

THE OTHER IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE DESERT FATHERS

Fabrizio Vecoli

1. HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Before approaching the main subject of this paper, it may be useful to outline the historical background against which it is to be unfolded, i.e., Egypt in the 4th century C.E. From the point of view of the church, this in fact means the territory of the patriarchy of Alexandria, simultaneously the administrative capital of the Roman diocese and a major hub for cultural and religious life in the empire. Moreover, the deserts stretching to the South of the great city figure, at least according to tradition, as the cradle from which the first monasticism was born and developed.

Notwithstanding, in this period, Roman Egypt was far from being a homogenous environment: the great religious diversity by which it was to be characterized makes it all the more relevant for our present development. Pagan cults, Judaism, and different Christian trends still rubbed shoulders on a daily basis to a striking degree in the 4th century C.E., despite the fact that the latter was the century of the triumph of Christianity, as evinced in the so-called Edict of Milan promulgated by Constantine and Licinius (313) and the Edict of Theodosius promulgated in Salonika (380). Thus, despite the emperor's interventions in favor of the ecclesiastic establishment, whether Catholic or Arian (the subordinationist heresy), a highly variegated patchwork is what first meets the eye.

Indeed, a great number of debates on this subject have already taken place, due to the fact that, until very recently, the claim of a significant continuity in pagan cult practices after Constantine's reign was not unanimously endorsed by all scholars. For instance, as late as 1993, Roger S. Bagnall¹ still defended the thesis of a religious "void"

¹ See R. Bagnall, "Combat ou vide: Christianisme et paganisme dans l'Égypte romaine tardive," *Ktema* 13 (1988): 285–96; idem, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

which, according to him, paved the way for Christianity. To reach this conclusion, the great papyrologist underpins his argument by the increasing paucity of material traces referring to traditional pagan religions, but, in order to do so, he is obliged to discard the numerous testimonies in literary sources (hagiography, *in primis*), which today appears to be untenable. The earlier position adopted by Roger Rémondon,² who suggested a “resistance” of the other religions facing an infiltration of Christianity, strikes us as more appropriate when trying to get an idea of the real situation of the period. Indeed, this is also what the American scholar David Frankfurter³ asserts in his fine book on Roman Egypt in late antiquity: throughout the empire a huge change is observable, a process which occurred gradually,⁴ in the course of which the Christian faith managed to absorb some of the social functions of the pagan tradition, which however remained very much alive (though it is true that from the 3rd century onward, the centralized temple cult entered a critical phase).⁵ This region may thus be perceived, as Wilfred C. Griggs⁶ has suggested, as a laboratory of religions,⁷ in the midst of which Christianity spread more slowly than is generally thought,⁸ asserting itself within certain bishoprics (Alexandria), more particularly those of Demetrius, Athanasius, and Cyril (between the 3rd and 5th centuries). In short, it might be said that for the Egyptian citizen of the empire this century was a period of

² See R. Rémondon, “L’Égypte et la suprême résistance au christianisme,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie orientale* 51 (1952): 63–78 (see 67).

³ D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁴ “Conflict” has often been evoked; see A. Momigliano, *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

⁵ A. C. Johnson, “Roman Egypt to the Reign of Diocletian,” in *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (ed. T. Frank; Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1936), 639–49; J. A. S. Evans, “A Social and Economic History of an Egyptian Temple in the Greco-Roman Period,” *Yale Classical Studies* 17 (1961): 149–283.

⁶ C. W. Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

⁷ See S. Rubenson (*The Letters of St. Antony: Origenistic Theology, Monastic Tradition, and the Making of a Saint* [Lund: Lund University Press, 1996]): “Egypt in the fourth century probably deserved to be regarded as the land of ‘heresies’ *par excellence*” (103).

⁸ F. R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization C. 370–529* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 205–240 (chap. 9: “The Nile Valley from Canopus to Philae”); E. Wipszicka, “La christianisation de l’Égypte aux IV–VI^e siècles: Aspects sociaux et ethniques,” *Aegyptus* 68 (1988): 117–65.

great religious “confusion”; at least, that is the way the Coptic monk Paul of Tamma put it in his *De Cella (On the Cell)*:⁹ “Let the reigning confusion, my dear, not disturb you... You will get to know God in your cell.”

Without going into any further detail on the various forms of religious life, several major indicators may be retained in order to obtain a clearer picture of what living in such a period of “confusion” might have meant. The important Manichean mission originating from the East,¹⁰ Gnosticism (on which a voluminous literary corpus was found at Nag Hammadi in 1945),¹¹ and finally the presence of a long-standing Jewish community in Alexandria (our period is contemporary with the literature of the *Merkavah*, a mystical tradition which may be linked both to Gnosticism and to Christian monasticism).¹²

⁹ Paul of Tamma, *De cella* 30–50.

