

Exercise 7.2

While the initial motivation for seeking the desert and monasticism was a response to persecution by Pagan rulers, it flowered as a response to the removal of the threat of martyrdom when Constantine made Christianity respectable and the uncertainty of Roman life generally as they faced the balance of power tipping toward the barbarians.

Once the Church becomes part of the ruling party, the level of rigour is inevitably going to decrease. Merely being part of a persecuted Church was enough to fulfil the need for extreme commitment felt by those who respond to that form of spirituality. Now, the distractions of a worldly Christianity impinged on their need to seek God:

Everyone baptized into Christ, every true seeker, is called to the freedom of the children of God. This was essentially the quest of the desert: freedom—to be free to be oneself, to be who we truly are, to celebrate our oneness in our common humanity and in our call to share in the bliss of the divinity...The men and women of the desert wanted the liberating force of the Spirit to have the greatest possible freedom to work in their lives. {M. Basil Pennington, preface to Helen Waddell (ed.) *The Desert Fathers* (New York: Vintage, 1998), xvi-xvii.}

For the fourth century Church, monasticism goes beyond the solitary to provide a new model of community, providing a framework for work, production and distribution as well as worship and charity. These communities welcomed the troubled and the visitor and their impulse to eschew worldly goods allowed a surplus to assist the needy.

Monasticism was also a powerhouse of intellectual endeavour and provided classics of Church literature that were influential well into the Middle Ages. It was also an important portal into mysticism and the development of the contemplative life within the Church.

The extract from the “Life of Antony” in Hamman (67) shows the features of hagiography in its idealised presentation of the virtues of the saint. It is a wonder that people who were so much fun to be around were allowed to leave for the desert. Lecky uncharitably gives the opposing view of hermits describing them generically as:

A hideous, distorted and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, spending his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious self-torture, and quailing before the ghostly phantoms of his delirious brain. (in Waddell 7)

There is a hint of the wonderworking in the prodigious memory Athanasius provides to his friend. In Jerome’s “The Life of St Paul, the First Hermit,” (Waddell, 30-43) St Antony is a main character and with a greater distance we now have magical behaviour by animals along with amazing feats of survival on virtually no food. This well on the way to incorruptible corpses and miracles attributed to relics.