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Douglas E. Christie

Loyola Marymount University, DEchristie@lmu.edu

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Simplicity, or the Terror of Belief: The Making and Unmaking of the Self in Early Christian Monasticism

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE

We are told that he was whipped with such force that he became “speechless from the tortures.” Now he lay alone on the bare earth, unmoving, “as if dead.”¹ This is the image of the desert ascetic that we encounter in the opening chapters of Athanasius’ fourth-century *Life of Antony*. It is a strange, bewildering image of utter helplessness and vulnerability. Elsewhere in the *Life*, Antony is portrayed as anything but helpless; he is a heroic fighter, capable of overcoming every temptation, every obstacle placed in his way by the demons who inhabit the desert. He is an *alter Christus* who routs the demons and makes of the desert a city for a generation of monastic fighters who will follow him into those wild places. But here in this moment he overcomes no one. Instead, he himself has been overcome. He has been reduced, radically, to a condition of pure need, of abandonment and desolation.

This scene occupies a relatively brief space in Athanasius’s narrative. Indeed, with the help of friends, Antony soon recovers and continues his assault on the demons, eventually realizing his heroic destiny. Still, I would suggest that the image of the monk lying alone and half-naked on the bare earth, a mute victim of a frenzied assault by nameless demonic forces, has a significance that far transcends its brevity. This is because it

1. Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. and Intro. Robert G. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980). Citations to the *Life of Antony* refer to this translation unless otherwise noted, and employ the abbreviation VA [*Vita Antonii*] followed by chapter number. VA 8.

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expresses, so eloquently and disturbingly, the feeling of psychological unravelling that was such a prevalent part of early monastic life. And because it helps us to grasp, in spite of the simple triumphalism of Athanasius's narrative, the immense complexity and cost of setting out on the ascetic path. Part of this complexity is revealed in the very character of the experience it expresses. The ascetic has entered a place of profound need. In a sense, he is in this moment nothing *but* need. He is struggling to survive, and everything else, every extraneous consideration, has been swept aside. In his weakness and vulnerability, he has been reduced to an elemental simplicity. And yet, what is unfolding within him in this moment is anything but simple. His identity, his very sense of self has begun to be eroded. A bewildering array of competing claims tears at him. He longs for a resolution, for a safe haven that—for the moment anyway—eludes him. In his simple need, he is vulnerable, exposed to an entire universe of anxiety and concerns that tests him, that threatens to destroy or remake him.

It is not easy to reconcile this notion of simplicity—at once complex and ambiguous and demanding—with the often clearer, more straightforward sense of simplicity that we so often encounter in the early Christian monastic tradition. Statements about the aims and purposes of early monastic life often give the impression of simple clarity. Cassian, for example, summed up the *end* of monastic life in essentially simple terms: the *skopos* or proximate goal is purity of heart, and the *telos* or ultimate goal is the kingdom of God. Such simplicity is also evident in the way monastic *beginnings* were understood: Antony's "call" to the monastic life involved nothing more or less than a complete and open-hearted response to the Gospel injunction to "sell what you possess and give it to the poor" (Mt 19:21), to renounce everything for the sake of God. (It was in part because of this commitment to radical renunciation that early monastics were often known simply as *apotaktikoi* or 'renunciants'.) And there is a simplicity also in the way the monastic practice is understood: at its root, it means, as it surely did for Antony, lying alone on the bare earth, in utter abandonment to God.

Still, in an irony that was probably not lost on the early monks, but which often *has* been lost on modern commentators, the monastic ideal of simplicity is anything but simple. It is, rather, full of complexity, ambi-

guity, and depth. In what follows, I would like to examine this apparent paradox, asking what the ancient monastic record reveals about the actual *experience* of seeking simplicity. I want to suggest that the simplicity admired and practiced by the early Christian monks, so often construed (wrongly, I believe) as a first order naiveté or credulity devoid of depth or subtlety, in fact contained and expressed a complex range of thought and feeling. More than this, it was, at least in its most mature expressions, a hard won *achievement*, realized only through a costly and demanding process of relinquishment. Ancient Christian monks actually did *realize* on occasion a simplicity that embodied a beautiful freedom and transparency. But such simplicity rarely came to expression in a life except through intense and costly, even terrifying, personal struggle. To realize such simplicity in one's life meant living through a kind of death. Nothing could be more, or less, simple than this.

Naiveté or Simplicity?

