

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

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From its first appearance to its legalisation under Constantine, Christianity was an illegal religion in the eyes of the Roman state. For the first two centuries of its existence, Christianity and its practitioners were unpopular with the people at large. Christians were always suspect, members of a "secret society" whose members communicated with a private code and who shied away from the public sphere. It was popular hostility—the anger of the crowd—which drove the earliest persecutions, not official action. Around 112, the governor of Bithynia-Pontus, (now Anatolia), was sent long lists of denunciations of Christians by anonymous citizens. In Lyon in 177, it was only the intervention of civil authorities that stopped a pagan mob from dragging Christians from their houses and beating them to death.

To the followers of the traditional cults, Christians were odd creatures: not quite Roman, but not quite barbarians either. Their practices were deeply threatening to traditional mores. Christians rejected public festivals, refused to take part in the imperial cult, avoided public office, and publicly criticised ancient traditions. Conversions tore families apart: Justin Martyr tells of a pagan husband who denounced his Christian wife, and Tertullian tells of children disinherited for becoming Christians. Traditional Roman religion was inextricably interwoven into the fabric of Roman society and state, but Christians refused to observe its practices. In the words of Tacitus, Christians showed *odium generis humani* 'hatred of the human race'. Among the more credulous, Christians were thought to use black magic in pursuit of revolutionary aims, and to practice incest and cannibalism.

Official reaction grew firmer. In 202, Septimius Severus issued a general decree forbidding conversion to either Judaism or Christianity. Maximin targeted Christian leaders and Decius, demanding a show of support for the faith, proclaimed that all inhabitants of the empire must sacrifice to the gods, eat sacrificial meat, and testify to these acts. Christians were obstinate in their non-compliance. Church leaders, like Pope Fabian, and the bishop of Antioch, were arrested, tried and executed, as were certain members of the Christian laity. The Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria, who was

one of the most influential figures in early Christian theology, apologetics and asceticism and who has been described as ‘the greatest genius the early church ever produced’ was tortured during the persecution and died about a year after from the resulting injuries.

In this climate of intolerance and persecution many Christian monks fled to the Egyptian Desert where there had been a culture of monasticism for several centuries. The earliest Christian monks inhabited the desert land of the Middle East starting at the end of the second century. Known as the “Desert Fathers”, they left everything in search of knowing Jesus Christ by making the Gospels absolutely integral to their daily lives. They wanted to commit themselves totally (body, soul, mind, and will) to being a disciple of the Lord Jesus with a profound holy zeal moving them to become ever more like Christ. These monks practiced integrity of character with an unrelenting courage that required their whole being to remain in the state of constant humility that comes from knowing that they were loved by God. Paradoxically, their extraordinarily harsh penances often resulted in gentleness and patience towards others, especially other monks but also visitors who came seeking an understanding of the essence of spiritual life. These monks sought most of all to experience union with God in the quiet of the desert and in the silence of their hearts.

Paul of Thebes commonly known as Paul, the First Hermit or Paul the Anchorite, is regarded as the first Christian hermit, who was claimed to have lived alone in the desert of Egypt from the age of sixteen to the age of one hundred and thirteen years old. Although Paul is recognised as being the first hermit monk to go to the desert, it was Anthony the Great who launched the movement that became the Desert Fathers. Sometime around 270, Anthony heard a Sunday sermon stating that perfection could be achieved by selling all of one's possessions, giving the proceeds to the poor, and following Christ (Matt. 19:21). He followed the advice and made the further step of moving deep into the desert to seek complete solitude.

