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Holiness and Ascetic Education in the Apophthegmata Patrum

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Abstract

This paper studies the relationship between holiness and ascetic education in the spirituality of the desert. In this sense, there is a complex attitude of Desert Fathers towards antique culture. Their attitude ranged from assimilation to outright rejection or a prudent adoption. In this paper we offer a more nuanced perspective, more exactly we wish to enrich our understanding on the creative assimilation of classical education (*paideia*) in the early Egyptian monasticism.

Keywords

holiness, education, monasticism, spiritual guidance, Desert Fathers, Apophthegmata Patrum

I. Introduction

A bias affirms that there is a gap between secular education and Christian teaching, namely, between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1, 2). As we know, the attitude of the Apostle Paul to the “the wisdom of the world” provided a model for Christian educators. In

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his view there is a dichotomy of wisdoms: “Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory” (1 Cor 2, 6-7). More exactly, according to 1 Corinthians, “wisdom of this age” corresponds to forms of antique education¹. But a rigid dichotomy between secular wisdom and Christian knowledge, however, is not valid in actual scholarship.

The first section (“Desert Fathers and the Transformation of Classical Education”) deals with the intricate relations between early Egyptian asceticism and antique Greek philosophy. More exactly, we argue that the ascetic life, like antique philosophy, was a kind of spiritual wisdom.

In the second section (“Teaching Holiness: Spiritual Guidance in the Desert”) we highlight the practice of spiritual guidance in the desert. This model appears in antique philosophical schools but in another form. Our conclusion is that between two models there is continuity, but the philosophical paradigm was assumed and transfigured by the ascetic model.

As we will see below “with Late Antiquity we face a time of intensified debate about classical texts and skills, and of astonishing innovations in combining such learning with the demands of the day. To this debate, the relationship of education and religion was fundamental”².

¹ For two wisdoms, see Arthur P. URBANO, *The Philosophical Life: Biography and the Crafting of Intellectual Identity in Late Antiquity*, The Catholic University of America Press, 2013.

² Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve VAN HOOF and Peter VAN NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity*, Routledge, 2016, p. 3. For pertinent reflections on this subject, see John A. MCGUCKIN, “Education (*Paideia*) as Kerygmatic Value in the Orthodox Tradition”, in Ann Mitsakos BEZZERIDES, Elizabeth H. PRODROMOU (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, pp. 55-79; Bruce N. BECK, “«Learn from Me»: Embodied Knowledge through Imitation in Early Christian Pedagogy”, in A. M. BEZZERIDES, E. H. PRODROMOU (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Christianity...*, pp. 115-139; John BEHR, “Plundering the Egyptians: The Use of Classical *Paideia* in the Early Church”, in A. M. BEZZERIDES, E. H. PRODROMOU (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Christianity...*, pp. 140-154; Andrew LOUTH, “Orthodox Monasticism and Higher Education Andrew Louth”, in A. M. BEZZERIDES, E. H. PRODROMOU (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Christianity...*, pp. 155-167.

II. Desert Fathers and the Transformation of Classical Education (*Paideia*)

The attitude of early monasticism towards classical education was very complex³. Generally, ascetic *paideia* – or renunciation of mainstream culture – appears in the self-representations of ascetic communities as alternative to the secular wisdom. In *Apophthegmata Patrum*, we see that one member of the Cappadocian circle, Evagrius Ponticus, found his way into the desert of Nitria (50 km South-East of Alexandria) and joined the monastic community whose oral wisdom traditions are recorded in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Educated in the secular culture and schooled by Basil and Gregory Nazianzus, Evagrius Ponticus makes an ambivalent appearance in *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Several sayings pit Evagrius against the monks, and in these exchanges we see the interesting confluence of urban education facing off with desert wisdom.

Thus Evagrius appears in conversation with two venerable monks, both of whom take the opportunity to point out the spiritual disadvantages his over-educated condition affords him: Someone (i.e. Evagrius) asked the blessed Arsenius: “How is it that we, with all our learning and our sagacity, possess no [virtue] and yet these Egyptian peasants are progressing in virtue?” And Abba Arsenius said to him: “We with the lessons of the world, have nothing, yet these Egyptian peasants have acquired grace from their labors.” Evagrius said: I went to visit Macarius and I said to him, “Give me a saying so that I may be saved.” And he said to me: “If I give you one, will you listen and practice it?” And I said: “My faith and my love are not hidden from you.” Abba Macarius told me: “If you cast far from you the rhetoric of this world and gird yourself in the humility of the Publican, you can be saved.”