STILL, it is not difficult to understand how ancient Christian monasticism could come to be seen by so many observers as embodying a simplicity that excludes almost all ambiguity and uncertainty. Unambiguous certitude and single-minded devotion appear woven into the fabric of early monastic experience. The ideals of obedience and renunciation, so crucial to early Christian monasticism, depend for their very meaning on an exclusion of choice and alternate possibilities. The understanding of monastic prayer as radical attention or surrender, advocated by John Cassian and others, invites a gathering in of the soul's wide-ranging concerns and desires until one finds oneself existing simply and purely in the presence of God. Humility, a quality valued so strongly by the early monks, is nothing more or less than a reduction of the concerns and claims of the self, a continual and ever-deepening movement of self-emptying that the monks understood to be an extension of Christ's great gesture of *kenosis*.

These are beautiful ideals, and one can read the early monastic literature with great appreciation for all that they yielded in the lives of those who practiced them. Yet one can also argue, and many *have* argued, that

this monastic impulse to reduce, to simplify, to clarify, often resulted not in a more expansive consciousness, or a fuller awareness of the presence of God, or a greater capacity for compassion, but rather in a shrinking from life, a harsh and cold extremism that excluded much more than it included. It was precisely this tendency in ancient monastic life that prompted the great classical scholar E. R. Dodds to ask, after having surveyed case after case of ascetic extremism: “where did all this madness come from?” In this assessment, Dodds joins many others, like W. H. Lecky, Hans Leitzmann, and Edward Gibbon, for whom the ancient monastic experiment represented not an original and significant achievement in spiritual thought and practice, but a “failure of nerve.” These writers have seen in Christian monasticism’s tendency toward extremism a small-minded rejection of the possibilities bequeathed to the late antique world by its classical heritage.² In this view, the monastic impulse to live for God alone yielded not profundity or capaciousness of spirit, but a regrettable and indefensible simple-mindedness. An eloquent, if extreme, expression of this view is found in Robin Lane Fox’s 1987 book *Pagans and Christians*, in which the author identifies the ancient Christian ascetic ideal of virginity as one of the primary causes of this failure of nerve:

[It] encouraged single-mindedness and dependence upon God alone. . . . This praise of simplicity and single-mindedness exalted human achievement by greatly limiting its scope. It denied man’s capacity for living in complexity, for pursuing desirable ends which might not be mutually consistent, for enlarging his sympathies and own understanding by engaging in several pursuits at once. To return to a child-like Paradise was to exclude almost everything and understand next to nothing: “single-mindedness” is a dangerous, enfeebling myth.³

Here, articulated with a barely concealed contempt, is the primary thrust of the argument against the monastic ideal of simplicity or single-mind-

2. E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1965) 34. The idea of a “failure of nerve,” which was given currency early in this century by the classical scholar Gilbert Murray, but which actually derives from Edward Gibbon’s editor, J. B. Bury, has influenced much modern discussion of ancient Christian monasticism. For a discussion of these ideas, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) 88–89 and Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 12.

3. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987) 366.

edness as it has arisen among modern and contemporary observers, namely, that it undermines the possibility of a more capacious understanding's taking hold in human experience; it closes off thought; it reduces, perhaps extinguishes altogether, the human capacity for living with ambiguity and complexity.

Such a reading of the early monastic legacy is, in a way, understandable. If one considers the ideological framing of Athanasius's foundational narrative—the simple, unlettered monk defying and overcoming his more learned pagan counterparts—or the pattern found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* of well-educated, sophisticated monks like Evagrius and Arsenius being called to task for presuming to teach their more rustic Egyptian brethren; or the spectacular instances of “blind obedience” to monastic elders (the setting aside of one's own subjective sense of the truth of a situation for the sake of adhering to the will of one's teacher)—one can easily begin to develop a sense that early Christian monks had little interest in or tolerance for complexity and ambiguity but sought at every turn to eliminate these elements of experience in favor of clarity and certitude. It is important to acknowledge that this tendency to clarify or simplify—whether in matters of theological understanding or spiritual practice or ecclesial affiliation—did exist among the early monks and does shape much of the early monastic literature. Still, to read the entire tradition through this lens is grossly misleading and reflects a limited and partial view of the ancient monastic record. This is a view, I suspect, that owes as much to our own prejudices and assumptions about human consciousness and moral choice as it does to an honest reading of the ancient monastic experience itself. It is an essentially reductive reading of this experience and reflects a refusal of complexity and ambiguity that is itself deserving of critical scrutiny.

