagrius's teachings on asceticism, but it seems obvious to me that the tradition of the desert played as great a role as did his reading of Origen. It was probably his own experiences of desert asceticism, however, practicing what he was taught by

his masters, that formed his writings and made them valuable for others. In them the results of monastic asceticism are made available for any person who starts to wrestle with self.

The contribution of the early monastic tradition to ascetic theology is, perhaps, primarily the realization of the need for separation from ordinary life and the creation of an autonomous “city” (*polis*). According to the *Vita*, what Antony realized was that it is impossible to live a fully ascetic life—that is, a life marked by spiritual warfare—within the context of ordinary social obligations. What monasticism adds to ascetic theology is the establishment of a milieu in which ascetic practice can flourish and in which its fruits can be handed down in spiritual teaching through the writings of the monks. It is this creation of a “Sonderwelt,” this creation of a *polis* out of the desert, that marks the beginning of monasticism. It should probably also be regarded as the basic condition necessary for asceticism to flourish in Christian tradition. Asceticism needs to be linked to the idea of a citizenship of heaven, not of worldly society, if it is not to remain a mere physical practice, comparable to sports.³¹

A secondary contribution of the early monks is what could be called the christianization of Hellenic ascetic traditions. Through the popularization of Origen’s synthesis of Platonic philosophy and the teachings of the New Testament, Antony and his followers provided a Christian interpretation of popular philosophy and a philosophical understanding of popular piety. This interpretation was, moreover, practiced in front of the people and personified in the monk, “the holy man.” In him and the tradition formed through his disciples, a canon of Christianity was created, a canon probably as influential as the biblical writings. The fact that the monk was independent of ordinary society, even almost independent of bodily needs, meant that he could be trusted as a mediator not only of God, but also of other human beings.³² As an ascetic and a man without civil obligations, the monk was freer than most. The success of Christianity could hardly have come about without the devotion of the ascetics combined with the Platonic interpretation of Christianity that developed in the monasteries of Egypt and Palestine.

NOTES

1. The date of origin and the earliest developments of monasticism have been a matter of dispute for more than a century. The position taken in 1877 by Helmut Weingarten—based on the silence of such sources as Eusebius and Athanasius (the *Life of Antony* he considered to be spurious)—that monasticism emerged only after Constantine has been refuted mainly on the basis of papyri. See, for example, E. A. Judge, “The Earliest Use of Monachos for ‘Monk’ and the Origins of Monasticism,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20 (1977):72–89; James Goehring, “The Origins of Monasticism,” *Eusebius, Christianity and Judaism*, *Studia Post-Biblica* 42, eds. H. W. Attridge and C. Hato (Leiden: Brill 1992), pp. 235–255, and others. For early material see the archives of Paphnutios, published in H. I. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt: The Jewish Troubles in Alexandria and the Athanasian Controversy* (London, 1924), and Nephoros, published in Barbel Kramer and John C. Shelton, *Das Archiv des Nephoros und verwandte Texte* (Mainz, 1987). Texts like the *Life of Antony*, the Pachomian material, the

- Apophthegmata patrum*, the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, and the *Historia Lausiaca* all look back on a tradition of one or two generations. For a survey see Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint* (Lund, 1990), pp. 116–119.
2. Cassian's dependence on the Egyptian fathers is documented in H.-O. Weber, *Die Stellung des Johannes Cassianus zur asuserpachomianischen Mönchstradition* (Münster, 1961). Evagrius's dependence is discussed in Gabriel Bunge, "Évagre de Pontique et les deux Macaire," *Irénikon* 56 (1983):215–227, 322–360; and S. Rubenson, "Evagrius Pontikos and die Theologie der Wüste," in *Festschrift Louise Abramowski* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993).
 3. The different theories were collected by Karl Heussi in his important but outdated *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums* (Tübingen, 1936), pp. 280–304. Recent discussions, albeit rather different, are found in Armand Veilleux, "Monasticism and Gnosis in Egypt," Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring, eds., *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 271–306; Goehring, in "Origins," and Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 36–39. The latter seems to me too apologetical and too negative on the influence of Hellenic philosophy. Cf. Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 119–125.
 4. The difficulty in using the *Vita Antonii* as a historical source is discussed in H. Dörries, *Die Vita Antonii als Geschichtsquelle* (Göttingen, 1949); revised edition in *idem*, *Wort und Stunde*, Erster Band, *Gesammelte Studien zur Kirchengeschichte des vierten Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1966), and with critical remarks on Dörries in Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 126–144. For the Pachomian material see P. Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 37–55. For the *Apophthegmata* see Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 145–162, and its caution against the general reliance on the sayings as "the authentic voice of the desert fathers."
 5. *Vita Pachomii Graeca*, chapters 2, 22, 99, 120, 136 and parallels in Coptic. See Rousseau, *Pachomius*, pp. 45–48, 60, and 179; and, for a full discussion, Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 165–172.
 6. For a discussion of all references to Antony see Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 172–184.
 7. See Michael A. Williams, "The Life of Antony and the Domestication of Charismatic Wisdom," *Charisma and Sacred Biography, Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1982), Thematic Studies 48.3–4.
 8. The literature on the *Vita Antonii* is vast. For a list of editions and for recent summaries see *Clavis patrum graecorum* 2101, ed. M. Geerard, 5 vols. (Brepols, 1974–1987) and G.J.M. Bartelink, "Die literarische Gattung der Vita Antonii: Struktur und Motive," *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982) and Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 126–132.
 9. W. Bousset, *Apophthegmata: Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen, 1923). A recent example of a similar reliance on the sayings is Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*.
 10. See above, note 4.
 11. *Vita Antonii* 1, 16, 66, 72–74, 81.
 12. For a discussion see Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 141–144.
 13. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–47.
 14. For descriptions of Egypt in this period see Alan K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs* (London, 1986) and Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule* (Oxford, 1983). The results of papyrological and historical research bearing on the setting of early mo-

- nasticism is discussed in Rousseau, *Pachomius*, pp. 1–36, and Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 89–125.
15. Evidence from the papyri in Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 95–99, 109–115, 119–125.
 16. See Colin Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London, 1979).
 17. Roberts, *Manuscript*, pp. 60–65.
 18. Rubenson, *The Letters*, p. 107, quoting Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 78.1.3 and Origen, *Commentarii in Mattheum* 15.26.
 19. See the editions of monastic archives mentioned in note 1 and the discussion on a Pachomian origin of the Nag-Hammadi codices summarized and developed in Clemens Scholten, “Die Nag-Hammadi-Texte als Buchbesitz der Pachomianer,” *JAC* 31 (1988). Cf. Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 119–125.
 20. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.4.1; Jerome, *Epistulae* 86–92; Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 3, 4, 11, 38, 47, 55; *idem*, *Dialogus de vita Iohannis Chrysostomi* 17; Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.4.8. See also Jon F. Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism in Early Christianity: Epiphanius of Cyprus and the Legacy of Origen* (Mercer University Press, 1988) and Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, 1992).
 21. See S. Rubenson, “St. Antony, ‘The First Real Coptic Author?’” *Actes du IV^e congrès copte* (Louvain, 1992), pp. 16–27.
 22. See Rubenson, “Evagrius Pontikos als Erbe der Wüste.”
 23. Rubenson, *The Letters*, pp. 59–88.
 24. *Epistulae Antonii* 4.13; 7.11, pp. 49–51.
 25. See Rubenson, *The Letters*, p. 73, note 2, and more general *ibid.*, pp. 132–141.
 26. The literature on the letters of Ammonas is very meager. Except for the editions listed in CPG 2380 and Franz Klejna, “Antonius und Ammonas: Eine Untersuchung über Herkunft und Eigenart der ältesten Mönchsbriege,” *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 62 (1938), the only study is S. Rubenson, “Ammonas—en bortglömd gestalt i den kristna mystikens tidiga historia,” *Florilegium Patristicum: En Festskrift till Per Beskow* (Delsbo: Åsak, 1991), pp. 168–185.
 27. See above, note 20.
 28. See Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, pp. 111–114 and Rubenson, *The Letters*, p. 119ff.
 29. See Bunge, “Évagre le Pontique et les deux Macaires.”
 30. For Evagrius, see Gabriel Bunge, *Evagrius Pontikos, Briefe aus der Wüste* (Trier, 1986).
 31. In the *Vita Antonii*, the first attempt to interpret nascent monasticism in the Christian tradition, Athanasius makes this his “Leitmotif.” See *Vita Antonii* 14.
 32. This theme is developed in Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971). Antony’s role as mediator is borne out in *Vita Antonii* 84–87.