Desert Fathers have been seen as opposites of the antique education, as anti-intellectual models of a new community replacing classical *paideia*. For example, Antony the Great rejects the secular wisdom in order to avoid any infestation by philosophical culture. Being a saint, Antony is depicted as detached from secular education. This ascetic education (*paideia*) is shown by Athanasius of Alexandria in *Vita Antonii* within he discredits the

³ The best book on this theme is L. LARSEN, S. RUBENSON (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, Cambridge University Press, 2018 (forthcoming).

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antique philosophy and pagan culture. The *Life of Antony* is a landmark text that identified ascetic life as a new model of Christian wisdom, “marked the ascetic as a new breed of Christian teacher, and defined asceticism’s superiority to traditional learning”⁴.

As Peter Gemeinhardt has remarked, “even if the historical Anthony knew to read and write (he is most probably the author of seven coptic letters), he was painted as having been holy because of his extraordinary piety which is strictly detached from anything he would have learnt at school”⁵.

In similar terms, S. Rubenson has noted that “Antony the Great, regarded as the father of the monastic tradition, has been depicted as not only illiterate but also antiphilosophical, based on significant passages in the *Vita Antonii*, probably the most influential text for the rapid spread of monastic ideals and practices. In it, he is said to have refused to learn letters, to have been taught by God, and, in a series of chapters recounting his encounters with philosophers, to be the exact opposite of what they are. He is the uninhabitable desert landscape, not the schools of the cities of learning”⁶. Such an understanding of the relation between illiterates monks and intellectual philosophers in Late Antiquity has been, however, contested by recent scholarship.

First of all, we need to understand that the emergence of monasticism in Late Antiquity was not *sui generis*, but a gradual process⁷. If we read the monastic literature, such as *Apophthegmata Patrum*, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* or *Historia Lausiaca*, it is evident that the most essential model used is that of antique philosophy. Therefore, as Samuel Rubenson has remarked,

⁴ Edward WATTS, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 170. For more details on this theme, see David FRANKFURTER, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

⁵ Peter GEMEINHARDT, “Holiness and Education in Late Antique Hagiography”, in P. GEMEINHARDT, *Die Kirche und ihre Heiligen*, Mohr Siebeck, 2014, p. 234.

⁶ Samuel RUBENSON, “Monasticism and the Philosophical Schools”, in Scott Fitzgerald JOHNSON, *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 487-488.

⁷ The best discussion on this subject, see Arthur P. URBANO, *The Philosophical Life: Biography and the Crafting of Intellectual Identity in Late Antiquity*, The Catholic University of America Press, 2013.

“instead of a dichotomy between monastery and school, we need to search for the models used for training and formation within monastic life and for developments within the traditions of philosophical formation that can bridge the gap between the city and the desert”⁸.

In this section we highlight that there is continuity between traditional education and monastic culture⁹. More exactly, we argue that ascetic literature can be read in light of ancient classical model. From this perspective, antique *paideia* served the same purpose as ascetic sentences, that is, to progress in virtue and wisdom¹⁰. We talk here on basic education¹¹, that is, on reading and writing skills because “higher education was probably not institutionalized in monasteries”¹².

⁸ Samuel RUBENSON, “Monasticism and the Philosophical Schools”, p. 503. For more details on this subject, see Edward WATTS, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, University of California Press, 2006, pp. 169-170 and Augustine CASIDAY, *Tradition and Theology in St. John Cassian*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 131-160. For the competition between monks and philosophers in Late Antiquity, see Arthur P. URBANO, “The Cell and the School: Geographical and Social Distance in the Competition for Philosophy”, in Arthur P. Urbano, *The Philosophical Life...*, pp. 205-244.

⁹ Ascetic literature written in the fourth and fifth centuries provide some information about the education of monks who joined their communities. Ewa WIPSYCKA has reviewed the late antique sources that describe Egyptian monks as illiterate peasants (cf. Ewa WIPSYCKA, *Etudes sur le christianisme dans l’Egypte de l’antiquité tardive*, 1996, pp. 330-331). For the importance of the monastic education in Egypt, see M. CHOAT, Maria Chiara GIORDA (eds.), *Writing and Communication in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Brill, 2017.

