

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
81 (4), pp. 97-107, 2019

Ascetic Authority and Ecclesiastical Authority in Late Antiquity: Conflict or Competition?

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the dynamic and ambiguous relationship between monks and bishops in the late antique monasticism. As is well known, in this period the ascetic or charismatic authority of the monk was indisputable. As a source of spiritual authority distinct from ecclesiastical authority, monks could support or undermine the work of the bishop. Therefore, monasticism became an important reservoir for the involvement of monks in clerical agenda. This paper is divided in two sections: in the first section, we will characterize the ascetic authority and ecclesiastical authority, and their specific way of interaction in Late Antiquity. Therefore, we will try to understand the complex relation between ascetic authority (represented by monks) and ecclesiastical authority (assumed by bishops). In the second section, we will try to promote a vision based on cooperation between ascetic authority and ecclesiastical authority. With this paper, we hope to bring out the complexity of the theme of spiritual authority and to demonstrate the major importance of this theme for late antique monasticism.

Keywords

Ascetic authority, Ecclesiastical authority, Monks, Bishops, Late Antiquity

I. From *Askesis* to *Theosis*: Ascetic Authority as Sign of Holiness in Late Antiquity

In this section I will try to shed some more light on the manner in which the ascetic authority is constructed in late antique monasticism. As we will see, ascetic literature (*Apophthegmata Patrum*, *Life of Antony*, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and so on) played a major role in promoting the monks as figures of authority.

It is known that the need for ascetic discipline of the body is a fundamental theme throughout the ascetic literature because through a strict and severe practice the monk acquires a deified body. From this perspective, the experience of the desert is part of ascetic holiness because as Columba Stewart has remarked:

“the utter simplicity of the desert landscape itself, the lack of comforts and material distraction, the isolation from the complexity of human society, are all seen to create an atmosphere of simplicity where one may grow in humility and spiritual insight”¹.

The disciplining of the body was key to the transformation of the monk into a holy man, so that the monk practiced a lot of spiritual exercises² to become a holy person. As Zachary B. Smith has remarked the spiritual exercises “serve to destroy the old self in order to rebuild a new, passionless, virtuous self”³. The body contains passions that are to be purified, so that

¹ Columba STEWART, *The World of the Desert Fathers: Stories and Sayings From the Anonymous Series of the Apophthegmata Patrum*, Fairacres: SLG Press, 1995, p. 19.

² Spiritual exercise always been regarded as indispensable to ascetic training, so that it served in monastic culture as a promoter of spiritual progress. Moreover, spiritual exercise was the most radical method for cultivating self-transformation in late antique monasticism. For pertinent reflections on the meaning and function of spiritual exercises in desert asceticism, see Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2017, and Paul C. DILLEY, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

³ Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks...*, p. 220. For more details on this subject, see Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY, “Demons and Prayers: Spiritual Exercises in the Monastic Community of Gaza in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries”, in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 57/2, 2003, pp. 200-221; Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY, “Spiritual Exercises: The Continuous Conversation of the Mind With God”, in: Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY and Aryeh KOFESKY (eds.), *The Monastic School of Gaza*, Leiden: Brill, 2006, pp. 157-182.

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spiritual life engages the monk in the struggle for virtue and the control of the passions. The essence of this ascetic doctrine is encapsulated in the words of Abba Arsenius: “A Brother asked Abba Arsenius if he could hear a saying from him. The elder said to him: As much as you are able, strive so that what goes on inside you be godly and you conquer your external passions”⁴.

Therefore, without asceticism, there is no spiritual life, and no spiritual progress because only through asceticism can the heart be cleansed of the passions. Briefly, *askesis* is valued in ascetic literature as a testing ground for spiritual progress.

This spiritual progress was conceived as an inner and outer freedom. Moreover, this inner state becomes one of the major sign for ascetic authority of the monk. There is one thing here that is particularly significant: the spiritual path of the ascesis is a transformative process by which the monk obtain an ascetic authority. Therefore, asceticism in the Late Antiquity assumes that monks are free to transform by spiritual exercises, and with divine aid can even cultivate extraordinary powers.

This intimate relationship between physical effort and spiritual elevation is fully attested in the early ascetic literature. For example, in the *Life of Antony*, Athanasius describes the archetypal monk as having attained, through arduous, lifelong ascetic practice, an incorruptible body:

“Nearly twenty years he spent in this manner pursuing the ascetic life by himself, not venturing out and only occasionally being seen by anyone. After this ... Antony came forth as though from some shrine, having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God. This was the first time he appeared from the fortress for those who came out to him. And when they beheld him, they were amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal. The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not considered by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection. ... He maintained

⁴ Abba Arsenius 9 (John WORTLEY, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Saint Vladimir’s Press, 2014, p. 41). All quote from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are from this translation.

utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature”⁵.