Anthony lived in a time of transition for Christianity—the Diocletianic Persecution in 303 was the last great formal persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. Only ten years later, Christianity was made legal in Egypt by Diocletian’s successor Constantine I. Those who left for the desert formed an alternate Christian society, at a time when it was no

longer a risk to be a Christian. The solitude, austerity, and sacrifice of the desert was seen by Anthony as an alternative to martyrdom, which was formerly seen by many Christians as the highest form of sacrifice. Anthony quickly gained followers eager to live their lives in accordance with this solidarity and separation from material goods. From these prohibitions it is recorded by Athanasius that Anthony received special privileges from God, such as the ability to heal the sick, inspire others to have faith in healing through God, and even converse with God on occasion. Around this time, desert monasticism appeared nearly simultaneously in several areas, including Egypt and Syria.

Over time, the model of Anthony and other hermits attracted many followers, who lived alone in the desert or in small groups. They chose a life of extreme asceticism, renouncing all the pleasures of the senses, rich food, baths, rest, and anything that made them comfortable. They instead focused their energies on praying, singing psalms, fasting, giving alms to the needy, and preserving love and harmony with one another while keeping their thoughts and desires for God alone. Thousands joined them in the desert, mostly men but also a handful of women. Religious seekers also began going to the desert seeking advice and counsel from the early Desert Fathers. By the time of Anthony's death, there were so many men and women living in the desert that it was described as 'a city' by Anthony's biographer.

The small communities founded by the Desert Fathers were the beginning of Christian monasticism. Initially Anthony and his followers lived as hermits in Lower Egypt, sometimes forming groups of two or three. Small informal communities began developing, until the monk Pachomius, seeing the need for a more formal structure, established a monastery with rules and organisation in Upper Egypt. His regulations included discipline, obedience, manual labour, silence, fasting, and long periods of prayer—some historians view the rules as being inspired by Pachomius' experiences as a Roman soldier.

The first fully organized monastery with Pachomius included men and women living in separate quarters, up to three in a room. They supported themselves by weaving cloth and baskets, along with other tasks and they wore simple peasant clothing with a hood. Each new monk or nun had a three-year probationary period, concluding with admittance

in full standing to the monastery. All property was held communally, meals were eaten together and in silence, twice a week they fasted. Meals were usually served in the general refectory, although those adhering to a stricter fast would eat (or not) alone in their rooms. Communal meals may have consisted of cheese (served only outside periods of fasting), pickles, greens, olives and cooked or raw vegetables and greens. It was advised that a monk always keep extra bread in his cell in case he received a visitor, as hospitality - even during periods of abstinence - was highly appreciated. Wine was a valuable commodity, and vineyards are commonly mentioned. Many types of wine were known but attitudes towards its consumption varied, from being acceptable in moderation to completely 'unknown' among the monastics and certainly not for them. However, monks getting drunk and climbing upon rooftops was not an unheard-of occurrence

Several times a day they came together for prayer and readings, and each person was expected to spend time alone meditating on the scriptures. Programs were created for educating those who came to the monastery unable to read. Pachomius also formalised the establishment of an *abba* (Aramaic for father) or *amma* (mother) in charge of the spiritual welfare of their monks and nuns, with the implication that those joining the monastery were also joining a new family. Members also formed smaller groups, with different tasks in the community and the responsibility of looking after each other's welfare. The new approach grew to the point that there were tens of thousands of monks and nuns in these organized communities within decades of Pachomius' death. One of the early pilgrims to the desert was Basil the Great, who took the Rule of Pachomius into the Eastern Church. Basil expanded the idea of community by integrating the monks and nuns into the wider public community, with the monks and nuns under the authority of a bishop and serving the poor and needy.

One of the most influential theologians in the late fourth-century church, Evagrius Ponticus was well known as a thinker, polished speaker, and gifted writer. He was born in 345 into a Christian family in the small town of Ibora, in the late Roman province of Helenopontus. He was educated in Neocaesarea, where he was ordained as a lector under Basil the Great. Around 380 he joined Gregory of Nazianzus in Constantinople,

where Gregory had been installed as bishop, and was promoted to deacon. He stayed on in Constantinople after Gregory left in July 381, and eventually became an archdeacon. When Emperor Theodosius convened the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, Evagrius was present, despite Gregory's premature departure.