¹⁰ L. Koenen, “Manichäische Mission und Klöster in Ägypten,” in *Das römisch-byzantinische Ägypten* (ed. G. Grimm et al.; Aegyptiaca Treverensia 2; Mainz: Ph. Von Zabern, 1983), 93–108; J. Vergote, “L’expansion du manichéisme en Égypte,” in *After Chalcedon: Studies in Theology and Church History Offered to Professor Albert Van Roey for his Seventieth Birthday* (Louvain: Peeters, 1985), 471–78; G. G. Stroumsa, “The Manichaean Challenge to Egyptian Christianity,” in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (ed. B. A. Pearson and J. E. Goehring; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 308–314; M. Krause, “Heidentum, Gnosis und Manichäismus, ägyptische Survivals in Ägypten,” in *Ägypten in spätantik–christlicher Zeit: Einführung in die koptische Kultur* (ed. M. Krause; Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1998), 81–116.

¹¹ F. Wisse, “Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt,” in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas* (ed. B. Aland; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 431–40; idem, “Language Mysticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts and in Early Coptic Monasticism I: Cryptography,” *Enchoria* 9 (1979): 101–120; C. W. Hedrick, “Gnostic Proclivities in the Greek Life of Pachomius and the Sitz im Leben of the Nag Hammadi Library,” *NovT* 22 (1980): 78–94; G. Mantovani, “La tradizione dell’enkrateia nei testi di Nag Hammadi e nell’ambiente monastico egiziano del IV secolo,” in *La tradizione dell’enkrateia: Motivazioni ontologiche e protologiche; Atti del colloquio internazionale, Milano, 20–23 aprile 1982* (ed. U. Bianchi; Rome: Ed. dell’Ateneo, 1985), 561–99; H. Holze, “Anapausis im anachoretischen Mönchtum und in der Gnosis,” *ZKG* 106 (1995): 1–17.

¹² G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941). The author, in the second chapter, describes a link between *Merkavah* and monasticism in the first homily by Pseudo-Macarius, which comments on Ezekiel’s vision of the throne (Ezek 1) in a way comparable to that of the Jewish mystical tradition (83). See also R. D. Williams, “Faith and Experience in Early Monasticism: New Perspectives on the Letters of Ammonas,” *Akademische Reden und Kolloquien. Band 20. Laudatio und Festvortrag anlässlich der Ehrenpromotion von Rowan Douglas Williams durch die Theologische Fakultät der Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg am 02.07.1999 in der Aula des Erlanger Schlosses* (Nürnberg: Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen, 2002), 19–36 (for the comment of Ammonas on Ezekiel’s vision of the throne, see *Ep. 13* [in Syriac]).

Debate on the interrelations between Gnosticism and monasticism have been never-ending (Nag Hammadi is located very near the Pachomian monastery of Pbow) and though I shall forego discussing the topic here, it is nonetheless appropriate to highlight how the propinquity of all these religious realities, more or less imbued with dualism, considerably influenced the mindset of the time. What is more, it should not be overlooked that, even within the Christianity of the time, no real uniformity exists, on the contrary: there are the so-called Catholics, meaning those who recognized the Christology defined at the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325), but also the adepts of the Melitian schism and the heterodox Arians. The dogmatic and disciplinary contrasts between these different ideological trends were to be the root cause of the five exiles of the Catholic patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius.

2. MONASTICISM

It was within such an environment, fragmentary and conflict-torn from the religious point of view, that Christian monasticism was to emerge, under the form which in the following centuries was most to influence the Western tradition, on the one hand, and the Palestinian tradition, on the other.¹³ Obviously, when one is discussing monasticism, one cannot omit the long history of asceticism in Syria, dating back to the post-apostolic period; however, despite its undeniable interest, we will be focusing here on the Egyptian context.¹⁴ The main names ordinarily retained when outlining a historical review of this new Christian institution are those of Anthony—the great hermit considered to be the father of all monks, whose biography was written by Bishop Athanasius (through whom there has also come down to us a

¹³ It is necessary to specify that today monasticism is considered to be a plural phenomenon, to which no single origin is ascribable, as often attempted in the past (when Egypt was considered to be its birthplace).

¹⁴ The Palestinian context would also have been relevant for this subject, but it has already been studied. See L. Perrone, "I monaci e gli 'altri': Il monachesimo come fattore d'interazione religiosa nella Terra Santa di epoca bizantina," in *Studi sul cristianesimo antico e moderno in onore di Maria Grazia Mara* (ed. M. Simonetti and P. Siniscalco), *Augustinianum* 35 (1995): 729–61; R. M. Parrinello, "Il rapporto con l'Altro nel monachesimo palestinese: Alcune considerazioni sul rapporto tra identità monastica e identità laicale da Isaia a Doroteo di Gaza," *Annali di storia dell' esegesi* 21 (2004): 303–313.

corpus of seven letters attributed to the saint)—and Pachomius, the great founder of coenobitic monasticism, whose life story has been transmitted to us in Coptic and in Greek by anonymous writers.