¹⁰ For example, Janet TIMBIE argued that monasteries were literate communities and that monks were expected to acquire a high classical culture (cf. J. TIMBIE, “The Education of Shenoute and Other Cenobitic Leaders: Inside and Outside of the Monastery”, in Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOFF and Peter Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion...*, pp. 34-46).

¹¹ This basic education may have assumed in a liturgical or ascetic context/setting. For example, Mary of Egypt learns in church about Saint Scripture. This shows that many biblical texts in ascetic literature reflect presence at the liturgy, which functions as the essential vehicle for the transmission of knowledge (cf. Derek KRUEGER, “Scripture and Liturgy in the Life of Mary of Egypt”, in Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOFF and Peter Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion...*, pp. 131-142).

¹² Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOFF and Peter Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion...*, p. 5. Daniel KING has pointed that ascetic communities became from the sixth century onwards centres of intellectual activities (cf. D. KING, “Education in the Syriac World of Late Antiquity”, in Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOFF and Peter

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For the beginning we highlight that Jerome argued for the coexistence of classical and Christian education, the former functioning as propedeutic for the latter (a model already crucial to the philosophical and theological instruction by Origen in Alexandria and Caesarea¹³. For example, Jerome's *Letter 22* (written in 384) thus bears witness to continuities and changes in the perception of education and religion during the fourth to sixth centuries. This period to which we refer as Late Antiquity¹⁴ was an epoch in which classical culture is merged with a new approach to education from a religious perspective. In this context we mention Averil Cameron's idea according to which Christian discourse depended on the learning acquired at school even when such learning was rejected outright, terming this phenomenon "the rhetoric of paradox".¹⁵

This rhetoric is based on an outdated stereotype characterized by a dichotomy between illiterate and educate monk. As we know, an essential factor in the development of Christianity was the emergence of the ascetic tradition. Monasticism was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, and especially in the antique philosophical school¹⁶. From this perspective, as

Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion...*, pp. 171-185. In other words, ascetic life, similarly as philosophy, never to have been taught at school or institutional context, but was rather assimilated in the daily practice of the desert. For more details on this subject, see L. LARSEN, S. RUBENSON (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, Cambridge University Press, 2018 (forthcoming).

¹³ See Origen's *Letter to Gregory Thaumaturgus*.

¹⁴ Late Antiquity was a time of tremendous social change. For this period, see C. RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, University of California Press, 2005.

¹⁵ Averil CAMERON, *Christianity of the Rhetoric of Empire*, University of California Press, 1991. For an instructive overview of education in the fourth century see A. CAMERON, "Education and Literary Culture", in A. CAMERON and GARNSEY (eds.), *The Late Empire, AD 337-425*, Cambridge University Press, 1997. On the cultural framework of *paideia* shared by pagans and Christians see P. BROWN, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Toward a Christian Empire*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, pp. 121-192.

¹⁶ Cf. Samuel RUBENSON, "From School to Patriarchate: Aspects on the Christianisation of Alexandria", in G. HINGE, J.A. KRASILNIKOFF, *Alexandria: A Cultural and Religious Melting Pot*, Aarhus University Press, 2009, pp. 144-157. For more details on this subject, see L. LARSEN, S. RUBENSON (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, Cambridge University Press, 2018 (forthcoming).

Larsen has remarked, “in recent re-framing, Antony, Arsenius, and Evagrius have been re-cast as desert philosophers; the most interesting aspects of emergent monasticism, derivatively encapsulated in the activities of dense networks of late ancient literati”¹⁷.

There is a stereotyped imagine of the illiterate monk, but F. Vecoli points out that

“the topos of the illiterate monk originates in part from a self-interested hagiographic reconstruction made by the bishops, whose aim it was to create a monastic paradigm which would respect ecclesiastical institutions (who were wary of everything that resembled a philosophical school). In that sense, it is possible to read anew the first phases of Egyptian monastic history and reinterpret them as the transformation of a high-cultured urban reality into one ideally centered on isolation and simplicity”¹⁸.

