

From Desert to City

Asceticism in Early Christianity and the Appropriation of Authority

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Around 374 C.E., Jerome wrote how a talented young man, trained in Greek and Egyptian learning and heir to a rich inheritance, fled a century earlier from imperial persecutions of Christians by seeking solitude in the desert. This young man, called Paul the Hermit by later followers, discovered a cave at the foot of a mountain which housed a small palm tree and a natural water fountain. He made this cave his only home and sustenance for the remainder of his life.¹ Paul soon gained some measure of fame as a hermit, and Jerome suggests that it was this man that Anthony the Great felt compelled through a vision to seek.² These two became the first of a series of Desert Fathers that characterized early Christian monasticism and they influenced thereafter scores of hermits, ascetics, and even bishops of high office. Anthony especially gained notoriety as an exceptional holy man when Athanasius as bishop of Alexandria put to paper his biography.

Written between 356 and 362, Athanasius's *Life of Anthony* depicts the customs, beliefs, and behaviors of the early desert ascetics by exalting Anthony's solitude as a Christian ideal. Aside from perpetuating a concept of spiritual authority that many early Christians began to see in and expect of monks, Athanasius also reveals in his *Life* a fundamental tension between "freelance" holy men like Paul and Anthony and "professional" clergy. The Alexandrian bishop, in writing Anthony's biography, sought to control the space of ascetic authority in Christian society. By praising Anthony and securing his place in history through this text, Athanasius

1. Jerome, *Life of Paulus the First Hermit*, 1–6.
2. Jerome, 7.

reinforced and installed his position as bishop *over* the ascetics. And for good reason, he believed; after all, what credentials had Paul gained to preside over or determine orthodoxy for the emerging church polity? The *Life of Anthony*, far from criticizing Anthony, emboldens what he had endeavored to overcome and praises the sanctity of a man who fastidiously renounced temptation. Athanasius, through the use of hagiography, not only supported the desert monks in their work of solitary self-refinement, but his own cause as well. The more praise he brought to Anthony, the more he elevated his position as Anthony's bishop. *Life of Anthony* remains a text imbued with overtones of Athanasius's attempt to centralize the authority of the bishop as the spiritual leader ordained with all of the holy characteristics the desert ascetics so manifestly lived.³

The Desert Fathers soon increased in number and prestige among fellow Christians, though their activities did not yet appear to challenge the clergy. Not until several ascetics attracted authority through their more extreme behaviors did bishops in outlying cities feel pressed upon to negotiate the role of the ascetic in the social order. Desert monasticism could not have come at a more formative period for the episcopacy. Once the Roman emperor Constantine proclaimed an edict of tolerance for Christianity in 313, the institutionalization of the religion continued with greater force and with a more stable foundation. The first ecumenical council convened at Nicaea twelve years later, not long before Paul the Hermit died. Formative events for the institutional church occurred alongside highly non-institutional movements, and both occurred during nascent phases of social development for the Christian community. As soon as ascetic authority appeared to undercut institutional authority, bishops reacted swiftly—not by punishing or blocking ascetic behaviors but by appropriating them into the role and ordination of the bishop.

This essay seeks to locate the making of authority within the Christian church as the episcopacy formed, and will examine that moment using two theories, one advanced as a psychological framework of analysis and the other as a sociological one. The interplay between the Desert Fathers and the urban bishops marks an ideal and crucial case for this study for a few reasons. On one level, a class of Christians who did not participate in the clergy received an authoritative social rank from lay persons just the same—a distinct phenomenon, when compared to other aspects

3. David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 11, 58, 60; Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity: A Topical Survey of Its Life, Beliefs, and Practices* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 90.

of this religious community's formation and self-concept. This interplay also occurred at a highly formative point when the episcopacy was not yet fully defined by the Christian church, but when the growing community had reached a critical mass that could ensure its continuation. Because this community had become somewhat large by this point, several social trajectories began to manifest themselves within this society which the leaders were forced to negotiate. Orthodoxy, as an apparatus for codifying and bolstering authority, was in flux as well; even with the Nicene Creed on the table, bishops still quibbled over its particulars, and consensus came with difficulty. In short, after 325 and throughout the following century, bishops reigned in their authority on many levels while new social phenomena surfaced and entered the realm of discourse. The place of the Desert Fathers (and monasticism in general) in the canon of spiritual authority would challenge the bishops' conception of official authority.