The rules of the Pachomian congregation, with the letters of its first abbots, have mainly come down to us in a Latin translation by Jerome. Among the very numerous sources on Egyptian monasticism, both Greek and Coptic, one cannot overlook the monastic histories, for instance *History of the Egyptian Monks* (anonymous) and *Lausiaca History* by Palladius Helenopolitanus, or again the tradition of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (more than three hundred anecdotes in a few lines, or even a few words, concerning the spirituality of recluses), without omitting ascetic treatises, for instance by Abba Isaiah of Scetis/Gaza, and Coptic hagiographic narratives, like the *Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt* (Syene) by Paphnutius. Not to mention the papyrological documentation...

The question to be raised is why, in a period like Constantine's, nascent monasticism should necessarily be a major focus in studying the concept of humanity and the relationship with the Other in different religions. The answer may well be that it is precisely because the monks are truly the sons of their time, a time of deep change and conflict-riven religious pluralism. The historiographic tradition has often perceived the anchorites as primarily successors to the martyrs,¹⁵ as though their choice of lifestyle had been a reaction to the general laxity of the church, which had morphed into an institution privileged by the imperial state, and was consequently contaminated by worldly considerations (first and foremost, economic and political).

Without reviewing them all here, the possible precedents for the monastic phenomenon (whose main components and essential elements to this day remain somewhat difficult to circumscribe, even within the limited framework of a terminological analysis) should by no means be omitted here; this in order to avoid identifying the latter with ordinary asceticism, an altogether older phenomenon. Notwithstanding, I believe it is important to take into account the environment within which this new Christian lifestyle was born, because monasticism was characterized by a powerful and rapid assertion of

¹⁵ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Apophthegmata Patrum)* [A. Alph.] Milesius 2; see PG 65:297–98. (All translations are the author's, English trans. P. H.) See E. E. Malone, "The Monk and the Martyr," in *Antonius Magnus Eremita* (ed. B. Steidle; Rome: Pontificium Institutum S. Anselmi, 1956), 201–28.

identity, voluntarily in contradistinction with the other, be they pagan, lay Christian, or heretical. In this sense, the reference to the martyrs is relevant, i.e., insofar as one is focusing on the radicalism of the new way of life: all those who are not monks are exposed in one way or the other to the qualification of being “Others.”

3. THE MONK AND THE OTHER

If a totally abstract gradient concerning the distance of one monk from another were to be established, an order might be reached within which non-monkish Christians would stand in the forefront of those who had the most departed from Christian perfection, followed by the pagans, and finally Christian heretics. Consequently, that is the order that we shall be applying in what follows.

Concerning the relations between the monks and other Christians, it is noteworthy that they were initially rather difficult. On the one hand, the rank and file was distrustful of this strange novelty, and the monks were often accused of causing the miseries of the human community: one example is the story of Macarius, wrongly accused of having got a girl from the local village pregnant.¹⁶ On the other hand, the monks tended to consider their own regime to be the only one worthy of a true Christian. The fact that there were no doubt to be many exceptions to this attitude clearly highlights the necessity of correcting this penchant for considering oneself superior to others, i.e., to worldly people “contaminated” by urban life and the passions of the flesh: may not the influence of the other forms of asceticism of the region, for instance Gnosticism and Manichaeism, be detectable here?

This is not to be excluded, and it must be recalled that there has also been an attempt to establish a link between the Jewish *shaliah* and the Christian monk,¹⁷ which entails the need to reflect, *mutatis mutandis*, on the relationship between the wise and the ignorant (“*amei ha-aretz*,” lit. “peoples of the earth”) in the Jewish world: this obviously concerns a different case, but one definitely gets the impression that the character who, in the terminology of religious studies, is normally called a “man of God,” sets a certain distance between himself and

¹⁶ A. *Alph.* Macarius the Egyptian, 31.

¹⁷ P. Henry, “From the Apostle to Abbot: The Legitimation of Spiritual Authority in the Early Church,” *StPatr* 17 (1982): 491–505.

other human beings, which closely resembles what occurs in monastic circles. Indeed, it is to be observed that the members of the latter display a certain taste for autonomy, including autonomy from the ecclesiastic institution.

Graham Gould¹⁸ wonders, for instance, if the coenobitic community was considered to be an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, to which Theofried Baumeister¹⁹ has replied in the affirmative. While rejecting this hypothesis, Gould has to admit that the Pachomian congregation nonetheless manifested a very strong desire for independence toward the ecclesiastic institution: it tended to want to go it alone. We can thus see that monasticism was born as a radical alternative—even as a charismatic and inspired one, I might say—in relation to the traditional church. Indeed, it is worthwhile, in this connection, to evoke the very interesting hypothesis put forward by James E. Goering who, contrary to what is ordinarily thought, considers the first Egyptian monasticism as essentially an urban phenomenon, only later relegated to the desert by ecclesiastic authorities alarmed by its growing autonomy and above all by the growing influence of its representatives on the people.²⁰

David Caner,²¹ while being in agreement on the radical charismatic origins of the monks and on the desire for control on the part of the bishops, thinks the first desert fathers can best be located among the early itinerant anchorites. However that may be, it is undeniable that these early desert ascetics sometimes displayed a dangerous penchant for considering themselves as the only true believers, the truly pure, and finally as the only ones to have revived the link with the original humanity of the prelapsarian Adam²² or, if preferred, to have realized the true Pauline eschatological humanity of regenerated Man.

