

Sydney College of Divinity

The Early Church: Ignatius, Athanasius, and the Desert Fathers

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO
DR. AUSTIN COOPER
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE CLASS REQUIREMENTS OF
SP412 HISTORY OF SPIRITUALITY
AS PART OF AN M.A. PROGRAMME

BROKEN BAY INSTITUTE
(A Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity)

BY
ALEXANDER MICHAEL PECK

BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND
APRIL 18, 2008

SP412-Studies in Historical Spirituality

Assignment #1

The Early Church: Ignatius, Athanasius, and the Desert Fathers

This essay first gives an overview of the essential elements of the spiritual doctrine, or *spirituality*, emerging from Ignatius of Antioch (35-107 AD), Athanasius (296-373 AD), and the Desert Fathers (3rd to 5th centuries). Second, relevance for a contemporary Christian spirituality will be presented, via a summary table, in the conclusion.

Ignatius of Antioch (35-107 AD)

Ignatius of Antioch addressed epistles to the congregations in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna.¹ In his letters, he defends the full deity and full humanity of Christ. Furthermore, the believer is not only in Christ, he is also *christophoros* (“Christ-bearing”).² In addition, Christian love is a cardinal emphasis in Ignatius.³

In seeking elements of Christian spirituality, one finds that Ignatius often writes of being “in Christ” and of Christ being “in us”; he also uses the phrase “in God”.⁴ In fact, the words *union*, *unity*, and *concord* are key themes in the bishop’s writing – and can indicate spiritual (or mystical) union.⁵ Understandably, three important concepts touching on spirituality in his writings are Christ’s union with the Father, the union of the divine and the human in the Redeemer, and the unity of Church in the one Eucharist.⁶ The spiritual

¹ Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 45.

² P. Woolley, “Antiochene Theology”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 72.

³ Ibid.

⁴ B. McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 80.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

unity of the Christian community finds its source and model in the union of the Father and the Son.⁷

Accordingly, two important elements contributing to authentic spirituality are the *Eucharist* and *faithfulness to the structure of the Church*.⁸ Ignatius developed the idea that salvation and the spiritual life are, as McGinn and Meyendorff summarize, “realized and experienced through faithful communion in the Eucharistic body of Christ” [the mystery of Christ in His Church⁹]¹⁰ – and based on such a Eucharistic approach to life, “being ‘spiritual’ meant accepting and sanctifying the material world and not undermining its importance in any way.”¹¹

An element of spirituality, distinctive to Ignatius’ teaching, is the idea of *attaining* God or Christ – used either in a more general sense (as a future possibility, realized at death), or in terms of his own martyrdom.¹²

In his own life, Ignatius saw *martyrdom* as the perfect imitation of Christ.¹³ However, as B. McGinn observes, “for Ignatius, the whole Christian life is an imitation of Christ” – and can include all forms of dedication, and endurance through suffering, based on the example of Jesus.¹⁴

Finally, two other elements of spirituality based on Ignatius must be mentioned – *unity* and *holiness*, which go together and are in direct proportion to one another. Thomas Merton states in this context that “the more a Church is one with the Father and Jesus

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the 12th Century* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1986), 31.

⁹ Thomas Merton, “Church and Bishop”, *Worship* 37, no. 2 (January 1963): 111.

¹⁰ McGinn and Meyendorff, *Christian Spirituality*, 31.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

¹² McGinn, *The Presence of God*, 81.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

Christ, the more it shares their holiness, by participating in the source of all holiness which is the passion of Christ”.¹⁵

Athanasius (296-373 AD)

Athanasius used his work, *Life of Antony*, to express his own doctrine of the spiritual life.¹⁶ In narrating the life of Antony (circa 251-356 AD), he wove into it a universal pattern of holiness.¹⁷ Based on Antony’s three withdrawals into the desert, Athanasius illustrated the three-fold stages (or elements) of growth in Christian spirituality – that which later writers called the *purgative*, the *illuminative*, and the *unitive* ways.¹⁸

According to Patrick Ryan, “one of the most important elements in Antony’s spirituality was *solitude*”.¹⁹ Solitude alone allows one to discover – and so to face – all the obscure and hidden forces within.²⁰ Henri Nouwen concurs when he writes that the story of Antony “shows that solitude is the furnace in which this transformation [to let our false, compulsive self be transformed into the new self of Jesus Christ] takes place”.²¹ This solitude was balanced, however, by coming back from time to time to be of *service* to others.²²

In addition to solitude, another vital element is *prayer*. In writing about the life of Antony, L. Bouyer comments about the monk’s task of prayer – not any kind of prayer, but a prayer nourished by the reading of holy Scripture.²³

¹⁵ Merton, “Church and Bishop”, 115.