Desert Monks and Urban Elites

Urban elites made up most of the clergy by 325. When Constantine invited all the bishops of the empire to Nicaea, the number of those that attended remained relatively low, clearly a gathering of what represented for the empire a select group of leaders. (Athanasius counted 318 bishops in the council, Eusebius, 250.⁴) Most fourth-century bishops came from the Roman *curiales* class, the leading citizens of the two thousand or so cities of the empire. Not all *curiales* were wealthy, though some, especially in places like Antioch and Carthage, had enough riches to rival an imperial senator. Few of the bishops came to the office from a lower class, and some even “downgraded” from a senatorial position to occupy an episcopate, like Ambrose of Milan and Nectarius of Constantinople.⁵

Ascetics, on the other hand, deliberately embraced poverty. With time, they would become perfect candidates for the bishopric because of their practices of self-denial as the office came to require a more visibly holy individual. Even so, the urban trait continued with even the monk-bishops. Patrick, the famous Irish bishop known for his extreme asceticism, had a *curiales*-class father and, perhaps due to his family's background, attributed a rank of nobility to the office of bishop.⁶ Palladius of Helenopolis

4. Athanasius, *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*, 2; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3:9.

5. Frank Gilliard, “Senatorial Bishops of the Fourth Century,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 77 no. 2 (1984), 154–58.

6. Gregory of Tours noted that Patrick associated the notion of *nobilitas* with the rank of *curiales* and believed that all bishops by ordination carried a certain level of spiritual *nobilitas*. See Gilliard, 164–65.

sought instruction by migrating through the Egyptian deserts from one *abba* to another, then returned to his place of origin to become the bishop in Bithynia.⁷ Even as Evagrius Ponticus suddenly took to the life of the desert monk, other monks mildly scolded him for bringing at times too much of his scholarly training with him. “We know, Father,” one said after Evagrius once lectured his brethren on theological points, “that if you had stayed in Alexandria you would have been a great bishop.”⁸ Though desert ascetics at this time characteristically avoided cities and status, leadership across the community still held ties to urban society and imperial social ranks. Notions of one’s class or upbringing with this social system remained a part of even the ascetics’ consciousness.⁹

By leaving the urban centers behind, desert monks of the fourth century identified themselves apart from the elitist circles of the clergy. Asceticism remained in close proximity to the bishop, especially for those in Egypt like Athanasius in Alexandria, but not so close that they worried about their clerical roles and functions at first. This feature gave rise to two parallel and developing societies: the institutional churches of the cities and the loosely guided and more solitary wanderers of the desert.

Like the bishops, the ascetics of the Egyptian desert were esteemed as teachers in the spiritual life by “sons,” small numbers of fellow ascetics who had apprenticed themselves to the *abba*, some for a short period of time and others for the rest of their lives.¹⁰ The monastic tradition took on various forms depending on the geographic location: lower Egypt was characterized by individual hermits, like Paul and Anthony’s order; upper Egypt was home to cenobitic monasticism in which more organized groups came together in a communal observance of the ascetic order, like in Pachomius’s communities; Nitria and Scetis were known for their smaller groups of ascetics that attracted visitors, like John Cassian and Evagrius; Syrian monasticism included some of the harshest forms of self-discipline, with monks like Simeon the Stylite inflicting terrible physical toll on themselves to gain mastery over their bodies and spirit; Asia Minor was home to a more liturgical form of monasticism, as advanced by monks like Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom; and Palestine became a monastic center by the fifth century out of which came many of

7. Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 102.

8. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, rev. ed. (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984), xxii.

9. Daniel Carner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 4.

10. Rapp, 102.

the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* from teachers such as Barsanuphius and Euthymius.¹¹

Early monasticism not only grew out primarily from Egyptian deserts across geographical space but in the literary corpus as well. Disciples committed to paper many of the most admired monks' sayings which later comprised the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*). This text combined anecdotes of these men's extraordinary ascetic feats with memorable quotations from their teaching.¹² Influential writers such as Palladius of Helenopolis, John Cassian, Athanasius, and Jerome contemporaneously composed hagiographies extolling the lives of the desert ascetics. As bishops themselves, such writers introduced much of their fellow clergy to the unfolding of the monastic movement, which eventually would prove vexing for both monk and bishop. They both claimed spiritual authority yet regarded differently, and were sometimes at odds over, the origin of that authority and the content, method, and medium of their teaching.¹³

The desert monks derived much of their spiritual authority from their lived religious expressions of deprivation. By casting themselves into harsh conditions, enduring long fits of temptation unscathed, or purging their bodies of spiritual impurities, the monks rendered themselves vessels of the Holy Spirit and discerners of the spiritual realm that surrounded them. They developed skills of intense rigor in body and mind and imparted lessons on how to cultivate such skills to their disciples and apprentices. One could not categorize or systematize their sayings because the teaching encompassed more than the written word or the oral tradition: Desert fathers intended to engage the learner with the totality of their experience, life, and teachings as much as possible, and by confining their instruction to an oral medium, they sought to reduce their teachings to a mechanically reproducible medium or depersonalizing the process of discipleship.¹⁴ Nevertheless, these monks could not restrain others from transmitting their sayings through the written word, and soon, ascetics like Pachomius and Evagrius began telling of their times in the deserts or organizing communities of monks. The fame and authority of the desert ascetics soon spread throughout the empire and gained attention, even adoration at times.¹⁵

11. Ward, xviii–xix.

12. Rapp, 103.

13. Rapp, 103.

14. Rapp, 103–04.

15. Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80–101.

