

‘Give blood and receive the Spirit’

The ascetical dimension of mystical experience

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THE ARRESTING INJUNCTION QUOTED in the title comes from a certain Abba Longinus, one of those ascetic teachers whose wisdom is recorded in the *Sayings of the desert fathers*. The full text is as follows:

A woman knows she has conceived when she stops losing blood. So it is with the soul, she knows she has conceived the Holy Spirit when the passions stop coming out of her. But as long as one is held back in the passions, how can one dare to believe that one is sinless? Give blood and receive the Spirit.¹

This characteristically vivid and uncompromising piece of advice from the fifth-century Egyptian desert neatly encapsulates the conviction common to virtually all Christians in late antiquity that some degree of ascetic effort is a prerequisite of any form of mystical experience. Grace does not come without blood and tears. But to what extent can such a conviction sway or even speak to contemporary Christians – let alone the wider world? Our society is overwhelmingly one in which talk of the passions is wholly alien, which sees asceticism as the exclusive preserve of a few cloistered monastics, and which marginalizes mysticism as an occupation of the deranged or simply deluded. I shall, in this brief essay, attempt to draw from the Christian tradition, and in particular the early Christian tradition, a number of pointers that may help demonstrate the ongoing relevance of Abba Longinus’ call.

Asceticism and mysticism

It hardly needs saying that much of the problem resides in language – as is always the case in any form of theological endeavour. The terms ‘asceticism’ and ‘mysticism’ are quite straightforward in their derivation; it is their use, which is to say their meaning, that creates the problems. Asceticism derives from the Greek *askesis* – effort, practice, training. Mysticism derives from the Greek *muein* – to close the eye, to initiate into the mysteries, to reveal that which is hidden. In

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contemporary parlance, however, the terms tend to denote something rather different. Asceticism conjures up images of extreme privation and severe self-discipline, with no apparent object beyond the chastisement of the flesh. Mysticism, on the other hand, even where it has not been rejected outright, has been neutralized by being hived off as the preserve of a very few exceptionally privileged persons, rare stars enjoying stunning visions and strange revelations. All very wonderful and marvellous, but not something to which 'ordinary' Christians need aspire. In fact little more than a harmless eccentricity, very much an optional extra.

Thus one of our first tasks has to be a re-appropriation of language, a definition of terms more in keeping with the insights of the Christian 'great tradition'. Asceticism, for example, has to be defined teleologically. It is not enough simply to speak of self-control or the disciplining of the body – one has to say to what end such discipline is aimed. Thus any definition of asceticism has to embrace the idea that the spiritual and physical effort involved is directed not only at the purification of soul and body but also, and more importantly, towards attaining union with God. This, of course, brings us on to mysticism. The term is, as is well known, a profoundly misleading neologism which is in itself both a sign and a vehicle of the process of marginalization to which I have already referred. The terms 'mystery', 'mystic' and 'mystical' are somewhat safer, since they, unlike 'mysticism' do have a long history within Christian usage – but they too are now infected by the web of meanings through which we conceive the phenomena embraced by the abstract term mysticism. Thus I propose to work in this essay with the following definition of mysticism: the quest for, and experience of, union with the divine.

With such a definition in mind we may be better equipped to embrace a fuller, more rounded vision of the Christian life – one in which mystical experience is not left to the exceptional few but is, rather, viewed as part and parcel of the authentic Christian life. If we understand mystical experience to be direct contact with God, then surely it is incumbent upon all Christians to seek out such experience and to make the necessary ascetic efforts to open themselves up to that touch. We must not let ourselves be inveigled into accepting a two-tier religiosity with one rule for the supposedly perfect and another for the 'ordinary' Christian. Ascetic effort and mystical experience should be seen as inseparable and integral components of the Christian calling. In order to illustrate what this might mean in practice and to address some of the potential problems raised by such an affirmation, let us now turn

to a number of examples from the thought of some of the great theoreticians of the Christian life.