Therefore, Antony’s authority rested, according to his *Life*, on his charisma⁶, manifested in his extraordinary inner qualities and imposing presence:

“Three of the fathers were in the habit of going to the blessed Abba Antony each year. Two of them would ask him about logismoi and the soul’s salvation, but the third always remained silent, asking nothing. After some considerable time Abba Antony said to him: «Look, you have been coming here for such a long time and you ask me nothing.» In reply he said to him: «It is enough for me just to see you, father»⁷.

In this context we stress that monasticism played an important role in the growing popularity of holy man in Late Antiquity. As Inbar Graiver has remarked the charisms of the monk “acquired through years of withdrawal and ascetic training, would have been crucial to the holy man’s success as an impartial mediator, a healer, and a «power broker» for those who sought his assistance”⁸.

The monk’s authority or power is a recurrent theme in ascetic hagiography, but we do not understand this power in the terms of “the social recognition of a person’s ability to control the behavior of others”⁹. On contrary, the ascetic power is understood as an inner disposition, born of a sense of inner freedom and closeness to God. This form of power was available only to those who had renounced their own will, and hence their

⁵ See ATHANASIUS, *Life of Antony* 14 (trans. Gregg, 1980, p. 42).

⁶ For relationship between holiness and charisms in monasticism, see Susanna ELM and Naomi JANOWITZ (eds.), *Charisma and Society: The 25th Anniversary of Peter Brown’s Analysis of the Late Antique Holy Man; Conference Held at the University of California at Berkeley, March 13-16, 1997*, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1997), pp. 343-539.

⁷ Abba ANTONY 27 (trans. Wortley, p. 37).

⁸ Inbar GRAIVER, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2018, p. 190.

⁹ Bruce J. MALINA, “Pain, Power, and Personhood: Ascetic Behavior in the Ancient Mediterranean”, in: Richard VALANTASIS and Vincent L. WIMBUSH (eds.), *Asceticism*, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 162-177, here p. 170.

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will for power, and subjected themselves to God. Power and powerlessness are closely linked in this transformative process: it is their convergence, as Edith Wyschogrod observes, that marks the process whereby the saint becomes a saint through ascetic training¹⁰.

And indeed, the monks cultivated holiness through rigorous ascetic discipline, and the purpose of this life was the spiritual transformation of the ascetic. A sentence of Abba Arsenius develops this need for the permanent transfiguration of the monk:

“Somebody said to the blessed Arsenius: How is it that we have gained nothing from so much education and wisdom, while these rustic Egyptian peasants have acquired such virtues? Abba Arsenius said to him: For our part we have gained nothing from the world’s education, but these rustic Egyptian peasants have acquired the virtues by their own labors”¹¹.

In this context, we stress that in the desert monasticism, the body was not an irrelevant part of the human person but it was an integral part of deification (*theosis*), and those who came to this holiness were monks that practiced an ascetic discipline. First and foremost, the monk’s special charisma, his *askesis*, becomes increasingly the prerequisite for his *theosis*.

To sum up, the most interesting feature of the ascetic literature is that it, in a sense, shows us a shift in understandings of the spiritual authority

¹⁰ E. WYSCHOGROD, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, University of California Press, 1990, p. 56. E. Wyschogrod points out that power in monasticism is authorised by the prior renunciation of power. For more details, see E. WYSCHOGROD, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, University of California Press, 1990. For additional interpretations of the mechanisms of power in asceticism, see R. VALANTASIS, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism”, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63 (1995) 4, pp. 775-821.

¹¹ Abba ARSENIUS 6 (Wortley, p. 41). Similarly, Abba Arsenius highlights what he saw as the deeper purpose of the desert life (cf. Abba Arsenius 7). As Daniel Lemeni has remarked “the holiness was a new *paideia* of the monk, born of the ascetic *praxis* of the desert. Two sayings sum up this new alphabet of the desert: Abba Arsenius 5 and 6. The desert has its own education, an education by monks who wish to change themselves rather than satisfy their intellectual curiosity” (D. LEMENI, “You can become all flame: Deification in Early Egyptian Monasticism”, in: John ARBLASTER and Rob FAESEN, *Mystical Doctrines of Deification: Case Studies in the Christian Tradition*, Routledge, 2019, p. 27).

of the monks. This point will be pursued further in the next section where we explore the dynamic relationship between ascetic authority and ecclesiastical authority.