¹⁶ P. Ryan, “The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers”, *Faith and Culture: Issues for the Australian Church* 6 (1982): 93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ L. Bouyer, *History of Christian Spirituality: The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, vol. 1 (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), 313.

²¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 9. This book found its beginning in a seminar at Yale Divinity School on the spirituality of the desert [from the Acknowledgments, p. vii].

²² Ryan, “The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers”, 93.

²³ Bouyer, *History of Christian Spirituality*, 309.

A third element of Antony's life is *silence*. In his time of solitude, he went through a trial by darkness, during which he had the impression of being abandoned by God – only in naked faith did he persevere.²⁴ At the end of the trial, a luminous vision of Christ comforted him – and he asked, “Where were you?”²⁵ A voice answered him: “I was there, Antony, . . .”²⁶

Athanasius' *Life of Antony* differs from other texts by Desert Fathers in its emphasis on *demons* and visions.²⁷ Philip Rousseau suggests that it is not the imagery, as the mechanics, that one must attend to.²⁸ The ascetic was to reclaim his conscious life from memories of error, weakness, and indulgence – something that was done by fixing one's attention on a range of concepts that would exclude the “other” thoughts.²⁹ In so doing, a psychic wall is built against one's past – both cultural and personal.³⁰

Finally, in the life of Antony one also observes a *balance between attitude and action* – a harmony between his inner achievements and the visible practices of the ascetic life.³¹ He was unwilling to recoil from the world – rather, he worked to support himself, and to give to the poor.³² Antony also never lost touch with the tasks of instructing and encouraging others – on the basis of his own experience.³³ His ascetic life was pursued in detachment, but not in complete solitude – in fact, it is remarkable to see his humanity and equilibrium.³⁴ L. Bouyer notes “the pursuit of amiability towards men goes along with assiduity in prayer”.³⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 313.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 313-314.

²⁷ P. Rousseau, “The Desert Fathers, Antony and Pachomius”, in *Study of Spirituality*, ed. C. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 125.

²⁸ Ibid., 126.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 127.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 125.

³⁴ Bouyer, *History of Christian Spirituality*, 309-310.

³⁵ Ibid., 310.

Desert Fathers (3rd-5th Centuries)

The spirituality of the Desert Fathers that influenced their contemporaries and subsequent generations was conveyed by writers such as Athanasius, and Evagrius of Pontus (346-399 AD).³⁶ Evagrius' influence came to the West through the writings of his disciple, John Cassian (360-435 AD).³⁷ This section describes elements of Christian spirituality observed in the Desert Fathers.

In Egyptian monasticism, much emphasis is placed on the virtue of *humility* – in fact, the ideal of a powerful, charismatic holy man recedes.³⁸ This explains the exhortation of the Desert Fathers to cultivate the fear of God and to purify the heart³⁹ since these elements would lead to humility.

Most prominence, however, is given to *self-knowledge* and *realism* – which involves paying attention to oneself, and the virtue of discernment.⁴⁰ Important was to diagnose exactly what is going on at any given moment – that is, seeing a situation clearly for what it is, and thereby becoming free from a distorted perspective which underlies sin.⁴¹ The Desert Fathers strove to cope with the disorder in their own souls – that is, by honestly and realistically facing their thoughts and temptations this was where they met and did battle with the demons.⁴² Knowledge and mastery of self, then, were two ideals – in other words, *judgement* and *watchfulness*,⁴³ or inner perception.⁴⁴ Consequently, the

³⁶ Ryan, “The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers”, 95.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ S. Tugwell, “The Desert Fathers”, in *Ways of Imperfection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), 15.

³⁹ Rousseau, “The Desert Fathers”, 122.

⁴⁰ Tugwell, “The Desert Fathers”, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 20. Philip Rousseau in “The Desert Fathers, Antony and Pachomius” notes that most important, a clear distinction was made between demons and ‘thoughts’. Further, he writes that although a demon might wish to drag a monk back to sensuality and error, he had the most limited access to the mind, and in particular to any spiritual mechanism of resistance based on prayer and reflection.