¹⁸ G. Gould, "Pachomios of Tabennesi and the Foundation of an Independent Monastic Community," in *Voluntary Religion* (ed. W. J. Sheils and D. Woop; Worcester: Blackwell, 1986), 15–24.

¹⁹ T. Baumeister, "Die Mentalität des frühen ägyptischen Mönchtums: Zur Frage der Ursprünge des christlichen Mönchtums," *ZKG* 88 (1977): 145–60.

²⁰ See J. E. Goehring, "Hieracas of Leontopolis: The Making of Desert Ascetic," in *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (ed. J. E. Goehring; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 110–33. On this topic, see also D. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

²¹ D. Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

²² *A. Alph.* Paul: "If someone acquires purity, everything will be submitted to him, as it was with Adam in the first Paradise."

4. HIERAKAS AND THE LAITY

There is much evidence of such an attitude in the sources aforementioned, but it would no doubt be more appropriate to focus here on the particular case of Hierakas of Leontopolis. According to the most recent historical reconstructions based on evidence in Epiphanius of Salamis,²³ Hierakas, who was an ascetic from the town of Leontopolis in Lower Egypt, lived in the second half of the 3rd century C.E. It may be said that, in a certain sense, he already represents a precedent or prototype of the monk who will be encountered in the following century. This ascetic, originally a calligrapher, presided over a community of pure men and women, that is to say, of Encratites practicing the mortification of the flesh and reading the Scriptures according to Origen's allegorical method.

What is of interest here is that the latter declined to take communion in the company of married people, considering them to be impure. Indeed, according to the founder (as Epiphanius describes him), Jesus came to accomplish the law of the Old Testament precisely on this point, that is to say, in abolishing marriage, which belonged within the former economy of salvation. Henceforth, after the resurrection of Christ, humankind should no longer make concession to the body, as the following text shows:

He [Hierakas] rejects marriage, because he says that it belongs to the Old Alliance... [Hierakas affirmed that Jesus came to accomplish the Old Alliance with one purpose only, that is to say] to proclaim continence to the world and choose for himself purity and continence: without that, none shall live... none unites with them [his community of saints], be they not a virgin, a monk, an abstinent or a widow. (Epiphanius of Salamis, *Refutation of All Heresies* 67.1-2)

This experiment, which left little or no trace, while being highly disturbing for the ecclesiastic hierarchy, was naturally condemned. It is nonetheless useful in reminding us that, initially, the monastic conception of humanity, in reaction against the religious confusion of the time, was thoroughly elitist. If one examines the later literature, traces of such an attitude are still to be found in orthodox monasticism.²⁴ For

²³ The fact that we are talking about an urban community has been proved by J. E. Goehring in "Hieracas of Leontopolis."

²⁴ See for instance *A. Alph.* Eucarist (a layman): he says that he has not been "contaminated" with his wife. This is the kind of purity on offer for the laity.

instance, the monk Pambon, seeing some of the laity sitting before him, enjoined them to rise whenever a monk passed by, “because the mouths of the recluses are ever in dialogue with God.”²⁵

5. PAPHNUTIUS AND THE OTHER FAITHS

The severity which has been clearly apparent in the relationship between the monk and the Other represented by the Christian from the profane world will naturally turn out to be still harsher and more radical toward the non-Christian Other.

Needless to say, the pagan-demon pattern of identification is frequent in monastic literature. Indeed, the explanation provided by the monks concerning the functioning of Greek or Roman oracles is perfectly clear: they are effectively inspired by demons.²⁶ This harks back, in antiquity, to the Christian polemic against paganism, which did not yet deny the efficiency of non-Christian theurgists (thus falling rather into the category of the denunciation of idols, proper to the Jewish prophetic tradition): it was thought to be enough, following a line of logic often observed in religious studies,²⁷ to assert that this power, though efficacious, was demonic in origin, and therefore deceitful and evil.

The Coptic sources abundantly document this trend. Paphnutius, in his *Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt*, provides a detailed account of the Christianization of Upper Egypt, which was the result of the endeavors of Coptic monks who were simultaneously bishops and missionaries. To understand the relationship with the Other in this form of monasticism, what must be kept in mind is the conception of the pure and the impure which had currency among the recluses; it was indeed by means of such concepts that they reasoned, even when reflecting on humanity in general.

A lot might be added on this subject, but I will here only specify that, in this case, the notions of pure and impure do not only retain a moral sense (as often thought, within a Christian context), but also represent a thoroughly material reality (the techniques of asceticism,

²⁵ *A. Alph.* Pambon 7.

²⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Anthony* [*Vit. Ant.*] 33.1; 37.3.

²⁷ J. Z. Smith, “Toward Interpreting Demonic Powers in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity,” in *ANRW* 2.16.1: 425–39.

whose goal is the purification of the body, are proof of this).²⁸ Humankind is thus susceptible to being divided according to the categories of pure and impure, which become the parameters of diversity, entailing a perception of otherness which may at times be judged to be ruthless. Moreover, it is not at all sure that this notion of otherness only operates in the case of the pagans, since, as observable in the case of Hierakas, it pertains just as much when setting about distinguishing the perfect from other Christians.

