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2. Monks and Empire

Asceticism and Political Disengagement in Late Antiquity

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Abstract

Unlike other modes of Christianity in late antiquity, monks and nuns in the eastern part of the Roman Empire practiced a careful disengagement from imperial politics. While political figures tried to draw monks into their spheres of influence and use their popular power for political ends, monks practiced political renunciation in almost all instances. The only exceptions occurred when something interfered with their ability to practice asceticism; in those instances, monks viewed politics as a tool to ensure their freedom. This disengagement mirrors monastic reluctance to become involved in ecclesiastical politics, and is part of the impetus to retreat in late antique monasticism. The Roman Empire was the location of ascetic practice, not the proper concern of Christian monks.

Keywords: monks, politics, asceticism, monasticism, Egypt, Syria, Palestine

Introduction

After Rome's reorientation toward Christianity during the two-year span 311 to 313 CE, Christianity found itself forever linked with politics.¹ By 337, Christianity's place at the imperial table was firmly established. Christianity was patronized by emperors and their households and used imperial administrators to settle its internal affairs; and the emperors in turn used Christianity to consolidate control over the empire (Barnes 1996; Barnes 1993; Drake 2000; Fox). The melding of Christian and imperial affairs by such bishops as Athanasius in Alexandria (fourth century), John Chrysostom in Constantinople (fourth century), and later Gregory the Great in Rome (sixth century) demonstrates the syncretic ability of late antique Christianity to step into the political-religious hole left by the state-level collapse of Roman religion (Brakke; Barnes 1993; Kelly; Demacopoulos 2015). Scholars have explored the post-Constantine relationship between church and state at length, generally concluding that early Christianity embraced its close relationship with the Roman Empire. For the most part, this characterization represents large portions of elite, institutional Christianity. One realm, however, of late antique Christianity featured a more nuanced approach to church-state relations. The monks and monasteries of late antique Christianity isolated themselves from society (for the most part) and maintained a model of political disengagement based on their distinctive goal and its associated practices.

In other words, Christian monks in late antiquity diverged from Christianity writ large, practicing careful disengagement from politics, unless politics interfered with their asceticism. In those cases, monks employed a delicate – and only occasional – engagement in political affairs for the purpose of ensuring the success of their continued disengagement. I understand “monks” as those men and women who practiced individual or communal asceticism for the purpose of union with the divine.² For the purposes of this article, Christian asceticism was intensive training of body, mind, and soul toward personal holiness and nearness to the divine.³ The Christian ascetic and monastic movement arose independently in two areas of the late ancient Mediterranean – Egypt and Syria. While each bore unique characteristics and exported the details of its style into different parts of the Roman Empire, monasticism in both regions shared a central goal: monks trained through ascetic practice to craft themselves holy bodies and holy souls, bringing them ever closer to the divine.⁴

¹ In 311 CE, Galerius issued an “edict of toleration” that ended persecutions against Christians in the eastern empire. Constantine, who had granted freedom for Christians to practice their religion in his domain in 306, became the senior *Augustus* in 312, and in 313 he concurred with the emperor Licinius' decree, what is commonly called the Edict of Milan, that offered freedom of worship and the restoration of property to Christians in the east. Timothy D. Barnes (1996) outlines this history.

² On the development and goal of monasticism, in all its varieties, see Dunn: 1-81. The standard portrait of monks retreating into isolation in a cell in the desert has been challenged recently as more literary, fictive, and metaphorical than what the texts present (Goehring 2003; Rapp; Brooks Hedstrom).

³ This definition is a tentative one, as are most definitions of “asceticism,” partly synthesized from Michel Foucault, Pierre Hadot (2002: 179-231; 1995: 81-144, 206-13), and Richard Valantasis.

⁴ On the rise and nature of asceticism and monasticism in Egypt, see Dunn: 1-81; Chitty; Regnault 1999. Regnault and Chitty take the literary accounts too much at face value, but their monographs are nevertheless valuable when read with care. The seminal work on the rise and nature of asceticism and monasticism in Syria is Arthur Vööbus.