Asceticism and Mysticism in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Bernard McGinn

In 1752, the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Battista Scaramelli issued his *Direttorio ascetico* designed “to teach the manner of leading souls through the ordinary ways of grace to Christian perfection.” This was followed, in 1754, with his posthumous *Direttorio mistico* “aimed at the directors of those souls which God leads through the way of contemplation.”¹ Scaramelli’s works were probably the most influential proponents in designating “asceticism” and “mysticism,” or ascetical and mystical theology, as the received terms for the basic divisions in the Christian path to perfection over the past two centuries, at least in the Catholic tradition. The publication of the *Direttorio mistico* was itself a minor miracle. Scaramelli had presented it for ecclesiastical judgment in 1743, and in the antimystical atmosphere of the reaction to Quietism and the condemnations not only of the questionable Madame Guyon, but also of the well-established Archbishop Fénelon, it is not surprising that it took over a decade and considerable willingness on the author’s part to respond to the censors that allowed the document finally to see the light and to enjoy its subsequent success.² The *Direttorio ascetico* encountered no such problems and was even more popular.

Scaramelli’s two-stage view of Christian perfection remained normative down to living memory in Roman Catholicism. Among its last great monuments was the *Preçis de théologie ascétique et mystique* of the Sulpician Adolph Tanquerey, who taught for fifteen years in the United States, before retiring to France, where his *magnum opus* appeared in 1923–1924. It went through nine French editions, was translated into at least ten languages, and remained a basic textbook in Catholic seminaries down to Vatican II.

I mention Scaramelli and Tanquerey not because they were responsible for creating the connection between asceticism and mysticism, but because they transmitted what they conceived the traditional relationship between these terms to have been to the modern era. Doubtless both the Italian Jesuit and the French Sulpician would have been amazed at a conference devoted to the study of asceticism, rather than its practice. They might well have insisted that any such conference would be incomplete without some consideration being accorded to the second stage of their itinerary to God, the mystical one. My purpose is to ask why and how asceticism

and mysticism came to be so intimately linked in the Christian tradition. Although asking the question may seem to be merely otiose (asceticism has always been linked to mysticism, correct?), what has so often been taken as a mere given is actually the product of a complex history which deserves further study.

To be sure, the very act of asking questions about the relation between “asceticism” and “mysticism” would have made little sense to Christian thinkers before the seventeenth century. “Mysticism” is a relatively recent term, and Michel de Certeau has persuasively argued that the creation of the substantive “la mystique” in French in the early seventeenth century (better translated as “mystics” in comparison with mathematics) marks a decisive shift in Western perceptions of that element in its religious history. Moderns attempt to circumscribe this when they use the term “mysticism.”³ The adjectival and adverbial forms (*mystikos*, *mystikōs* in Greek; *mysticus*, *mystice* in Latin), of course, have a long history in Christianity, one intimately connected with what modern scholars call mysticism, but also with a wider penumbra of signification. Even “asceticism” as a technical term may be more modern than we usually think.⁴ The Greek substantives *askēsis* and *askētēs* are as old as Homer (*Iliad* 10.438 and 23.743; *Odyssey* 23.198); but the terms do not occur in the New Testament (though the verb *askeō* is used in *Acts* 24.16). Early Christian adaptations of *askēsis* were often broader and more diffuse than the modern term “asceticism,” which in English at least appears to be a seventeenth-century creation.⁵ Full semantic studies of the evolution of both terms are still lacking.

My purpose here is not to try to give any history, even a sketchy one, of how Christianity adopted, adapted and perhaps even abused *askēsis* in its formative centuries, but to reflect on some—by no means all—stages in how Christians came to see ascetical practice and mystical contemplation as integral parts of one path, the road to God. My remarks are meant to be provocative rather than probative, designed to open up avenues for discussion and debate. I shall suggest a thesis, but a tentative one, still open to qualification and revision.

In my book *The Foundations of Mysticism* I argued that the struggle over the true meaning of *gnōsis*, or saving knowledge, during the second and early third centuries was formative in the history of Christian mysticism. The development of Christian mysticism, like Christian orthodoxy, must be understood in the light of this debate.⁶ The mystical elements that were of importance for many gnostic groups—such as the ascent of the soul, the awakening to the immanence of God, the role of visions, the relation of faith and love to *gnōsis*, and the necessity for a spiritual reading of the scriptures—were to remain of central significance in later Christian mysticism.⁷ But on several crucial issues the debate over *gnōsis* produced significant reactions against views held by those we today call Gnostics. These involve not only the dogmatic foundations of later Christian mysticism: that is, teachings like the goodness of material creation, the unity of the Creator and Redeemer, and the real enfleshment of redeeming Logos, but also issues more directly involved in what came to be called mystical theology.

Most Gnostics, like the mystics of the pagan Platonic tradition, taught that the “spark of the soul” was innately divine, needing only to be awakened to its true

self in order to be saved. Anti-Gnostics like Justin, Irenaeus, Clement and Origen insisted that the soul was created, even its “spark” being something only divinizable rather than inherently divine. The spokesmen for the orthodox party also gave *pistis* (faith) a saving role, though they believed that among the “true Gnostics” *pistis* should flower into a higher stage marked by both *gnōsis* and *agapē*. To paraphrase Clement of Alexandria, “All the elect are good, but some are more elect than others.”⁸ Finally, the orthodox came to insist that visionary experience and even the spiritual interpretation of scripture, which was of central importance for patristic mysticism, was to be tested not by its ability to facilitate contact with God for the few through the revelation of gnostic mythology as a deeper and more real message about salvation. Rather, it should be evaluated according to its conformity to the exoteric *paradosis* (framework) of the Christian community enshrined in the teaching of the bishops, and therefore open to all.⁹ Although Christianity included an esoteric element from the beginning, the gnostic crisis effected a decisive shift in the forms of modified esotericism that were considered legitimate. Since the time of the great debate over *gnōsis*, any forms of esotericism founded upon diversity of message and not merely upon different modes of transmission or levels of reception have always been suspect, and often condemned, in the Christian tradition.

