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Vision Becoming Joy: The Desert in History and Imagination

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VISION BECOMING JOY: THE DESERT IN HISTORY AND IMAGINATION

Douglas Burton-Christie

It has been almost thirty-five years since the publication of Peter Brown's groundbreaking essay, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity."¹ For scholars who were drawn into the study of early Christian asceticism and monasticism in its wake, it is almost impossible to recall how we imagined and conceived of Christian Late Antiquity before its publication. But the challenge of conceptualizing this world in light of the tremendous outpouring of work that has emerged from the subsequent generation of scholars is perhaps even more daunting. How many can really claim to have kept abreast of or arrived at a meaningful way of making sense of the avalanche of new critical editions and translations, archeological and papyrological discoveries, studies of the theological or socio-cultural dimensions of early Christian monasticism?

One might argue that there is no compelling reason to even attempt such a synthesis, that the diversity of subjects, methods and ideological perspectives that have come to characterize scholarship of early Christian monasticism ought to be recognized and celebrated for what it is, a necessary and creative corrective to an earlier, more homogenized view of this world that we have now come to see as having been far too narrow. Still, one of the challenges of working in a field that has seen such an explosion of creative scholarship appearing in so many different arenas simultaneously, is precisely that of asking whether certain patterns or trends have begun to emerge in our understanding of early Christian monasticism and, if so, what they are.

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¹Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971) 80-101.

This is not the primary aim of William Harmless' *Desert Christians*, which is, rather, to provide a clear and reliable introduction to the world of early Christian monasticism. But this book covers the scholarly ground of the past thirty years or so with such thoroughness and intelligence that it will almost surely provoke such questions in its readers. It did for me. In what follows then, I want to comment briefly on what I believe to be the book's primary contributions, and then move on to consider some of the questions it raised for me about the character and meaning of ancient Christian monasticism—as it is emerging in contemporary scholarship and in this particular cultural moment.

CONTRIBUTIONS

First, it must be said that as an introduction to the world of early Christian monasticism the book succeeds admirably. If anything, it is too modest in its stated aims, at least as these are expressed in the subtitle. For it is more than an introduction to the *literature* of early Christian monasticism. It also investigates monasticism's socio-cultural context, its theological-spiritual vision, critical historical-textual questions, in short almost anything one might consider relevant to understanding how this world came into being and how it functioned in its ancient context. This is something new in the scholarship of early Christian monasticism: a comprehensive introduction that lays out all the key critical questions and provides a reliable bibliographical guide to the ancient sources and contemporary scholarship.

What has been commonplace in the world of New Testament studies for some time now has never really been attempted in relation to ancient Christian monastic literature. This is likely due at least in part to the fact that the field had not yet matured to the point where such a work could really be attempted. But I think it is also because the task simply appeared too daunting. How could one ever hope to encompass in a single volume the critical assessment of a literature that not only spans several centuries but that emerged in radically diverse languages and cultural settings and that expressed such divergent visions of ascetic life and practice?

It has been challenging enough for individual scholars to assess and interpret the contributions of a single figure such as Evagrius or Cassian or Antony, or to evaluate the competing the-

ories of monastic origins or to compile a critical edition of a key monastic text or to probe particular themes in the literature such as fasting, reading, embodiment, or community. To synthesize all of this work and to do so in a way that respects the diversity of scholarly opinion about the state of the field while also creating a coherent picture of the whole is a task almost too difficult to imagine. And yet, that is precisely what *Desert Christians* has achieved. As an introduction, as a book that one can use to orient students to the world of early Christian monasticism, it is clear, responsible, and reliable. In other words exemplary.

A second significant contribution of this book is the author's even-handed attention to both the theological and social-historical contexts that shaped these documents and figures. For an earlier generation of scholars, there was a tendency to deal primarily with the "thought world," or theological and spiritual vision of early Christian monasticism. Often this vision was situated broadly but not very specifically within a socio-cultural context. During the past thirty years or so, scholarly attitudes about this have changed dramatically. There is now a widespread recognition that our understanding of the theological ideas and spiritual practices of the early Christian monks must be refracted through the lens of the social-political-cultural-ecclesial contexts that shaped them. Scholars have also become increasingly sensitive to the myriad ways in which meaning—theological-spiritual-ecclesial—was contested in the ancient monastic world and thus how important critical social theory is to the work of interpreting and analyzing the meaning or meanings arising from monastic experience. Whatever theological or spiritual meaning we attribute to these monastic texts or figures, we now recognize more clearly than we did previously its socially, culturally and politically conditioned character.