Priests and bishops derived their authority from their ordination and their call to teach. They saw a clear precedent for their priesthood in holy writings and historical texts. Biblical verse gave examples of Jesus bestowing apostolic authority, apostles receiving heavenly revelation, apostles ordaining others, and other priestly behaviors; however, even in these writings methodology and doctrine did not appear so clearly as to resolve all dispute.¹⁶ Appointing bishops, though, did hold historical significance in the tradition of the clergy, regardless of the mode of biblical interpretation. The *Didache*, argued by some to be the earliest authentic source of Christian instruction, enjoined the congregation to “appoint ... for yourselves bishop and deacons worthy of the Lord.”¹⁷ When no superior authority could preside, the community ought to choose their own officers from among themselves, counseled the *Didachist*. Other instructions in the *Didache* allude to a recognition that these practices of appointing leaders for a congregation had already appeared in earliest Christianity and that the *Didachist* was only reinforcing the practice by counseling the congregation thus.¹⁸ Once appointed, the bishop enjoyed the same status as prophets: “Do not, then, look down upon [bishop and deacons]; for they themselves are your honored ones with the prophet-teachers.”¹⁹ Prophet-teachers, the *Didache* describes, “are your high-priests,” worthy of food and lodging without having to beg, ones who may “eucharistize as much as they wish,” those already “tested,” and able to train and supplement justice.²⁰ Naturally, bishops came to expect certain duties to derive from their ordination along these lines.

Unlike the method of the monks and the manner described in the *Didache*, however, priests and bishops did not provide the same kind of personal encounter for their disciples or catechumens. The setting of their

16. Rapp, 104–05.

17. Aaron Milavec argues that the *Didache* was produced in the mid-first century C.E. in the tradition of catechizing new Christians in house churches and smaller Christian communities. His analysis suggests that the *Didache* began as an oral work that eventually was committed to writing later on, hence some confusion over its authentic origins in contemporary scholarship. Others agree upon a later date for the work, but few argue that the *Didache* was produced after the third century. By the fourth century, practices discussed in the *Didache* do appear in the same tones and with similar customs, adding relevance to the duties as conceived by bishops at the time as discussed here. See Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), ix–xiv, 39–88.

18. Milavec, 78–79; *Didache* 15:1.

19. *Didache* 15:2; see also David Horrell, “Leadership Patterns and the Development of Ideology in Early Christianity,” *Sociology of Religion* 58 no. 4 (1997), 327–28.

20. *Didache* 11–13.

instruction resembled a lecture hall. They did not tailor messages to individual hearers but rather generalized lessons of the Christian faith for a large audience and interested nonbelievers. Whereas the monks acted as guides in things of the spirit—experienced travelers who could point the way and discern the traps that might beguile the disciple in his or her journey—priests acted like a shepherd who worked to prevent his sheep from going astray, relying on their learning and their status to encourage respect and trust. Trained rhetors, priests made their preaching agreeable to their listeners; monks openly challenged their apprentices with common-sensical and sometimes curt maxims.²¹

Though the office, as understood by the leadership, often demanded that only truly spiritual men should become clerics, in practice candidates for the clergy were recruited from well-respected and prominent members of the local community.²² The office of bishop came to command attention within the Roman communities and some priests apparently pursued the position through their civic contacts and reputation. Ambrose had been governor of northern Italy before his ordination as bishop of Milan and brought his retinue with him. Cyprian of Carthage had gained extensive academic training as a pagan before converting to Christianity, and very quickly gained the episcopate after his conversion. In contrast, many desert monks fled from ordination, or in some cases, even mutilated themselves in an effort to become disqualified from occupying a clerical position. Ammonius had been ordered by Bishop Timothy of Alexandria to come to the city for consecration when he refused and, in view of those sent to fetch him, grabbed scissors and suddenly cut off his entire left ear, announcing that he was disqualified for ecclesiastical office since a mutilated man was forbidden from the priesthood by law.²³ Athanasius rebuked Dracontius for fleeing the burden of the episcopate. Pachomius and Macarius the Egyptian gained notice for resisting clerical offices. Acepimas in Syria agreed only to accept the priesthood when he knew he was on the edge of death. Gregory of Nazianzus once fled the priesthood, providing written justification for his actions.²⁴

