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ASCETICISM—CHRISTIAN AND GREEK*

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morality is a reminder that any form of asceticism is a complex phenomenon, especially when it is attired in the trappings of religious-philosophical language. Pythagorean and Christian asceticism have much in common. Both look to the example and precepts of their respective founders, both offer some form of philosophical justification for what they suggest, both are witnesses to a common heritage of popular piety and morality. Again it is unfair to dismiss certain sorts of evidence as purely literary, because although, as in the case of pagan hermits, there is no non-literary evidence for their existence, the fact that they are mentioned tells us something about that most elusive of phenomena, 'religious feeling'.¹ Finally it would be misleading to suppose that Christian asceticism in the period under review was homogeneous.

All of the authors here to be studied wrote during the third and fourth centuries A.D., though the sort of work they wrote is by no means homogeneous. Athanasius wrote a *Life of Antony*, Basil produced *Rules* for an existing community and Gregory of Nyssa several ascetic treatises on the nature of the philosophic life, among them the *De Instituto Christiano*.² A life and a rule and a treatise on the life are progressive degrees of abstraction, and if the particularity and concreteness of *Antony's Life* are absent from the *De Instituto* this is probably as much due to the differences of aim and genre as to deliberate difference of conception. On the side of the Greeks there is above all Porphyry of whom A. D. Nock writes:³ 'For the study of Paganism of the third century no writer is more important than Porphyry'. Of him there is the *Vita Pythagorae* and the *De Abstinencia*. Iamblichus' *De Vita Pythagorica* is a more deliberately 'spiritualising' production, and finally there is the *Life of Apollonius*, the Pythagorean sage and saint, by Philostratus. For convenience' sake I have divided the evidence into three sections, dealing respectively with Athanasius, Basil, and Gregory. I hope in each section to isolate what seem to be the salient features of the author's treatment of his subject and then to see what sort of parallels may be found in Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Philostratus and popular philosophy. In the sections dealing with Basil and Gregory I shall also try to indicate how they differ from each other and from Athanasius. A fourth section will try to summarize my results.

ATHANASIUS: *Vita Antonii*

Athanasius produced his *Life* not very long after the death of Antony in 356. It achieved speedy popularity, was translated into Latin,

¹ See especially A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford, 1933), chapter 1.

² W. Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Christian Literature* (Leiden, 1954), and the review by W. Völker in *Gnomon*, vol. 27.

³ A. D. Nock, *Collected Papers* (Oxford, 1972), p. 964, n. 11.

and in that form played some part in the conversion of St. Augustine.¹ Athanasius' purpose in writing seems to have been twofold. He wanted to recommend the ascetic life to his own contemporaries. He also tried to show how loyal a churchman his hero was, with a zeal for orthodoxy that led him to return to Alexandria in order to combat heresy, and a loyalty to the ecclesiastical hierarchy that induced him to leave his cloaks to bishops—perhaps in the manner of a latter day Elijah.² Peter Brown sees in the life of Antony the parting of the ways in the religious history of Late Antiquity:

Both men (Plotinus and Antony) were admired for having achieved a 'godlike mastery' of mind and body. But the means they had chosen to the same end were diametrically opposed . . . The 'godlike' man of paganism could only be produced from among intellectuals, who had undergone the ancient grooming in the ways of a civilised gentleman . . . In whatever light he may show it the new Christian holy man had opted for some flagrant antithesis to the norms of civilised life in the Mediterranean. (*The World of Late Antiquity*, 1971, pp. 97, 98.)

To put it slightly differently, what the hermit lacked was 'noise, culture, and women'. According to this analysis both Plotinus and Antony were trying to do the same sort of thing though in rather different ways. But what, according to Athanasius, was Antony trying to do? Was he trying to achieve '“godlike mastery” of mind and body' or something rather different? Is it the old tune transposed into a different key, or is it a different tune?

There are, I suggest, five elements that figure largely in the biography: scripture, withdrawal, asceticism, prayer, and demons. The first of these elements stands outside the other four, because it is in a way normative for the rest and influences the existence and form the others take, at least in Athanasius' account. In the second chapter of the *Vita* we read that 'he entered the church and it happened the Gospel was being read, and he heard the Lord saying to the rich man "If thou wouldst be perfect, go and sell what thou hast and give it to the poor, and come, follow me and thou shall have treasure in heaven" [Mt. xix. 21].' In response to this appeal he disposed of his property, which was not inconsiderable, provided for his sister, and withdrew into the desert. Again, fighting with the devil and the demons, which formed such a

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, viii. 12. 29.

² Antony also returned to Alexandria during the persecution of Maximin Daia (310–11) (*V.A.* 46); for his defence of orthodoxy against the Arians in July 338, see *V.A.* 69, and for his loyalty to the Church and especially to the bishops, see *V.A.* 91, which relates the bequest of the sheepskin coat to the bishops.

large part of Antony's experience in the desert, is on at least two occasions directly connected with Eph. vi. 12 (*V.A.* 21, 51). At *V.A.* 21 in the course of his address to the ascetics Antony says: 'For we have terrible and crafty foes—the evil spirits—and against them we wrestle as the Apostle said, "Not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"'. Finally, 1 Thess. v. 17 is used at *V.A.* 3. to prove that a man ought to pray unceasingly.¹ In other words, for some of the most important aspects of his life Antony is portrayed as under the influence and pattern of the norm of scripture. How much this proves about the real influence of scripture upon the life style of Antony is of course debatable. It is, however, significant at least for the non-philosophical nature of Antony's asceticism, that he nowhere uses 'philosophia' to describe that life. This by itself is interesting, because it distinguishes Athanasius' approach both from Iamblichus and Porphyry on the one side and from the so-called Christian Platonists on the other. As we shall see later it also distinguished him slightly from Basil and strongly from Gregory.²