Moreover, Christian monasticism evinced an indifference to other locations of power and authority. Tensions between ecclesiastical and monastic authorities arose frequently; the history of Christianity overflows with bishops and priests trying to get monks to do their bidding, with varying degrees of success, while senior monks try to maintain control of their spiritual charges.⁵ Imperial power receives a similar treatment.

In exploring the relationship between monks and empire, I read texts produced or used by monks in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Frequently, these texts contain stories or sayings from several generations earlier, passed down orally and/or textually, then edited into final textual form. These texts may represent more the thoughts and wishes of their authors and compilers than accurate historical records of monastic thought. Given the nature of monastic pedagogy (passing down wisdom one generation to the next), what the authors and compilers wished to convey reflects, at least in part, the training from the earlier generations about which they write. Teachings about imperial power occur rarely in these texts, and usually as allegories of the ascetic life of monks. These vignettes present primarily the monastic view of imperial authority.

The texts come from a variety of genres, time periods, and authors (including episcopal authors); the same model of political disengagement occurs across genres and time periods. Since these texts prescribe behavioral norms through the example of elite monastic practitioners – and since there is consistency in how these texts across time, space, and literary genre present political engagement – we can speak fairly confidently about a model of monastic political disengagement that formed part of the late antique Christian ascetic life.⁶

Articles by Peter Brown and W. H. C. Frend explore monastic power in the late antique popular imagination and attempts by politicians to use that power for their own ends. There is very little written, however, on how the monks may have viewed such imperial attempts.⁷

⁵The examples from the primary sources are too numerous to list, but some of them are presented and analyzed in Brakke; Elm: 281; Rousseau 2010; 1999: 105-18, 149-73; Vööbus: 2:316-414; Binns: 68-75, 183-217; Hevelone-Harper: 106-18; Haas: 258-67, 294-95; Davis: 43-99; Demacopoulos 2007: 15-17; Leyser.

⁶My selection of texts intendeds to provide a cross section of the available literature, including time period (late third through early sixth centuries), location (Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Constantinople), authorship (anonymous, monastic, and ecclesiastic), and genre (sayings collection, travelogue, and history). From Egypt and Palestine, I have selected the alphabetic and systematic collections of the Greek *Apophthegmata Patrum* (abbreviated as *AP* Alph. And *AP* Sys. respectively). These are collections of sayings by and about monks primarily in Egypt and Palestine, likely collected and recorded in Palestine as early as the sixth century but containing sayings from as early as the late third century. From Constantinople, but about Egypt, we have the *Lausiac History* (abbreviated as *LH*) written by the bishop Palladius about his journeys in Egypt during the early fifth century. Importantly, this text about monks was written for a member of the imperial court (Lausus) by a bishop (Palladius). Also about Egypt is the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (abbreviated as *HMA*), an anonymously composed travelogue from the late fourth century. From Syria is the bishop Theodoret's *Religious History*, or *History of the Monks of Syria* (abbreviated here as *HMS*), composed in the first half of the fifth century. Full citations for the texts and relevant literature are below.

⁷Note that this topic does not appear in Chitty, nor is it fully addressed in Markus. Some scholars (e.g., Barnes 1993; Lenski; Sterk; Rapp) recognize that both church and state tried to use monks for their ends, but they either do not address or only barely indicate how monks viewed this development. Albrecht Diem discusses the complexities of constructing a political monk in the seventh-century Frankish *Vita Columbani*, representing the

Analyzing monastic teachings on political disengagement fills this lacuna and hones discussions of church-state relations in the late antique period.

Diverging Views

Initial readings can obscure a consistent view of political engagement or disengagement in Christian asceticism, and in fact can indicate that different monks taught different lessons on the monastic relationship to empire. Two stories from the same text exemplify this apparent confusion. In a story about the famous Egyptian monk Anthony, the Roman emperor Constantius II sent a messenger asking Antony to visit Constantinople. Antony was unsure what to do and asked a fellow monk, who advised him, “If you go, you will be called just Antony. But if you stay here, you will be called Father Antony” (Anthony 31 [AP Alph.]).⁸ And there the story ends. The reader is left to assume that Antony remained in Egypt, secure in his position as *απα*, a Coptic Christian term for a respected elder in Egyptian monasticism. One is left with the assumption that monks entirely eschewed imperial authority. The affairs of political figures had little to offer those following a life of extreme training in holiness.