Here are a few examples of the relationship between Christian missionaries and the idolaters of Upper Egypt. When two young neophytes, converted to Christianity by the missionary monk Macedonios, were subsequently to encounter their father, the pagan high priest of the village of Philae, they refused so much as to touch him, though he was undoubtedly their own father, because he was a pagan priest who was in the habit of sacrificing to demons and so necessarily in a state of impurity. It was indeed for the same reason that Macedonios had refused to eat in the company of his new disciples, although the latter were already converted in conscience, because they had not yet received baptism, supposedly the sole agency able to purify them through and through.²⁹ It can thus be seen that the humanity proper to all, in the sense of a common nature on which peaceful neighborly relations might be founded, depended on a person's degree of purity, and the latter, in turn, on religious affiliation.

The identification of pagans with demons is quite clearly established in another passage, in which a disciple of the saint was left alone in the desert: the young monk was tormented by the powers of darkness and confounded the latter with the Nubians from the South. Consequently, he fled and rejoined his master. When he had located him and told him what had happened to him, "the latter smiled and told him: They really are hidden Nubians, my son."³⁰ So it really was a case of demons that resembled barbarians: their qualification as "hidden" indicates the use of a symbolic image. Another episode is still more explicit: it figures demons who, shouting out loud in the language of the Blemmyes

²⁸ See Anthony's *Letters*; G. Garitte, *Lettres de saint Antoine: Version géorgienne et fragments coptes* (CSCO 148–49; Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1955); and F. Vecoli, *Il sole e il fango: Puro e impuro tra i Padri del deserto* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2007).

²⁹ Paphnutius, *Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt* [*Pap.*] 6 (17r–17v); 6 (20r–20v).

³⁰ *Pap.* 10 (40r–40v).

(a southern tribal population), haunted the mountainside where a master and his disciple lived. Only the master could see that the latter were in reality demons, since demons and pagan foreigners were indeed becoming increasingly hard to distinguish.³¹

The incapacity to respect other religions displayed by such fire-and-brimstone missionaries is made even more clearly apparent in the case of Macedonios, both monk and bishop, who decided to enter the premises of a pagan temple and to smash its idol, with a view to proving the latter's powerlessness.³² This falls within the framework of the category of Old Testament prophetic fulminations against idols and idolatry.³³

Conversely, one may wonder what the attitude of the southern Christians toward the pagans was concretely, seeing they identified them so readily with demons. In the best of cases, the representatives of the Christians, who are the monks themselves, thought it their duty to seek advice from the central authority of Alexandria in order to feel authorized to come to the assistance of the tribal populations of the South, ravaged by famine. Even charity, the first among the gospel's commandments, stumbles on the difficulty of accepting the pagan Other. It is interesting to note that Athanasius is of the opinion that they should be helped and not considered as impure, but only because it has been revealed to him that these barbarians were soon to be converted.³⁴

In other cases, military governors came to seek propitiatory benediction before setting out to fight against the southern populations. One of the saints consulted, none less than Shenouda himself—a monk reputed for his violent character—does not merely satisfy their request, but what is more, sets out to fight by their side: the hagiographer depicts him to us as majestically seated on a cloud, armed with a flaming sword, busy massacring the infidel barbarians.³⁵

What goes before establishes that, in the culture and the spirituality of this missionary monasticism, respect for the Other per se, let alone any rights of the Other, cannot be said to exist. When it boils down to deciding whether to assist some hunger-stricken southern population

³¹ *Pap.* 11 (41r).

³² *Pap.* 6 (13r–13v).

³³ Isa 41:21–29; 44:9–20; Jer 2:26–28; 10:1–16.

³⁴ *Pap.* 7 (26v).

³⁵ Besa, *Vita Sinuthii* 106–8.

or not, it can finally be decided to do so, but in the name of a prophesy concerning their imminent conversion to the Christian “cause,” and not on the basis of any shared humanity. Conversely, in the *Life of Shenouda*, it is the identification of the nomadic peoples from the South with impure demons which enables the Christians to slaughter them.

6. THE CASE OF HERETICS

Anthony³⁶ and Pachomius³⁷ seem to have particularly feared being associated with heretics, who were still more badly considered than the pagans. Indeed, an apothegm by Gelasius³⁸ narrates how the holy monk had received the charisma of the discernment of spirits precisely in order to be able to detect heretics and so shun them. It is also through the apothegms that we learn that one can help a sinner, but not a heretic, because the latter is liable to contaminate and entail in his or her fall any who may offer help.³⁹ At best, if some Arians come to visit, one may read them Athanasius’s anti-Arian writing (which is precisely what Father Sisoës does).⁴⁰ The passage in which the abandoned skull of a pagan high priest recounts in detail to Macarius his sufferings in hell is also worth mentioning; but, the skull adds, some are in a far worse predicament than he is, for instance those who have reneged on their faith, i.e., heretics and apostates.⁴¹

Later, the conflict between Chalcedonians and Monophysites was to generate a new literary genre which dominated most of Coptic culture: these are the *plerophoria*, miraculous stories whose aim was, through testimonials of the prodigies operated by God and the saints, to prove the truth of one Christian confession rather than another. The *Pratum*

³⁶ *Vit. Ant.* 68.2–3. It is noteworthy that Anthony, according to the *Vita* by Athanasius, undertook a stringent selection of the persons with whom relations could be maintained, according to which Melitians, Manicheans, Arians and all other heretics were to be excluded (*Vit. Ant.* 68.3).