If we turn now to the second point we see that Antony's life was characterized by a series of physical withdrawals. His disengagement from the world around him was characterized by a physical break from surrounding culture and society. (This is not the inner disengagement and withdrawal of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Plotinus.)³ Step by step he retired further and further from society. Beginning in the nearby desert at the age of 20 (*V.A.* 8), (*V.A.* 12) he then withdrew to the inner desert *c.* 285 for twenty years (*V.A.* 14). Finally *c.* 312 he sought the innermost desert (49) from which he only emerged to declare his support for orthodoxy, in July 338 (*V.A.* 69). Many motives have been assigned for this move on his part—flight from persecution, tax evasion, even the imitation of pagan models. But unless Athanasius' life is taken as a pure romantic and philosophical fabrication, with no basis in fact, it is hard to see how Antony became in any direct sense acquainted with pagan models. Nor should it be forgotten that according to Athanasius (*V.A.* 72) Antony was illiterate. Of their actual existence there is little

¹ The same text is also used at *De Instituto Christiano*, Jaeger, viii. i. 80. 4.

² A. M. Malingrey, '*PHILOSOPHIA*': *Étude d'un groupe de mots dans la littérature grecque* (*Études et Commentaires*, 40, Paris, 1961).

³ There are two distinct attitudes to 'withdrawal'. First there is the purely inward type, advocated especially by the Stoics, cf. Diogenes Laertius, vii. 123; Epictetus, *Diss.* iii. 13. 7; and Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* iv. 3. 1., and by the Neoplatonists, Plotinus, *Enn.* i. 1. 12. 18. Secondly there are the physical withdrawals discussed below. On the whole subject see Leipoldt, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–19, and A. J. Festugière, *op. cit.*, p. 478.

evidence, and of their ideal of 'literary existence' only three possible cases. Plutarch in his treatise *On the Obsolescence of Oracles* describes two hermits that he knows of by report. In chapter 18 he relates how a certain Demetrius had made a voyage of inquiry among the Scilly Isles by the emperor's order. 'He came to the nearest of these islands which had a few inhabitants, holy men who were all held inviolate by the Britons.' In chapter 21 Cleombrotos is made to say 'I do not hesitate to favour you with a narrative about a man, not a Greek, whom I had great difficulty in finding, and then only by dint of long wanderings and after paying large sums for information. It was near the Persian Gulf that I found him, where he holds meetings with human beings once a year.' Both these accounts have the aura of travellers' tales about them.¹ More worthy of attention is a remark in Porphyry's *De Abst.* i. 36. The reference is to some Pythagoreans who in the past distinguished themselves by inhabiting ἐρημότατα χωρία (cf. Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica* xxi. 96). Nothing more is said about them, nor have we any evidence of this sort of practice either in early or late antiquity, unless it be of the community of Pythagoreans foregathered at Croton (see Iamblichus, *De V.P.* vi. 29). The only other community of ascetics, gathered together for the purpose of ascesis and contemplation and capable of providing a form for the enterprise of Antony, were the Therapeutae, described by Philo in *De Vita Contemplativa*, but not elsewhere either mentioned or traced by archaeology. Eusebius, indeed, discusses them,² and identifies them with Christian monks—an identification that gave rise to a great deal of controversy at the end of the last century about the authenticity of Philo's work—but both the absence of independent evidence and the community aspect of the Therapeutae make it unlikely that Antony's essentially solitary retreat was in any direct sense influenced by them. Nevertheless, the existence of such passages in Plutarch, Porphyry, and Philo is evidence of a similarity of religious feeling between Christians and Greeks, even if this feeling in the case of the Greeks did not lead to any practical steps.

When we come to the third element, ascesis, the picture is by no means

¹ Dodds, op. cit., p. 31, n. 3, quotes the case of the only 'pagan hermit' from Lucian, *Demonax* i. He lived 'in the open on Mt. Parnassus and supported himself entirely on milk'. But, as Dodds notes, his motive was supposed to be practical rather than religious. For the value of *anachoresis* there is also the evidence of Philostratus, *Vita Ap.* 1. 7, though it did not entail total withdrawal from human society.

² Eusebius' account of the Therapeutae is at *H.E.* ii. 16. 2. His clear belief that the ascetics described by Philo in *De Vita Contemplativa* were in fact Christian monks, led Lucius and others to doubt the authenticity of the latter work. The matter is fully discussed by F. C. Conybeare in his commentary (Oxford, 1893).

so clear. In the prologue to his work Athanasius uses the word three times to describe the life of hardship and self-discipline that the monks were preparing for, and the word *ascesis* itself is used on at least forty occasions in the course of the life. Within the general context of self-discipline it is possible to isolate at least three distinct but related elements. First, there is abstinence from wine and meat. In chapter 7 we read 'His food was bread and salt, his drink, water only. Of flesh and wine it is superfluous even to speak'. We seem to be here in the presence of some form of fairly identifiable Pythagorean taboo about wine and meat. An array of authorities from that school forbade it to its votaries. Both the *Lives of Pythagoras* record a like practice for him, Plotinus abstained from all meat and the same may be said of Apollonius.¹ In other words, as far as practice is concerned Antony and Pythagoras are close. When, however, we inspect the motives that underlie the similarities some interesting differences emerge. In *V.A.* 7, after describing Antony's first struggle, Athanasius gives a list of reasons, some scriptural, some philosophical, for the self-denial in food and sleep practised by Antony. His perpetual asceticism is first seen in the context of 1 Cor. ix. 27, which is quoted in paraphrase: 'But I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified'. The scriptural basis is supplemented, however, as the chapter progresses. By self-denial in the matter of food the pleasures of the body are reduced and the *τόνος τῆς ψυχῆς*, the vigour of the soul, is increased. The results of these efforts was daily advance in virtue, *προκοπή*. The sentiment of the earlier reason is Pythagorean and Platonist; the language of the latter is Stoic and may be paralleled in both Epictetus (*Ench.* xii, xiii) and Gregory of Nyssa, *De Instituto* (Jaeger, vol. viii. i. 44. 26). This interesting amalgam of reasons for practices undertaken can be paralleled in the ascetic writings of Gregory of Nyssa, and may be seen as part of the general apologetic desire to show that anything the Greeks did could also be done, though rather more successfully, by Christians. The contrast with the much more coherent philosophy of the *De Abstinencia* is illuminating. Athanasius' chance phrase becomes in Porphyry the outcrop of a whole system.