Desert Christians is sensitive to these issues and recognizes that they have had a profound effect on our understanding of early Christian monasticism. At the same time, the author is highly skilled and thoughtful in his attention to the intricate and complex theological and spiritual concerns that shaped the early monastic world, concerns that cannot be reduced to or completely explained by their social-cultural-ecclesial influences. One sees examples of this in the author's treatment of the way Athanasius' theological interests shaped the *Vita Antonii*, in his careful assessment of the influence of Origenism on early monastic spiritu-

ality, and in his insightful explication of Evagrius' elaborate ascetical-theological system. To navigate these waters requires real sensitivity to the subtlety and range of theological language and the relationship of such language to religious experience. *Desert Christians* is consistently reliable in its treatment of these matters.

In the fundamentally balanced approach that characterizes this book, it seems to me that *Desert Christians* offers a valuable corrective to the sometimes-polarizing tendencies that have shaped scholarship on ancient Christian monasticism during the past generation. We need to find more creative ways to understand the *relationships* between religious experience, theological vision and social-cultural context. This book can help us in this important work.

EMERGING QUESTIONS

I want to turn my attention now to some of the questions that arose for me as I read this book, questions that the book does not set out to address, at least not directly, but which are suggested by the discussion that unfolds in its pages. And here it is important to acknowledge something the author himself takes great pains to acknowledge throughout the book—that because of its character as an *introduction*, it cannot and does not go into detailed analysis of some of the most contentious and complex issues arising from the recent scholarship on Christian monasticism. The author is consistent and reliable in pointing toward the important scholarly works on key issues, and his bibliography in this regard is exemplary and for the most part complete. However, at many points along the way, he reminds readers that because of the introductory character of the work he can go no further in his consideration of a given critical question.

This, one feels, is entirely fair. Still, such questions are at the heart of our evolving understanding of the world of early Christian monasticism and will likely continue to shape emerging research. What follows, then, is not meant to suggest all the things the author ought to have included in his book but did not, but rather is meant to probe briefly some of the questions to which this fascinating book gives rise. Two questions in particular arose for me in my reading of this book: one concerns methodology; the

other concerns the wider cultural significance of the kind of ascetic ideas and practices described in the book.

Methodology

One of the most difficult things to accomplish in an introductory work of this kind is to provide a real feeling for the often-idiosyncratic character of emerging scholarship. It is one thing to represent the general viewpoint or ideas of a scholar in a fair and even-handed way—this *Desert Christians* generally does quite well. It is another thing to imaginatively represent a scholar's sense of things. This is much harder to do, for it requires entering into the work of a given scholar more deeply than is appropriate or possible in a book such as this. Still, one cannot help but feel in reading this book that while the key ideas and issues raised in recent scholarship are fairly represented, the *feel* of this work, its particular texture, the way the early monastic world looks through the lens of a given work, and the way a specific methodological approach alters our understanding of the early monastic world are often, of necessity, missing.

I noticed, for example, that in the discussion of the significance of anger in early monasticism, the author makes no mention of Peter Brown's influential reading of the socio-political-economic context of monastic attitudes about this subject.² I do not mean to suggest that Brown's reading of this phenomenon is the most insightful or that it is universally accepted. But it represents one of those significant shifts in perspective, borne of a creative methodological leap, that has the potential to alter our perception of a particular aspect of early monastic life. One can think of many other examples of this kind of methodological creativity in scholarship on early Christian monasticism: for example, Teresa Shaw's appropriation of the work of Pierre Bourdieu as a means of interpreting the role of food and dietary habits (in particular fasting) in shaping the identity of Christian ascetics; Georgia Franks' employment of optic theory to help us understand more clearly what it might have meant for an ancient pilgrim to behold

²I refer here to Brown's discussion in *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U 1978) 82, and elsewhere, of the flight to the desert as arising in no small measure because of social tensions in Egyptian towns and villages, that is, because of what he refers to as a "crisis in human relations." The monastic concern with anger, Brown suggests, can only be understood by considering it in light of this social context.