Gregory of Nyssa: the ascent of Mt Sinai

The great Cappadocian theologian St Gregory of Nyssa (c.332–c.395) produced a number of remarkably penetrating expositions of the ascetical and mystical life, of which perhaps the best known is his *Life of Moses*. In this work the biblical narrative of Moses is treated on a number of levels, most significantly as a paradigm of the soul's ascent to unitive contemplation of God. Gregory's treatment takes it as axiomatic that ascetic endeavour is a *sine qua non* of mystical experience. Every aspect of Moses' life is seen as a preparation for his ascent of the mountain and as a pattern for us to follow. Thus the crossing of the Red Sea, to take one of the most obvious examples, shows us that:

Those who pass through the mystical water in baptism must put to death in the water the whole phalanx of evil – such as covetousness, unbridled desire, rapacious thinking, the passion of conceit and arrogance, wild impulse, wrath, anger, malice, envy, and all such things. Since the passions naturally pursue our nature, we must put to death in the water both the base movements of the mind and the acts which issue from them.²

The Egyptian army is here taken as a type of the passions which must be slain if the intellect is to achieve the kind of clarity and balance it needs to apply itself to the mystical ascent. The soul must then go on to taste of the waters of Marah, 'the life far removed from pleasures' – a way of life that appears bitter and disagreeable at first:

But if the wood be thrown into the water, that is, if one receives the mystery of the resurrection which had its beginning with the wood (you of course understand the cross when you hear the wood), then the virtuous life, being sweetened by the hope of things to come, becomes sweeter and more pleasant than all the sweetness that tickles the sense with pleasure.³

The bittersweet life of asceticism is very clearly a presupposition of any sort of authentic knowledge of God:

The person who would approach the contemplation of Being [i.e. God – the source of all being] must be pure in all things so as to be pure in

soul and body, washed stainless of every spot in both parts, in order that he might appear pure to the One who sees what is hidden and that visible respectability might correspond to the inward condition of the soul.⁴

Such purity is required to cleanse the faculties of perception, to open the spiritual senses of the soul – senses corresponding in some measure to the physical senses but capable of direct apprehension of divine realities. As Gregory enlarges:

The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind. For ‘no eye has seen, and no ear has heard’, nor does it belong to those things which usually enter ‘into the heart of man’ (1 Cor 2:9). He who would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual and irrational emotion. He must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain.⁵

Moses’ experiences on the mountain, his penetration into the luminous darkness – the true knowledge of God that transcends knowledge, the seeing that consists in not seeing – are not properly part of our concern in this essay. But what should be crystal clear from Gregory’s account thus far is the fact that ascetic effort is an indispensable prelude to mystical experience. One cannot ascend the mountain without adequate preparation. This is an insight shared by Gregory’s contemporary, the author of the *Macarian homilies*.

The Macarian homilies: the ascetic offering

The *Macarian homilies* constitute one of the great fountain-heads of the Christian mystical tradition. Long ascribed to St Macarius of Egypt, they have since been shown to be the work of an anonymous ascetic writing in Syria or Mesopotamia roughly between the 370’s and 390’s. The author, whom we shall, for the sake of convenience, call simply Macarius, was an immensely perceptive observer of the complexities of the spiritual life and a mystic of the highest order. He has left us a substantial body of writings full of sharp insights into – and eloquent testimonies concerning – the encounter between the human person and God. His work can be encapsulated as a call to each and every baptized

Christian to strive towards the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Much of his teaching is devoted to stressing the interdependence of ascetic effort and mystical experience. One of the most striking ways in which he does this is to draw an analogy between the eucharistic and the ascetic offering:

Just as in the visible Church, unless the readings, psalmody and gathering of the people and all the ecclesiastical ordinance of the service are first accomplished, the priest does not accomplish this divine mystery of the body and blood of Christ, and the mystical communion of the believers does not take place [. . .] Similarly if the Christian has fasting, vigils, psalmody, all *ascesis* and all virtue, but the hidden activity of the Spirit is not accomplished by grace upon the altar of his heart in all perception and spiritual repose, then all his ascetic effort is in vain.⁶

In both examples the pattern is the same: without due preparation, the consecration does not take place; without the consecration, the preparation is in vain. Ascetic effort, like the liturgy, constitutes an offering:

The first and foremost parts of our whole composite nature – the intellect, the conscience, the disposition, the upright thought, the loving power of the soul – that is to say, the first-fruits of our whole person, should always be offered first of all to God as a holy sacrifice of the heart, all the firstlings and the first of the upright thoughts being wholly dedicated to the remembrance and love of God.⁷

Thus our whole life is to be liturgical: all is to be constantly referred back and offered to God.