Unlike Stoicism, which practised moderation rather than unnatural methods (Epictetus, *Diss.* iii. 12), Porphyry based his prohibition of meat-eating on a particular view of the origin of the soul and of its relation to the body which it acquired as a sort of natural consequence of

¹ On Pythagorean abstinence see Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 2. 5; *De Abst.* i. 46; Iamblichus, *De V.P.* xxiv. 107; xxxii. 224; Philostratus, *Vita Ap.* 1. 8; *Gnomologicum Vaticanum* 464 (ed. Sternbach), and Basil, *To Young Men*, 9. 76.

and punishment for previous weakness. In the body, therefore, and in this physical universe the soul is in a state of exile and alienation which may only be remedied by means of a rigorous process of asceticism and introversion. Only so can the soul realize its sovereign desire to return to the place of its origin. The outlines of this teaching receive an elaborate exposition in *De Abstinētia*.¹ According to this view meat-eating makes the soul adhere more closely to the body, and in *Vita Apollonii* i. 8, it is further explained that meat somehow thickens the soul. In this chapter Apollonius appeals to the example of Pythagoras for his own practice, and it is said of him that 'he avoided the meat of animals as something impure that dulled the intelligence.' There is more philosophy and less popular morality in the theory and practice of asceticism in Philostratus and Porphyry than there is in Athanasius—a view which is supported by the interesting case of the Therapeutae.

Philo in his account of the Therapeutae writes as follows of their diet: 'Still they eat nothing costly, only common bread with salt for a relish, flavoured further by the daintier with hyssop, and their drink is spring water' (*V.C.* 37). In his comment on this passage Conybeare draws attention to the curious and interesting fact that, in the Letronne Papyri, we have records for the year *c.* 164 B.C. of the monks of the temple of Serapis at Memphis, in which the item 'pure salt and bread' is of frequent occurrence. It was very probably the staple diet of the Egyptian poor man, copied by the priests of Serapis, the pre-Christian Therapeutae, and the holy men of the desert. It is perhaps in imitation of them that the *Apostolic Constitutions*² of the latter half of the fourth century lay down for fasting in Holy Week bread, salt, water and herbs, with a strong embargo on wine and meat. My suggestion therefore is that despite the similarity of Christian and Pythagorean abstinence a different set of presuppositions underlies the two. Porphyry urged his friend Castrius to abstain because he believed that meat was hostile to the welfare of the soul; Antony abstained because his desire to obey the gospel and follow Christ's poor led him to sell his possessions and

¹ The following passages from *De Abst.* i. illustrate the underlying principles of Porphyry's ascesis. Prior to its fall the soul was a spiritual being (i. 30, Nauck 10. 18–20); owing to some fault it now exists in some foreign, hostile atmosphere (i. 30, N. 107. 24–108. 3), and therefore needs to put off that part of himself that is alien, namely body and sense (i. 30, N. 108. 3–18; i. 31, N. 109. 2–7). There is a discussion of Porphyry's treatment of the origin of the soul and end by P. Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus* (Paris, 1968), p. 91, n. 1. The derivative character of much of Porphyry's thought is illustrated by the dependence of large tracts of *De Abst.* ii on Theophrastus' lost treatise *On Piety*.

² *Const. Ap.* v. 18, advocates a diet of bread, salt, water, and leeks and a total abstinence from meat and wine for Holy Week.

imitate the life of his poor compatriots, the subsistence farmers of the outskirts of the Nile belt.

There is a further element in Antony's *ascesis* that deserves mention. Chapter 14 of the *Vita* describes the condition of Antony after his twenty years in the inner desert. 'Those who saw him wondered at the sight, for he had the same habit of body as before, and was neither fat like a man without exercise, nor lean from fasting and striving with the demons, but was just the same as they had known him before his retirement. And again his soul was free from blemish, for it was neither contracted as if by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor possessed by laughter or dejection.' Bodily hardship had not done the man of God any harm. What has attracted people in this description is the great similarity the words bear to those with which Porphyry describes Pythagoras after an equally strenuous *ascesis* in *Vita Pythagorae* 35. The verbal likeness of the two texts is very striking. Pythagoras was not ὑπ' ἀνίας συνεστέλλετο, neither was Antony ὑπ' ἀνίας συσταλείς. Laughter was found in neither of the two heroes. Reitzenstein and others seized on this as an example of the method of Athanasius, who wished to portray his hero as outdoing the heroes of paganism in their own chosen fields of excellence. Although the parallel is sufficiently striking, I am inclined to think that both go back to some common source, possibly Plutarch, in which the well-tempered man is described.¹

The final point that needs making about *ascesis* is the result that accrues to the ascetic in terms of increased spiritual power. In the case of Antony this power meant two things: the power to deal with demons by discerning them and then expelling them, and secondly miraculous powers over various forms of illness. In chapter 84 of the *Vita* we read of the miracles he worked and the discernment he displayed. The author, however, is careful to remark at the outset that 'it was clear to all that it was not he himself who worked, but the Lord who showed mercy by his means and healed the sufferers' (cf. also ch. 38). Antony's part was only prayer and discipline. Even with this qualification such a claim is not very far from that advanced for the ascetic by Porphyry in *De Abst.* ii. 49. The true philosopher, he writes, is a priest of the supreme God, and by his abstinence he is united to the God he serves. This union gives him great powers of judgment and knowledge of the secret things of nature. More explicitly, he writes in *Ad Marcellam* 11, that 'to the wise man God gives power'. The only difference between