a desert saint; Richard Valantasis' engagement with theorists such as Max Weber, Michel Foucault and Geoffrey Harpham to articulate a theory of the social function of asceticism; James Goehring's literary-historical critique of the "myth of the desert."³

What is the appropriate place for a discussion of such theoretical-methodological issues in an introduction to early Christian monasticism? I am not sure. The author thoughtfully includes toward the end of his work a discussion of certain disputed questions—concerning theories of monastic origins and underreported dimensions of the early monastic world. Might it be useful, if not in this volume, then somewhere else perhaps, to consider seriously and carefully how our understanding of Christian monasticism has been affected by the methodological shifts that have increasingly come to characterize contemporary scholarship? It would be a kind of mapping exercise, related to, but distinct from, the one that has been attempted in this book. To construct such a map would require moving beyond a description of the terrain (which is for the most part what *Desert Christians* does) to an analysis of the assumptions and perspectives that shape how we approach and interpret the early monastic world. Introducing students to the early monastic world should include not only, as *Desert Christians* does so well, an introduction to the key texts, figures, and findings of recent scholarship, but also an invitation to consider the methodological challenges involved in interpreting this literature imaginatively and critically.⁴

Retrieving and Reimagining Desert Monasticism

A second cluster of questions that arose for me while reading this book had to do with the wider cultural significance of early

³Teresa Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress 1998); Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: U California 2000); Richard Valantasis: "A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism," in Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford 1995) 544-52; James Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt," in *Ascetics, Society and the Desert: Studies in Early Christian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity 1999) 73-88.

⁴For a recent example of this kind of methodological mapping exercise, see: Dale B. Martin, ed., *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham, NC: Duke U 2005).

Christian monasticism, not only in relation to the cultural setting in which it first came into being, but also in relation to subsequent historical epochs including our own. One of the most intriguing aspects of the desert tradition, if one can call it that, is its protean character, its capacity to endure and adapt itself to an astonishing array of different cultural and religious settings. *Desert Christians* alludes to this phenomenon in places, for example in its consideration of Antony's importance in the art of Martin Schongauer and Hieronymus Bosch among others. But the instances of this retrieval and reimagining of the desert monastic tradition are far more numerous and wide ranging than this, and provoke questions about why its appeal remains so strong and what precisely the nature of this appeal is.

A recent book by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, entitled *Silence and Honey-Cakes*, suggests one response to this question and it has to do with the desert monastics' persistent attention to the challenge of forming a community of integrity, honesty and compassion, a challenge that remains formidable for leaders of contemporary religious communities.⁵ The solitary dimension of early monastic life also continues to exert an undeniable appeal to the contemporary imagination, something one sees in recent works such as Isabel Colegate's *A Pelican in the Wilderness* and Sue Halpern's *Migrations to Solitude*, both of which inquire into the larger cultural significance of solitude, especially in moments when its value is undermined or denied.⁶ This is also what interests Mark Slouka, whose recent essay in *Harper's* "Quitting the Paint Factory," offers an astonishing meditation on the virtues of idleness in a culture that has developed a degrading and destructive cult of "business." The idleness he has in mind is far deeper than mere leisure, whose very meaning, he argues, has been corrupted by its association with endless work. No, the idleness he considers is more akin to the kind of radical purposelessness ancient monastics associated with contemplative prayer.⁷

⁵Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (Oxford: Lion 2003).

⁶Isabel Colegate, *A Pelican in the Wilderness: Hermits, Solitaries and Recluses* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint 2002); Sue Halpern, *Migrations to Solitude* (New York: Pantheon 1992).

⁷Mark Slouka, "Quitting the Paint Factory: On the Virtues of Idleness," *Harper's Magazine* (November 2004).