Generally, the Egyptian monks were literate men, and two sentences illustrating this fact: “Somebody said to the blessed Arsenius: «How is it that we have gained nothing from so much education and wisdom, while these rustic Egyptian peasants have acquired such virtues?» Abba Arsenius said to him: «For our part we have gained nothing from the world’s education, but these rustic Egyptian peasants have acquired the virtues by their own labors»”¹⁹. and “Abba Arsenius was once asking an Egyptian elder about his own *logismoi*. Another person, when he saw him, said: «Abba Arsenius, how is it that you, who have such a command of Greek and Roman learning, are asking this rustic about your *logismoi*?» But he said to him: «A command of Greek and Roman learning I have, but I have not yet learned the alphabet of this rustic»”²⁰.

¹⁷ Malcom CHOAT, Maria Chiara GIORDA (eds.), *Writing and Communication in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Brill, 2017, p. 2.

¹⁸ F. VECOLI, “Writing and Monastic Culture”, in M. CHOAT, Maria Chiara GIORDA (eds.), *Writing and Communication in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, p. 169. For the dichotomy between the philosophical wisdom and Christian wisdom understood as the opposite of the pagan philosophical schools, see Edward WATTS, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, University of California Press, 2006, pp. 169-170. Also, for a critique of earlier scholarship concerning the “anti-intellectualism” of early Egyptian monasticism, see Augustine CASIDAY, *Tradition and Theology in St. John Cassian*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 131-160.

¹⁹ ARSENIUS 5, in *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. by John Wortley, St Vladimir’s Press, p. 41.

²⁰ ARSENIUS 5, in *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*,

As F. Vecoli has remarked,

“One could mention here the theme of the vaunted rusticity of the solitary, who avoids commenting on the text of Scripture as much as possible, renounces all mundane wisdom to opt for the ignorant saint’s divine wisdom, and puts thaumaturgical power above philosophical reasoning”²¹.

But we understand that the Desert Fathers were very careful to affirm that reading Holy Scripture was primordial for their ascetic education and spiritual growth. Briefly, the Desert Fathers were so immersed in Scripture that they were memorizing Scripture, so that we can say that Bible became the essential element of their ascetic life. As Lois Farag has noted

“the Desert Fathers memorized Scriptures as an integral part of their spiritual life. Given modern technology and the high level of education of modern societies, one might ask: Why memorize Scripture? The initial reason for memorization in ancient societies was that illiteracy was the norm and only a few were capable of reading and writing. The culture was more oral than modern cultures. Memorization was the main tool for the easy and quick availability of information. The modern educational system emphasizes analytical thinking rather than memorization and honing the tools and faculties for memorization. Now, with modern technology, when literally

p. 41. For early ascetic investment in education, see BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 59; HARMLESS, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 71; LARSEN, *Pedagogical Parallels: Re-Reading the Apophthegmata Patrum*, PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2006. Also, for re-assessment the monastic resistance to antique pedagogical model, see Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOFF and Peter Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion...*, LARSEN, “Early Monasticism and the Rhetorical Tradition: Sayings and Stories as School Texts”, pp. 13-33. For pertinent reflections, see L.I. LARSEN, “Re-drawing the Interpretive Map: Monastic Education as Civic Formation in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*”, *Coptica* 22 (2013), pp. 1–34; S. BUCKING, “Scribes and Schoolmasters? On Contextualizing Coptic and Greek Ostraca Excavated at the Monastery of Epiphanius”, *JCS* 9 (2007), pp. 21– 47; L. LARSEN, “On Learning a New Alphabet: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and the Monostichs of Menander”, *Studia Patristica* 55.3 (2013), pp. 59–77; Jean-Claude GUY, “Educational Innovation in the Desert Fathers”, in *Eastern Churches Review* 6 (1974), pp. 44–51.

²¹ F. VECOLI, “Writing and Monastic Culture”, in M. CHOAT, Maria Chiara GIORDA (eds.), *Writing and Communication in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, pp. 168-169.

the whole of Scripture is available digitally at our fingertips, why memorize? Memorization is still important for the spiritual endeavor. Technological tools provide Scripture on demand, but that was not what the fathers were doing. Memorization internalizes the biblical message in the heart, soul, and mind of the person endeavoring to live a spiritual life. Technology cannot internalize Scripture; it makes it available, but we have to do the inner work of interacting with the biblical verses of figures and meditating on them... The main goal is internalizing Scripture so that our heart, soul, and mind conform to God's words so that we can be in the constant presence of God"²².