¹ Daniel i. 15 describes the Hebrews after their lean diet as 'looking healthier and better nourished than all the young men who lived on the food assigned them by the king.' Healthiness of body is a proof of the natural excellence of the ascetic life in Epictetus, *Diss.* ii. 22. 86–9.

the sage and the saint is less one of practice than of theory.¹ The saint becomes God's instrument (*V.A.* 83): the sage becomes his agent—descriptively they are barely distinct.²

It is when we come to the fourth division, that of prayer, that the differences become most marked. Prayer clearly played a very important part in Antony's life. The explicit references to it total at least twenty, and it is pursued in obedience to the word of scripture which bids us pray constantly. Little, however, is actually said about the content of these prayers. The contrast between the frequency of Antony's prayer and what we find in all the Greek counterparts is striking. Philostratus mentions Apollonius' prayer twice and says it took this form: 'O God, give me what I deserve'.³ (*Vita Ap.* i. 11; iv. 40). Plotinus on two occasions criticizes those who think that prayer will enable them to evade the normal consequences of their actions. In *Enn.* iii. 2. 8. 37–40 he says that bravery, not prayer, will save a man in battle, and that industry, not prayer, will improve his crops. And in the following section (iii. 2: 9. 10–11) he denies the value of prayer in saving men from the consequences of their wrongdoing. The language of the latter passage may well be directed against a Christian idea of salvation. There is one passage, however, where he adopts a less negative view of the matter. In *Enn.* v. 1. 6. 10–15 Plotinus suggests that anyone who wishes to understand the mystery of the procession of the all from the One ought first to betake himself to prayer, as a sort of preparation for reflection. This must be an affair of the soul only and not of the lips, as men try to address the Alone with the whole of their hearts in solitude. What is there described is clearly not any easily recognizable form of petitionary prayer, but rather an attention of the mind prior to thought, a form of recollection. A similar 'internalization' of prayer is to be found in Gregory of Nyssa.⁴

¹ The phrase here quoted from *Ad Marcellam* 11 finds an exact parallel in Sextus, *Sentences* 36, another example of the derivatory character of Porphyry's thought.

² See the useful collection of texts by A. J. Festugière, art. cit. especially Iamblichus, *De V.P.* xxviii. 138, 140, 143, and Athanasius, *V.A.* 56, 59. Pythagoras became a god, Antony never more than a man of God, *V.A.* 70, 71, 73.

³ See also Porphyry, *Ad Marcellam* 12 (N. 282. 9), Iamblichus, *De V.P.* 54; and for the parallel in popular piety see Horace *Ep.* 1. 18. 107–12 and Sextus, *Sent.* 122.

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Inst.*, Jaeger viii. i. 82. 6, says that prayer does not consist of falling on the knees or prostrating oneself on the ground, but rather in rigorously controlling the mind and then giving the whole attention to prayer: similar expressions may be found at *C. Eunomium* i. 541, and *De Vita Moysis* ii. 118—a refined concept of prayer with parallels in Clement, *Strom.* vii. 43 and Plotinus. Plotinus' attitude is discussed by J. M. Rist, *Plotinus, the Road to Reality* (Cambridge, 1967), especially ch. 15. He notes (a) Plato rarely discusses

The fifth striking feature of Antony's life is the predominance of demons. It is the devil and his agents who oppose the saint's efforts at asceticism from the outset. 'But the devil, who hates and envies what is good, could not endure to see such a resolution in a youth, but endeavoured to carry out against him what he had been wont to effect against others. First of all he tried to lead him away from discipline' (*V.A.* 5). The devils are actively hostile beings, not unlike goblins, opposed to the self-dedication of the saint, and the fight against them is conceived, as has been noted, in the light of Eph. vi. 12. To what extent did the philosophical writers share the same sort of picture? Late classical antiquity indeed knew of demons. They were an inheritance from Plato who regarded them as intermediaries between the gods and man. Such too is the opinion of later Platonist writers like 'Albinus' and Plutarch. Iamblichus likewise regards them as a grade of reality, and so does Porphyry. The Christian writers, beginning from the New Testament, though using the word, imply a different idea. For them the 'demon' is a uniformly hostile being, possessing, tempting, or fighting against men. It is clearly in this latter tradition that Athanasius' usage lies.¹

So far we have seen that despite certain similarities between Antony and the pagan sages, the differences are more pronounced, especially in the matter of devils and prayer. The asceticism they both practised in its content and in the power it conferred is indeed similar, but whereas the pursuit of poverty in obedience to Scripture and a strong sense of dependence on God marks the efforts of Antony, prayer and then only in its illicit use when it acts as a sort of substitute for effort and action on our part. *Laws* 801a stresses this though also it asserts God's interest in our welfare. (b) Plotinus (i) had no interest in cult (*Vita* x); (ii) he did, however, believe in cosmic sympathy (*Enn.* iv. 4. 26. 15), but tended to place prayer on a level with magic and on a lower plane than contemplation (*Enn.* iv. 4. 44. 1). (iii) Prayer, as in Plato, should not be allowed to take the place of effort (*Enn.* iii. 2. 8-9). (iv) The lofty conception of prayer at *Enn.* v. 1. 6 is rather of acute mental contemplation. Such language may be Stoic in inspiration, see W. Theiler, *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus* (Berlin, 1930), p. 134.

¹ For the *δαίμων* as a sort of intermediary being cf. Plato, *Rep.* 392a; 427b; 469a; 617d; Alcinoos ('Albinus') *Did.* 15. 1; Plutarch, *De Is. et Os.* 26. 361b, c; *Def. Or.* 10. 415a; *De 'E'* 13. 390c; Iamblichus *V.P.* 37, 55, 146, 219. The New Testament uses the word *δαίμων* only once at Mt. viii. 31. It is doubtful, however, whether the weight laid on this fact by Nock, *Collected Papers*, p. 343, can be sustained by the evidence. The New Testament uses the diminutive *δαιμόνιον* with great regularity, and assigns to them the same functions as does Antony to his demons. See also Philostratus' *Vita Ap.* iii. 38; iv. 10; 20. 25—all describe the expulsion of demons. I owe these references to Dr. K. Noakes. Also benevolent and malevolent demons play a considerable part in Porphyry, *De Abst.* ii. 38, 43.

neither of these features appears in the lives of either Pythagoras or Apollonius.

