

John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* ('Oxford Early Christian Studies') (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000), x + 261 pages.

This book is the revised version of an Oxford DPhil thesis by the now Assistant Professor of Patristics at St Vladimir's Theological Seminary in USA, one of the most promising contemporary teachers of Christian doctrine. Behr's first volume on the formation of Christian theology (*The Way to Nicaea*, 2001) has already been very sympathetically reviewed in *Archæus*, and translated into Russian and Romanian. Dr Behr is acknowledged world-wide as an outstanding specialist in Irenaeus of Lyon. He has published many articles on methodological issues of Scriptural exegesis, and is editor of the Patristic Popular Series at SVS Press, Crestwood. Two articles related to the topic here under review, are the entries on 'Adam' and 'Anthropology' published in J.-Y. Lacoste (ed.), *Dictionnaire critique de théologie* (PUF: Paris, 2002²).

Despite its conventional title, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* is a provocative, gripping and well-crafted book. It is a brilliant sample of English Patristic scholarship. It is a generally accepted view that in France, Germany or Italy more emphasis is laid on the textual work, the prose of the commentator usually limited to historical contextualisation, philological clarification and theological paraphrase. In Britain, Canada and the United States, the attention of the scholars tends to shift from the philological investigation towards the methodological, where the construction of the argument (the *thesis*) is elaborated. Of course, this general rule does not always hold, and this is the case of Dr Behr, whose expertise in dealing with primary and secondary sources (from Armenian, Greek and Latin materials to Italian and Spanish bibliography) is admirable. Yet, the strength of the book lies in its simple and persuasive rhetoric and argument, and bold engagement with some complex issues. Dr Behr knows that a true question is always bigger than the answer, and for that reason this book can be seen as a study-case of the thorny issue of asceticism, at the crossroad of Hellenism and Christianity. To illustrate this point, Behr's choice (i.e.: Irenaeus of Lyon and Clement of Alexandria) seems a good one, although few people may have imagined how rewarding a comparison of these two figures could be. Before get to the content of this book, I will consider Dr Behr' methodological premises and the interpretative problems he has so successfully met.

It is no surprise, given the topic of Behr's research, that the names of M. Foucault and P. Brown quickly appear in the introduction, which circles around the question of the specific character of Christian asceticism, as against 'Hellenic' (or virtually any other religiously inspired) ethics. Before addressing this perennial query, the reader must be very clear that 'the popular, hackneyed contrast between the pleasure-loving, licentious (or healthy) pagans and the virtuous, chaste (or repressed) Christians does not stand up to close scrutiny' (Behr, *op. cit.*, 4). With the impressive results of the scholarly work of many authors – from Werner Jaeger and H. I. Marrou to P. Veyne or Pierre Hadot – this simplistic view must go. However, there is also another, subtler mistake, which Dr Behr is ready to dismantle. He sees to Michel Foucault's attempt to read the ascetic discipline of the early Christians as an important contribution to the making of the modern subject. The practice of confession conveyed, in Foucault's eyes, a new sense of verbalisation, obedience and voluntary submission to an external power. In the Imperial age, this was something missing from formative curricula of the philosophical schools: thus, the hermeneutics of the self (as it can be seen Evagrius or John Cassian) acquired a higher degree of exactness, unknown to previous epochs. This is probably true, but to what extent were the theological premises of the early monastic life in Egypt, Syria, Palestine or Cappadocia were identically carried out through the great works of the Western history of 'Christian spirituality'? By this generalisation, Foucault is unable to do justice to the multifarious historical reality of the Christian spirituality. Secondly, Foucault confuses the context of emergence for a practice such as the act of confession among the early Christian monk with its later context of justification in the moral jurisprudence of the Roman-Catholic Church (before the Council of Trent). This is an unacceptable epistemological error. The theological concept of 'original sin' (of Augustinian import), just as the doctrine of atonement based on the Christological doctrine of penal substitution (which occurs first in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury) did not provide the rationale for the widespread custom of opening one's heart in confession to a charismatic spiritual director.

Very seldom, the latter was a priest, or member of the Church hierarchy, in the context of the first generation of the Desert Fathers.