But to realize this presence the monk fights for purifying the thoughts. So, the inner work was a fundamental axiom of the desert spirituality which means that inner spiritual discipline should be accompanied by ascetic life. A sentence highlights the importance of both practices:

“Agatho was asked: «Which is more difficult, bodily discipline, or guard over the inner self?» He said: «Man is like a tree. His bodily discipline is like the leaves of the tree, his guard over the inner self is like the fruit. Scripture says that every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire (Matt 3, 10). So we ought to take every precaution about guarding the mind, because that is our fruit. Yet we need to be covered and beautiful with leaves, which is bodily discipline». Agatho was wise in understanding, earnest in his discipline, armed at all points, careful about keeping up his manual work, sparing in food and clothing”²³.

From this perspective there is continuity between philosophical model and ascetic paradigm of wisdom. For the Greeks, philosophy was primarily a way of life characterized by transformational and spiritual exercises: “Above all, philosophy is viewed as an exercise of wisdom, and therefore as the practice of a way of life”²⁴. But for the early Christians, monasticism provides the ultimate and only true philosophy – way of life. In other words, as Nathan Jennings has remarked “philosophy is a way of life, and

²² LOIS FARAG, *Balance of the Heart: Desert Spirituality for Twenty-First-Century Christians*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012, p. 115.

²³ S. S. WARD, p. 90 (Discretion 11). On theology as ascetic practice, see Nathan G. JENNINGS, *Theology as Ascetic Act: Disciplining Christian Discourse*, Peter Lang, 2010.

²⁴ P. HADOT, *Ancient Philosophy*, p. 49 and p. 102. On more this subject, see Nathan G. JENNINGS, *Theology as Ascetic Act...*, pp. 142-161.

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that true mode of life give only in Christianity”²⁵. Therefore, asceticism and renunciation of this world was necessary to gain spiritual knowledge.

P. Hadot, in his book *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, has convincingly argued and demonstrated how in ancient philosophy techniques such as that of attention to oneself (*prosoche*) required meditating on and memorising rules of life, those principles which were to be applied in each particular circumstance, at each moment of life. It was essential to have the principles of life, the fundamental ‘dogmas’, constantly, ‘at hand’. Hadot demonstrated how this same theme is operative once again in the monastic tradition – except that in the monastic tradition philosophical dogmas are replaced by an evangelical rule of life inspired not only by the words of Christ but also by biblical exempla and proverbs, the words and deeds of the ‘ancients’; in other words, of the first monks. Both evangelical commandments and the words of the ancients were presented in the form of short sentences, which – just as in the philosophical tradition – could be easily memorized and meditated upon... The numerous collections of apophthegmata and of kephalaia we find in monastic literature are a response to this need for memorisation and meditation²⁶.

Also, P. Hadot has drawn attention to the literary practice (and its implications) of presenting philosophical traditions in the form of short sentences, maxims, *sententiae* and *gnomai*, which made easier their memorisation and their meditation²⁷. As Yannis Papadogiannakis has remarked

“both apophthegmata and kephalaia were already in existence in the philosophical tradition and Hadot has pointed to numerous examples of them in the works of Diogenes Laertius, Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and Porphyry’s *Sentences*. Both of these literary genres are responses to the requirements of meditation”²⁸.

III. Teaching Holiness: Spiritual Guidance in the Desert

Besides prayer, renunciation, silence, humility, fast or chastity, Christians need an old man or spiritual guide (*abba*). Indeed, the essential relationship

²⁵ Nathan G. JENNINGS, *Theology as Ascetic Act...*, p. 146.

²⁶ Nathan G. JENNINGS, *Theology as Ascetic Act...*, p. 66.