BASIL

Writing of Basil's ascetic works Werner Jaeger has this to say: 'In his ascetic writings Basil keeps consciously to the words of Scripture: he refrains from calling the monks "philosophers" and their life "the philosophic life"' (op. cit., p. 82). Jaeger's concern here is to illuminate the difference between Basil and his brother Gregory and in so doing he seems to overstate his case. Although it is true that the expression does not occur in the *Rules*, it should be noted that in the *Proemium* to the *Rules* Basil is happy to employ philosophic language: and further that in the *Letters*, the *Proemium* to the *Constitutiones Asceticae* (P.G. xxxi. 1321), and the two ascetic sermons, Basil is found using the term *φιλοσοφία* to apply to the monastic life. It is true that most scholarly opinion agrees that the last-named group of sermons is not Basilian, but it is also agreed that they are Basilian in inspiration.¹

It is with Antony rather than with any supposed philosophical vocabulary that Basil's rules are most strongly to be contrasted. As Amand de Mendieta notes, the accent in the *Rules* falls principally on two items either totally absent or barely alluded to in the *Vita Antonii*: corporal charity to those outside, coupled with a strong sense of community inside the monastery. Both these aspects are based on clear scriptural warrants and both receive full treatment in *Regulae Fusius Tractatae* 3 and 7 respectively. In *Rule* 3 starting from Mt. xxii. 34 Basil develops a whole theology of practical charity. In this concern there is already a glimpse of the immense social interest that marks his years as bishop of Caesarea. Important though this is, it is the seventh rule with its emphasis on Community that is more characteristic and was destined to have a greater influence on the history of Christian

¹ The arguments against the authenticity of the two *Sermones Ascetici* are laid out by W. K. L. Clarke in *The Ascetic Works of St. Basil* (S.P.C.K., London, 1925), p. 11. They are three in number. (i) There is a total absence of biblical quotations; (ii) Many of the words used have no counterpart in the New Testament; (iii) They manifest a difference in style and content from Basil's other writing. The inauthenticity of these works is accepted unquestioningly by both Amand de Mendieta and Jaeger, though it should be noted that Pierre Maraval, *Vita Macrinae* (S.C., 1971, p. 91, n. 2) seems to assume the opposite. He also alludes to the use of 'philosophia' for the monastic life in *Letters* i, iv, xlv, ccx. In the *Proemium* to *R.F.T.* (P.G. xxxi. 889A) Basil uses the platonic language of *skopos* and the epicurean idea of *ataraxia* to recommend his own *Rules*. For a treatment of *φιλοσοφία* in Basil see A. M. Malingrey, op. cit., pp. 207, 277 f. There need of course be no deep significance in this, but the absence of this depth should be proved rather than assumed.

monasticism. The origins of this stress are not clear. Dr. H. Chadwick¹ is definitely against the view that it owes its genesis to the example of the cenobitic life practised in Egypt under Pachomius. It probably owes more to the influence of Eustace of Sebaste. The anti-eremitical tone, however, of the whole rule does seem to presuppose either a knowledge of the Antonian system or of something very like it. The title of the rule reads: 'It is both disagreeable and dangerous to live alone'. The reasons adduced by Basil are interesting, especially as they seem to show him abandoning rather than sanely modifying Antony's ideal. The central contention of Basil is that we need each other so much both for our physical and spiritual welfare that isolation is opposed to our true interests. Alone we are too self-preoccupied and desert the fundamental law of love, nor have we in our solitude anyone to correct our faults and make us humble (7. 1). Common life corrects the natural tendency most of us have to self-pleasing and pride. Without brethren around us who is there to bring us to a humble frame of mind (7. 3, 4)? It ought perhaps to be said in support of the Antonian ideal that it was not aiming in the same direction as Basil. Antony's primary concern was with soul-making, with fighting against devils, with approaching God, with giving advice to the spiritually needy. Basil in his attempt to recreate the conditions of Acts ii. 44 and iv. 32 was less concerned with individual achievement than with corporate effort, less with spiritual than with material need.

In his substitution of a corporate for a solitary way of life Basil has much in common both with the communal life described by Philo in *De Vita Contemplativa* and with the precepts and practice of Pythagoras and his followers at Croton. There everything was held in common in accordance with the Master's precept *κοινὰ τὰ τῶν φίλων*.²

The food asceticism that plays so large a part in the life of Antony and of Pythagoras is less prominent, though by no means absent, from the *Rules* of Basil.³ He returns rather to the ideal of Clement of Alexandria and the Stoics who thought that it was more important and praiseworthy to be able to use the goods of this life moderately than to abstain from some of them completely.⁴ In his nineteenth rule Basil lays down

¹ H. Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 178.

² The dictum has a long life. It appears for the first time in *Phaedrus* 279 c 6 and subsequently as a preserve of the Pythagoreans at *D.L.* viii. 10; Porphyry, *V.P.* 33; Iamblichus, *V.P.* 81. For the actual practice of having goods in common, cf. Porphyry, *V.P.* 20, and Iamblichus, *V.P.* 30, 72, 81, 168, 257. He says that they handed their property over to an *οἰκονομικός* (72, 74).

³ *Regulae Brevius Tractatae*, 128–30, esp. 130, which is entitled *πὼς χρὴ νηστεύειν, ὅταν χρεῖα γένηται νηστείας*. The whole rule presupposes a considerable degree of fasting.