A blatant example of this hermeneutic anachronism is to be found in the special issue of the French journal *Critique* dedicated to Georges Bataille, for whom Foucault wrote “Préface à la transgression”. He speaks there about “the whole tradition of mysticism and spirituality which was incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that outpouring of that leaves us spent”, and which allegedly contributed, through rituals of confession and penitence, to the public awareness of the place of sexuality in our own time: ‘we have not – says Foucault – in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be more exact, carried it to its limits: the limits of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our consciousness.’¹ The famous architect of subversive interpretations of the Western culture shows here a weakness for excessive generalisation. Considering the first centuries of Christianity, and especially the monastic literature of the desert (which is responsible for authoritatively establishing the institution of confession), where can we find ‘the mysticism of rapture and penetration’? To be sure, the athletes of the Christian virtues warned against the univocal usage of any sexual imagery (let alone feelings of this sort) in describing the experience of union with God. Besides, how on earth could somebody who kept his or her bodily virginity intact describe the prayerful union with God in terms of sexual orgasm? From Anthony the Great to Macarius of Alexandria and Abba Poemen, imagination was the intellectual faculty, which every monk or nun had to suppress in order to acquire the gift of ‘pure prayer’. A comparison of the corpus of *The Philokalia* with the writings of *Theresa of Avilla* would be very telling for assessing the discontinuities of the tradition of Western Spirituality. Foucault found in the practice of confession, so strikingly distinct in different ages and areas of Christianity, a mere instigation to curiosity (prohibited as *concupiscentia oculorum* by Augustine, the author of the *Confessions*) and to conversation about the imperceptible movements of desire in one’s soul and body. Originally, suggests Foucault, the sexual drive (sometimes provoked by the haunting presence of the evil Other) was exorcised through the work of self-interpretation under the guidance of the confessor and through the commitment to a set of ascetic practices. Christianity would appear to be responsible for picturing man as the receptacle of an infinite number of emotions expressing the same sexual desire, which at the dawn of modern age started to be screened through other techniques of control and manipulation (which include school pedagogy, medicine, state demographic policies, etc.). In conclusion, Christianity transformed the Western man into ‘a confessing animal’.

Neither Dr John Behr², nor the undersigned reviewer would find room to discuss at large the premises of Michel Foucault’s analysis of early Christian ‘technologies of the self’ (an analysis, which was unsurprisingly biased from the viewpoint of Foucault’s own eccentric sexual orientation³). Yet, given the authoritative role played by Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* among contemporary scholars, we are obliged to make some additional comments, before we take on board Dr Behr’s chief question: why should we liberate our understanding of the early Christian asceticism from the Foucauldian hermeneutics of ‘power’ and ‘knowledge’? First, let us remember that Foucault’s genealogical project aimed to present the formation of the Christian subject as something substantially different from the birth of the Cartesian mind, or than the emergence of the pure subjective *ego* in the wake of Husserl’s transcendental reduction. Yes, the Christian subject and his or her self-awareness are not the result of a neutral, abstract cogitation upon “the last principles of being”, practiced with leisure, in a cosy

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¹ The English version of this text is to be found in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Selected Essays and Interviews, edited with an introduction by Donald F. Bouchard and translation by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), p. 29-30 (here quoted).

² Who ten years ago devoted a lengthy discussion of the same issue, see J. Behr, ‘Shifting Sands: Foucault, Brown and the Framework of Christian Asceticism’, *Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993) 1, 1-22.

³ In the posthumous account of one of his boy friends (Hervé Guibert, *A l’Ami qui n’a pas sauvé la vie*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990), Foucault’s homosexuality reveals to have had shocking and yet concealed sadomasochistic overtones. In J. Baudrillard’s perceptive phrase, ‘Foucault lived his life as though he were ill-loved and persecuted’. See David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Vintage Press, 1993), 360.

environment (e.g., Descartes' famous 'stove-heated room'⁴). Similar to the process going on in the Hellenistic philosophical schools, the Christian self-awareness was the outcome of a constant commitment to bodily discipline, which included a wide range of complex gestures and articulate practices. Yet, Foucault fails to see the articulation of these ascetic practices within the theological context of worship. Indeed, it is first in the liturgical context, where Christians were invited to participate to a vast spectacle of self-transformation, combining audio, visual, tactile, and all the rest of the human senses. (Of these pedagogical practices, many were preserved until nowadays in the more traditional Churches of the East, which resisted the homogenising assault of secularisation⁵; the worship of the icons, use of incense, choral music, crossing oneself, bowing, kneeling, standing up and opening the arms at time of solemn prayer are an organic part of the liturgical performance.) Understandably, the catechetical program of the early Church did not touch only on doctrinal issues, addressing with intellectual weapons questions related to the totality of one's new life in God. Consequently, Christian asceticism should not be understood as an attempt to accommodate, in despair, the ruthless rules of social respectability and the sacrificial means for gaining respect, dignity, leadership, supremacy or at least psychological immunity within the public life of Late Antiquity. For instance, by generally accepting the imperative of procreation, the Stoics were looking to be good citizens, whereas the purpose of the early Christians was to maintain a steady bodily discipline for greater spiritual benefits, not related to the civic prestige. More precisely, in the decision of opening up sexual intercourse for the procreative finality, the Christian marriage assumes in part one aspect of the Cross and warns against the perils of self-indulgence. As we shall see, in order to do that, one doesn't need to develop the complex of superiority (by which the citizen triumphs in the agora), nor the psychological hang-up determined by feeling of guilt and misery. Given its ecclesial context, and not the implicit pressures of the social fabric of the Roman Empire, early Christian asceticism cannot be correctly interpreted as an individualist cruise, which could perhaps be explained in the neo-Darwinist logic of socio-biology.⁶ It is also because Foucault borrowed it from Burckhardt's analysis of Renaissance that the concept of 'self-stylisation' is problematic when applied to the early Christian context.