Professor Gedaliahu Stroumsa of Hebrew University has suggested a similar dialectical relation between gnostic and orthodox views of asceticism. In a paper comparing the roles of asceticism in gnosticism and in early monasticism, Stroumsa argues that despite many initial similarities and overlaps, there is a fundamental difference between the two. “The Gnostic is essentially a stranger to the world; his asceticism only makes it possible to confirm this inherent situation. In the case of the monk, on the other hand, the long effort of asceticism is absolutely necessary to enable him to detach himself from the world.”¹⁰ The root of this, according to Stroumsa, is in the lack of a concept of human personality in gnosticism, which is a corollary to the gnostic insistence on the innate spark of divinity discussed above. Long ago, Plotinus, who shared the Gnostics’ view about the innate divinity of the soul, also detected another significant root of the difference between his own philosophical understanding of asceticism and that which he found in the Gnostics, when he upbraided them for neglecting the study of virtue.¹¹

Gnostic asceticism and mysticism presented a major challenge to those Christians—the not-so-silent majority—who eventually won the day. Important elements of the “orthodox” Christian view of the relation of asceticism and mysticism began to take shape in the debate over *gnōsis*. The orthodox party (if I may be permitted to describe something so amorphous in shorthand fashion) certainly based its view of what constitutes acceptable ascetical and mystical practice on what we can call “internal” components of Christian beliefs, such doctrines as the goodness of creation and the created nature of the soul; but the task of putting asceticism and mysticism together into a coherent program was to be accomplished only with tools taken from Hellenistic philosophy, as a brief look at Clement of Alexandria and Origen will suggest.¹² The real work of making this program of Christian *paideia* (ideals of culture) a central element in the history of Christianity, however, was accomplished by monasticism. Monastic asceticism was not founded on the care-

fully structured educative pattern envisaged by Origen, though Origenist influence on the early monks, such as Antony, cannot be excluded.¹³ It was the “Origenist wave” of the late fourth century, culminating in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus, which brought the practice of the desert and the speculative genius of Origen together into a program that was to prove decisive in the history of Christian spirituality, both in the East and the West.

Clement of Alexandria was deeply concerned with the limits of Christian self-denial, as we can see from his treatise *Quis dives salvetur?*, as well as from his reflections on martyrdom and on the role of *apatheia*. He is one of the first Christians to use the term *askēsis*, describing “gnostic *askēsis*” as an important Christian ideal in the *Stromateis*.¹⁴ Clement was no less concerned with the role of direct forms of contact with the unknown God present in Jesus Christ through prayer and contemplation; indeed, it was he who first domesticated the term *theōria* (theory) in Christianity (he uses it eighty-four times). In this Alexandrian teacher we can find many of the core elements relating to the later history of both Christian asceticism and Christian mysticism; but, given the eclectic nature of his thought, they have not yet been placed into any comprehensive or articulated structure.

One area in Clement’s thought, however, deserves special notice for an understanding of later treatments of the connection between asceticism and mysticism. Asceticism’s relation to mysticism was often to be expressed in terms of *praxis* and *theōria*, or what the Western Christian tradition came to call the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.¹⁵ Clement initiated the domestication of these terms taken from classical philosophy into Christianity. *Praxis* (doing) and *theōria* (originally, gazing or watching) first signified two kinds of activity at the basis of two discrete forms of life, the political and the philosophical. Later they came to be viewed as two aspects of the life of any thinking person, aspects that also gave rise to two specific kinds of knowledge. Plato, in his *Statesman* (258E) divided “all *epistēmē* (science) into two parts, calling the one *praktikēn* (practical) the other *monon gnōstikēn* (purely gnostic).” Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7 (1177A–1178A) adapted the terms “practical” and “theoretical” for these forms of knowledge, arguing that the theoretical or contemplative activity was better, insofar as it is based upon “something divine” in humanity. In later Greek philosophy, and especially in Christianity, these root meanings shifted. Among both pagans and Christians *theōria* came to be taken not just for any form of philosophical observation, but only for contemplative vision of the divine; *praxis*, among Christians like Clement, came to signify active love for neighbor, the *agapē* enjoined in the New Testament, not the public life of the citizen.

In the *Stromateis*, Clement notes the three things necessary for the true Gnostic—“These three things our philosopher attaches to himself: first, *theōria*; second, the fulfillment of the commandments; third, the forming of virtuous persons. . . .”¹⁶ It seems reasonable to take the latter two as comprising the realm of *praxis*, so that while Clement neither identifies *praxis* with *askēsis*, nor provides any clear account of how *praxis* and *theōria* are to be related in the life of the “true Gnostic,” by insisting that both elements are necessary he nevertheless laid the seeds for much to come—especially when monastic authors explicitly identified *praxis* and *askēsis*.

Clement was a precursor, Origen a direct source for many subsequent Christian attempts to bring together self-denial in the name of the gospel and mystical contemplation of God. The question as to whether Origen's thought constitutes a "system" or not, in this case regarding the question of the relation of asceticism and mysticism, seems to me misplaced.¹⁷ The great Alexandrian was not unlike Plato in this respect. He was not interested in "systems" in the modern sense, but everything he wrote sprang from a unified perspective based on deep and careful thought. Nowhere is this more true than in his thoughts about Christian *paideia*, that is, the lifelong training necessary to achieve the goal of human existence. Here his contributions were both original and epochal.

Origen himself was a noted ascetic. Whatever we are to make of his famous self-castration, Eusebius's description of how "He went to the limit in practicing a life given up to philosophy,"—that is, strict asceticism—is evidence enough.¹⁸ Even today, an academic who sold off all his books and restricted himself to an income less than that of a day laborer (four *obols*, says Eusebius) would be a source of surprise, if not of emulation, to his colleagues. Origen provides the earliest Christian spiritual itineraries that describe the progress of the soul from its present fallen state through the various stages of self-denial, practice of virtue, and finally encounter with the saving Logos. The most famous of these occurs in *Homily 27 on Numbers*, entitled "De mansionibus filiorum Istrahel" in the surviving Latin translation.¹⁹

In the exegetical treatise that closes the *De principiis*, Origen had advanced the key hermeneutical principle that "the prophecies which are uttered concerning the various nations ought rather to be referred to souls and the different heavenly dwelling places occupied by them" (*De prin.* 4.3.10). This is applied to the forty-two stations or camps of the wanderings of the children of Israel in the desert described in *The Book of Numbers*, chapter 33. Spiritually interpreted, the account reveals a "double exodus": first, of those who pass from a "Gentile" life to one lived under knowledge of the divine law; and second, the exodus of the soul's leaving the body. "... Let us strive to go forward," says Origen the preacher, "and to ascend one by one each of the steps of faith and the virtues. If we persist in them until we come to perfection, we shall be said to have made a stage at each of the steps of the virtues..." (*Hom.* 27.3). The rather tiresome, if consistently ingenious, way in which Origen interprets each of the forty-two waystops mingles ascetic struggle and the attainment of virtues with contemplative experience. The struggle to attain virtues by self-denial is a warfare against demons ("There is not a sin accomplished without them," says Origen [*Hom.* 27.8])—an important point for subsequent monastic appropriation of the Alexandrian's thought. The second stage, for example, is *Buthan* or "valley": "For in valleys and in low places the struggle against the devil and the opposing powers takes place" (*Hom.* 27.9). The actual mystical aspects of the journey are not clearly delineated, as, for example, stage twenty-three, *Thara*, which is interpreted as "contemplation of amazement" (*contemplatio stuporis*; Greek *exstasis*), and is briefly described as "a time when the mind is struck with amazement by the knowledge of great and marvelous things" (*Hom.* 27.12).²⁰ It would be difficult to make a coherent itinerary from this homily

alone, but Origen is clearly attempting to provide some structure for the process by which the soul advances in the spiritual life.