Macarius is, however, very clear that ascetic effort does not automatically produce mystical experience. Like the first stages of the Eucharist, human endeavour constitutes a stage of preparation. The consummation of the sacrifice is the preserve of God alone, yet for this to happen, the offering must first be made. This understanding is a typical of the classic eastern Christian tradition of *synergeia*, or cooperation, between divine grace and human freedom:

We receive salvation by grace and divine gift. But to advance to the perfect measure of spiritual maturity we also need faith and love, and to struggle to exercise our free will. Thus we become inheritors of eternal life by grace and by justice. We do not advance through divine

power and grace alone, without human co-operation and effort; but neither on the other hand do we attain to the will of God and the final measure of freedom and purity as a result of our own power, effort and strength alone, without the co-operation and assistance of the Holy Spirit.⁸

This synergetic doctrine ought not to be regarded simplistically as though it were suggesting that God and the human being were equal partners in the work of salvation. Macarius is insistent that the virtuous soul is built into the Church 'not by virtue of what it has done but by virtue of what it has desired. The human being is saved not through his own labours but by him who has granted strength through his grace.'⁹ Macarius is quite clear that while the ascetic life constitutes a necessary preliminary to the advent of divine grace, it in no way implies that we merit our salvation or have some sort of natural capacity to attain union with God. He is no Pelagian, semi- or otherwise. Without, however, getting overly embroiled in considerations concerning the complex relationship between divine grace and human freedom, let us simply take from Macarius the affirmation that ascetic effort and mystical experience are inseparable and, in some sense, inter-dependent.

Having given two examples of the conception of the relationship between ascetism and mysticism in late antiquity, let us now look at two possible problem areas: attitudes towards the body and paraecclesiality.

Asceticism and the body

As I have mentioned, asceticism should not be seen in negative terms, directed merely at the chastisement of the flesh, but rather directed towards the ultimate achievement of union with God. It is, however, quite clear that this framework has not governed all expressions of the ascetic ideal over the course of Christian history. Enthusiasm for asceticism has often produced a dualistic approach to the body, one in which the body is seen as necessarily militating against the pursuit of the spiritual life. There are several examples of such an approach in the *Sayings of the desert fathers*. Abba Longinus, for example, from whom the quote at the head of this article is taken, advised: 'If ever you are ill, say to your body, "Be ill and die; if you ask me for food outside the agreed time, I will not bring you even your daily food any more."¹⁰ Abba Daniel, in the same spirit, said: 'The body prospers in the measure in which the soul is weakened, and the soul prospers in the measure in which the body is weakened.' A similar

approach is found in Palladius' *Lausiac history*. Questioning the wisdom of Abba Dorotheus' custom of tormenting his body by working all day in the cruel Egyptian sun, Palladius is simply told: 'It kills me, I kill it.'¹¹ Such examples could be multiplied almost endlessly – a number of the more esoteric examples of ascetic endeavour described in Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *History of the monks of Syria* spring to mind – but alongside these rather simplistic and wholly negative appraisals of the body we have a number of subtler and more constructive analyses.

The life of Macarius of Alexandria is instructive in this respect. As the *Lausiac history* tells us, Macarius practised a very severe ascetic régime. Learning that the Pachomian monks, pioneers of the coenobitic ideal, ate no cooked food in Lent, he eschewed all such food for seven years. Another time he punished himself for killing a mosquito by exposing himself to innumerable bites by the side of a marsh. Again wishing to outdo the Pachomian monks, he disguised himself as a workman and entered their community. He easily surpassed all the other monks in his prodigious feats of asceticism – so much so that they all threatened to leave if he didn't. Eventually he was indeed asked to leave by Pachomius, 'Go away to your own place for you have edified us sufficiently.' But Macarius was in many ways consciously exploring the limits of human nature, seeing just how much it could bear. He once stayed awake for twenty days in a row, desiring to overcome the burden of sleep, but eventually relented, conceding: 'Unless I had soon gone under a roof and got some sleep, my brain would have so dried up as to drive me into delirium for ever after. And I conquered so far as depended on me, but gave way so far as depended on my nature that had need of sleep.' In other words, he knew when to stop.