II. Ecclesiastical Authority in Late Antiquity

In this section we will examine the relationship between ascetic authority and ecclesiastical authority. More exactly, we will discuss the process of divergence and mutual acceptance that characterised relations between the monk's charismatic authority and the institutional authority, represented by bishops and priests. Our premise is that monks and bishops are different groups, so that the authority of each group should remain confined to that group.

From this perspective, we recall the Rapp's model of spiritual authority. More exactly, Rapp distinguishes between ascetic authority and ecclesiastical authority. The first

”derives its name from *askesis*, meaning practice. It has its source in the personal efforts of the individual. It is achieved by subduing the body and by practicing virtuous behavior. These efforts are centered on the self, in the hopes of attaining a certain ideal of personal perfection. Ascetic authority is accessible to all. Anyone who chooses to do so can engage in the requisite practices. Finally, ascetic authority is visible. It depends on recognition by others, as it is made evident in the individual's appearance, lifestyle, and conduct”¹².

Briefly, authority of the monk is based on his personal charisma, so that he is characterized by a personal form of spiritual authority. As Rafat Kosinski

”this particular authority was derived *directly* from God; it was not conferred through the sacraments of the Church. As a result, the validity of this authority must be affirmed by charisma received from God”¹³.

¹² Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, University of California Press, p. 17.

¹³ Rafat KOSINSKI, *Holiness and Power: Constantinopolitan Holy Men and Authority in 5th Century*, Walter de Gruyter, 2016, p. 243.

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Briefly, the monks were endowed with charismatic gifts. On the contrary, the bishops exert an authority delegated by an “institution” (“the power to bind and loose”, cf. Matt 16, 18-19)¹⁴, so that their authority

“is not rooted in their spiritual gifts or their ascetic distinction. Rather, it derives from the definition of their office as standing in the succession of the apostles and from the process of their ordination, which, like monastic tonsure and martyrdom, could be regarded as a second baptism that washed away previous sins”¹⁵.

Briefly, ecclesiastical authority is the authority that bishops exercise by virtue of their office as the spiritual leaders of their communities and administrators of their dioceses¹⁶.

Thus, if a monk is recognized for his charismatic qualities, the bishop as a successor of the apostles partakes of the same Spirit as they had. As a consequence, his spiritual authority can reside not just in the *person* of the bishop, but in the episcopal *office* per se.

From this perspective, monks and bishops appear as separate – and sometimes opposed – groups. In this sense, Zachary Smith points out that monks and ecclesiastics are separate groups

“in terms of power and authority, though figures in those groups sometimes overlap. Moreover, each group holds a measure of respect for the other based on their mutual asceticism, and monk’s respect the meditational position that priests hold in the celebration of the Eucharist. This respect, however, does not grant any authority to ecclesiastics based on their position in

¹⁴ The clergy administered penance by virtue of their succession and imitation of the apostle Peter. As Claudia Rapp has remarked “in the Middle Ages, this power to bind and loose, especially in its most extreme form of excommunication, became one of the most potent weapons of the episcopate in exerting authority over their flock, over theological or political adversaries among their fellow bishops, and indeed over secular rulers” (Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 93).

¹⁵ Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 94.

¹⁶ For pertinent reflections on this subject, see Renate DEKKER, *Episcopal Networks and Authority in Late Antique Egypt: Bishops of the Theban Region at Work*, Peeters, 2018, and Andrea STERK, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, 2004.

the institutional church; instead, monks view seasoned and able ascetics as authoritative and worthy of wielding power in the monastic sphere¹⁷.

Therefore, the monk is essentially a “charismatic” and prophetic figure, characterised by spiritual gifts, so that he ordained, not by human hands, but by the hand of God. In other words, the monks are an expression of the Church as “event”, rather than of the Church as institution (cf. Kallistos Ware). According to Kallistos Ware

“there is, however, no sharp line of demarcation between the prophetic and the institutional elements in the life of the Church; each grows out of the other and is intertwined with it. The ministry of the *starets*, itself charismatic, is related to a clearly-defined function within the institutional framework of the Church, the office of priest-confessor. In the Orthodox tradition, the right to hear confessions is not granted automatically at ordination. Before acting as confessor, a priest requires authorization from his bishop; and in the Greek Church, at any rate, only a minority of the clergy are so authorised. Yet, although the sacrament of confession is certainly an appropriate occasion for spiritual direction, the ministry of the *starets* is by no means identical with that of a confessor. The *starets* gives advice, not only at confession, but on many other occasions. Moreover, while the confessor must always be a priest, the *starets* may be a simple monk, not in holy orders, or even a layman. The *starets*, whether ordained or lay, frequently speaks with an insight and authority that only a very few confessor-priests possess¹⁸.