The beginning and the end of *Homily 27 on Numbers* hint at another, more coherent model of the soul's progress, which was to be one of Origen's major contributions to the history of spirituality. The Alexandrian introduces the homily by describing three kinds of food that nourish the Christian's advance to perfection—the milk of simple souls, which is identified with moral instruction; then the *olera* (vegetables) and lastly the *fortis cibus* (strong meat) which is suitable for the more advanced. Unfortunately, he does not stop to tell us more about the latter two. At the very end of the piece, however, he tellingly defends a homily he knows that some will think contrived by a comparison with the progress that students make in school:

In our analogy the students appear to linger in each different topic for public speaking and to make, as it were, stages in them; and they set out from one to the next, and again from it to another. In the same way why should not the names of the stages and the setting out from one to the next and from it to another be believed to indicate the progress of the mind and the acquisition of virtues? *Hom. 27.13*

This paidetic analogy illuminates the significance of Origen's most influential presentation of an integrated picture of the pilgrim soul's progress, the stages of development achieved through the instruction given in the three books of the true Solomon, that is, Christ the Teacher.

The well-known prologue to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* likens the teaching found in the Song with the "strong food" (*Heb. 5.14*) also mentioned in the Numbers homily.²¹ Subsequently, Origen identifies Solomon's three books, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* and the *Song of Songs*, with the "three general disciplines by which one attains knowledge of the universe," going on to say "The Greeks call them ethics, physics, and epoptics; and we can give them the terms moral, natural, and contemplative."²² The *disciplina moralis* teaches the "habits conducive to virtue." *Disciplina naturalis* shows how "each individual thing is assigned those uses for which it has been brought forth by the Creator," and *disciplina contemplativa* enables the mind to "transcend visible things and contemplate something of the divine and heavenly things."²³

As Pierre Hadot has shown, what Origen is doing here is appropriating the paidetic program of classical philosophy in the service of Christianity.²⁴ We often forget how far the ancient view of philosophy was from the modern one.²⁵ The classical concept of leading the philosophic life had nothing to do with a comfortable academic position and everything to do with a way of life that broke with the normal *bios* of the politically engaged citizen. Philosophy was a way of life more than a mode of discourse—a spiritual exercise founded upon *askēsis* and *theōria theou* (vision of the divine). The philosopher was, by definition, *atopos* (unclassifiable), that is, outside the ordinary social and political categories. In this sense, later Christian identification of the monks as true philosophers was far more appropriate than our modern linking of the Greek notion of philosophy with contem-

porary teachers of what we call philosophy. (By the way, just to be fair to all, modern theologians would have an equally difficult time fulfilling the job description of ancient theology, at least as Evagrius of Pontius put it—"If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian."²⁶) In the ancient world, philosophers had already begun to create a form of life that attempted to join what Scaramelli and Tanqueray, almost two millennia later, called asceticism and mysticism.

Origen's pioneering efforts to integrate the ascetical and mystical elements in Christianity into a coherent program was achieved on the basis of transmutation of the categories created in ancient philosophy. Whether this is to be condemned as a Greek invasion of authentic gospel purity, or to be applauded by closet Platonists, is not mine to judge. But even the closet Platonist should be attentive to the changes that the Alexandrian introduced into the classical philosophical paradigm in adapting it for Christian purposes. Plato, of course, had wanted philosophers to study reality, specifically the cosmos, to arrive at *epistēmē*. Later philosophers insisted that their students study books, especially the books of Plato. While the best and brightest, such as Plotinus, used the classical texts to advance their own thought, most philosophical education, even good philosophy, was conducted on the basis of the exegesis of received texts. However important these written authorities were in their respective textual communities, an importance that often rested on their connection with *palaïos logos* (ancient revelation) they could not equal the power of the Christian scriptures as sources both of group cohesiveness and of personal spiritual growth.

Origen's identification of Solomon Christ's three books of instruction as mapping out a new educational curriculum fused the classical view of textbooks as manuals for the "atopic" lifestyle of the philosopher with Christian emphasis that truth was really available only through the "divine oracles," the books of the Old and New Testaments. For Origen, the transformative process by which the fallen soul is trained in virtue in order to come to contemplative experience takes place in the very act of reading and appropriating the scriptural text. The homology that he established between the three components of the human person (body, soul, and spirit) and three levels of deepening penetration into the scripture (see *De prin.* 4.2.4) was only a shorthand way of presenting the complex process by which the believer is to place him- or herself *within* the text to inscribe its real meaning on the soul.²⁷ The trichotomic scheme, which expresses the inner unity of Origen's view of scripture, of *paideia*, and of human nature, controls his total ascetical and mystical teaching.

Origen's program was a great intellectual achievement. Its survival and subsequent influence, however, cannot be understood apart from its institutionalization in monasticism. But if Origen needed monasticism, monasticism also needed Origen. If it is legitimate to see monasticism, among other things, as the last great "philosophical school" of antiquity—as the monks themselves later claimed—then we have to admit that it was the Origenist view of Christian *paideia* that enabled them to create a full philosophical program, that is, one that not only lived an "atopic" life of the spiritual exercises of *askēsis* and *theōria*, but that also could

express this in philosophical discourse. Here I will speak primarily of the discourse itself in relation to its major creator, Evagrius of Pontus.²⁸

Evagrius had a background and training rather different from that of most of the monks of his time. An educated Greek courtier, he arrived in the Egyptian desert in 382 CE after spending some time among the Origenists in Palestine. But his training under Macarius and others gave him a real reputation for *askēsis*. Palladius records his saying, “I did not touch lettuce or any vegetable greens, or fruit, or grapes, nor did I even take a bath, since the time I have come to the desert.”²⁹ He was especially abstemious in drinking water, an element that he considered a particular instrument of diabolic temptations. But this “most learned man,” as Rufinus describes him in the additions he made in his translation of the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, was especially noted for his “grace in the discernment of spirits and the purging of thoughts,” which were so great that “it was thought that no other brother had ever achieved such subtle and spiritual knowledge.”³⁰ Evagrius’s impeccable credentials as a monastic ascetic and the profundity of his theology created what Louis Bouyer has justly called “the first complete system of Christian spirituality.”³¹

The beginning of Evagrius’s *Praktikos* summarizes this system in three stages that are based on Origen’s three sciences. “Christianity is the teaching of Christ our Savior. It is composed of *praktikē* (practice) of the *theōria* (contemplation) of the physical world, and of the contemplation of God.”³² This ternary division, however, does not rule out binary forms of expression: “The *praktikoi* understand the practical reasons, but the *gnōstikoi* see gnostic realities,” as we are told at the beginning of the *Gnostikos*.³³ Several things are immediately evident in these programmatic statements: the adaption of Origen’s threefold *paideia* to describe Christianity itself (something Origen would certainly have agreed with); the substitution of *praktikē* for *disciplina moralis*; and the use of the Platonic and Clementine vocabulary of *gnōstikos* along with the more usual *theōretikos* as contrasting terms with *praktikos*. Evagrius’s structuring of the inherited terminology into a flexible program of a fundamentally binary character—that is, one based on *praktikē*, or asceticism, and *gnōstikē*, or mysticism—which program could also be expressed in more mediational language of a ternary kind (*praktikē*, *physikē*, *theologikē*, the ancestor of the later categories of purgation-illumination-union) was the *Magna Carta* of the main tradition of itineraries of Christian spirituality in both the East and the West.