Another story from the same text, however, offers a different approach. In an incident likely occurring between 325 and 341,⁹ a provincial governor visited the town of Pelusium on the eastern edge of the Nile Delta and attempted to tax the Christian monks living there. The monks gathered and asked one of their seniors, Ammonathas, for his advice, and some of the monks suggested that they should go to the emperor (either Constantine or Constantius II). Ammonathas makes a miraculous instantaneous trip to Constantinople, receives a letter from the emperor with his seal, and then makes a miraculous trip to bring that letter to the governor in Alexandria (Ammonathas 1 [AP Alph.]). Here, Ammonathas actively and miraculously sought imperial assistance. Whatever one makes of the miracle in the story, the account offers another monastic view of imperial authority – when politics interfered with the monastic life, monks felt it their duty to seek relief from the source.

These stories appear in the same collection of sayings created to instruct younger monks, and they seem to present different views of the role that politics played in monastic life; however, the goal of asceticism – union with the divine – dominates both vignettes. In general, monks viewed political engagement as a distraction from the life of holiness that unified them with the divine. They wanted little contact with the affairs of the empire. Monks did use government, however, as a means to ensure their separation from the concerns of normal life. Empire was a distant affair that did not trouble monks, until something interfered with their ability to practice lives of extreme holiness, thereby requiring them to employ the tool of

turn toward political life that early medieval European monasteries took. This turn, however, flies in the face of eastern monastic literature that maintained a careful distance from political involvement.

⁸The text is in Migne, edited and supplemented in Guy 1962: 13-58. On dating the *AP Alph.* to the sixth century in Palestine, see Bousset: 66-68; Regnault 1981.

⁹The eastern region of Lower Egypt was separated into its own province in the Tetrarchy, but reabsorbed into the Egyptian province in 325. In 341, it became its own province again – Augustamnica – and by the end of the fourth century the capital was Pelusium. Ammonathas would have had no need to visit Alexandria unless it were the provincial capital (Bowman: 79; Keenan).

empire, occasionally even against itself. This distance is highlighted in the lengths to which monks go to avoid becoming entangled in politics.

Monks Visiting Politicians

Stories in the monastic texts of monks seeking out politicians are few and far between. One account finds ten monks preparing to visit the emperor from a monastery on Sinai, though their visit is incidental to the point of the story and the reason for their visit is unknown (Cronius 5 [AP Alph.]). Another story finds the monk Poimen interceding before the governor on behalf of a man from his hometown who had been arrested; the story ends with Poimen being chided by the governor for asking for a criminal's release, and the monk leaving glad because his entreaties had not worked (Poimen 9 [AP Alph.]). Ostensibly, Poimen was happy because *had* he succeeded in securing the man's release, his life would have been upended by people asking Poimen to get their friends and family out of prison. Poimen did not want to be a monastic bail bondsman.

In fact, perhaps it is another story about Poimen that most closely illustrates how monks viewed political power. At some point, Poimen refused to receive the governor, so the governor threw Poimen's nephew into prison on false charges and said that he would release the boy only if Poimen came and asked. Poimen's sister begged him to get her son released, and the governor even relaxed his demands, saying that Poimen only needed to ask, even from afar. Poimen sent a message to the governor saying that the boy should be judged according to the law, and even executed if he deserved it. The message that Poimen sent was clear: politics and jurisprudence were not his concern (Poimen 5 [AP Alph.]).