²⁷ Cf. P. HADOT, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 1981

²⁸ Yannis PAPADOGIANNAKIS, “An Education through Gnostic Wisdom”, in Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOF and Peter Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion...*, p. 63.

in the desert was between a spiritual guide and a disciple, who came to learn the ascetic life. As we will see in this section, the practice of spiritual guidance was in the first instance practical. Thus, the old man (*geron*) shares with the disciple spiritual wisdom from his experience:

“If we are climbing a mountain for the first time, we need to follow a known route; and we also need to have with us, as companion and guide, someone who has been up before and is familiar with the way. To serve as such a companion and guide is precisely the role of the *abba* or spiritual father – of the one whom the Greeks call *geron* or *geronta* and the Russians *starets*, a title which in both languages means old man or elder”²⁹.

The importance of the spiritual guide in the Orthodox Tradition is underlined from the very first beginnings of Eastern Christian monasticism.

And indeed, this theme of the elders, so important in the early Egyptian monasticism, has retained its full significance up to the present day in Eastern spirituality. The need for spiritual direction is a great theme throughout the *Apophthegmata Patrum*:

“The old men used to say: if you see a young monk climbing up to heaven by his own will, grasp him by the feet and throw him down, for this is to his profit... If a person places his faith in someone else and surrenders himself to the other in full submission, he has no need to attend to the commandment of God, but he needs only to entrust his entire will into the hands of his father. Then he will be blameless before God, for God requires nothing from beginners so much as self-stripping through obedience”³⁰.

There is a certain kind of ascetic instruction employed in *Apophthegmata Patrum* assumed by the relationship between a young monk and a wise man (*abba*)³¹. As Edward Watts has remarked “education in all periods and all

²⁹ Bishop Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000, p. 127.

³⁰ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, anonymous collection, 244, ed. Nau, *ROC 14* (1909), p. 364.

³¹ More details on this subject, see Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-monks, Episcopal authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, Brepols, 2018; I. HAUSHERR, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990; Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, especially, pp. 26-87; John CHRYSAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom, 2008, and K. WARE, “The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity”, in Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, St Vladimir’s Press, 2001.

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contexts depends upon a profound and personal exchange of information between a master who possesses knowledge and a disciple who wants to gain that knowledge³².

This passage brings us back to the point discussed in the first section, namely the continuity between philosophical model and monastic paradigm of spiritual guidance. Like ancient philosophy, monasticism practiced a form of ascesis, that is, discipleship. From this perspective, P. Hadot provides an interesting observation on this point:

“They entered into a community, under the direction of a spiritual master, in which they venerated the school’s founder and often took meals in common with the other members of the school. They examined their conscience and perhaps even confessed their misdeeds... They lived an ascetic life... (some) followed a vegetarian diet and devoted themselves to contemplation, seeking mystical uniform³³.”

Therefore, Hadot compares the antique philosophy with early asceticism as it developed from the third through the fourth centuries. From this perspective, the purpose of the monk is the spiritual wisdom. In this context we point out, together with Fr. John Chryssavgis, that Desert Fathers was sources of spiritual formation, because “the desert had its own system of education; it was its own school of thought³⁴.” The ascetic life is an inner work characterized by stillness, silence, praxis and labor, humility, patience, solitude and charity. In other words, the desert was a locus of personal and spiritual experience:

“A brother came to Abba Theodore and began to talk and inquire about things he was not yet putting into practice. The elder said to him: «You have not yet found the ship or loaded your goods and you have already gone away to that city before setting sail. When you have first put the action into practice, then you will come to that of which you are now speaking»³⁵.”

Also, another saying reflects this point:

³² E. WATTS, “Teaching the New Classics: Bible and Biography in a Pachomian Monastery”, in Peter Gemeinhardt, Lieve Van Hoof and Peter Van Nuffellen, *Education and Religion...*, p. 47.

³³ P. HADOT, *Ancient Philosophy*, pp. 247-248.

³⁴ JOHN CHRYSAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom, 2008, p. 75.

³⁵ THEODOR OF PHERME 9, in *Give Me a Word*, p. 119.

“When this Abba John was about to die and was migrating to God joyfully and eagerly, the brothers gathered around him, asking him to leave them some concise and salvific saying as a legacy by which they would be able to advance toward perfection in Christ. but he sighed and said: «I have never done my own will, nor did I teach anyone to do that which I did not first practice myself»³⁶.

Therefore, the old man or the elder, necessarily had to teach by example as well as by word. These apophthegms witness to the elder’s example. As Columba Stewart has remarked, “equally necessary, of course, was the disciple’s ready obedience in fulfilling a word or imitating an example”³⁷.