Evagrius’s contributions to subsequent programs of spirituality based on the inner relation of asceticism and mysticism went far beyond merely setting up the theoretical structure. His thought marks a new stage in the history of both asceticism and mysticism, though, because of his condemnation for Origenism in the sixth century he was to be more directly influential in the ascetical tradition. The three stages (*praktikē*, *physikē*, *theologikē*), the latter two constituting *gnōstikē* (which might be as easily called *mystikē*),³⁴ are specified by their aims according to Evagrius. At the end of the *Gnostikos* he summarizes: “The goal of *praktikē* is to purify the intellect and to render it impassible; that of the *physikē* is to reveal the truth hidden in all beings; but to remove the intellect from all material things and

to turn it toward the First Cause is a gift of *theologikē*.³⁵ The monk's major theoretical works, all expressed in the chapter form which he appears to have adopted from the ethical-ascetical *Sentences of Sextus* and the desert tradition of *dicta*,³⁶ or sayings of the respected abbas and ammas, formed a systematic, if gnomical, trilogy he called the *Monachikos*. The *Praktikos* consists of a hundred chapters on the ascetical life and can be supplemented by several other ascetical works, especially the popular *Antirrheticus*.³⁷ The *Gnostikos* contains fifty chapters dealing with how the contemplative teaches spiritual knowledge. Both these works of a more practical character are based upon the speculative Origenist systematics found in the *Kephalaia gnostica*, six centuries of ninety chapters each.³⁸ Evagrius's teaching on *proseuchē* (prayer) a term that he used almost interchangeably with *theōria* and *gnōsis*, was so essential to his mysticism that he devoted a separate treatise of 153 chapters to it. This work forms a useful supplement to the *Kephalaia*.³⁹

Although Evagrius, as we have seen, was known for his asceticism, the *Praktikos* and the *Antirrheticus* are not manuals or rules detailing external practices, but rather speculative considerations and advice about the more important internal asceticism by which the monk learns to master the *logismoi* (the evil tendencies within) that are the work of the demonic forces and the main obstacles to the return of *nous* (soul, spirit) to its true goal of perfect union with the Trinity.⁴⁰ Evagrius's subtle teaching about the eight *logismoi* (*gastrimargia*, *porneia*, *philargyria*, *lypē*, *orgē*, *akēdia*, *xenodoxia*, *hyperphania*), the ancestors of the "Seven Deadly Sins" of the later Western tradition,⁴¹ make up the bulk of his ascetical writings. Even his ascetical treatises, however, always keep the mystical goal of the vision of the Trinity in mind, as the prologue to the *Antirrheticus* shows:

We take pains that what will stand before the judgment seat of Christ is not a solitary man, but a solitary *nous*. For a solitary man is one who has turned from sin through his substantive deeds and actions, but a solitary *nous* is one who has turned from that sin that springs from the thoughts that reside in it and that sees the light of the Holy Trinity at the time of prayer.⁴²

"Reading, vigils and prayer. . . . Hunger, toil and solitude" (*Praktikos* 15), as well as the characteristically Evagrian "Limiting one's intake of water" (*Praktikos* 17) all play their part in acquiring the science of *praktikē*, but the fundamental training occurs within, by keeping careful watch over one's thoughts. "Let him [the monk] note well the complexity of his thoughts, their periodicity, the demons which cause them, with the order of their succession and the nature of their associations. Then let him ask from Christ the explanations of these data he has observed" (*Praktikos* 50).

This monk's mystical teaching, while based upon Origen's view of the fall and return of the *nous* (also described as the *logikos*), was both original and controversial. Evagrius went well beyond Origen in a number of ways, especially his use of apophatic language and his notion of what can be called an absorptive concept of union with God, perhaps the earliest in the history of Christian mysticism. By making contemplative prayer, or "pure prayer" in his terms,⁴³ the goal of the monastic life Evagrius made explicit a marriage between the developing forms of mo-

nasticism, in which the early rules generally say little about contemplation, and the rich tradition of Greek speculation about *theōria*.⁴⁴ For the theme under consideration, it is also important to take a brief look at the ways in which Evagrius drew out the inner connections between the ascetical and the mystical parts of his spiritual program through his treatment of *apatheia* and *agapē*.

Apatheia, the “health of the soul” as Evagrius called it (*Prak.* 56), was a key term in his spiritual vocabulary.⁴⁵ Perfect *apatheia*, which “develops in the soul after the victory over all the demons whose function it is to offer opposition to the ascetic life” (*Prak.* 60), has been well described by John Eudes Bamberger as “deep calm arising from the full and harmonious integration of the emotional life.”⁴⁶ An important passage in the “Letter to Anatolius” that prefaces the *Praktikos* describes the relation between *apatheia* and *agapē* as the two forces whose dynamic relation binds together the ascetical and the mystical stages of the Evagrian spiritual itinerary:

The fear of God strengthens faith, my son, and continence in turn strengthens this fear. Patience and hope make the latter virtue solid beyond all shaking and they also give birth to *apatheia*. Now this *apatheia* has a child called *agapē* who keeps the door to deep knowledge of the created universe [that is, *physikē*]. Finally, to this knowledge succeed theology and the supreme beatitude.⁴⁷

A more complete investigation than can be given here would reveal that *apatheia* and *agapē* can be considered as two sides of the same *katastasis* (state of soul) the goal of all ascetic effort and the necessary precondition for the pure prayer, the two stages of which lead to “essential *gnōsis* of the Trinity.”⁴⁸

Greek Christian speculation about the relation of asceticism to mysticism became available to Latin Christianity in the fourth and the fifth centuries. Origen’s analysis of the three kinds of teaching—the moral, the natural and the mystical—that lead to loving union with the Word was adopted by Ambrose of Milan in his treatise *De Isaac*, which despite its title is really a mystical commentary on the *Song of Songs*.⁴⁹ The bishop describes this triple pattern of the soul’s progress as *institutio*, *profectus*, and *perfectio* (*De Isaac* 8.68–70), language that already hints at the standard three stages that were to prove so popular later, especially through the influence of the Dionysian texts. Augustine of Hippo, on the other hand, was little touched by Origen, in this area at least, and did not see the *Song of Songs* as a mystical text in the sense of containing the deepest message about the soul’s erotic relation to God. Augustine’s adoption of Plotinian motifs in describing the soul’s ascent to the divine realm, both in the *Confessions* and in later works actually stands on the margin of the mainstream of subsequent attempts at structuring the spiritual journey.⁵⁰ More important for our theme (and I must stress that I am considering only one element of a complex picture here) was the North African’s teaching on the relation of the active and the contemplative lives. Augustine, building on earlier philosophical accounts,⁵¹ as well as on the Christian transformation of the meaning of the *vita activa* already noted, taught that contemplation of divine things was superior to action conceived of as loving service to neighbor, but that the highest ideal was the interaction of action and contemplation in what he called the *vita*

composita. “No one should be so contemplative that in his contemplation he does not think of his neighbor’s need; no one so active that he does not seek the contemplation of God.”⁵²