Considering the proper aim of asceticism, Abba Poemen very wisely remarked: 'We have not been taught to kill our bodies, but to kill our passions.'¹² Amma Syncletica, one of the desert mothers whose wisdom is recorded in the *Sayings of the desert fathers* also put the need to set limits on one's *ascesis* very well, counselling:

There is an asceticism which is determined by the enemy and his disciples practice it. So how are we to distinguish between the divine and royal asceticism and the demonic tyranny? Clearly through its quality of balance. Always use a single rule of fasting. Do not fast four or five days and break it the following day with any amount of food. In truth, lack of proportion always corrupts. When you are young and healthy, fast, for old age with its weakness will come. As long as you can lay up treasure, so that when you cannot, you will be at peace.¹³

This is one of the clearest statements of measured asceticism in the literature of the Egyptian desert. Perhaps we should not be surprised that it took a woman to make it.

In fact it was this more measured and holistic attitude that prevailed within the Christian ascetic tradition. The body came to be regarded as an integral component of the human person, a helper and not a hindrance in the spiritual life. Such a perspective is outlined very cogently by Macarius. Distinguishing between the body and the Pauline 'flesh', the body *qua* fallen, he develops a remarkably advanced treatment of the place of the body in the spiritual life. He evokes the iconic relationship between the soul and the body, the body being an icon of the soul, an image of the *imago Dei*. He insists that the body shares the glory and the suffering of the soul and looks forward to the body's being raised to the level of spirit at the resurrection. His is not, however, a postponed eschatology; the glory of the resurrection is realized in the inner person even in this life. He grounds this teaching in his understanding of the Transfiguration:

As the body of the Lord was glorified when he ascended the mountain and was transfigured into the divine glory and the infinite light, so too are the bodies of the saints glorified and resplendent. For as the glory that was within Christ covered his body and shone forth, in the same way the power of Christ that is [now] within the saints will overflow outwards upon their bodies.¹⁴

The holistic anthropology represented by figures such as Macarius constitutes an essential framework for any form of ascetic endeavour. Without it, asceticism is liable not only to lose its proper *telos* but also to engender patterns of behaviour which can be frankly pathological.

Para-ecclesiality

Another danger attendant upon the ascetic and mystical life is that of separation from the wider Church structure. The pursuit of *unio mystica* can all too easily lead to divorce from the great Church and severance from its sacramental lifeblood. This brings us on very clearly to one of the recurring features of Church history: the tension between the prophetic and priestly ministries, between the charismatic tradition and the formal structures of the Church. There is hardly a mystic in the history of the Church who has not at one time or another been regarded as somehow heretical. In this respect we might mention Evagrius,

Macarius, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, Meister Eckhart. And the list goes on.

Looking at the early Christian tradition, it is clear that the burgeoning monastic movement of the fourth century onwards was looked upon with considerable suspicion by much of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. These ascetics in their deserts with their miracles and visions could be seen as offering direct access to God without recourse to the established mechanisms of the Church. They spoke little of the sacraments and, while they generally remained loyal to the hierarchy, did not accept episcopal authority unconditionally. The energy of the monastic movement was, however, largely harnessed for the great Church by bishops such as Athanasius of Alexandria and Basil the Great. Integration within the mainstream became the dominant pattern. Only occasionally were some of the more extreme ascetic tendencies subject to formal ecclesiastical censure, for example the Eustathians and the Messalians.