Briefly, the wise men are to be imitated³⁸. The point of departure in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* was learning and not teaching, because the essential was ascetic praxis and not curiosity of the mind: “He also said: «To teach one’s neighbor is (the work) of a healthy person, free of passions; for what is the point of building a house for somebody else and destroying one’s own?»”³⁹.

In ascetic education monks put under the spiritual guidance of a *geron*, so that learning and spiritual authority went hand in hand. This authority was fundamental in the practice of the spiritual guidance, as the young ascetic-geron relationship was individual and direct. And indeed, “the knowledge a teacher possesses given him a sort of authority that the student willingly accepts in exchange for instruction”⁴⁰.

This spiritual authority has profound implications for the practice of spiritual guidance because “teaching was an activity whose success depended upon a master’s ability to continue to assert direct, personal authority over disciples”⁴¹.

³⁶ CASSIAN 5, in *Give Me a Word*, p. 166.

³⁷ Cf. *The World of the Desert Fathers*, SLG Press, 1996, p. 1.

³⁸ For a general survey on this theme, see Paul C. DILLEY, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity: Cognition and Discipline*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

³⁹ POEMEN 127, in *Give Me a Word*, p. 249.

⁴⁰ E. WATTS, “Teaching the New Classics: Bible and Biography in a Pachomian Monastery”, in Peter Gemeinhardt, Lieve Van Hoof and Peter Van Nuffelen, *Education and Religion...*, p. 47.

⁴¹ E. WATTS, “Teaching the New Classics...”, p. 47.

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Essentially, the disciple was to model his life on this exhibited by his spiritual guide and learn the ways of the life ascetic by following his guide's example. As E. Watts has remarked, "if the relationship worked, the ascetic father provided the novice with personalised guidance and support"⁴².

Also, Janet Timbie has summarized the stages of education in Late Antiquity:

"The student began with the *didaskalos*, either in a schoolroom or at home, learning reading, writing and basic maths. Some students continued with the *grammatikos* to study grammar in the context of intensive reading of literature, and maths studies continued. A few students then studied with a rhetor in order to learn persuasive speech by means of formal exercises (*progymnasmata*) in standard forms such as declamation or encomia"⁴³.

What kind of education was available inside the monastery or in the desert? An answer we find in Torallas Tovar: "While it is true that Christians adopted Classical education and progressively retooled it to meet their needs, in some circles, such as monasteries, education was limited to the reading of the Scriptures"⁴⁴. Thus, fundamentally, the daily routine of the monk include hearing, reciting and thinking about Scripture.

In conclusion, we say that is not that secular wisdom was unacceptable to the Desert Fathers. Indeed, many of them were lettered men: Antony the Great, Arsenius, Evagrius, Basil, and Cassian. But this wisdom remains unfulfilled without the spiritual dimension. The only degree that counted in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* was the degree to which one was holy, even effaced, in order to reveal the presence and grace of God. The desert was fundamentally a place of encounter with God, and the elder was an instrument of the Holy Spirit in the world. From this perspective, the role of spiritual guide is, according to St. Barsanuphius, "I care for you more than you care for yourself".

⁴² E. WATTS, "Teaching the New Classics...", p. 52.

⁴³ Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van Hoof and Peter Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion...*, p. 41.

⁴⁴ Torallas TOVAR, "What is Greek and What is Coptic? School Texts as a Window into the Perception of Greek Loanwords in Coptic", in FEDER and LOHWASSER (eds.), *Ägypten und sein Umfeld in der Spätantike*, 2013, p. 112.

IV. Conclusion

The desert movement played a great role in the transformation of the pagan philosopher. From this perspective, Desert Fathers were very important players in the history of Christian responses to the pagan culture. In other words, the true philosopher is the monk, but his wisdom is not from pagan philosophy but from faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, Desert Fathers exchange one *paideia* for another: asceticism and faith in Christ replace Greek education. The monk is the teacher of the new Christian education, so that the ascetic has exchanged his philosopher's mantle (wisdom teacher or pagan sage) for the monk's habit (spiritual father). In other words, the academic authority of the Greek philosopher is replaced by the spiritual authority of the monk.