The system of Evagrius,⁵³ especially as disseminated by his student, John Cassian, the third of the founders of Western Christian mysticism,⁵⁴ was as important in the West as it was in the East, particularly because of its role in the institutionalization of an integrated program of asceticism and mysticism within the monastic life. Cassian, a monk trained in both Palestine and Egypt, fled the East at the time of the first Origenist controversy about 400 CE, eventually settling in southern Gaul. His writings, the *Institutiones*, which described the external practices of the Eastern coenobites, and the *Conlationes*, the teachings of the Desert Fathers about the interior life, were the most important link between early monasticism and the monks of the West.

Cassian was neither so original nor so systematic a thinker as Evagrius; but his somewhat simplified and practical version of the Evagrian understanding of the relation of asceticism and mysticism set the mold within which early medieval spirituality, largely monastic in character, appropriated this theme. *Conlatio* 14, put in the mouth of Abba Nestorius, divides *spiritualis scientia* (spiritual knowledge) into two parts: “First there is practical, that is, active science, which is perfected in correcting moral actions and purging vices; and second, the theoretical science, which consists in the contemplation of divine things and the grasp of the most sacred meanings [of Scripture].”⁵⁵ *Scientia actualis*, what Scaramelli would later call ascetical theology, has both a negative and a positive side. Negatively, the monk strives to overcome the eight principal vices, Evagrius’s *logismoi* that Cassian introduced to the West; positively, asceticism acquires and orders the virtues under the direction of *puritas cordis* (purity of heart), which was Cassian’s more biblically oriented term for Evagrius’s *apatheia*. Purity of heart is described as the *scopos*, or *destinatio*, of the monastic life, that is, the proper aim or intention which makes the ultimate goal of the enjoyment of heaven possible (*Conl.* 1.4). In a sense, Cassian integrated both parts of his ascetico-mystical itinerary even more closely than Evagrius. Purity of heart is at one and the same time tranquil avoidance of vice (*Conl.* 1.6) and “the perfection of apostolic charity.”⁵⁶ The *Gospel of Matthew* 5.8 had promised the vision of God to the pure of heart, so that Cassian saw the *puritas cordis* gained through constant repetition of the formula of “unceasing prayer” (*Deus in adiutorium meum intende: Domine ad adiuvandum me festina*, cf. *Psalms* 69.2, in the Septuagint) as leading to *theoriae* (invisible and celestial contemplations) and to that inexpressible fire of prayer experienced by very few” (*Conl.* 10.10).

Cassian’s description of *scientia theoretikē* differs from that of Evagrius in being directly tied to the Bible, its two parts being described as “historical interpretation” and “spiritual understanding, which consists in tropology, allegory and anagogy” (*Conl.* 14.8). Thus, like Origen, the whole program of monastic education for him was explicitly biblical; he even cites the Origenist identification of Solomon’s three books with three ascending stages of the soul’s progress, though tying them in, with a typically monastic twist, to three forms of renunciation. The *Book of Proverbs*

teaches the renunciation of the flesh and earthly things; the *Book of Ecclesiastes* teaches the vanity of the world, while the *Song of Songs* instructs the soul in the renunciation of “every present visible thing” so that “the mind transcending everything visible is joined to God’s Word by the contemplation of heavenly things” (*Conl.* 3.6).

Cassian also discussed the relation of action and contemplation, but only in a monastic vein. *Conlatio* 19 identifies the *vita activa* with the coenobitic life of the community, while the *vita contemplativa* is primarily associated with hermits. But things are not quite that simple. The heights of *scientia theologikē* can be reached by coenobites too (see *Conl.* 9.25–27); and Cassian appears to think that some mixing of action and contemplation is found in both kinds of monasticism, although his thoughts on this topic are not notably clear. His monastic reading of the two forms of life, however, was to be modified by his early medieval successors, notably Julianus Pomerius and Gregory the Great.

Julianus was a late fifth-century Gallic church leader, poised between the dying world of bishops like Sidonius Apollinaris, who could still think of themselves as Roman gentlemen, albeit of Christian persuasion, and the Western episcopate of the seventh century—educators, missionaries and functionaries who could only dream of belonging to a world that no longer existed. His popular work called *De vita contemplativa* was a handbook for bishops describing how to relate the active life (of restraining the passions and performing works of charity) to the contemplative life (of the vision of God, which can only be fully enjoyed in heaven, but to whose foretaste not just monks, but even bishops are called), “. . . Who will be such a stranger to faith as to doubt that such men are sharers in the contemplative virtue, by whose words as well as example many become coheirs of the kingdom of heaven?”⁵⁷

It was Gregory the Great, pope from 590 to 604 CE, who gave the most thought to the question of the proper relation between action and contemplation, and whose views on this subject were to become normative for almost the entire medieval period. This is not the place to go into the details of the pope’s understanding of either asceticism or mysticism; but, in order to complete this sketch of the pre-Dionysian development of our theme, at least in the West, we can highlight four major contributions that he made to the later history. First, Gregory recognized an important ascetic element present in all the charitable activities of the *vita activa*. For him there were two ways of carrying the cross in imitation of the Redeemer—“*aut per abstinentiam in corpore . . . aut per compassionem in corde*” (either through abstinence in the body, or through compassion in the heart).⁵⁸ Gregory’s broad and deeply interiorized conception of asceticism is still in need of further study.⁵⁹ Second, the pope taught that contemplation could not be restricted to the monastic life, or even to bishops. As a text in his *Homilies on Ezekiel* puts it:

For it is not that the grace of contemplation is given to the highest [the clergy] and not to the least, but frequently the highest, frequently the least, more frequently “those set apart” [*remoti*, that is, the monks], and sometimes even the married receive it. Therefore, there is no Christian state from which the grace of contemplation can

be excluded. Whoever has an interior heart can be illuminated by the light of contemplation. . . .⁶⁰

Third, Gregory furthered the movement away from the purely monastic understanding of action and contemplation found in Cassian. His teaching was fundamentally Augustinian in that it accepted both modes of life as good and saw contemplation as the superior life, but insisted that contemplation must yield to the demands of active love when necessary. Fourth, and perhaps most important, Gregory went beyond both Augustine and Julianus in his discussion of the conditions under which contemplation must yield to action and the reasons why an oscillation between the two is necessary in the Christian life. Fuller development of this dimension, however, would lead us away from the issue of the fundamental structural relations between asceticism and mysticism that has been our main concern.

