

uniquely God made human (call me old-fashioned), but her picture works as well if we assume that saints can inhabit our imaginations, without being the product of them, by the gift of God. She calls for a recognition of the goodness of the imagination, which can harbour much that has no other place on earth, pointing out that the potential dangers of this can be avoided by testing it against criteria for knowing the voice of God in general: is it a voice that calls to compassion? To community? and so on. Above all, she claims, "such experiences may not be consciously sought, they are inevitably deeply mysterious".

This is a work of enormous integrity, full of hard thinking matched by strong feeling. It is aimed at a Christian feminist readership, and takes some time to gently challenge some of Christian feminism's dearly-held assumptions (though very little to write off some of Christianity's even more dearly-held ones, unfortunately), but its voice deserves to be generally attended to. Whether or not the reader can stomach the idea of meeting someone else in the imagination, this counts as a persuasive picture of what medieval saints with their mystical friendships were doing, and an impressive drawing-out in general of the spirituality of the communion of saints.

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ATHANASIUS AND THE POLITICS OF ASCETICISM by David Brakke, *Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995 (Oxford Early Christian Studies series)*, pp. xvii + 356, £40.

The emergence of the Christian ascetic movement in Egypt, Palestine and Syria has long been a subject of particular interest and importance in the history of Late Antiquity. Its genesis and the respective claims made for rival founders, such as the Egyptian hermit Anthony or the Palestinian Paul, became matters of debate as early as the second half of the fourth century. Its influence on the leading Greek Christian intellectuals of that period, notably the three 'Cappadocian Fathers', Basil of Caesarea and the two Gregorys - of Nyssa and of Nazianzus - is undoubted, as is the role of Basil in particular as the systematiser and populariser of ascetic practices for the upper classes of Constantinople and the provinces of Asia Minor. From this there were but few steps to the popularity of modified ascetic lifestyles and the creation of the aristocratic house monasteries and communities in Rome that provided the context for such popular spiritual teachers as Jerome and Pelagius. In the course of the fourth century a highly diverse, spontaneous, non- or even anti-intellectual movement that had developed in provincial backwaters in the east had been controlled, systematised, and made chic.

In that the founding fathers of the movement, such as Anthony, Pachomius and later the early Stylites, such as Simeon, have left little or no literary traces of themselves, it is to a second or later generation of more sophisticated and literate interpreters that recourse has to be

made to find out what they taught and what they achieved. Indeed, it is only from the assertions of such texts as Athanasius's *Life* of him that we are led to believe that Anthony played the formative role in the movement that is normally attributed to him. It thus becomes more interesting to try to establish what significance Anthony had for Athanasius, what he intended to achieve in composing the earliest known monastic *vita*, and why it took the precise form that it did. Nor can this text be seen in isolation from Athanasius's other writings on and attempted regulation of contemporary asceticism.

From these and other sources Professor Brakke puts together, on the basis of his doctoral thesis of 1992, a powerful and convincing presentation of what Athanasius sought to achieve. He also shows how generally successful the bishop was in redefining and regulating female asceticism, particularly in Alexandria, in imposing episcopal authority on male monastic communities and in manipulating the veneration of Anthony to further his own episcopal and political-theological purposes. On the first of these in particular useful comparison can be made with the arguments of the final chapter of Susanna Elm's book, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1994). These topics are considered here in the course of the four individual chapters that make up the heart of the book. All of these interrelated areas are discussed against the background of Athanasius's other pressing concerns, not least in his conflict with imperially supported Arian theology and its adherents, and in the creation of an administrative and pastoral structure for the Church in Egypt, which had only recently emerged from the persecution of the reigns of Galerius and Maximin II.

Following a short 'Conclusion', six appendices contain translations from Coptic, Greek and Syriac originals of a series of minor writings of Athanasius on ascetic themes. These include two *Letters to Virgins*, treatises on Virginité and on *Sickness and Health*, fragments 'on the Moral Life' and four of his annual Festal Letters. The attribution of all of these works to Athanasius is by no means uncontroversial, but Professor Brakke has previously argued his case for them in his article 'The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana' in *Orientalia* volume 63 for 1994. As this might indicate, there are numerous more technical or subsidiary issues taken up and helpfully illuminated in the course of this work, alongside its broader themes. In general, this book impresses by its erudition and makes a significant contribution to the better understanding not only of Athanasius but also of the wider history of the development of early monasticism.

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