⁴³ Rousseau, “The Desert Fathers”, 122.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

elders were seen more as intercessors and who would pray for a disciple's spiritual progress, rather than provide detailed recommendations.⁴⁵

A misconception about the Desert Fathers is that they lacked *fraternal charity*.⁴⁶ On the contrary, a social dimension,⁴⁷ or community experience,⁴⁸ existed – fraternal charity was expressed in ways such as offering and sharing food with any visitor; refraining from undue interference with other people; restraining from criticizing others; not condemning the sinfulness of others; showing gentleness in the face of others' weaknesses; submitting to others; and allowing the example of forbearance to convert others.⁴⁹ Philip Rousseau supports this conclusion of a social consciousness held by the Desert Fathers by referring to the value attached to consultation, charity, tenderness, affection, concern, and active service.⁵⁰

Another significant element of the spirituality of the Desert Fathers is their desire to interrelate the life of *contemplation* and the life of *action* – the life of the heart and the life of labour.⁵¹ Philip Rousseau summarizes this observation by writing that “a complex interweaving of attitude and endeavour characterized the asceticism of the desert”.⁵²

Finally, Pachomius (circa 290-346 AD), a contemporary of Antony, is credited for having begun to establish monasteries⁵³ – he wrote the first rule for monks to regulate their communal life.⁵⁴ His contribution to spirituality can be listed as follows: *obedience* (necessary for order and cohesion in the monastery), *uniformity* (showing an individual's

⁴⁵ Ibid., 121-122.

⁴⁶ Tugwell, “The Desert Fathers”, 17.

⁴⁷ Rousseau, “The Desert Fathers”, 121.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁹ Tugwell, “The Desert Fathers”, 17-18.

⁵⁰ Rousseau, “The Desert Fathers”, 124.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ryan, “The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers”, 93.

⁵⁴ Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1998), 47. King writes that “this rule governed development of cenobitic, or communal, monasticism, which eventually replaced the eremitic, or solitary type of ascetic life. It was the generally accepted monastic rule until the sixth century, when St. Benedict of Nursia, in central Italy, wrote the Benedictine rule, which gave medieval monasticism its definite and lasting shape in the West” (p. 47).

subordination to the community), *poverty* (involving the monk’s dependence on the community and abandonment of his own will/judgement), *community* (including prayers in common and meals shared), and *discretion* (a certain moderation).⁵⁵

Conclusion

A number of significant elements for spirituality emerging from Ignatius of Antioch, Athanasius, and the Desert Fathers have been described. Elements with relevance for a contemporary spirituality are presented in Table 1 below. Each element has been alluded to and briefly described in the text of the essay.

Table 1. Elements for Contemporary Spirituality

Based on Ignatius of Antioch, Athanasius, and the Desert Fathers

<u>Ignatius</u>	<u>Athanasius</u>	<u>Desert Fathers</u>
“Christ in us” and “Christ-bearing”	Purgative life – the way of purification	Humility – through fear of God and purity
Christian love and the imitation of Christ	Illuminative life – spiritual betrothal	Self-knowledge – through self-mastery
“In God” and “in Christ”	Unitive life – spiritual marriage ⁵⁶	Realism – freedom from distorted views
A Eucharistic approach to life	Solitude – furnace of transformation	Judgement – through discernment
Faithfulness to Church structure	Prayer – nurtured by Scripture reading	Watchfulness – or inner perception

⁵⁵ Ryan, “The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers”, 94.

⁵⁶ King, *Christian Mystics*, 22. I am indebted to Ursula King here for the wording of *purgative*, *illuminative*, and *unitive*.

Attaining God and Christ	Silence – promoting a pure faith	Fraternal charity – love for one’s neighbour
Unity of the Church in the Eucharist	Demons – the need to control one’s thoughts	Discretion – or moderation
Participating in the Source of all holiness	Contemplation and action – a balance	Attitude and endeavour – balance

Source: Broken Bay Institute, *Studies in Historical Spirituality*

(*SP412*): *Readings*, vol. 1 (Pennant Hills, Australia: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008).

Bibliography

Bouyer, L. *History of Christian Spirituality: The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, vol. 1. London: Burns and Oates, 1960.

Heick, Otto W. *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965.

King, Ursula. *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1998.

McGinn, B. and J. Meyendorff, eds. *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the 12th Century*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1986.

_____. *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1. New York: Crossroads, 1992.

Merton, Thomas. "Church and Bishop". *Worship* 37, no. 2 (January 1963): 110-120.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Way of the Heart*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1981.

Rousseau, P. "The Desert Fathers, Antony and Pachomius". In *Study of Spirituality*, ed. C. Jones, 119-130. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Ryan, P. "The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers". *Faith and Culture: Issues for the Australian Church* 6 (1982): 86-95.

Tugwell, S. "The Desert Fathers". In *Ways of Imperfection*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984.

Woolley, P. "Antiochene Theology". In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell, 72-73. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001.