Both monk and priest received recognition as intermediaries in Christian soteriology from their followers, but soon Christians began to perceive a more palpable spiritual authority in the ascetics due to the visibil-

21. Rapp, 104–05; Ward, xxiii.

22. Rapp, 104; Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1–2.

23. Sterk, 1–2.

24. Sterk, 2.

ity of their holy walk. Some sent letters on papyrus to the desert monks asking them to plead in prayer for healing blessings on particular family members. “I ask and beg you, most honored father,” wrote a woman named Valeria to Paphnutius, “that you request [help] for me from Christ and that I receive healing. Thus I believe that I receive healing on account of your prayers, for the revelations of the ascetics and the worshipers are clear.” Valeria besought Paphnutius to remember also her daughters and husband in his “hallowed supplication.”²⁵

The spiritual authority of monks and bishops connected Christians to their miraculous and divine history. Offering an intercessory prayer on behalf of someone else distinguished the truly holy men from others and enhanced their perceived levels of spiritual authority. The hagiographies of desert ascetics certainly attribute enough miraculous intervention to them that may have exaggerated their actual powers, but they thoroughly incorporated the practice of intercessory prayers nonetheless. While bishops had more pressing pragmatic concerns to manage, ascetics by their refusal of titles and office could publicly demonstrate their constant effort to intercede through prayer. The stylites of Syria especially attracted attention for living atop pillars for years on end—all one could do in such a precarious situation was pray. John Cassian developed a four-part scheme of supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings, and for him, intercessory prayer is the highest form of prayer, as it requires a self devoid of its own needs yet filled with compassion for humankind.²⁶ This form of prayer demonstrated a carrying of others’ burdens, particularly their sins, by the holy man. When the holy men combined intense personal mastery, wisdom, and intercessory prayer into their visible regimen, they enhanced their spiritual authority in the eyes of Christians. Followers correlated spiritual authority with personal conduct, and once the more immediately visible forms of this level of spiritual perfection came out of the deserts and not the churches, the clergy began to institutionalize forms of asceticism and incorporate the virtues of the desert monks into their expectations of bishops.²⁷

Appropriation of Ascetic Authority

25. London Papyrus 1927 in Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, trans. Robert F. Boughner and James E. Goehring (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1990), 460.

26. Rapp, 83.

27. Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 26–27.

Legislation of Monasticism

The late fourth century saw a crucial point of contact between desert monks and urban clergy. While neither the monastic systems of the wilderness nor the institutions of the cities held up monolithic models of episcopal or ascetic leadership, the two social phenomena in general began to merge more fully. Apparently, for the first time in early Christianity, several measures to expand the episcopate into the realm of ascetic authority and to absorb the monastic system into the church hierarchy and institutional structures came into effect.²⁸ Despite problems for the historian in tracing a legal history of the development of monasticism in the institutional church—specifically, the scanty information available and the overlapping civil and ecclesiastical authorities that produced legislation at the time—the Council of Chalcedon provided the first serious basis for the governing of monastic policies and orders.²⁹ This does not mean that monks had not yet entered the realm of public discourse or that they avoided completely social reactions of an official nature. In fact, the Council of Chalcedon probably hearkened to scores of policies and public sentiment surrounding controversial aspects of the ascetics' behavior when writing an official policy on monasticism.

One of the earliest references to monks in the legal code came from a decree of Emperors Valentinian and Valens in 370 which censured "certain devotees of idleness [who] have deserted the compulsory services of the municipalities, have betaken themselves to solitudes and secret places, and under the pretext of religion have joined with bands of hermit monks."³⁰ The civil authorities here gave no attention to the authority of the monks but rather saw these religious isolationists as delinquents or radicals. Emperor Valens considered the Egyptian monks religious fanatics and agitators of sedition. He ordered soldiers to destroy the monasteries of Nitria and condemned many monks to mines and quarries in distant provinces. Jerome recorded that Valens passed a law that conscripted the monks into military service under pain of being clubbed to death.³¹ Various other decrees and similar law codes addressed the monks, though

28. Sterk, 163.

29. Sterk, 164.

30. *Codex Theodosianus* 12.1.63 in Clyde Pharr, ed. and trans., *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); Charles Frazee, "Late Roman and Byzantine Legislation on the Monastic Life from the Fourth to the Eighth Centuries," *Church History* 51 (1982), 263–279.

31. Sterk, 165; Malcolm Drew Donalson, *A Translation of Jerome's Chronicon with Historical Commentary* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1996), 55.

the role and place of the monk had not yet been articulated in the canons of the church.