Becoming Simple: Antony's Path

THERE is, I believe, a more accurate and subtle and helpful way of understanding the ancient monastic sense of simplicity that does not necessitate reducing it to something static or closed. Rather, it sees simplicity, as I think the monks themselves saw it, as a *process* that involved opening

oneself ever more deeply to the most intense and searching struggle, exposing oneself ever more fully to the purifying, transforming power of God. This meant engaging in radical risk, in a continual opening of the self, without prejudice or constraint, to everything emerging from within and without, in particular the anomalous and chaotic and fearful, all those elements of reality that are most difficult to face and absorb. This, I believe, is what that image of Antony, exposed and diminished and vulnerable, reveals: a human being who has opened himself, again and again and again, to the real as it presents itself, who has resisted the temptation to manage or control reality, and who has in the process tumbled over an abyss in himself from which he may or may not emerge.

Simplicity in this sense means something like annihilation, especially the annihilation of the carefully constructed and defended self. What, if anything, emerges on the other side of such annihilation? The monastic literature testifies, over and over, that something or someone new — a free, transparent being — does sometimes emerge from this harrowing emptying out of the self. But it is also remarkably honest about the cost of this transformation, about the depth of vulnerability required for real transformation to occur. This, I think, helps to account for the enduring power of Antony's story in the artistic tradition. Matthias Grünewald's depiction of Antony in the Isenheim altarpiece, for example, surrounded and hounded and being torn to pieces by a host of gruesome creatures, reveals a figure who is nothing if not exposed, vulnerable, helpless. And when one places this image, as Grünewald himself did, in proximity to the bruised, pierced, degraded corpse that is Grünewald's crucified Christ, and in the company of all those victims of the disease known as St. Antony's Fire, for whom the altarpiece was commissioned and who suffered the most terrible and painful and debilitating wasting away of their bodies and of their very beings, one begins to get a sense of the compelling power of the image of the monk Antony, who like Christ ultimately triumphs over disease and death and pain, but not before having travelled deep into an awful place of agony.⁴

The way into those depths could be terrifying. Athanasius's detailed

4. On Antony in the Isenheim Altarpiece, see Andrée Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) 13–51.

account of Antony's struggle with the demons makes this clear. When he tells us, describing Antony's initial encounter with the demons, that the devil "attempted to lead [Antony] away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship, love of money and of glory, the manifold pleasures of food, the relaxations of life, and, finally, the rigors of virtue and how great the labor is that earns it . . ." we recognize immediately the doubts and fears arising in the mind of a person not yet fully resolved upon a new course of life. The mention of *memories* suggests the profound interior depths at which these concerns are working on the ascetic; they are not merely peripheral concerns but they touch upon the things he cares and worries about the most, the places within him where he is most vulnerable. The devil, Athanasius tells us, "raised in [Antony's] mind a great dust cloud of considerations," a telling indication of the kind of confusion and anxiety the ascetic experienced as he struggled to live more deeply into this life.

But this is only the beginning. As Antony's time in the desert lengthens, his struggles increase in depth and complexity. Athanasius tells us that Antony's progress provoked the enemy so much that "approaching one night with a multitude of demons he whipped him with such force that he lay on the earth, speechless from the tortures. [Antony] contended that the pains were so severe as to lead one to say that the blows could not have been delivered by humans since they caused such agony."⁵ What *were* these pains? Athanasius does not tell us. But the way they are described — "so severe as to lead one to say that the blows could not have been delivered by humans" — suggests something of how bewildering and frightening this experience was for the monk. Here is an agony so great that it cannot be accounted for by any simple reference to ordinary human experience. This is but one of many instances in early Christian monastic literature where one senses just what the confrontation with the demonic in solitude really involved: the most demanding and far-reaching struggle with the self. Peter Brown has argued that, for the early monks, the demonic was "sensed as an extension of the self. A relationship with the demons," he suggests:

5. VA 5.

6. VA 8.

involved something more intimate than attack from the outside: to be 'tried by the demons' meant passing through a stage in the growth of awareness of the lower frontiers of the personality. The demonic stood not merely for all that was hostile *to* [the monk]; the demons summed up all that was anomalous and incomplete *in* [him].⁷