Concern for political matters turned the monk away from striving for personal holiness. In one story, when a monk visited the emperor (the names of each are lost to time), he received a gift of gold from the hand of the emperor and used it to buy more land. This transaction results in the loss of his spiritual gifts because the monk has abandoned divine matters and turned to earthly matters – the text, in fact, compares him to a demon (Watchfulness 10.80 [AP Sys.]).¹⁰

On the rare occasion that it becomes necessary for a monk to engage with political affairs, it is only to demonstrate divine power working through the monk or to instruct politicians in how to make Christianity thrive as a unified group. John of Lycopolis was well known for his prophecies to Theodosius I about the emperor's future victories (*HMA* 1.1, 1.64; *LH* 35.2).¹¹ The monk Macedonius delivered a pointed message to emissaries of Theodosius I that was

¹⁰The text of *AP Sys.* is in Guy 1993-2005. I follow Bousset (1-60) in seeing a form of the *AP Alph.* as the source of the early *AP Sys.*, making the *AP Sys.* later than the early sixth-century *AP Alph.* After examining the manuscripts and translations of the *AP Sys.*, Guy (1962: 182-84, 120) concluded that there were three stages of development, with the earliest manuscript for the final stage (used here) dating to 970 CE, though that manuscript likely represents a stage of development earlier than its tenth-century date.

¹¹The text for the *HMA* is in Festugière, and the text for the *LH* is in volume two of Butler, with the history, dating, and exposition in volume one. Derwas Chitty (51) dates the beginning of the trip in the *HMA* to 394, and the Greek *HMA* was translated by Rufinus into Latin in the early fifth century (de Vogüé: 317 n. 3; Rousseau 2010: 16), so it must date to the end of the fourth century or the very early fifth century (before Rufinus died in 410 CE). For the *LH*, Rousseau (2010: 16-17) argues on the side of Butler and dates its composition to 420.

intended to shame the emperor into acting according to God's design and his own imperial station (*HMS* 13.7).¹² Symeon the Stylite, from atop his pillar, sent instructions to emperors, governors, and bishops on the treatment of heretics (*HMS* 26.27). These instances show monks interacting actively with governmental officials, but only to ensure that Christianity, and thus their own monastic practice, thrived. Given that monks became embroiled in theological disputes largely without wanting to be (each side attempted to win the monks through visits, gifts, and persuasive speeches, distracting the monks from their ascetic practices), it would be to the monks' advantage to leave heresies, disputes, and debates to those most willing to deal with them, such as the bishops and emperors.¹³ Monks prayed for the wellbeing of the emperor and the empire (*HMS* 8.8) – and a monk's prayer was credited with divine intervention in the death of the emperor Julian called the Apostate, Constantine's nephew (*HMS* 2.14). But the prayers of monks for the empire were not for the sake of empire *as* political power, but for the sake of empire as *locus* of Christian expression, particularly their own expression of training in holiness.

The political disengagement of the monks may have been the result of their sometimes poor treatment by the empire, or their ill-treatment by the empire may have been a result of their political disengagement. Whatever the reason, stories about monks being persecuted and/or martyred by the empire occur regularly in monastic literature (Poimen 183 [*AP* Alph.]; Virtue 20.16 [*AP* Sys.]; *HMA* 19; *LH* 3.1-4, 45.1, 46.3; *HMS* 8.5, 9.12),¹⁴ while stories of a monk being honored by an emperor end well for the monk only rarely (*HMS* 17.9).¹⁵ The overall teaching of Eastern monastic literature on empire is that distance creates the best relationship.

Imperial Metaphors

This idea of distance, specifically the space between individuals and the emperor, served as a frequent metaphor in monastic teachings. Being able or unable to access the emperor, either because of political connections (or the lack thereof) or because of the imperial guards, symbolized being able to perform or not perform the difficult training of a monk's life of holiness (Poimen 14, 109; Serapion 3 [*AP* Alph.; see also *AP* Sys. 5.7 (Poimen 14) and 11.71 (Serapion 3)]; Watchfulness 11.95 [*AP* Sys.]). Even the command of Jesus to "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" received a spiritualized interpretation as being willing to stop one's ascetic practice in order to deal with necessary earthly affairs such as feeding visitors – the emperor

¹²Theodoret's text is in Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen. R. M. Price (xiii-xv) weighs the arguments for the *HMS*'s dating and comes up with c. 440 CE; his argument seems plausible, and at any rate arguments for the *HMS*'s dating involve a difference of four years.