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A more felicitous, though unjustly broad definition of Christian asceticism would spell out its many ways of being different from the heroic ethos of the Greek virtue. For the Christian virtue, the last verdict of authenticity does not belong to impersonal crowds filling in the streets of the *polis*. The essential, although paradoxical character of the Christian virtue is to seek anonymity and to avoid public exposure (this statement is proved even in the case of the stylites or of the 'fools for Christ'). Yes, early Christian asceticism was determined by the radical cast of mind of the Church, but the power of the mind exercised by one individual over his or her body wasn't perceived, in the orthodox circles, primarily as the triumph of the will (as with Pelagius) over the weakness of flesh. The supreme gift of freedom, promised by the Cross of Christ in the light of his resurrection, was seen rather as the indwelling of the grace of the Spirit in the sacred body of the saints, and hence, in the holy Temple of God, which is the Church. As R. M. Price once put it, 'until Augustine the dominant factor in the

⁴ It is perhaps not wholly inappropriate to recall here Descartes' health sensitivities in connection with leisure, as *the* condition of possibility of the emergence of modern subject. In 1649, the author of *Le Discours de la Méthode* travelled to Sweden at the invitation of Queen Christina (1626-89) to teach her philosophy at five o'clock in the morning. The result of this adventure lies in René Descartes' premature death: in the context of this sudden change of climate, he contracted pneumonia and died in Stockholm on 11 February 1650.

⁵ These aspects come to surface especially during the solemn services of the Great Lent. For a theological interpretation of the significance of the Byzantine canon of the Triodion in the Orthodox Church, see the superb book of Makarios Simonopetritul (Gerard Bonnet), *Triodul explicat. Mistagogia timpului liturgic*, Romanian translation from the typed manuscript (not yet published in another modern language) by diac. Ioan I. Ică Jr. (Sibiu: Deisis Press, 2000).

⁶ The nihilist premises of this epistemology have been demonstrated by P. Koslowski, 'The Theory of Evolution as Sociobiology and Bioeconomics. A Critique to Its Claim to Totality', in *idem* (ed.), *Sociobiology and Bioeconomics. The Theory of Evolution in Biological and Economic Theory* (Berlin etc.: Springer, 1998), 301-328.

development of a distinctive Christian sexual ethic was the need to express and preserve the purity of the Church as the body of Christ through the purity of the bodies of its members.⁷

The centrality of the ecclesial consciousness (*ekklesiastikon phronema*) in the deployment of the Christian principles of renunciation can be seen in the solitary lives of the saints that separated themselves from the world. They not only transformed the ‘desert into a city’, but became pillars of the both visible and invisible Church, just like the choir of martyrs played, in the first three centuries, a crucial role for the universal recognition of the divine authority of the apostolic tradition. Without this reference to martyrdom, the theological authority frequently invoked with respect to the scriptural canon and liturgical customs would have had a different stature. Foucault’s analysis not only obliterates the ecclesial roots of the ascetic techniques (or rules of stylisation) when he addresses the question still in the wrong terms of modern subjectivism (*souci de soi*). He is slow to ask whether, on the chart of Christian axiology, the alleged ‘pleasure’ experienced by virtue of *apatheia*, when the mastering of one’s own body achieves perfection, does not belong to the most frequent (though ‘intellectual’) category of sin, which is pride. If the early Christians were ready to call into obedience the subtlest thoughts of irrational and corrupted desire, let alone bodily movements of the same stock, this exercise of power was not supposed to be performed for its own sake. In the monastic literature, at stake it is not the ethics of resentment, or the idolatrous triumph of *Wille zur Macht*, but the gentle submission to higher exigencies of life, which man received and returned back as a gift from God. A similar point could be made also with respect to the practice of confession of thoughts in the early Christian monastic context: if, in the case the Desert Fathers, the psychological scrutiny reaching the innermost depths of man seems to be unstoppable, it is because their ultimate *source and object* of desire – namely God’s eternal beauty and glory – is by nature infinite and, for the first time in the history of European thought, acknowledged as such.

