
Inbar GRAIVER, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2018

This book is a brilliant study dedicated to the theme of self-formation in the late antique monasticism. Although it deals with the demonology, monastic self and spiritual exercises as elements implicated in the ascetic discipline, the core of the book is the mental exercise of attention as prerequisite to achieve a purified mind. Moreover, this mental training is correlated with the notions of cognitive research of attention. Strictly speaking, Inbar Graiver's book seeks to promote a useful debate on the relationship between cognitive psychology and late antique monasticism. From this perspective, this volume marks a valuable and original contribution to theological studies.

The book begins with an extensive "Introduction" that provides background for reading the chapters that follow. In this sense, Inbar Graiver establishes some methodological base points on the role of attention in late antique monasticism. The main argument of the book is to show how ascetic discipline of attention can be understood better if we look to the cognitive research and psychological practice. From this perspective, the book aims to point out the practical relevance of neuropsychological and cognitive neuroscience for understanding of the way in which "the mind and its operations were understood and articulated within the explanatory model of monastic anthropology" (p. 24). Graiver's introduction is both persuasive and full of insight.

Between "Introduction" and "Conclusion", Inbar Graiver's book may be divided into four major chapters: in the chapter one ("The Ascetic Self"), the author highlights the historical background of the ascetic self in the late ascetic tradition, especially Alexandrian and Evagrian anthropology. Briefly, the mind is created in the image of God, and therefore capable of union with God. In pursuing this end, the mind of the monk must be

transformed through a set of spiritual exercises, especially the mental training of attention. So Graiver suggests that “monastic asceticism assumed that humans can be improved by ascetic practice and become masters of their own mind and experience, in order to align themselves with God” (p. 59).

The chapter two (“Control of the Self”) is devoted to examine the self-control in the antique monastic discipline. A core premise of this chapter is that the self-control or the practice to direct attention inward went hand in hand with the spiritual progress. Also, this mental control is a good starting point to advance to better understanding of the ascetic demonology with the tools of neuroscience.

Chapter three (“The Challenges of Attentiveness”) treats the nature of the challenges involved in ascetic inner transformation. The main point here is that the thoughts (*logismoi*) played a fundamental role in antique monastic tradition. In other words, the key to mental training and ascetic behaviour is the capacity to control one’s thoughts. The author suggests that ancient spiritual exercise of attentiveness can be retrieved in the forms of modern cognitive.

Chapter four (“The Besieged Mind”) surveys the theme of the besieged (lat. *obsidere* – “obsession”) mind and its significance in late monastic antiquity. In this chapter, Inbar Graiver sets out peculiar terminology, and the essential features of the demonic siege (obsession) in the ascetic practice of self-formation. The author has pointed to the fact that ascetics were permanently besieged by demons. By juxtaposing modern psychology with ascetic demonology, this chapter seeks to contribute “to formulations of the cognitive mechanisms involved in attention regulation” (p. 129).

Chapter five (“Removing the Blockage”) covers the topic of self-disclosure as a therapeutic way designed to remove the blockage of thoughts (*logismoi*), especially the obsession. In this context, Inbar Graiver draws on cognitive research, and her conclusion highlights that neuroscience underscores the complexity of ascetic psychology. More specifically, Inbar Graiver asserts that brain neuroplasticity is a good point of starting to understand the complex process of the ascetic mental training. From this perspective, the book is very welcome because this relationship between neuroscientific research and monasticism is almost absent in modern scholarship.

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Finally, the author concludes that “neuroscientific research lends support to the hypothesis that the strategies of focused attention employed by late antique monks, could serve as powerful tools for healing dysfunctional thinking patterns” (p. 182).

Also, a detailed bibliography and index complete this competent and innovative book.

In my opinion, this excellent book is a visionary work, remarkable in its insight. And indeed, the implications of the study presented in these pages are extensive and this is a book to be read by scholars across a wide range of interests and disciplines.

Undoubtedly, Inbar Graiver provides a provocative reflection on the relationship between neuroscience and asceticism, so that it will be definitely an impulse for further investigations.

Written by an eminent scholar, *Asceticism of the Mind* equally valuable for research and teaching will be a go-to reference and indispensable for theologians and broader audience everywhere.

Really, Inbar Graiver’s voice demands to be heard.

Daniel LEMENI