³⁷ Ammonas, *Ep.* 12, 18–22: “And after having prayed God with a great many tears to reveal to me in the house of whom truth was to be found, because I was confused, and while I was still praying, an ecstasy visited me and I saw everything below the firmament as though night had fallen. And a voice called out the different places, saying: ‘Truth is here.’”

³⁸ *A. Alph.* Gelasius 4.

³⁹ *A. Alph.* Theodorus of Ferme 4.

⁴⁰ *A. Alph.* Sisoës 25.

⁴¹ *A. Alph.* Macarius the Egyptian 38.

of John Moscos, a fundamental work of Sinaitic monasticism, was to be strongly influenced by this literature.

7. OF MONKS AND MEN

It would be possible to grind to a halt here, concluding that, within the trends of radical Christianity represented by the different forms of monasticism (which probably figured as the most prestigious lifestyle in post-Constantine Christianity), it is regrettably impossible to detect any elements tending to promote an awareness of common humanity and, consequently, of enhancing mutual tolerance. But, in reality, within the framework of such a historical period, the issue is quite simply being raised in the wrong way, without at least some additional clarification.

First and foremost, it must be highlighted that any conception of humanity, in the modern sense of the word, is practically beyond the purview of ascetic thought in the ancient world, except within the perspective of the salvation of souls. For the desert fathers, humanity above all means the innocent humanity of Adam, which the ascetic itinerary was established to help men regain. A human being is a totality, formed of body, mind, and soul, according to the famous formula to be found in the First Letter to the Thessalonians.⁴² But beyond this assertion, there is not the slightest trace of a neutral and independent conception of humanity: Anthony's letters,⁴³ with their theory of the three movements of the body, even reach a point of extreme pessimism in their conception of the human being, seen as a creature defiled from the very day of birth. The three movements represent the action of impure forces in the human body, the first of which accompanies us from birth onward. To be truly a human, in the positive sense of the word, it is primarily necessary to restore the condition of innocence and purity which belonged originally to Adam, or better still, to rid oneself entirely of the Old Man and resemble the New Man preached by Paul. This is the final aim of the technique for "decontamination" of

⁴² 1 Thess 5:23. More precisely the passage mentions the body (*sôma*), the life force (*psychè*), and the spirit (*pneuma*). See L. Reypens, "Âme," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* 1.435.

⁴³ See above all Anthony, *Ep. 1*, 3. For the Greek version of this passage, see *A. Alph. Antoine* 22 (= *A. Syst.* 5.1): "But there is another movement, which is that of those who struggle, and which is fed by the cunning and the jealousy of the demons."

the different members of the body taught by Anthony in his writings. But it is also the objective of the ascetic itinerary taught by Isaiah of Scetis/Gaza, another theorist of monasticism, whose aim is to “extinguish the venom which Adam ate from the jaws of the Dragon, and restore nature, which has become a counter-nature, to conformity with nature.”⁴⁴ Nature and counter-nature are very important concepts for this 5th-century C.E. author: recovering one’s prelapsarian nature is Isaiah’s final objective, and the same is true of many other desert fathers.

Salvation—or at least the possibility of attaining salvation—is thus the element which transforms an individual into a fully human being. This is highly important: it is the final destination of humanity which determines its nature. But this involves a very fragile factor, because, as seen in another apothegm,⁴⁵ every individual is the target (and so exposed to becoming the receptacle) of two forces which are exterior to him or her and originate from two opposite horizons, the East and the West. On the one hand, there are the angels of light and, on the other, the demons of darkness, and the two are ever at war on earth through the intermediary of human beings. But this representation of the conflict between good and evil is handed down to us by a monk who supposedly possesses the visionary power to penetrate beyond material reality, as a shaman is capable of discerning the spirits which agitate the ether and influence our actions.

Despite the conflict which opposes the different traditions extant on Egyptian territory, it is possible to delineate some common traits among them. A certain number of ideas are in circulation beyond the frontiers of doctrine and to be found within all religious constituencies, particularly a very clear-cut opposition—undoubtedly dualistic, I would say—between the forces of good and the forces of evil. In such a context, humanity as such does not possess any independent value, but only that of a recipient—one might almost say, of a “vase,” if one has recourse to the Pauline terminology (2 Cor 4:7) used by the ascetics—capable of making room for the presence of God, a capacity which entirely depends on the recipient’s degree of purity. Pure and impure are indeed more or less visible qualities, indicative of that indwelling strength a person may or may not possess: the pure draws down God,

⁴⁴ Isaiah, *Asceticus* 25.17.