¹³*HMS* 1.10 records the monk James attending Nicaea, but there are other instances (Gelasius 4; Lot 1; Poimen 78; Sisoës 25 [*AP* Alph.]) of monks maintaining "orthodoxy" while not becoming embroiled with the disputes and debates, though they were presented as clearly preferring "orthodox" companions (Agathon 5; Theodore of Pherme 4; Sisoës 48; Sopatrus 1; Chomas 1 [*AP* Alph.]). James E. Goehring (1999) explores how the literary sources presented a less tolerant desert than what likely existed.

¹⁴*LH* 3.1-4 is not a story of a monk being martyred, but an account of a Christian woman being martyred that was told to Palladius by Isidore, and to Isidore by Antony. See also the article by Noel Lenski on Valens ordering the military conscription or summary execution by beating of monks.

¹⁵Theodosius II sends for the monk Abraham, who comes and is honored.

in this interpretation represented unpressing, worldly, distracting concerns (Joseph of Panephrisis 1 [AP Alph.]). Access to the emperor symbolized difficulty, while the emperor himself represented worldly distractions. Both metaphors centered on the distance between the monk's present state and his (or, more rarely, her) goal.

The emperor represented an obstacle on the monk's road to becoming nearly divine on earth. These metaphors support the overarching monastic orientation to political engagement that was found in the stories warning monks against political entanglements – when it comes to empire, keep your distance.

Politicians Visiting Monks

The monastic desire for distance from political concerns did not, however, mean that monks were left to their own devices by political powers. In fact, most stories involving monks and governmental officials find politicians visiting the monks. The success of these visits varies widely.

Unsuccessful attempts to visit monks generally fall into three categories: monks either refused to see politicians, confused politicians, or intentionally present themselves contrary to stereotypes in order to disgust politicians. Refusing to see visitors was not new for monks, who refused to see even fellow monks on occasion. We can read little into specific refusals to see governmental officials when they visit (Arsenius 28, 29; John Cassian 8; Poimen 5 [AP Alph.]), unless we couple them with the story of the monk John of Lycopolis agreeing to see a governor.

In the story, the monk Palladius (the author of the text in which the story appears) visited John and talked to the cloistered monk. Mid-conversation, the governor approached the window and John stopped talking to Palladius to speak to the governor instead. They speak for a long time, and likely in Coptic, a language Palladius did not understand.¹⁶ Palladius grew increasingly annoyed that it appeared as though John was honoring the governor (a political figure) more than Palladius (a fellow monk). Palladius prepared to storm away, but John had a disciple keep him there until the governor left. John chided Palladius, reminding him of Jesus's words that it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick (*LH* 35.5-7).

Palladius's reaction betrayed his bias against the politician. Governmental officials were a distraction, unworthy of the honor of speaking with a monk of such stature as John of Lycopolis. John, however, saw it differently. As the spiritual director of all souls in his sphere of influence, he had a duty to speak to everyone. Palladius's anger helps us interpret some monks refusing to see politicians, while John's acceptance of the governor's visit helps us see why some monks would accept visits from distracting political figures.

Monks present more than just refusal to see governmental officials, though. In at least two stories, monks deceived visiting politicians. The Ethiopian monk Moses, while living in Egypt, received a visit from the governor, who asked Moses for directions to Moses's cell

¹⁶Since John must speak to Palladius through an interpreter, and Palladius is in the company of the Greek-speaking Evagrius (and writes in Greek), we can assume that John only speaks Coptic, a language likely spoken by the governor in this story since John is able to send his interpreter to Palladius while he stays speaking with the governor.