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Despite this empirical evidence, but like many other nihilist genealogists, Foucault is prone to mount up a retrospective reading of any cultural event that shaped our modernity as an agonistic play inevitably leading to violence. The hermeneutics of suspicion arrived at this conclusion, of course, not by unpacking the data of the early chronicles of Christian monasticism, but from the very ontological premises conducting both Nietzsche and Foucault’s cultural genealogies: it is the words of Heraclitus, the warfare is, or must be, ‘the father of all things’⁸. The failure to see in the practice of renunciation and confession more than preparatory but necessary moments of sheer negativity on the long way leading toward the modern establishment of disciplinary societies, is due to the almost complete negligence of the theological rationales framing the living body of the Christian Church. Cultural anthropologists following Michel Foucault have serious problems in accepting that it was theology, above all, that made of the Christians ‘a third race’ (neither Greeks, nor Jews). As John Behr put it, ‘to assume, in comparison of the problematization of sexual activity elaborated by Christians and their pagan contemporaries, that we are dealing with parallel or equivalent modalities of subjectivity, albeit using different technologies of the self, is to overlook, and thereby to defuse, Christianity’s most fundamental claim: that it brings a new revelation to the world and through this makes all things new. Most early Christian texts are principally concerned with the problematization of this new revelation, its elaboration in theory and practice, and orientate the discussion of issues such as sexuality around this thematics. Whilst we may, if we so wish, suspend our belief in this claim, it would be unjust to do so, on behalf of those whom we are studying, and improper to analyse their texts without this perspective.’⁹

On this methodological basis, John Behr is ready to critique also Peter Brown’s own judgements, not before acknowledging the great value of his imaginative history of early Christian

⁷ R. M. Price, ‘The Distinctiveness of Early Christian Sexual Ethics’, *The Heythrop Journal* 31 (1990), p. 272. One should pay attention to understand correctly the Christian (and especially the Pauline) notion of ‘purity’ in contrast with the forensic account usually found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

⁸ This critique of M. Foucault has been consistently deployed by John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 290-294.

⁹ J. Behr, ‘Shifting sands’, *loc. cit.*, p. 15.

asceticism (to be found in the celebrated tome: *The Body and Society*).¹⁰ Against the horizontal approaches of both Foucault and Brown, Dr Behr calls for a vertical consideration of the subject of asceticism, which can be aptly understood only through an assessment of the original concern of the early Christians for the inevitably theological tenets of the Gospel. He can prove his argument by tackling the writings of two contemporary authors: Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130- c.200) and Clement of Alexandria. Apart from belonging to the same age of the early Church, Irenaeus share with Clement some more important features: they are representatives of a widespread form of asceticism that precedes the rise of monasticism in the late third and early fourth century. They were also concerned with the claims made by the Gnostics, who couldn't be rejected in the absence of an alternative anthropology and doctrine of atonement (both going back to protology and moving forward toward eschatology, while both are Christocentric). Yet, despite their common interest rooted in the same Christian framework of thought, Irenaeus and Clement developed two parallel views of what is actually man's divine vocation, and they both strike the modern reader used perhaps to the more uniformed tradition of the Latin West.