Prior to Chalcedon, ecclesiastical law hardly treated monasticism. The Council of Laodicea around 365 made a distinction between a particular order of ascetics and the clergy. In 401, the sixth Synod of Carthage anticipated the ordination of monks in forbidding bishops to ordain a monk from a monastery outside the bishop's own diocese. Canon 25 of the Synod of Seleucia Ctesiphon around 410 provided guidelines for the kind of monks a bishop could consider when filling a vacancy and emphasized the subordination of the monks to the bishop.³²

Hoping to bring religious unity to the empire, Emperor Marcian called in 451 the Fourth Ecumenical Council. A controversy surrounding Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius involved the monastic movement to a degree, and in connection with subversive behavior by Eutyches, tensions between monks and church hierarchy in Constantipole escalated.³³ The main product of the council was its management of the Nestorian controversy. Given the nature of this controversy, the council necessarily and officially legislated the mode of monastic society within the church in several canons.³⁴ Canon 4 declared that no monastery could be established without the consent of the bishop and reiterated the hierarchy between bishops and monks. Monks could not be involved in ecclesiastical or temporal affairs nor could a monastery admit a slave without the permission of his master. The canon censured monks who wandered indiscriminately from one city or monastery to the next, and stipulated that monks could not leave the monastery without the express permission of the bishop, and then only in case of necessity. Behind these mandates lay the council's reactions to Eutyches, who had not only personally opposed a synod of bishops but had also incited a group of monks against the hierarchy in Constantinople.³⁵ Canon 4 proved to regulate and influence successive civil and canonical legislation regarding monasticism.³⁶ The Council of Chalcedon also brought the ordination of monks into canon law. Canon 6 stipulated that monks could not receive an ordination outside of their monastery and bounded their authority to their particular church, martyrrium, or monastery.

Several other canons addressed misbehaving or conspiratorial monks.

32. Sterk, 169–70.

33. Sterk, 171.

34. Chalcedon, canons 2–4, 6–8, 16, 18, 23, 24.

35. Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, chapter 9.

36. Chalcedon, canon 4; Sterk, 171.

Canon 8 condemned monks or clerics who dared to rebel against their bishops; canon 18 forbade them from forming secret societies; canon 23 prohibited the organizing of lawless or heretical monks into groups. Monasteries received attention as well; canon 24 not only reinforced the role of the bishop as overseer of the monastery but also prohibited lay persons from establishing their habitations there. At first glance, these canons of Chalcedon portray monks as nuisances to both the civic government and the church, but in each of them remains the tacit assumption that monks were recognized as a respected part of the church.³⁷ The Council succeeded at legislating a more disciplined and stable monastic institution which would remain under the purview and control of the episcopacy and which the imperial authorities found acceptable. Monasteries, as now the main centers of approved ascetic schooling, became a vast and legitimate pool from which to fill clerical vacancies and recruit ecclesiastical leaders.³⁸

Over the course of the fifth century, cenobitic monasticism gained an ascendancy over eremitic forms of asceticism in the institutional church. Benedict's rule, which developed at the start of the sixth century, would shape the foundation for major monastic orders for the next millennium and cement forever the establishment of cenobitic monasticism within Roman Catholicism. The Council of Chalcedon paved the way for several new options to flourish in the church for ascetics, which options came to be identified with the ordained role of priests and bishops. What Chalcedon provided, therefore, was the beginning of a critical appropriation of ascetic authority by the episcopacy. The Desert Fathers introduced new forms of extreme asceticism into Christianity that flourished throughout the fourth century, but the increasing institutionalization of monasticism eventually elicited a decline in eremitic forms of individual asceticism.³⁹

Emergence of Monk-Bishops

Managing the effect of independent and individual modes of authority which developed in the Egyptian deserts required conciliar appropriations of ascetic authority, otherwise the clergy might have continued in tension with a parallel trajectory of jurisdiction in the Christian community. But perhaps the most profound influence on curbing ascetic practices and appropriating them into the control of the bishop came out of

37. Sterk, 172.

38. Sterk, 173; John F. Matthews, *Laying Down the Law: A Study of the Theodosian Code* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 120, 290; Rousseau, 56–57.

39. Rousseau, 4–5, 177–79, 189–98.

the administrations of several monk-bishops. The Cappadocian Fathers and John Chrysostom especially incorporated asceticism into their ideals of episcopal duties with lasting success.