⁴ For Clement see M. Pohlenz, 'Klemens von Alexandria und sein helle-

that the one criterion for self-control is abstinence from whatever leads the soul into destructive pleasure. In putting forth this ideal Basil can be interpreted as attempting two separate things: (i) a spiritualizing of the rather physical ideal of Antony, which makes the ideal he proposes open to all Christians and not simply to those who have embarked on the contemplative life. This tendency to allegorize away the physical character of the following of Christ can be detected in Clement of Alexandria's *Quis Dives Salvetur* and in the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus. The argument is two-fold: (a) If perfection is within the reach of all it cannot be made to depend on certain physical states, like celibacy and poverty, which are not open to all. (b) it is not the actual physical virginity that matters so much as the state of soul that it ought to reflect or produce. (ii) It may well be that the less austere views of Basil are partly influenced by the different audience he is addressing. Antony's poverty, as we have seen, probably resulted from a desire to draw closer to the mores of the poor he lived close to. The majority of Basil's monks—and Basil himself—came from a more wealthy section of the people, who would have seen no particular virtue in poverty as such. The social stress of much of Basil's thinking combines with his more spiritual attitude in the end of the first sermon on fasting, where Basil uses Isaiah lviii. 4–6 to prove the superiority of charity to the poor over physical self-denial.

Even so, despite the tendency that has been noted to spiritualize the physical features of the religious life, certain particularities obstinately remain. Physical withdrawal, *anachoresis*, is never dispensed with. Silence, too, is insisted upon in the thirteenth rule in a way strongly reminiscent of the practice and precepts of both Apollonius and Pythagoras.¹ Coupled with this emphasis on silence is a similar stress shared by both Basil and Porphyry on the need for *hesychia* and recollection. Willy Theiler² has drawn attention to the resemblances between Basil's language in his second letter and Porphyry's in parts of the *De Abstinencia* and *Ad Marcellam*. The language in the letter is certainly far more 'philosophical' than the language of the *Rules*—

nisches Christentum', *Kleine Schriften*, i. pp. 481–559. Pohlenz quotes as examples of Clement's moderation *Paed.* iii. 31. 2; *Str.* iii. 82. 3; and the Stoicism of Clement's teaching can be seen by comparing *Paed.* ii. 11. 4 with Musonius, *Diatribes* xviii (Hense, p. 99).

¹ The Pythagorean precept of silence is clear in Iamblichus, *V.P.* 30, 72, 195; Porphyry, *V.P.* 19; Diog. Laert. viii. 10; and for Apollonius cf. *Vita* i. 14.

² Willy Theiler in *B.Z.* xli (1941), p. 171. His remarks occur in a review of P. Henry's *Les États du texte de Plotin* (Paris, 1938). Henry had indicated Plotinian influence on Basil, and was in this followed by Amand de Mendieta, *op. cit.*, p. 90, n. 2.

a feature of Basil's writing that Jaeger rather neglects in his attempt to draw too stark a contrast between the writings of Basil and Gregory. Theiler, Henry, and Amand de Mendieta agree in general that the Basilian emphasis on the need for seclusion, peace, and silence as prerequisites for recollection and thought about God may be paralleled in either Plotinus or Porphyry or both. *Hesychia* may be found in all three writers and receives prominence in all three.¹ It would be possible to explain the likeness on the basis of some common human aspiration which any serious seeker after knowledge of the divine would advocate. But I am inclined to think that here the pattern of Neoplatonic/Pythagorean withdrawal has entered into the fabric of Basil's thought. The early date and self-centred tone of the letter combine with its philosophical language to differentiate it sharply from the more scriptural and community-oriented approach that mark his *Rules* and later writings. It is also worth observing that *Ep.* ii not only bears the strongest marks of Neoplatonist influence, but is also addressed to Gregory of Nazianzus, as a sort of protreptic to the monastic life. Basil, as sometimes, starts from the position of his addressee in order to convert him to his point of view. He invites his friend to find in monastic seclusion all the hopes of the truly contemplative life. Such a strongly philosophic tone is not to be found elsewhere, I believe, in the writings of Basil. The two *Sermones ascetici* are probably spurious, and the parallel to *Enn.* v. 1. 2. 11–14 in Basil's *Homily xv de Fide* (*P.G.* xxxi. 465AB) indicated by Henry is scarcely convincing.

The features that distinguish Basil from Antony are clear enough; those that distinguish him from the ideals expressed in Porphyry and Plotinus less so. Devils and miracles are almost, if not entirely, absent from Basil's *Rules*; so is the rigorous abstinence and the solitude and the prolonged praying. These have been replaced by moderation, the common life and common worship, practical charity to and concern for the poor. The ideals and life of the early Church, especially as they are described in the earlier chapters of Acts, seem to have played a probative if not normative role, and it is to them rather than to any real or imagined Pythagorean ideal of common ownership that the writings of Basil appeal. Only in the insistence on *hesychia*, do we seem to glimpse an almost Epicurean obsession with freedom from cares as

¹ On the need for *hesychia* as a prerequisite for both thought and prayer cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* v. 1. 2. 11–14; also Philostratus, *Vita Ap.* i. 7; and for the need of recollection *Enn.* vi. 9. 7. 5–10; this latter passage is extremely close in tone to the text from *De Inst.* 82. 4; Porphyry, *Sent.* 32; Basil, *R.F.T.* 6, stresses the need for retirement for those who desire to continue in prayer. But above all cf. *Ep.* ii. 2, *passim*, and for a commentary with parallels cf. Amand de Mendieta, *op. cit.*, pp. 86 ff.

a necessary prerequisite for 'success' in the monastic life, and the strongest expression of this conviction occurs, as we have seen, in the early second letter.