(clearly the governor did not know whom he was seeking, because a black monk in Egypt was unusual enough to receive nearly constant comment in the ancient texts). Moses answered the governor by saying that the monk Moses is a fool, then he sent the governor away. The governor, confused, asked other monks about this. The unnamed monks, when hearing the description of Moses, told the governor that he was speaking to the monk Moses himself, and that Moses told him that Moses was a fool so that he would not have to meet with the governor (Moses 8 [AP Alph.]). In another story, the monk Simon intentionally misled a visiting governor while technically not lying. Hearing that the governor was going to visit him, Simon left his cell to tend to one of his trees. The governor approached and asked where the cloistered monk was, to which Simon replied that no anchorite lived there, and the governor left (Simon 1 [AP Alph.]). Simon was correct: no anchorite was there because Simon was not an anchorite. Because Simon knew that the governor was seeking him, he left his cell to mislead the governor intentionally and thereby forestall his visit. Both of these stories indicate the lengths to which monks went to confuse visiting governmental officials and thus refuse, through mild deceit, their visits.

In another story, Simon heard that the governor was approaching, so he behaved contrary to the stereotype that the governor was expecting. When the governor approached his cell, Simon was sitting outside of his cell wearing a torn and dirty cloak, with a hunk of bread in one hand and a hunk of cheese in the other, taking bites from each. The governor leaves disgusted, expecting to find an anchorite who either ate little or ate nothing (Simon 2 [AP Alph.]).

In all of these instances, monks actively avoid substantive interactions with visiting politicians, reflecting perhaps an extreme form of the monastic desire to retreat from worldly concerns. As demonstrated by the story of John and Palladius, though, this avoidance is only one way of treating visiting officials. There is an equally strong tradition of accepting visitors and showing them hospitality, even when they are politicians. The monastic virtue of hospitality, though exercised with discretion, seemed to impel the monks to welcome even governmental figures who otherwise represent everything that the monk has left behind – worldly power, political attainment, and earthly concerns. A repeated theme in the stories about monks is that they teach and heal officials who come to them, but in doing so the monks treated the officials as they would have any other petitioner (*HMA* 1.1-12, 5.5; *HMS* 2.20, 8.2, 9.5, 13.9, 13.13, 13.15).

While the monks treated governors and other officials just like laypeople – and indeed, an Egyptian monk living near Constantinople had no idea who the emperor was when he was visited by Theodosius II, and fled when he found out that it was the emperor (*AP Sys.* 15.85) – it seems that governmental figures wanted to tap into the popularity of monks and gain the trust of their followers through appearing close to the monks. The esteem given to the monks by politicians even led one governor to refuse to jail a monk who had committed and voluntarily confessed to a crime (*AP Sys.* 15.130). Monks functioned as a *locus* of popular authority, so ingratiating oneself to the monks was a popular political tactic (Brown). Some people tried to give monks an inheritance in their wills (Arsenius 29, John Cassian 8 [AP Alph.]), city officials followed the examples of monks (*HMA* 5.5), and leaders gave gifts to the monks (*HMS* 8.4). High imperial officials escorted the bodies of some dead monks to burial, and in one case the emperor himself processed behind a monk's corpse (*HMS* 10.8, 17.10).

After Christianity became more widespread following Constantine I, many emperors, governors, and generals sought the approval of the monks, those holy men and women who had captured the hearts and imaginations of the laypeople. By approaching (literally and figuratively) monks' lives of holiness, the political elite hoped to appear holy themselves. The monk's holiness metaphorically marked the official who revered the monk in public and was received openly by the monk. The mark carried weight in a world both superstitious and enthralled by the piety of the wild men of the desert.

Thus we find two strains of thought in monasticism when it comes to receiving the visits of politicians. On the one hand, politicians proved a distraction from the life of holiness. On the other hand, politicians required spiritual direction just as much as anyone, and perhaps more so because of their difficult station in life. Perhaps it is a story of the monk Arsenius, who was himself a reformed politician, that most captures this tension between the two strains of thought. A governor visited Arsenius, brought by a bishop, and asked for a teaching from Arsenius. After a moment's silence, Arsenius told them, "If you hear Arsenius is somewhere, don't go there" (Arsenius 7 [AP Alph.]). Arsenius received his visitors, but told them in no uncertain terms never to visit him again.