This sense that a crucial dimension of human identity is in danger of becoming lost to us perhaps helps to account for the continued interest not only in the *idea* of solitude, but also its *practice*, the dream of setting off, like Antony, into an untracked wilderness where one can rediscover something of the enduring and primordial character of human existence. Such a dream seems to have been part of what motivated Christopher McCandless, a young man from a well-to-do family, to give away all his money, abandon his car and most of his possessions, burn all the cash in his wallet and set off into a remote, wild corner of Alaska in the spring of 1992. He would not return alive. McCandless' story, narrated in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, is a poignant contemporary account of *anachoresis*, a complicated tale of spiritual longing, alienation and foolishness that could have been lifted straight from the pages of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.⁸

A somewhat less extreme but no less profound version of this story of wild abandon—Thoreau's *Walden*—has reverberated in the American imagination for more than a century. Its tenacious appeal suggests that McCandless' story, however aberrant it first appears, may well be part of a larger pattern of resistance to certain cultural, social and political values. What we have now come to see, much more clearly than was apparent when *Walden* first appeared, is the deeply subversive character of Thoreau's experiment. The "natural life" that Thoreau struggled to live and whose meaning he spent a lifetime trying to articulate, was more than a simple refusal of the world. It was a sustained effort to *reimagine* the world. As David Robinson's recent study reminds us, "[Thoreau's] pursuit of the natural life is . . . envisioned as the pursuit of a life of moral freedom, one in which each choice in our daily life is a reaffirmation of our constructive agency in the world."⁹

I found myself reflecting on this notion last October as I sat in a darkened theatre at the Brooklyn Academy of Music watching a performance of the "Temptation of St. Antony." Conceived of by Robert Wilson and Bernice Johnson Reagon (founder of the musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock), and based loosely on Flaubert's nineteenth-century meditation on the life of Antony, this production retold the ancient monastic tale through the lens

⁸Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Villard 1996).

⁹David Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U 2004) 166.

of the bitter, violent legacy of slavery and the haunting music of African American spirituals. The demonic forces against whom Antony now struggles include the classic expressions such as gluttony, sexual temptation and greed; but there is also something stronger and more brutal that afflicts him. When the ascetic cries out, "I be troubled, I be troubled/I be troubled 'bout my time/done long gone. . . /In the morning, in the morning/I don't feel like seeing/the sun come shining," one senses the specter of a violence so potent that it threatens to eclipse all meaning, all hope. Moral freedom and constructive agency, if these are to be found at all, will have to be wrested from a staggering silence and emptiness.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The desert is a place of emptiness. It is an ambiguous, shifting emptiness—now harsh, brutal, devoid of meaning, now open, spacious, forgiving. The literature that emerged from this emptiness in the Late Antique world reflects this ambiguity. So too, it retains its capacity to fascinate and disturb us. But we are, I suspect, only beginning to grasp its subtleties and its myriad meanings, in spite of a generation of sustained work. William Harmless' *Desert Christians* will help us to deepen this work. Students will be grateful for its clarity and thoroughness. Scholars will appreciate its careful balance and integrity. It gives us something we have not had before, a reliable map to a complex and elusive terrain.¹¹ If it helps us to move into that terrain with greater sensitivity and awareness, to see things more clearly, it will have done its work well.

Learning to see clearly, without illusion, was central to the early Christian monastic experiment. Clarity is also a quality of

¹⁰"The Temptation of Saint Anthony," created, designed and directed by Robert Wilson; music and libretto by Bernice Johnson Reagon. World Premiere, June 20, 2003, Ruhr Triennale Geblasehalle Duisburg. Compact disk produced by Change Performing Arts, www.changeperformingarts.com. See also: Felicia R. Lee, "Translating Flaubert, in the Gospel Tradition," *New York Times*, October 20, 2004.

¹¹The map I have in mind here is not a static or fixed thing, but rather a provisional attempt to see and understand a particular terrain, one that must be continuously revised as one's knowledge and understanding deepen. In this sense, I am in agreement with the approach to religion and religious experience articulated by Thomas Tweed in his book, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U 2006).

the desert itself, something worth remembering as we continue to reflect on this strange and mysterious world. "The desert's pure air," suggests Susan Brind Morrow,

was a prism separating the harsh light into bands of intensely articulated color. Vision there became a joy. The eye in the desert could see with such clarity that something as subtle as an animal track, which in the city would be lost, stood out distinctly. I have sometimes thought that this quality of light in the Egyptian desert is what inspired the monasticism of the early Christians . . . who spoke of an intoxication of the spirit there. To see it is enough, is like falling in love.¹²

¹²Susan Brind Morrow, *The Names of Things: Life, Language and Beginnings in the Egyptian Desert* (New York: Riverhead 1998) 128.

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