⁴⁵ *A. Alph.* Moses 1.

the impure attracts the demons. In fact, humankind, who represents the eternal battleground between light and darkness, remains worthy of such a name only to the degree in which God is still susceptible of dwelling within humans. And, as noted above, the latter is only possible if a person accepts to purify him- or herself from the filth of the world and the bad thoughts it engenders. It is within this concept of purification that all the gravitational pull of the monastic vocation lies: A human being remains human insofar as he or she has not fallen so far from grace that rising again is no longer possible, if a hope of conversion and salvation remains, if he or she has not definitively stifled this uncompleted potentiality. For the day a person will be deemed to have lost it, he or she will be considered as damned, a slave to the devil and the plaything of the demons. Only saints possess the power to pronounce such a judgment (which, within an agnostic perspective, is purely arbitrary), because they purportedly possess the charisma of spiritual discernment. This is why Theodore, Pachomius's successor, makes no bones about telling a disobedient monk that he would rather have learned of his death, than of his insubordination, which was the certain equivalent of his damnation.⁴⁶

8. SOME LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS

As the above suggests, in the spirituality of the desert fathers, there seem to be very few elements which may be seen as promoting tolerance toward the Other. Nevertheless, in certain apothegms quite surprising episodes are reported, particularly when compared with the radical and intransigent manifestations reported in many other passages of this literature. In some cases, admittedly rare enough, monks who are already themselves perfectly purified turn out to be astonishingly benevolent toward the Other, be they a sinner, a heretic, or a pagan.

For instance, in an apothegm on Lot,⁴⁷ the holy father unknowingly welcomes to his home a heretical monk, and the latter suddenly begins to preach ideas from Origen (a heterodox theologian, who allegedly died in 254). Lot, who cannot refuse his hospitality because of the commandment, has to face the dilemma of playing host to a heretic.

⁴⁶ Ammonas, *Ep.* 24.

⁴⁷ *A. Alph.* Lot 1.

He asks Father Arsenius for council, and the latter tells him to entertain the latter as a guest, but to ask him to cease from his pronouncements. It is observable here that hospitality remains in all cases a fundamental value, not to be neglected even when dealing with heretics. That is why the great Poemen requires of his monks to provide food to heretics as soon as they arrive at the monastery, and only then to send them away in peace.⁴⁸

However, by far the most meaningful and surprising episode is the following, which I quote here *in extenso*:

Father Olympios recounted: One day a pagan priest stopped at Scetis (a monastic site) and slept for the night in my cell. Having witnessed the monks' way of life, he asked me: Living in this way, are you not visited by visions from your God? I answered him: No. So the priest said to me: On the contrary, to us, when we celebrate the sacred rites for our God, he conceals nothing from us, and manifests his mysteries to us. And you who, as you tell me, make such great endeavours, vigils, retreats, abstinence, you receive no visions? No doubt, if you have no visions, it is because you harbour in your heart bad thoughts which separate you from your God; which is why he does not reveal his mysteries to you. I went and told the Fathers these words spoken by the priest; they were filled with wonderment and said that it was really so: impure thoughts separate God from men.⁴⁹

Olympios's behavior, in welcoming a pagan priest in his cell and accepting to discuss amiably with him about religious topics, may strike us as highly improbable, when compared with everything asserted up till now concerning the monks. Are we in presence of a contradiction? Perhaps, but it is also possible to envisage quite a different explanation: in some cases, one may imagine that the saint, after a long ascetic curriculum, has reached such a high degree of spiritual perfection that he is no longer concerned by the contamination implicit in the contact with the Other; this endows him with so great a moral strength that he no longer feels the need to violently assert his own identity.

He is henceforth wholly free, as though his identity had been reinforced to the point of no longer needing to be preserved. I am referring here to Mary Douglas's work in religious sociology:⁵⁰ she asserts that the division between pure and impure, in a conceptual system

⁴⁸ A. *Alph.* Poemen 78.

⁴⁹ A. *Alph.* Olympios 1.

⁵⁰ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

in which the Other is considered to be impure, is a sign of the need for protection of the cultural identity of a community. This model, as we have seen, can perfectly well be applied in the case of Egyptian monasticism, developed in a region where religious identity is in jeopardy because of the spreading of other forms of worship or of other Christian denominations. However, there may be situations where this does not hold, for instance when one comes upon a perfectly purified saint, like Olympios.

It must be remembered that there is an evolution in the process of spiritual elevation, obviously engendered by ascetic practices: which is what Ammonas,⁵¹ Anthony's successor at Pispir, recalls to his disciples when he explains to them that they must first spend a long period as solitary recluses and learn to trample on their self-will, until they succeed in no longer having a will of their own, and in no longer wishing to interrupt their isolation. It is then that they will be ready to go out into the midst of other men, like doctors who, having cured themselves, are ready to take care of others. They will be pure to such a degree that they will be perfect. This indeed is what Poemen says in another passage: "If a man attains the stage that the Apostle calls: 'Everything is pure for the pure' (Titus 1:15), he will see himself as the worst of all creatures,"⁵² and this will help him struggle against the demons. It is on attaining such a degree that the ascetic becomes capable of encountering a prostitute in order to convert her,⁵³ when normally he would be forbidden from casting so much as a brief glance at any woman, despite his being a saint.