Such integration permitted the development within the Christian tradition of a more considered understanding of the place of asceticism and mysticism within the wider Church. This kind of unified understanding is seen at its best in figures such as Macarius, Dionysius the Areopagite, and St Maximus the Confessor. Macarius' intuition of the complementarity and indeed conjunction of the liturgical and ascetical offering, cited above, would seem to be a prime example. A similar framework would seem to be in operation in the work of Dionysius and Maximus, both of whom see a life committed to ascetic endeavour and the pursuit of mystical union as integrally bound up with participation in the Church's liturgy.

Conclusion

We can, I think, draw a number of points from this necessarily brief sketch. The early Christian tradition clearly regarded ascetic endeavour and mystical experience as inseparable and, in some sense, interdependent. At its best, it understood asceticism as a means not of punishing the body but of uniting soul and body in the pursuit of the Good. It also set its ascetic and mystical theology firmly within the context of participation in the sacramental life of the ecclesial community. Such an understanding, *mutatis mutandis*, seems to me just as applicable today as ever. Indeed it opens the possibility for the construction of a far more profound and challenging conception of the Christian life than that which now commonly prevails, one in which union with God is a universal vocation demanding ascetic effort from

all members of the one body. Human nature, after all, remains fundamentally the same. While changed circumstances mean that it may no longer be appropriate to seek God in the Egyptian desert on a diet of palm-fronds, nonetheless we remain obliged to do what we can to ready ourselves body and soul for the visitation of our God. If we do so, we may be in position to take on the prevailing anti-ascetic, anti-mystical and anti-liturgical mindset of modern western culture with an alternative world-view based not on mere piety but on the direct experience of that of which we speak.

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NOTES

- 1 *Apophthegmata patrum* (Alphabetical collection), Longinus 5. Greek text in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol 65. English translation in B. Ward, *The sayings of the desert fathers* (Oxford, 1975).
- 2 *Life of Moses* II.125. Greek text in H. Musurillo (ed), *Gregorii Nysseni: de vita Moysis* (*Gregorii Nysseni Opera* vol 7.1 W. Jaeger, gen ed; Leiden, 1964). English translation in E. Ferguson and A. Malherbe, *Gregory of Nyssa: the life of Moses* (New York, 1978).
- 3 *Life of Moses* II.132.
- 4 *Life of Moses* II.154.
- 5 *Life of Moses* II.157.
- 6 *Logos* I 52.2.2–3. Greek text in H. Berthold (ed), *Makarios/Symeon, reden und briefe: die sammlung I des Vaticanus Graecus 694 (B)*, two volumes (GCS 55–56; Berlin, 1973).
- 7 *Epistola magna* 7.11. Greek text in R. Staats (ed), *Makarios-Symeon: epistola magna. Eine messalianische Mönchsregel und ihre Umschrift in Gregors von Nyssa "De Instituto Christiano"* (Göttingen, 1984).
- 8 *Epistola magna* 3.1
- 9 Homily II 37.9. Greek text in H. Dörries, E. Klostermann and M. Kroeger (eds), *Die 50 geistlichen homilien des Makarios* (Berlin, 1964). English translation in A. J. Mason, *Fifty spiritual homilies of St Macarius the Egyptian* (London, 1921). Also G. Maloney, *The fifty spiritual homilies and great letter* (New York, 1992).
- 10 *Apophthegmata patrum* (Alphabetical collection) Longinus 2.
- 11 *Lausiac history* 2.
- 12 *Apophthegmata patrum* (Alphabetical collection) Poemen 184.
- 13 *Apophthegmata patrum* (Alphabetical collection) Syncletica 15.
- 14 Homily II 15.38. For the reflection of the state of the soul in the body in the next life, see also Origen, *On first principles* II.10.8. A further intriguing parallel is found in Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, supp. Qu. lxxxviii, a.1: 'After the resurrection the bodies of the saints will be resplendent with light, as Scripture promises [. . .]. This brightness will be caused by the overflowing of the soul's glory into the body [. . .]. In the glorious body the glory of the soul will be discerned, just as the colour of an object which is contained in a vessel of glass is discerned in

the glass.' I have this reference from Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, 'The transfiguration of the body', in A. M. Allchin (ed), *Sacrament and image: essays in the Christian understanding of man* (London, 1967).