Basil of Caesarea composed the so-called *Short* and *Long Rules* that comprise the *Great Asceticon* which intended to give spiritual advice in keeping with the biblical text. The work encouraged what the Council of Chalcedon wrote in its canons, particularly the hierarchy between bishop and monk, leaders and followers. The ideal Christian leader practiced the asceticism he or she⁴⁰ taught; above all, Basil believed, those who instruct and lead the faithful must serve as models of such a lifestyle.⁴¹

Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus followed suit with the writing of treatises on clerical authority and the blueprints for a model episcopacy. For Gregory of Nazianzus, an ascetic and contemplative life represented the ideal of the episcopal office, and as bishop in Constantinople, he wrote his determination to fulfill the commandments “by ministering to the poor, exercising hospitality, tending the sick, persevering in psalmody, prayer, groaning, mortifications of the senses, or impulse of laughter, control of the tongue, lulling the flesh by the power of the spirit.”⁴² Gregory of Nyssa devoted much of his writings and work to reforming the office of the bishop, though some would argue that he had no knack for ecclesiastical politics. His *Life of Moses* revealed his concern that the church lacked bishops of spiritual stature, whose spiritual authority needed rejuvenating. Orthodox faith could not fully define the office, but rather an ascetic attitude toward the self and a commitment for relieving distress would legitimize the spiritual acumen and authority of the bishop.⁴³

Perhaps no other monk-bishop did more to appropriate ascetic authority to the episcopacy than John Chrysostom. His *On the Priesthood*, which he wrote around 390, justified his earlier flight from the burden of ecclesiastical responsibility. He worried that one could thirst for power thanks to ecclesiastical appointments and believed that such had infiltrated the clergy in his day.⁴⁴ John viewed himself as one unworthy of the

40. Basil assumed the presence of women’s monasteries and female superiors, though he gave no specific instructions regarding their selection or responsibilities.

41. Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 354–59; Sterk, 65.

42. Gregory, *De Vita Sua* in Denis Molaise Mehan, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: Three Poems* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), lines 1219–24.

43. Sterk, 116–18.

44. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 3:10.

right duties and dignity of the bishop, and resisted assuming the office even as notable citizens encouraged him to do so. In his mind the bishop not only fulfilled a prophetic role in the church but was burdened with many tasks reserved mainly for the episcopacy: preparation of effective sermons, visitation of widows, patronage of the poor, care for the sick, administration of justice, and management of church finances.⁴⁵ John wanted the priests and bishops to practice asceticism, not only for their personal development as pastors of Christ's sheep, but for public church service. He criticized the hermit for embracing too much the isolated life, since in this scheme the monk could hide his defects from others. No, those in service to the church must expose their souls to all.⁴⁶ After finally assuming the episcopate in Constantinople and more fully integrating his ascetic ideals into his ecclesiastical duties, Chrysostom, perhaps in spite of himself, alienated fellow clergy and eventually suffered banishment and death. Nevertheless, monks regarded Chrysostom's tenure as ideal for church leaders and his legacy contributed to the continuation of recruiting clergy from the monasteries.⁴⁷

Modes of Appropriation of Authority

Conciliar as well as episcopal modes of appropriating ascetic authority into the office of the bishop played a part in the development of the fifth-century church. By that time, the episcopacy had a firm precedent to stand on, and though future developments continued to further evolve the functions and responsibilities of the episcopacy and the definitions of orthodox belief, the office of bishop retained much of what had been appropriated to it during the fourth century. The clergy negotiated the rise of desert asceticism through conciliar legislation and the making of policy. Ultimately, the force of that legislation depended upon its enforcement. The discourse eventually favored the episcopacy as an increasing number of learned clerics articulated how the Christian community ought to understand and view their ecclesiastical authorities. Bishops, rather than attack asceticism, assumed it for themselves and their office, which only added to the perceived level of spiritual authority. They already could claim a traditional and institutional continuation of their office as well as a legitimacy granted by the social system through their ordination. Now an added measure of spiritual authority was theirs as they gained

45. *On the Priesthood*, 3:12–14.

46. *On the Priesthood*, 3:10, 6:6–8.

47. Sterk, 160.

favor through the undeniable holiness attributed to ascetic behavior. By increasingly training up their successors through church institutions and not secular ones or recruiting from the wealthier classes alone, the clergy asserted and guaranteed control over how their office would continue. These features favored the social system of the urban episcopacy over the eremitic and rural monastic communities.

Analyzing the Appropriation of Ascetic Authority

The aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon, the rise of monasticism prior to and during the Middle Ages, the establishment of asceticism as a holy practice for clergy and laity, and the development of Christian traditions after the fourth century all suggest that the negotiation of asceticism with the clergy and the influence of eremitic monasticism proved a pivotal epoch in the formation of the Christian episcopacy. That does not mean that asceticism only appeared once Paul the Hermit fled to the mountains. Quite the contrary—asceticism predated Christianity by centuries in other cultures and religions, and within the Christian community, its earliest expressions demonstrated ardently ascetic rituals and behaviors. Ignatius, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and others acclaimed the virtues of asceticism decades (and in some cases centuries) before John Chrysostom composed his treatise on the priesthood.⁴⁸ What sets apart the fourth century and early fifth century as a period unique to the development of the episcopacy is its innovative appropriation of asceticism as a mode of legitimizing the authority of the bishop. The bishop becomes the ideal ascetic, not the desert hermit, after monk-bishops dot the eastern Christian landscape. And monasteries replace the deserts as the space for the training of pious spiritual advisors and the apprenticeship of future clergy, once canon law enacted monastic policies. In this negotiation of asceticism, we see the making of religious authority at the institutional level and the forging of obedience within the early Christian community.