If Desert Fathers were drawn predominantly from the ranks of the lay monks, priestly orders came to be viewed as an adequate criterion for offering spiritual guidance. Briefly, the clergy evokes an “automatic” power imparted through the rite of ordination¹⁹.

¹⁷ Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks...*, pp. 124-125

¹⁸ Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, pp. 129-130.

¹⁹ For more details on this theme, see Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transformation*, University of California Press, 2005; Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the*

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In this context, we stress that it is very important to say that the two types of authority, the “administrative/institutional and charismatic/personal” (Kallistos Ware) are not mutually exclusive. In other words, the monk and the bishop illustrate the two interpenetrating levels on which the earthly Church exists and functions:

“On the one hand, there is the external, official and hierarchical level, with its geographical organization into dioceses and parishes, and its apostolic succession of bishops. On the other hand, there is the inner, spiritual and charismatic level, to which the monks primarily belong. Here the chief centers are, for the most part, not the great primatial and metropolitan sees but certain remote hermitages, in which there shine forth a few personalities richly endowed with spiritual gifts”²⁰.

A bishop who is characterized by holiness has both personal and institutional spiritual authority. If people believe that he can read souls and detect hidden sins, they may adjust their behavior and confess more readily, hoping that he will not expose their faults unexpectedly and in public. Particularly during the administration of oaths, his presence could work as “a powerful spiritual lie-detector test”²¹.

However, the spiritual authority of the bishop remain a fertile topic for late antique monasticism. And indeed, the bishops played a huge role in disseminating notions of spiritual authority in this period. According to A. Sterk this authority explain the eventual triumph of a distinctly monastic episcopate in the Byzantine church²².

The importance of the personal holiness in the assertion of episcopal leadership remains a touchstone in the late antique monasticism. From this perspective, the charismatic feature plays a decisive role in the establishment of personal holiness of the bishop. There is no contradistinction between charismatic authority and institutional (episcopal) authority. The bishop

Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine, Brepols, 2018, and Renate DEKKER, *Episcopal Networks and Authority in Late Antique Egypt: Bishops of the Theban Region at Work*, Peeters, 2018.

²⁰ Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, p. 130.

²¹ Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, pp. 251-252. One example of monk-priest reputed for his clairvoyant gift is Shenoute of Atripe.

²² Cf. Andrea STERK, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, 2004.

was a spiritual guide for his community, so that he was perceived as a holy man in Late Antiquity.

III. Conclusion

There are many reasons to conclude that monks represented a major challenge to the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church. As we seen, the ascetic authority of the monks is portrayed as independent of priests and bishops because

“it is a form of religious influence which rests on marginalising technologies of the self, which is tied to the wilderness spatiality, and which self-reflectively uses literary culture and literary letters as media with which to intervene in power structures”²³.

It is thus important to note that closely related to this authority is ascetic training. But I have not used the term “authority” in a Weberian sense because I have found this type too static. Therefore, I work here from an understanding of authority in personal terms. Authority is essentially a relation between two persons, an elder and his disciple(s). From this perspective, authority is essentially an elastic and flexible relation between two persons, an elder and his disciple(s). Finally, two aspects here are noteworthy.

Firstly, ascetic literature presents the ecclesiastical and monastic worlds as separate spheres of influence with little overlap. In other words, monks should hold authority over their own affairs and should be free from external (including ecclesiastical) interference. Briefly, ascetic authority is a separate system from institutional, ecclesiastical authority.

Secondly, I have opted for a mediating solution between ascetic authority and institutional authority. Authority in the Church is never the monopoly of an ordained few (cf. Eph 4,11-12) whether bishops or other clergy. Authority is the responsibility of all (cf. Eph. 5, 34). In the history

²³ Laura FELDT, “Letters from the Wilderness – Marginality, Literarity, and Religious Authority Changes in Late Antique Gaul”, in: Laura FELDT and Jan N. BREMMER (eds.), *Marginality, Media, and Mutations of religious Authority in the History of Christianity*, Peeters, 2019, pp. 69-96, here p. 91.

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of Christianity, centuries of institutionalism and clericalism, followed by the “lay revolution” in conservative and anti-hierarchical churches alike, have rendered the concepts of authority and obedience problematic a point of contention and almost disdain. Nevertheless, clergy and monks cannot exist without one another.