Asceticism and mysticism are modern terms and the legitimacy of applying them throughout almost twenty centuries of Christian history is not without its dangers. Nevertheless, I have suggested that the effort of placing what later ages came to call asceticism and mysticism into a coherent and integrated program of spiritual training that has a succession down almost to the present era is rooted in the encounter between Christianity and Hellenism between c.200 and 400 CE. Clement and Origen were the initiators, and Origen's adaptation of the classical threefold program of *paideia* in the service of Christian biblical culture marked the first great stage. The second stage came with monasticism and is evident in writers such as Evagrius and Cassian who can—paradoxically for some—be seen as the last ancient philosophers: that is, writers who used their experience of the atopic life to create a philosophical discourse fusing ascetic self-denial with contemplative vision of God. A complicating factor, one viewed in different ways by the participants, was how far the categories of *praktikē* and *theoretikē*, that is, *actio* and *contemplatio*, were to be used to express these stages on the road to Christian perfection.

NOTES

1. For an introduction to Scaramelli, see Giuseppe Mellinato, "Scaramelli (Jean-Baptiste)," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, eds. M. Viller, S.J., et al., 14:396–402.
2. Thirteen Italian editions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, two editions of the Latin translation, and translations into Spanish, German, French, Polish, and English.
3. See Michel de Certeau, "'Mystique' au XVII^e siècle: Le problème du langage 'mystique,'" *L'Homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac* (Paris: Aubier, 1963), 2:267–291; and *The Mystic Fable*, volume 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), pp. x, 3–13.
4. On the early evolution of the term, see "Ascèse, Ascétisme," *DS* 1:939–941.
5. The early appearances of both terms cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* were often pejorative ones. In 1646, Sir Thomas Browne in his *Pseudegraphia Epigrapha* spoke of those who were ". . . doomed to a life a celibacy by the asceticism which had corrupted the simplicity of Christianity." In 1763 John Wesley's *Journal* spoke of the "poison of mysticism" that has "extinguished every spark of life."
6. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 89–99.

7. For a recent interpretation of gnostic mysticism, see Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987). A summary of "Gnostic Spirituality" by R. M. Grant can be found in *Christian Spirituality I: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp. 44–60.
8. *Quis dives salvetur* 36 (ed. O. Stählin, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* [Leipzig, 1897–1941; Berlin and Leipzig, 1953; Berlin 1954ff.], 3:183); cf. *Stromateis* 5.14.141 (GCS 2:421).
9. This is not to deny the modified esotericism found in thinkers like Clement and Origen, which is part of an important trajectory in early Christian thought. Clement, with his teaching on the *gnostikē paradosis* (*Strom.* 1.1.15), is the clearest example; but Origen's *Contra Celsum* also witnesses to this motif (e.g., 1.7, 3.60, 4.6). See Gedaliahu Stroumsa, "Paradosis: traditions ésoteriques dans le christianisme des premiers siècles," *Savoir et salut* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), pp. 127–143. Others were more radically opposed, for example, Irenaeus, *Libros quinque adversus haereses*, 3.3.1.
10. Gedaliahu Stroumsa, "Ascèse et gnose: Aux origines de la spiritualité monastique," *Revue Thomiste* 81 (1981):557–573 (quote on 570). This paper is also reprinted in *Savoir et salut*, pp. 145–162.
11. See Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.15.
12. On the relation between Christianity and classical education, see especially Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); and Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).
13. See Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990).
14. For example, *Strom.* 4.21.132 and 7.7.46 (GCS 2:306.33, 3:35.10) Clement uses *askēsis* twenty-seven times and *askētēs* six times.
15. For a useful overview, see Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967). For Christian uses, see P. T. Camelot, "Action et contemplation dans la tradition chrétienne," *La Vie Spirituelle* 78 (1948):272–301; and Aime Solignac, "Vie active, vie contemplative, vie mixte," in *DS* 16:592–623.
16. "*Strom.* 2.10.46 (GCS 2:137.14–16); cf. 7.1.4.
17. Henri Crouzel, in his *Origen* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 167–169, 266, insists that he did not; but Crouzel's understanding of "system" seems unduly rigid; and his denial of system in Origen is also tinged by the desire to maintain Origen's orthodoxy at all costs.
18. Eusebius, *Church History* 6.3.6–9.
19. The Latin text can be found in the GCS, *Origenes Werke VII*, ed. W. A. Baehrens, pp. 255–280. I will cite from the translation of Rowan A. Greer, *Origen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 245–269.
20. Other stages that seem to indicate what we can call mystical aspects of the journey include number 35 (*Selmona*, or "shadow of the portion" of Christ and the Holy Spirit) and number 326 (*Phinon*, or the "frugality of mouth" that follows contemplation of Christ and the Holy Spirit).
21. The text of the *Commentary* has been edited by Baehrens in GCS, *Origenes Werke VIII* (the *prologus* appears on pp. 61–88). I will use the translation of Greer in *Origen*, pp. 217–244.
22. The correct name for the third science is *epoptics*, not *enoptics* as Greer, following some versions, reads. As in so much else, Origen's program was foreshadowed in Clement,

- who, in *Strom.* 1.28.176 (GCS 2:108–109) fits the four divisions of “Mosaic philosophy” into the three branches of philosophy—the historic and the legislative belong to ethics; the sacrificial to physics; “and the fourth, above all the department of theology, *epopteia*, which Plato predicates of the truly great mysteries.”
23. On the importance of the three sciences in Origen’s thought, see Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 56–62; and Karl Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 16:92–94.
 24. Pierre Hadot, “Les divisions des parties de la philosophie dans l’antiquité,” *Museum Helveticum* 36 (1979):218–231. Cf. the same author’s “Théologie, exégèse, révélation, écriture, dans la philosophie grecque,” *Centre d’études des religions du livre: Les règles de l’interprétation*, ed. Michel Tardieu (Paris: Cerf, 1987), pp. 13–34; and “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990):218–231.
 25. On this question, see the studies collected in Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1987); as well as Peter Brown, *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity. The Center for Hermeneutical Studies: Protocol of the Thirty-Fourth Colloquium*, eds. E. C. Hobbs and W. Weullner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
 26. Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos. Chapters on Prayer*, ed. and trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1970); see especially *Chapters on Prayer* 60 (p. 65).
 27. See Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen’s Exegesis* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), pp. 39–41, 130–138. Cf. Marguerite Harl, “Le langage de l’expérience religieuse chez les pères grecs,” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 15 (1977):5–34.
 28. For the account of Evagrius that follows, as well as for comments on the literature, see *Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 144–157.
 29. *Palladius: The Lausiaca History*, translated and annotated by Robert T. Meyer (Westminster: Newman, 1965), 38.12 (p. 114). Most of what we know of Evagrius’s life comes from this chapter of the *Historia Lausiaca*.
 30. See *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (London: Mowbray, 1981), 20.15, with “Additions of Rufinus” (p. 150).
 31. Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (New York: Seabury, 1982), p. 381.
 32. *Praktikos*, eds. Antoine and Claire Guillaumont, 2 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 1971). I will generally use the translation of John Eudes Bamberger, *The Praktikos. Chapters on Prayer* 15 (here adapted).
 33. *Évagre le Pontique. Le Gnostique*, eds. Antoine and Claire Guillaumont (Paris: Cerf, 1989), p. 88.
 34. The term, to my knowledge, does not occur in the surviving Greek texts of Evagrius, but it is found in his master Origen. See *Commentary on Lamentations*, fragment 14, in GCS, *Origenes Werke* 3:241.3f.
 35. *Gnostikos*, ed. Guillaumont, 49.191.
 36. On the second-century *Sentences of Sextus*, see the edition of Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 161–162 for the influence on Evagrius.
 37. For a partial translation and discussion, see *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 243–262.