We do, however, catch in Basil a glimpse of one feature, evident also in Athanasius and very evident in Gregory, which has been thought by many to vitiate the Christian character of all three writers, namely, a basic belief in the uncorrupted character of the human soul or heart. In other words there are expressions that point to a weak doctrine of grace and an absence of a doctrine of original sin. So Antony in the address put into his mouth in *V.A.* 20 says 'For when the soul has its spiritual faculty in a natural state, then virtue is formed. And it is in a natural state when it remains as it came into existence. And when it came into existence it was fair and exceedingly honest. . . . If we abide as we are made we are in a state of virtue. . . . And as we have received the soul as a deposit, let us preserve it for the Lord, that he may recognize his work as being the same as when he made it'. Basil's and Gregory's expression of the same sort of optimism takes a slightly different form. In *R.F.T.* 2 Basil writes of the desire for God that each of us naturally possesses, and which was sown in us like a seed from the beginning of our lives. Our business is with the joint help of prayer and the grace of God 'to stir up the spark of divine desire within us'. Later on in the same section of the rule he speaks of the sharpness of the desire that exists for God in souls purged of the dross of evil. The optimism which strikes us so forcibly in Athanasius is here a little muted. We need the grace of God in order to achieve our end, but the end is the realization of an inner desire, overlaid doubtless with the defilement of sin, but not internally corrupted. The sentiment expressed, if not the actual words chosen, is so like certain passages in Plato and Plotinus,¹ that the only difference between Basil and them is in the realm of grace, and even here it is possible to overstress the cleavage between Christian and pagan (cf. esp. p. 329, n. 3).

GREGORY OF NYSSA

What is true of the deficiencies and idiosyncracies of Basil's teaching on the pattern and power of the ascetic life may be paralleled in the writing of his brother. The opening of his treatise *De Instituto Christiano* contains the salient features of his spiritual teaching. In words that may echo the opening of *Enn.* iv. 8. 1., Gregory claims that a pure and unimpassioned look at the soul will reveal to the spectator God's love

¹ For the ascent of the soul to good, cf. Plato, *Symp.* 211 ab; Plotinus, *Enn.* i. 6. 7; vi. 9. 3. 43. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. v in Cant. Cant.* (Jaeger vi. 159. 11–18 and *passim*) (cf. *De An. et Res.*, P.G. 46. 65a).

towards us and his design in creating us. For the soul which was made with man is adorned with both a passionate longing for the beautiful and the best and a pure and blessed love for the intelligible and blessed image of which it is itself a copy. What keeps the soul from enjoying the vision of these intelligible delights is above all the deceitfulness of passion, for ever bewitching the soul with the sight of visible beauty and base pleasure. The only thing that can free the mind of man from the distractions that surround and threaten to engulf it, is the grace of God which provides the soul with the healing medicine of the knowledge of truth. We may note the following points: (i) There is a basic belief here as in Basil in the intrinsic uncorrupted and natural excellence of the human soul. (ii) The basic set of the soul's desire is the contemplating of intellectual truths, from which it is distracted by the deceits of sense. (iii) Although grace is required for the release of the soul from these deceits, in this passage at any rate it is the grace of knowledge, that is mental illumination, which effects the change. Both the assertion of the essentially incorrupt state of the human soul and the conviction that release comes through knowledge are Platonic. Desire, as Nygren puts it, 'is not to be rooted out but purified and directed to the right objects—that is to that which is in itself beautiful, or God' (p. 439). Later on he writes 'Their union can only be hindered if the sense world comes between and draws desire to itself' (*An. Res.*, *P.G.* xlvi. 65A).

The parallels between Gregory and Plotinus also touch the precise way in which the process of purification is to be brought about. *Enn.* i. 2. 3. specifies the content of likeness to God as a mixture of freedom from passion and 'knowledge', the moral element preceding and preparing the way for the intellectual. A clear statement of this view occurs in a contemporary of Gregory, the emperor Julian.¹ Philosophers, he says, maintain that likeness to God (*Theaetetus* 176 b) consists in absence of passion and contemplation of the real. In other words the formal characteristics of the philosopher's life are identical with those of the would-be perfect Christian. A confirmation of this picture may also be derived from the fact, noted by Jaeger, that whereas Athanasius always refers to monks and ascetics and never to the philosophic life, precisely the opposite is true of Gregory, who never uses the word *monachos* or *ascetes* but frequently refers to the ideal of the philosophic life. This particular usage is accompanied by a collection of words that are derived ultimately from Stoicism or Platonism, and more immediately from some more recent eclectic amalgam. Mention has

¹ Julian, *Contra Galilaeos* 171 d. The need for moral purification as prelude to contemplation is clear at *Phaedo* 69 c, and *Or. ix in Cant. Cant.* (vi. 271. 11 f.).

already been made of *pothos* and *eros*, to which must be added from the Platonic side *skopos* and *homoeosis*, and from Stoicism *kathorthoma* and *apatheia*.¹ All these formal elements combine to present a picture of a thoroughly philosophical ideal. If there is added to this the spiritualizing of the ideal of virginity and the absence of any reference either to fasting or to demons or to the importance of community or to the need of charity towards our neighbour, we do indeed seem to be dealing with a sub-Christian ideal even by the standards of Athanasius and Basil.

Two points should be made to correct this picture or at least to modify it: (i) Gregory does use scripture intensively as the *De Instituto* moves on. (ii) The somewhat inadequate role assigned to grace in the first two pages is corrected as the author proceeds. On the first point, the increased use of scripture from page 44 onwards of the Jaeger edition cannot be simply attributed to the influence perhaps exercised on Gregory by the *Great Letter* of Macarius. The close similarities between that work and the *De Instituto* do not start until p. 64. Further, the other two certain ascetic works of Gregory, the *De Perfectione* and *De Professione Christiana* are, at times, simply catenae of biblical quotations. On the second point it is only fair to add that the notion of grace presented by the opening of the *De Instituto* as simply 'revelation' is not supported later on. The word *χάρις*² occurs at least nineteen times in the course of fifty pages. But, though Gregory here and in other places admits the need for something a little stronger than knowledge to help men regain the vision of God, his conception of the relationship between this grace and human endeavour is one of joint effort or partnership. The word he uses is *συνεργία*, and in his explanation of this partnership (*De Inst.* viii. i. 43. 17–21; 44. 21, *passim*), he can at least be taken as meaning that man prepares the ground for grace to work in. Two points need to be made about Gregory's teaching. (i) Weak though such a vision may seem in comparison with the conceptions of St. Paul and St. Augustine, it nevertheless preserves with considerable vigour an element which is largely lacking in Plotinus³ and Porphyry. (ii) Even

¹ *Skopos* (all refs are to vol. viii. 1 of Jaeger's edition); 41. 16, 18; 48. 14. *homoeosis*: 136. 6–8, 299. 19 etc.; *kathorthoma*: 64. 9, 65. 2, 20; 66. 4, 5. *apatheia*: 41. 10.