Politicians as Monks

Monks view the political sphere as a realm separate from their own – the world of politics is the world of temporal concerns, and the world of the monk is the world of holiness. Stories about monks brim with accounts of former political officials or their family members leaving the world of commerce and court and entering the world of prayer and piety. The monk Arsenius is perhaps most famous for being a high official in the imperial court who left everything to live in the Egyptian desert. He was not the only former official to retreat to the desert (Cronius 5 [AP Alph.]; AP Sys. 15.131; HMS 3.2, 5.1), and in some instances the wives and children of political leaders became monks and nuns (LH 41.3-4, 46, 56.1, 57.1-3). Political officials would have wanted to tap these connections and the power that they brought.¹⁷

Conclusion

From the many stories by and about monks, we find a monastic model of political disengagement in the late antique period. Similar to the model that the monks employed against institutional Christian authority, they viewed political power and authority as a separate sphere from their own lives of intense training in holiness. While monks considered themselves independent from the institutional power structure of Christianity, they took an even harder line with political power – when it came to empire, distance was the rule. If empire interfered with their ability to live ascetic lives, monks would enter the political world only briefly. The rest of the time, they stayed away. Monks sometimes accepted visits from political officials, treating them like everyone else in their monastic exercise of hospitality. Other times, however, monks refused to interact with governors, emperors, and generals entirely. Politics could be a tool for living a life of retreat, but only if wielded carefully. Fraternization with the

¹⁷ Few things were more evil than monks who, like Ananias and Sapphira, sold most of what they had and retreated from the world, but insisted in keeping a little bit back, as in John Cassian 7 (AP Alph.).

empire proved dangerous, as evidenced by the monk who became demonic through his association with a pious emperor.¹⁸

Officials used monks for their own ends, both personal and political. Imperial officials valued monks as centers of popular power. Politicians viewed the holiness of monks as something that could elevate them through association, further legitimizing their political authority with the veneer of popular piety. The monks, however, viewed these relationships as inimical to exercising a life of holiness, and either disregarded visiting authorities or insisted on treating them exactly as they did everyone else. Historian H. A. Drake (2011) explored the widespread violence in the Roman Empire post-312 as representing imperial and ecclesiastical fighting to control access to the divine. With cathedral and castle vying for the legitimacy of divine access, each attempted to harness the power of the monk. Monks, though, strove to distance themselves from this fighting and to ignore the claims of politics, and the mainstream church.

Perhaps it is telling that the texts most critical of imperial-monastic entanglements were the sixth-century sayings collections known as the Alphabetic *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the Systematic *Apophthegmata Patrum*, compiled in a time of close relations between religion and politics. Both of these collections represent purposeful editorial actions intended to mold a particular kind of ascetic practitioner in the pattern of the early Egyptian monks. And the pattern, when it comes to politics, is decisively one of distance.¹⁹

Asceticism and political engagement were inimical to each other, and so monks did not participate in imperial politics, just as they avoided (as much as possible) ecclesiastical politics. After Constantine, ecclesiastical and imperial politics twined together – as Robert Grant put it, “the church came to be more a state within a state,” and “the pattern of government within the church was close to that of the larger state around it” (42-43) – and monks wanted part of neither. As in the Sermon on the Mount, the monastic goal was the kingdom of heaven, the attainment of which was safeguarded by practicing asceticism in the Christian empire of the earth. Empire was just a location for asceticism, not an appropriate activity for the holy monk.

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¹⁸ It was engaging a political leader and receiving favor that condemned the monk; the emperor's piety served only to make the monk's condemnation more stark.

¹⁹ Philip Rousseau (2007) argues that the tension in monasticism between retreat and engagement is an example of a monk developing in ascetic practice, because it is through engaging the world that the monk's true interior peace is tested. This does not seem to be the case with political figures, where their presence seems to have been seen as more of a distraction than the presence of other figures, women and demons possibly excepted.

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