38. This survives in two Syriac versions, S1 and S2, of which the latter is more authentic. See the edition of Antoine Guillaumont, *Les six centuries des "Kephalaia Gnostica" d'Évagre le Pontique* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1958). There is a translation of the first century in Wimbush, *Ascetic Behavior*, pp. 175–186. The threefold division appears in numerous chapters of the *Kephalaia*, for example, 1.10 and 5.65.
39. The *De oratione* may be found in PG 79:1165–1200.
40. Though the struggle against the demons is most evident on the level of *praktikē*, their opposition is also experienced in *physikē* and *theologikē*. See KG 1.10: "Among the demons, certain oppose the practice of the commandments, others oppose thoughts of nature, and others oppose words (*logoi*) about divinity because the knowledge of our salvation is constituted from these three" (*Ascetic Behavior*, p. 178).
41. For an overview of the development, see A. Solignac, "Péchés capitaux," *DS* 12:853–862.
42. Evagrius Ponticus, *Antirrheticus*, prologue (*Ascetic Behavior*, p. 248).
43. For Evagrius's teaching on pure prayer, see, for example, *Chapters on Prayer* 30, 53, 55, 60, 67, 70, 72, 75, 80, 97, 113, 153. For the broader doctrine, see David A. Ousley, "Evagrius's Theology of Prayer and the Spiritual Life," Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1979.
44. See John Eudes Bamberger's introduction to the *Chapters on Prayer* in *Praktikos*, pp. 45–46.
45. On *apatheia*, see especially *Praktikos* 57–89. For background, see Bamberger, *Praktikos*, pp. 82–87; and "Apatheia," *DS* 1:734–736.
46. Bamberger, *Praktikos*, p. 84.
47. Bamberger, *Praktikos* 14. Cf. *Prak.* 81 and 84 for other expressions of this inner relationship.
48. On the role of *apatheia* in pure prayer, see, for example, KG 1.27 and 81, 2.4, and 5.75; for the knowledge of the Trinity, see KG 2.2–3, 3.42 and 5.40.
49. For example, Ambrose, *De Isaac* 4.17–32 (ed. C. Schenkl, *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* [Vienna, 1866ff.], 32.1:655–661). See the discussion in *Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 210; and especially, Solange Sagot, "Le triple sagesse dans le *De Isaac vel anima*: Essai sur les procédés de composition de saint Ambroise," *Ambroise de Milan: XVI^e centenaire de son élection épiscopale* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1974), pp. 67–114.
50. For this aspect of Augustine's thought, see *Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 232–243. More extensive discussions can be found in Paul Henry, *The Path to Transcendence: From Philosophy to Mysticism in St. Augustine* (Philadelphia: Pickwick Press, 1981); and Suzanne Poque, "L'expression de l'anabase plotinienne dans la prédication de saint Augustin et ses sources," *Recherches augustiniennes* 10 (1977):187–215.
51. A number of earlier Latin authors had taught the superiority of the mixed form of life that combined action and contemplation, that is, at least as understood in philosophy. For example, Cicero, *De finibus* 2.13.40; and Seneca, *De otio* 5.1, 5.8.
52. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 19.19, where he also criticizes Varro's understanding of the three forms of life (cf. *De civitate Dei* 8.4). There is a brief discussion in *Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 256–257.
53. Some of Evagrius's own writings were available in Latin. The *Antirrheticus* and the *Gnostikos* were both translated by Gennadius, but these have been lost. Two Latin versions of the *Mirror for Monks and Nuns* survive.
54. What follows is based in part on *Foundations of Mysticism*, pp. 218–227. On the relations between Evagrius and Cassian, the best study remains that of Salvatore Marsili,

Giovanni Cassiano ed Evagrio Pontico: Dottrina sulla carità e contemplazione (Rome: Herder, 1936).

55. *Conlationes* 14.1, ed. E. Pichéry, 3 vols. This text can be found in 2:184.
56. *Institutes* 4.43: "Purity of heart is acquired by the flowering of the virtues, and the perfection of apostolic charity is possessed by means of purity of heart" (ed. J. -C. Guy in *Sources chrétiennes* [Paris, 1940ff.], 109.184.16–17).
57. *De vita contemplativa* 1.25 (PL 59.410B). See the translation and study by Sister Mary Josephine Suelzer, *Julianus Pomerius: The Contemplative Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1947).
58. Gregory, *Homilia in Evangelia* 32.3 (PL 76.1234BC). Cf. *Hom.* 37.5 (1277AB).
59. There are, of course, a number of useful studies. See especially, Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), chapter 6; Robert Gillet, "Spiritualité et place du moine dans l'église selon Grégoire le Grand," *Théologie de la vie monastique* (Paris: Aubier, 1961), pp. 323–351; and Jean Laporte, "Une théologie systématique chez Grégoire?" in *Grégoire le Grand*, eds. Jacques Fontaine, Robert Gillet, and Stan Pellistrandi (Paris: Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1986), pp. 235–244.
60. Gregory the Great, *Homilia in Ezechielem* 2.5.19 (SC 360.264.2–10).

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Practical, Theoretical, and Cultural Tracings in Late Ancient Asceticism

RESPONSE TO THE THREE PRECEDING PAPERS

Teresa M. Shaw

Our three papers, which share some points of interest on the general landscape of ancient ascetic behavior, suggest directions or trajectories for a broad discussion of the origins and meaning of ascetic behavior and interpretation in religion and culture. They raise questions of particular interest for those of us studying the Greco-Roman religious world of late antiquity. Clark's paper, especially, raises the question of the social and cultural meanings of ascetic behaviors. What does the renunciation of marriage, a meager diet, simple clothing, or communal living communicate to the dominant culture? How do these behaviors critique or validate existing social and power structures? How do physical techniques and practical lifestyles represent theological formulations? To borrow Clark's terms, does the "negative" act of renunciation allow both negative and positive formulations of its religious and social meaning? Rubenson has challenged our assumptions about class, education, and literary production among early desert monastics and illustrated the ways in which those assumptions have shaped our understanding of the formation of Egyptian ascetic theology.

In tracing the influence of the Greek philosophical treatments of *praxis* or *askēsis* and *theōria* on early Christian ascetic theory and the development of a Christian *paideia*, McGinn throws light on two crucial issues: the ties between pagan philosophical asceticism and its early Christian counterpart; and the relationship between physical renunciation and psychological or contemplative discipline. The same issues concern Clark, and also Rubenson, for the standard view of Antony which he rejects depends on a split between "high" philosophical or contemplative asceticism and "low" physical asceticism. For this response I will take up three general themes that have especially intrigued me: the role of physical and contemplative disciplines in the spiritual life; the relationship between pagan philosophical and Christian asceticism (I will discuss these two issues in light of Evagrius of Pontus); and the interpretation of ascetic behavior in culture and society. Here I will briefly consider female asceticism.

It is interesting to me that McGinn draws connections between philosophical