Several avenues of analysis elucidate this phenomenon of authority-making. My concluding analysis of this particular case involves two, as I have already mentioned: how authority is made from a psychological perspective and also from a sociological one. These two avenues point out the singularity of the *appropriation* of authority—authority is established within a social system thanks to someone or a group of individuals decid-

48. John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1–3.

ing either unconsciously or deliberately that the authority as such is appropriate. Persons or groups also seek authority through various means, and in many cases, successfully assume social functions or attach acceptable features to their roles or identity. In one case, authority is appropriated from one individual *to* another, and in the other case, authority is appropriated *into* an individual's identity. When assessing the moment of authority-making within the Christian social system, bishops certainly play a key role through their methodical use of social apparatuses of power.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, bishops' authority is checked by the social systems that surround the clergy. As later Christian history bears out, when the masses grow dissatisfied with the clergy, schisms and full-blown ruptures can plague the religion and fracture the community. Had the clergy appropriated different functions into their identity during the fourth and early fifth centuries, the Desert Fathers may have legitimately commanded the greater population of Christians, and perhaps the deserts of Egypt may have become the capital of Christendom rather than Rome. In a sense, the circumstances that shaped the authority-making of the bishop had the approval and the mutual appropriation from the laity. Since so much of the surviving sources come from the clergy—not to mention the role of the monastery in preserving documents—recent psychological evidence may help in understanding this phenomenon of the *giving* of authority by the laity. Social theory may also assist in understanding the clergy's appropriation of ascetic authority from a more sociological perspective.

Stanley Milgram, a twentieth-century psychologist, devised experiments that tested the installation of authority and the psychology of obedience. In summary, his experiments isolated the moment in which an agent appropriates authority to another commanding figure, then tested for how the agent responded to commands and at what point would the agent refuse to obey.⁵⁰ He found that several conditions were present where the social system installed authority between various players. The agent comes to the system predisposed to perceive authority based on antecedent conditions. The authority system takes shape once the agent shifts into what Milgram calls the "agentic state" of mind—the agent perceives authority, hierarchy, and his or her place in the system instantaneously when a given scenario plays out. Binding factors influence the continua-

49. For a full study of this observation, see Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

50. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

tion of the authority system in a way that keeps the agent in the agentic state of mind. What the agent perceives as consequences for accepting or rejecting authority can serve as binding factors, and in many ways, perpetuates the perception of the authority as authoritative. Identifying, therefore, the antecedent conditions, binding factors, and consequences installed in the authority system in the case of ascetic authority ought to illustrate how individuals conceived of the spiritual power exhibited by desert ascetics and the bishops.⁵¹

The individual in early Christianity would have approached an authority system in their religion with several embedded notions. Perhaps the most powerful antecedent condition that predisposed the Christian to perceive authority in the episcopacy was the role of social class in their societies and his or her own position relative to that class. Given that the bishops came increasingly from the upper classes in the fourth century, the office would have held prestige in the minds of the lower classes. The sheer presentation of the bishop, especially those like Ambrose with a staffed retinue that paraded down busy avenues and appeared in elite social functions, would have left an impression that there did exist a social hierarchy, and that the bishop occupied a high place in that system.

The teachings of Christianity subverted the popularity and perceived social rank of the bishops, however, in praising the renunciation of wealth, the embracing of charity, and the pursuit of heaven over mortal gains. In this way, a revolutionary ethic of God-first, neighbor-second, self-last commanded a more austere position in the Christian mind: Jesus had no place to lay his head and performed a humble ministry of treating the sick and afflicted, and he was God incarnate, to say nothing of a royal celebrity of the time. This central figure of the religion spoke forcefully against civic authority when interrogated by Pilate and promised of a resurrection and a triumphant coming in the future when all would be recompensed. Christians, therefore, had good reason to seek a godly reward over a fiscal or social one. Both the perceived austerity of the bishop and the striking poverty of the desert hermit would have attracted the individual toward installing the agentic state when approaching these figures in their pious practice of the religion.