² *χάρις* in *De Inst.* alone occurs at 41. 5; 44. 17, 27; 45. 2; 46. 6, 19, 26; 47. 2, 3, 5, 8, 11.

³ It is important to note that parallels to this 'attenuated' doctrine of grace may be found even in Plotinus. The differences, as R. T. Wallis notes in *Neoplatonism* (Duckworth, 1972), esp. pp. 90 ff., are these: Plotinus' mysticism lacks any sense of sin and consequent need for redemption; and further, that for Plotinus our true self is eternally saved anyway. All that we need to do is to wake up (cf. *Enn.* i. 6. 9. 22–5). There is, however, one text which uses the

so, both popular morality and religious feeling together with later Neoplatonism offer striking parallels to the view of Gregory. Popular morality as it finds expression at Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 811 (cf. Fraenkel, ad loc.) believes in the co-operation of God with man. Iamblichus also, with his emphasis on theurgy at the expense of contemplation, stresses the humbler cosmic status of the soul. Wallis (op. cit., p. 122) observes that 'The *De mysteriis* exhibits a new stress on the need for divine grace combined with a humility and receptiveness on man's part towards that grace'. Iamblichus, op. cit., ii. 11, describes the importance of theurgy as follows: 'It is not thought that links the theurgist to the gods. . . . Theurgic union is achieved only by the perfective operation of the unspeakable acts performed correctly, acts which are beyond all understanding.' With this, as Dodds notes (*Proclus, the Elements of Theology*, Oxford, 1933, introd. p. xx), 'the whole basis of the Plotinian intellectual system is rejected'. Even, therefore, on the supposedly uniquely Christian doctrine of grace it is possible to discover outside Christian writers a view about the innate powers of man and his need for divine help which is barely distinct from the three Fathers here examined.

CONCLUSION

1. Even within the narrow limits that this article sets itself the three writers here examined are by no means homogeneous in their views. This is partly, no doubt, because each has a different aim in mind, and therefore each lays emphasis on differing elements. To Antony's ideal of poverty and solitary fighting with the devil in the interest of soul-making answers Basil's vision of a community living in charity with itself and the outside world; while his brother seems to spiritualize this ideal and to concentrate upon the underlying purpose, as he conceives it, of Christian asceticism. In attempting this philosophical appraisal and justification he is never far from the language of platonized Stoicism. Although it is possible to overstress, as does Jaeger, the differences of vocabulary and method between Basil and Gregory, it does remain true that the *De Inst.* is in language and conception closer to the ascetic ideals of Plato than it is to those of Antony. It should always be remembered, however, that it was not Gregory's theorizing, but Basil's and Antony's lived practice that influenced the Church.

Christian language of grace, *Enn.* vi. 7. 22. 5-7. There a distinction is made between the 'thing in itself' and the 'grace' or 'charm' that may be added to it. What makes something attractive to us is this superadded *charis*. The rest of the passage contains distinct echoes of *Phaedrus* 251 c which describes the ideas as giving off some sort of emanation, by contact with which souls recover their lost wings.

2. Behind the very evident similarities that characterize both forms of asceticism there lies a common tradition of popular morality, to which many similarities owe their existence. To this element it is possible to attribute such features as asceticism in food, a belief in the need of some form of divine aid, the need for physical or psychological withdrawal in order to further the process of reflection, and finally some, admittedly attenuated, belief in the value of prayer. On the basis of these common features Christians and pagans alike erected their respective structures of religion and philosophy—in the case of Gregory of Nyssa above all a mixture of the two.

3. Where there exist similarities that are not to be attributed to a common source, these do not occur evenly. For example, Pythagoreanism preached both a strong sort of food abstinence coupled with emphasis on communal life and silence. But, whereas the food abstinence may be paralleled in the life of Antony it is much less prominent in Basil, and the stress on the importance of community we find in Pythagoras while it is lacking in Antony is very prominent in Basil. But though there are many such similarities on both sides there are important differences both in stress and content. Although it is true that prayer receives a place in pagan and Christian alike, one does not rise from reading the former with the feeling that prayer is a matter of immense urgency. One has only to compare the elegant and restrained prayer at the close of Plato's *Phaedrus* with the restless urgency of Antony or Basil to sense the difference. Again, as has been suggested earlier, there is even in late Platonism some conviction of man's need of God, yet even so the emphasis is different. Athanasius writes (*V.A.* 5) 'For the Lord was working for Antony—the Lord who for our sake took flesh and gave the body victory over the devil, so that all who truly fight can say "not I but the grace of God within me"'. This should be compared with the natural divinity of man that is expressed at *Med.* ii. 4 by Marcus Aurelius: 'Yet now, if never before, shouldest thou realise of what universe thou art a part and as an emanation from what Controller of that universe thou dost subsist.' Again the notion that man's life is one of perpetual warfare with the devil is a stress that may not be found in Philostratus or in the two lives of Pythagoras. There are, however, two features of Christian asceticism that are proper to it. It is possible to dispute about the originality of it as a mode of behaviour in the Church; it is not possible to deny the prolific growth it has received in the Church since its beginning in the fourth (? third) century. Secondly, even the most philosophically self-conscious attempt to justify asceticism within the Church has never been able to forget the appeal to the words and example of Christ in the New Testament as a

basis for its practice. Although it is true that Pythagoreanism appealed to Pythagoras, yet in that very fact is revealed something of its difference from the ascesis with which it has often and rightly been compared.

ANTHONY MEREDITH