This acutely psychological understanding of the encounter with the demons is confirmed by the monks' own testimony. One day Abba Abraham asked Abba Poemen: "How do the demons fight against me?" Poemen responded: "The demons fight *against* you? . . . Our own *wills* become the demons, and it is these which attack us in order that we may fulfill them."⁸

Antony's story can be understood in similar terms. Athanasius, for his own theological and ecclesial reasons, insists on the ultimate triumph of his ascetic hero.⁹ But not before giving us glimpses of the profound uncertainty and anxiety Antony experienced in the face of the assaults of the demons. The range and subtlety of the assaults—confronting the ascetic where he is most uncertain and insecure at any given moment (around concerns about family, money, food, sexuality, even the threat of death)—suggest the depth at which they took hold within Antony's psyche. But beneath or within these particular temptations lay something even more disturbing—the sense in which the very coherence and security of the self was under attack. At one point, Athanasius tells us that Antony was assaulted with such ferocity that the place where he was dwelling "seemed to be shaken by a quake. The demons, as if breaking through the building's four walls, and seeming to enter through them . . . struck and wounded" him.¹⁰ The sense of psychological vulnerability in this image is palpable. The ascetic experiences the boundaries of the space he occupies as porous, completely open to the demonic forces. There is no protection, no safe place to dwell, at least not in this moment. He is exposed and fragile.

7. Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978) 89–90.

8. Poemen 67; Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Christian: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (New York: MacMillan, 1975) 176.

9. See Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 201–65.

10. VA 9.

Here one sees a portrayal of vulnerability in the ascetic's experience not unlike that depicted in the sayings of Antony found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. There one sees a monk who displays uncertainty in the face of affliction (1), who expects temptation to the last breath (3), who groans at the thought of the "snares that the enemy spreads out over the world" (7), who seems near despair at the recognition of how difficult it can be for the ascetic actually to change (19), and who expresses profound anxiety about the reality of death, and grief in the face of the injustice that seems to reign over the world (2).¹¹

"We have acquired a dark house full of war," says Antony in one of his letters.¹² This ominous declaration captures accurately Antony's sense of the general condition of human beings caught in sin. But it also describes with haunting pathos his (and so many other monks') experience of being so intensely vulnerable to the subtle and debilitating power of "the devils and their disciples. . . [who]," he says, "sow in our hearts every day . . . their hardness of heart and their numbness." Antony also bemoans "the many sufferings they bring us at every hour, the weariness which causes our hearts to be weary at all times." Nor does Antony give any comfort to those who wish to live with the illusion that these demonic forces are somehow distant from us, not part of us. "We are their bodies," says Antony, "and our soul receives their wickedness; and . . . then it reveals them through the body in which we dwell."¹³ It would be hard to imagine a more difficult, entangled, compromised existence than this. And yet this is precisely the character of the monks' existence.

Not that this is the only thing that can be said about their existence. Early Christian monastic tradition testifies everywhere to the belief in the possibility of liberation from the demonic forces at work in the world and in the depth of the soul. This was part of the monks' immense appeal to their contemporaries: they were seen to have achieved, through Christ, a real freedom from the tenacious assaults of the demons and an authority over them. We catch a glimpse of this in the story related in Palladius's *Lausiac History* of a demon, who, struggling for mastery over a certain

11. See Ward, Sayings 1–5.

12. Letter Seven; Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 226.

13. Letter Six; Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony* 218–19.

Abba Paul, ultimately succumbs, crying out: “O violence! I am carried off! The simplicity of Paul drives me out! Where shall I go?”¹⁴ Yet one should not imagine that such freedom or simplicity—which is so often construed as mere naïveté—came cheaply. It did not. For the early monastic tradition also testifies continuously to the withering cost of opening oneself to the ascetic path, and to the ultimate fruitfulness of this path in the life of the ascetic and for the larger community. Simplicity in this view can hardly be understood, as it so often has been understood, as the “path of least resistance,” or as a way of being that admits of few or no challenges. Nor can it be understood as solipsistic or narcissistic. If by simplicity we mean instead, as I believe the early monks meant, *simple openness*, an openness that exposes the ascetic to everything, that invites him or her to hide from nothing that may emerge from within or without, then our entire perception of this ideal changes.