Christians felt concerned over their eternal welfare and enlisted other agents to pray on their behalf. Their scripture encouraged this behavior, especially in its teaching of the centrality of Christ as mediator and savior. When push came to shove, those that performed an ethic of holiness served more effectively in the minds of sinners and sufferers as interme-

51. Milgram, 136.

diaries than those that articulated belief well. The dependence on others for salvation so central to Christian belief prompted this relationship between the holy men and the struggling sinner. Where sinners felt relief thanks to the prayers of the righteous ascetics, they reinforced the authority system with the monks at the top. When apprentices sought the Desert Fathers, they characteristically asked for wisdom. Doctrine, therefore, held sway in their minds even when the monk had no formal training in rhetoric, philosophy, or law. Since ecclesiastical authority unambiguously called for the duty of ministering to the spiritual needs of the congregation, where that congregation directed their hopes of finding relief meant a great deal. With a parallel body that had the capacity to treat the spiritual problems of the laity gaining a reputation, the clergy, consciously or not, came to realize that the institutional apparatus of addressing sin and spiritual suffering might soon lose ground. To preserve the social order, the clergy had little choice but to reign in and do something about ascetic authority. True to form, they used the conciliar body to write policy and create consequences for that parallel group of monks who could eventually supplant the clergy as the spiritual authorities of the church. Those consequences reinstalled and reasserted the place of the episcopacy as the authoritative body of the church, to which monks had better obey. The clergy clearly had the upper hand in enforcing those consequences; their institutional structures guaranteed the lasting effect of their policies and the spiritual authority moved back to the cities from the desert.

Asceticism continued in highly institutionalized forms in the perpetuation of monasticism. Why the eremitic lifestyle did not become a lasting attribute of the Christian life at large likely has its roots in the sociological implications of how the clergy managed the appropriation of ascetic authority. Pierre Bourdieu amplified the philosophy of habitus by fashioning the concept of “field” to an individual’s navigation through social space. His theory of habitus and field, like Milgram’s experiments in obedience and authority, help to explain why the episcopacy became identified with asceticism and why desert monasticism remained a sparse and exceptional phenomenon for the Christian community.⁵² The social structures surrounding both the clergy and the laity contributed to each player’s set of individual social conditions, or in other words, the social effects that occupied each person’s habitus. The individual could only navigate his or her field using this habitus; today’s epistemologies of human rights and individualism, therefore, would not have existed in their

52. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

minds at the time. Hence, reactions to episcopal authority like those of anti-Christian movements today are not seen during these blatant formations and exercises of power by the clergy and Roman elites. The realm of ascetic authority represented an emerging field for the clergy to navigate. Customs of Roman conciliar politics and of philosophizing over points of doctrine occupied the set of expectations and tools with which the clergy could negotiate the advent of desert asceticism. In their appropriation of ascetic authority, naturally, the clergy looked to the episcopacy, the already-functioning class of bishops, as the point of contact for the powers and effects of perceived holiness. When positioning themselves in reference to ascetic authority, little wonder these bishops only conceived of themselves as superior and authoritative. Whether or not they operated with an overt notion of accumulating and wielding power, the bishops still approached the situation already carrying a habitus that favored a hierarchical reaction. The solution *was* the hierarchy. Some other mode of appropriating authority or maintaining the social order would have appeared alien to these actors in the authority system. From a sociological perspective, the bishops further carved out their authority through their management of the field of extreme and eremitic asceticism.

Since individual Christians involved in this scheme already maintained a predisposed inclination toward the agentic state which favored both the hierarchy and the ascetics, the consequences and binding factors that could produce the most strain would win their allegiance. It is in this aspect that the Desert Fathers unabashedly could not care less. The very nature of their lifestyle, their very identity as holy men, called for a level of ignorance about social structures and creating consequences and binding factors for their disciples. As monks completely invested in the pursuit of personal holiness and the recovering of sinners to spiritual health *through* their solitary confrontation with sin and temptation, they could not involve themselves with doling out punishments or creating incentives for an institutional establishment of their order. They could only command obedience insofar as their apprentices cared to conform. The strain they discussed in the wilderness came from within the individual as a process of self-purgation, not from the threat of being anathematized or banished (or worse) by an ecclesiastical body.

Whether or not Athanasius was aware of how his readers might react psychologically upon hearing of Anthony's odyssey through eremitic asceticism, or if he considered his own set of expectations when he wrote his *Life of Anthony* probably did not matter within the realm of his thinking. The more immediate concern on his mind was that monks of Egypt

rivalled his episcopal authority, and these freelancers in administering the church deserved a more orthodox example of how to live their asceticism. Little wonder, then, that he began the *Life* by saying,

You have entered upon a noble rivalry with the monks of Egypt by your determination either to equal or surpass them in your training in the way of virtue. For by this time there are monasteries among you, and the name of monk receives public recognition.... Now since you asked me to give you an account of the blessed Anthony's way of life ... that you also may bring yourselves to imitate him, I very readily accepted your behest, for to me also the bare recollection of Anthony is a great accession of help.⁵³

53. Athanasius, *Life of Anthony*, preface.