Jean-Claude Guy has written that it is impossible to set up a coherent theological overview on the fathers' apothegms.⁵⁴ Concerning the subject of our research, it appears that in ancient monastic literature two theologies are intertwined, creating a precarious equilibrium between sectarian closure and a liberal empathy toward the Other. It might almost be asserted that the image that these monks form of God represents the perception they have of their own identity, so to speak. Wherever we come upon a God comparable to the sun, capable of drying up the mire in which humanity is foundering, without becoming

⁵¹ Ammonas, *Ep. 1*.

⁵² *A. Alph.* Poemen 97–98.

⁵³ *A. Alph.* Serapion 1.

⁵⁴ J.-Cl. Guy, "Les *Apophthegmata Patrum*," in *Théologie de la vie monastique* (Paris: Aubier, 1961), 79.

likewise contaminated to the slightest degree, we find a divine spirit ready to take up its abode in a human being who is not yet freed from sin. According to this vision of things, each and every human being may possess God in him- or herself, and—it might be added—every human being is deserving of respect, for he or she cannot be irrevocably damned. However it is perhaps hardly fortuitous that so beautiful an image originates in fact from a heterodox writing, that is to say the *Homilies* of Pseudo-Macarius (a monastic author belonging to the Syriac world, perhaps Mesopotamian in origin, and condemned as a heretic at Ephesus, in 431 C.E.).

Conversely, in the case of a God who finds it repugnant even to approach a human being in a state of impurity, as though the latter were mired in mud, the “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit remains open only to the perfect. And beside them, no other human can receive God into him- or herself: in such a perspective, the infidel will not easily be found deserving of tolerance and understanding. To compound the coincidence, this association of impurity with mud originates from an absolutely orthodox Coptic ascetic treatise.⁵⁵

Despite its non-Egyptian origin, the first interpretation of the mud metaphor testifies to the idea that a theological foundation for tolerance toward the Other was theoretically possible in Egyptian monasticism.

Let us briefly revert to the apothegm on Olympios, in which the saint hosts a pagan priest and what is more, praises him for his wisdom concerning the gift of vision. No doubt, in this episode, anti-Messalian radicalism, deeming that the proximity of God is incompatible with the presence of impurity in the Christian’s mind, is still strongly perceptible. But this is nonetheless a case of peaceful encounter between the representatives of different religions: the basis for agreement between the two interlocutors is the necessity for profound veneration toward one’s own divinity. It was perhaps for that reason that Sisoës, one of the Lower Egypt fathers, made no bones about going to pay a visit to some monks who had been won over to the Melitian schism, while his disciples, in fear of being defiled, preferred to stay behind.⁵⁶

It is again perhaps for a like reason that Father Macarius addresses a pagan priest in a friendly tone, acknowledging his spiritual endeavors (though, of course, these efforts would be vain). The father’s

⁵⁵ Compare Pseudo-Macarius, *Homilies* 16.3, and Ephraim, *Ascetica* 50a.

⁵⁶ *A. Alph.* Sisoës 48.

gentleness endears him to the pagan, who had previously come up against his overzealous disciple. What is more, the latter had called him a “demon” (following the monastic pattern of pagan-demon identification), triggering a violent reaction on the pagan’s part. We thus have, on the one hand, a young monk who believes he is confronting a demon and openly displays a reaction which is consistent with his prejudice, and on the other, an experienced master who sees before him a tired traveller and attempts to establish human contact. Only the saint still distinguishes the human being in the “Other.”

There is thus a superior level of awareness which only saints attain, a new spiritual dimension which suddenly shows up the traditional precepts of the monastic life as imperfect, to be compared with gradual degrees of truth—Buddhists would call the latter “*upaya*”⁵⁷—which are perhaps initially necessary, but which can be cast off when one has become perfect. It was in the same order of reasoning that Pachomius, the founder of the coenobitic monastery, reprimanded his own monks because they refused to serve meat to a sick monk who called out for some. Among the monks, meat was naturally depreciated, because it was the symbol of vice and greed; notwithstanding, as Pachomius himself says, “everything is pure to the pure,” and charity toward the sick is of a higher moral order than ascetic rules.

All that seems to converge toward the simplest of conclusions: in monastic spirituality with this type of background—where different religions were competing head on for cultural supremacy—it appears that the quest for a common humanity, susceptible of upstaging dogmatic differences of faith, required the stamina needed to go the whole length of the itinerary leading to ascetic perfection. This pathway first led to a strong consolidation of individual religious identity, in opposition to that of others, then eventually issued onto the plateau of a higher condition of perfect purity, from which there ensued the freedom to behave humanely toward that Other, who no longer loomed as a threat.

⁵⁷ “Cunning means,” which an already enlightened being uses to show others the way to enlightenment.