Conclusion

I often spend time in a small Cistercian monastery in the Redwood forests of northern California. Each morning I rise for an hour of silent meditation with the members of the monastic community. Sitting in that cinder block chapel in the presence of flickering candlelight, the redwood trees rising just beyond the altar, and the sisters who comprise this community, a ritual practice I have shared with them for over twenty five years, has taught me much about the meaning of simplicity. In a way, nothing could be simpler than this—sitting, breathing, walking, sitting again. Here, reduced to its elemental form, contemplative practice is born. And yet, what unfolds in such a space is almost infinite in its complexity and depth and ambiguity. Everything gets held in this space, everything the conscious and unconscious mind is capable of expressing. There is no real protection from what emerges out of the depths. One becomes intensely vulnerable. In each moment, there is an opportunity

14. Palladius, *The Lausiatic History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1965) 81.

to open oneself to what is emerging, to face it with curiosity and compassion, to struggle with it, to let it go.¹⁵

Sometimes, of course, one wonders: is anything really happening here? Does such practice have any real effect, any meaning? Perhaps. Or perhaps it is like the exchange between the two monks I remember from an old *New Yorker* cartoon. They sit side by side in the lotus position, the young monk with a look of barely concealed bewilderment on his face, the old monk, wizened and impassive. The younger monk has apparently just asked the old monk a question, something we realize by the old monk's reply. "Nothing happens next," he tells the younger monk. "This is it."

Perhaps in the end, it is just that simple. And yet even this exchange, ironic and playful, suggests something immensely complex and challenging that corresponds to what the early Christian monks knew so well from their own practice: that the meaning of our experience, including our experience of ourselves and our experience of God, is not always comprehensible to us. This too must be relinquished. It seems unlikely that the young Antony, setting out on the ascetic path, had any idea of this. Nor is it easy to guess at whether he would still have set out along the way had he known. There is grace in that initial impulse to leave everything behind for the sake of God, the grace of simplicity and purity as yet uncomplicated by the testing that will follow. But this is only the first gesture, the initial step. To continue walking into the desert, as Antony did, is to move deeper and deeper into a place of unknowing. It is to become lost to oneself, a bewildering and terrifying experience, but one somehow necessary to the mysterious process of being remade in God.

Only the closest of Antony's friends witnessed his terrifying struggle in solitude, his reduction to a condition of utter helplessness. But many more came to know the person who emerged from that space of desolation. And that person was capable of holding and tending to so much—he emerged from his long solitude as a healer, someone capable of rec-

15. Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön speaks of curiosity as one possible response (often a necessary and creative response) to the reality of impermanence in our lives. It is, she says, a posture or way of being that can enable one—whether in the practice of meditation or in daily living—to open up to and to embrace, with joy, whatever arises in that moment, however frightening, disturbing, or threatening it might be (*When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* [Boston: Shambhala, 2002] 77–83).

onciling those who had become estranged from one another, a person able to encourage those lost in grief or despondency, a bearer of compassion.¹⁶ There is real simplicity in this. But it is the simplicity of wholeness, not exclusion or fragmentation. Born of suffering, of self-emptying, it is simple in the way love can be simple, ever expanding, ever deepening, capable of holding everything and everyone.

Loyola Marymount University
University Hall
1 LMU Drive, Suite 3700
Los Angeles, CA 90045
dburton@lmu.edu

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CONTRIBUTORS

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE is Professor of Christian Spirituality at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. He is the author of *The Word in the Desert* and serves as editor of the journal *Spiritus*.

JEAN LECLERCQ, OSB (+ 1993), well-known Benedictine scholar from Clervaux Abbey in Luxembourg, spent thirty years working on the critical edition of the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. He was a frequent contributor to this journal from its very beginning and is the author of many books on medieval monasticism and spiritual theology.

E. GLENN HINSON is Emeritus Professor of Spirituality and John Loftis Professor of Church History, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. In retirement he teaches Church history and spirituality at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, Lexington. He brought his first Church history students at Southern Baptist Seminary to Gethsemani in 1960. Thomas Merton served as host. Hinson continued to bring students each semester until Merton's death in 1968. He is a founding member of the International Thomas Merton Society.

MIRIAM POLLARD, OCSO, entered at Wrentham, where she made profession in 1959. As author and poet she has published a number of books including *The Laughter of God: At Ease with Prayer* (1986), *Acceptance: Passage into Hope* (1987), *Listening to God* (1989), and more recently, *The Other Face of Love: Dialogues with the Prison Experience of Albert Speer* (1996) and *Neither be Afraid and*

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