The first part of the book is dedicated to Irenaeus and presents in a sweeping sequence the move 'from breath to Spirit', presenting the scriptural economy of God (with its rich unfolding and symmetrical verges), and the process of human formation and growth. Irenaeus' theological anthropology is worked out within the frames of an ontology of participation. The essential and rather not Platonic aspect of Irenaeus' anthropology is his inclusion of sexual difference in the substantial definition of man (see his striking image of Adam and Even 'kissing and embracing each other in holiness', *Demonstratio apostolica* 14). Sexuality does not represent an accident, belonging to the paradisiacal reality, but the post-lapsarian experience of gender division is for us, belated adolescents, a source of anxiety and sin. The bishop of Lyon did not have a grip on the Augustinian concept of interiority and 'when speaking of growth, Irenaeus, more simply and more realistically focuses on the fashioning of the handiwork of God into a full human being' (*op. cit.*, 124). The picture of Adam as infant called to grow up and to reach in Christ the age of maturity (according to God's likeness) allows us to understand Irenaeus' take on sexuality¹¹. Let us read the commentary of Dr Behr: 'Within the framework of the progression of each individual life, this same perspective demands that, to become truly human, each person must fully engage themselves in their concrete lives and situations. One learns by experience. One cannot simply abstain, through a self-imposed continence, from anything that carries with it a risk that one might become ensnared thereby in apostasy' (*op. cit.* 125). In short, Adam's innocence is not the synonym of spiritual perfection, as later the Alexandrian tradition (Origen, Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers who followed this line) would claim. Rather, from the beginning, Adam was designed to be not an immutable substance endowed with reason, but as a project, destined always for the better by participation in the life divine. Sexuality, therefore, must not be consumed without being first assumed. Asceticism is understood as a premise for any responsible appropriation of the Gospel. For Irenaeus, procreation does not provide a full account for the reality of sexual differentiation between male and female, and the reason for this is that in the primordial stage, as well as in the eschaton, the human body maintains its sexual qualities. In conclusion, with Irenaeus we can speak about a human body *capax Dei* – a rare position, which doesn't involve, necessarily, the suspension or even the suppression of sexuality.

¹⁰ See also A. Louth's review of P. Brown's "Body and Society" (1988) in *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1988), 231-5.

¹¹ Irenaeus' understanding of body gave a great impetus to one of the most formidable thinkers of the phenomenological school in France over the last century, namely Michel Henry. In his tome called *Incarnation. Pour une philosophie de la chair*" (Paris: Seuil, 2000), Michel Henry offers a radical deconstruction of any reifying understanding of the body by making use of the Irenaeus' theology of the flesh.

Although renowned for his urban and pluralistic account of Christian virtue, being like St Paul ‘all things to all men’ (Behr, *op. cit.*, 131), Clement offers a contrasting view on asceticism and sexuality. An offspring of the great city of Alexandria, Clement is definitely, and inescapably so, more Hellenic than Irenaeus. For the pupil of Pantaeus at the Catechetical School in Alexandria, the conflict between the intellectual contemplation of the transcendent realm of Being and the gravitational force of attraction exercised by the flesh must be corrected through asceticism. One finds in Clement’s writings an outspoken nostalgia for the angelic condition, and consequently he tends to style sexuality as a transient reality, justified by its procreative power within marriage. Dr Behr takes pain to show how these two anthropological accounts stem from two different narratives. Irenaeus is preoccupied by the scriptural unfolding of the story of *homo vivens* in the light of God’s radical condescension. Clement, in his turn, seems to be fond of the Greek concept of *paideia*, which forms the prism through which he reads the biblical story. Clement’s call for man to bridge the gap between, respectively, ignorance, faith and knowledge, has been immensely influential for the latter development of Christian asceticism, especially in the Coptic Church. Evagrius, though not mentioned by John Behr, is probably the most prominent figure of the fourth century monasticism drawing on Clement’s theological teaching and ascetic vision¹². His ideal of *apatheia* and the tribute given to the Christian *gnostikos* became landmarks for the Desert Fathers and the whole philokalic tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Other theologians, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor endorsed Clement’s view on sexuality, regarding it as being accidental and ephemeral. Contrarily, Irenaeus’ view was gradually marginalised or at best forgotten. It is the merit of John Behr to bring us the treasures of Irenaeus’ thought in the context where discussions on Christian asceticism tended focus more on the encratite movements inside and outside the Catholic body of the Church.

Though sometimes very technical and loaded with many conceptual distinctions, Dr Behr’s prose is never turgid or unfriendly. On the contrary, being relatively short and very well structured, it invites the reader to serious reflection and further commentaries. John Behr’s book on *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* is a very important contribution to the growing amount of literature on asceticism in Early Christianity, and it will certainly meet the expectations of any patristic expert in either Irenaeus or Clement. The book doesn’t have much space for historical contextualisation of the questions raised throughout, but this is a deliberate choice of the author. For this reason, Dr Behr’s book will be of great interest also for philosophers and theologians reading ethics, and for historians of Late Antiquity.

Mihail NEAMȚU
King’s College, London.

¹² See A. Guillaumont, “Le gnostique chez Clement d’Alexandrie et chez Evagre le Pontique”, in *Alexandrina : Mélanges offerts à Claude Mondésert S. J.* (Paris : Cerf, 1987), 195-201.