According to the biography written by Palladius, Constantinople offered many worldly attractions, and Evagrius's vanity was aroused by the high praise of his peers. Eventually, he became infatuated with a married woman. Amid this temptation, he is said to have had a vision in which he was imprisoned by the soldiers of the governor at the request of the woman's husband. This vision, and the warning of an attendant angel, made him flee from the capital and head for Jerusalem.

For a short time, he stayed with Melania the Elder and Rufinus of Aquileia in a monastery near Jerusalem. Melania the Elder was a wealthy widow who was born in Spain in 325, she was one of the Desert Mothers and a spiritual mentor to Evagrius. According to Palladius even in Jerusalem Evagrius could not forsake his vainglory and pride. He apparently took special care of his dress, and spent much of his time sauntering through the streets of the cosmopolitan Holy City. He fell gravely ill and only after he confessed his troubles to Melania, and accepted her instruction to become a monk was he restored to health. After being made a monk at Jerusalem in 383, he joined a cenobitic community of monks in Nitria in Lower Egypt in around 385, but after some years moved to Kellia. There he spent the last fourteen years of his life pursuing studies under Macarius of Alexandria and Macarius the Great (who had been a disciple of Anthony the Great, and lived at the monastic colony of Scetis, about 25 miles away). Evagrius lived an ascetic life. He ate only once a day and did not consume fruit, meat or vegetables or any cooked food. He also refrained from bathing. His extreme diet ruined his digestive tract and it is suspected he suffered from urinary tract stones. Evagrius did not sleep more than third of a night and devoted much time to contemplation and prayer.

Most Egyptian monks of that time were illiterate. Evagrius, a highly educated classical scholar, is believed to be one of the first people to begin recording and systematising the erstwhile oral teachings of the monastic authorities known as the *Desert Fathers*.

Eventually, he also became regarded as a Desert Father, and several of his maxims appear in the 'Vitae Patrum' (a collection of sayings from early Christian monks).

Evagrius rigorously tried to avoid teaching beyond the spiritual maturity of his audiences. When addressing novices, he carefully stuck to concrete, practical issues. For example, in one of his Logismoi he includes this disclaimer:

‘I cannot write about all the villainies of the demons; and I feel ashamed to speak about them at length and in detail, for fear of harming the more simple-minded among my readers’.

The most prominent feature of his research was a system of categorising various forms of temptation. In 375 he developed a comprehensive list of eight evil thoughts (Logismoi), or eight terrible temptations, from which all sinful behaviour springs. This list was intended to serve a diagnostic purpose: to help readers identify the process of temptation, their own strengths and weaknesses, and the remedies available for overcoming temptation.

Evagrius stated, ‘The first thought of all is that of love of self; after this, the eight’.

The eight patterns of evil thought are gluttony, lust, greed, sadness, despondency, anger, vainglory, pride. Some two centuries later in 590 AD, Pope Gregory I, (Pope Gregory the Great) would revise this list. He combined despondency with sorrow, calling the combination the sin of sloth, vainglory with pride; and added envy to the list to form the more commonly known Seven Deadly Sins.

Evagrius taught that tears were the utmost sign of true repentance and that weeping, even for days at a time, opened one up to God.

The desert monastic communities that grew out of the informal gathering of hermit monks became the model for Christian monasticism. The eastern monastic tradition at Mount Athos and the western Rule of Saint Benedict were both strongly influenced by the traditions that began in the desert. All of the monastic revivals of the Middle Ages looked to the desert for inspiration and guidance. Much of Eastern Christian spirituality,

had its roots in the practices of the Desert Fathers. Even religious renewals such as the German evangelicals, and the Methodist Revival in England are seen by modern scholars as being influenced by the Desert Fathers.

One of the sayings from the Desert Fathers is, 'Take care to be silent. Empty your mind. Attend to your meditation in the fear of God, whether you are resting or at work. If you do this, you will not fear the attacks of the demons.'