

1# Selective Summary

The chapter entitled “The Desert Fathers” written by Peter Brown presents the early Christian monastic life tradition in the area surrounding the Egyptian Desert. Brown brings to light many questions concerning why one would chose this lifestyle and the effects that monasticism has on the community. Brown’s main focus in this particular section is to expose his readers to the central idea of self control, and such an aspect of self control encompasses the categories of physical and mental self, in addition to the spiritual nature. The actions an individual takes concerning sexual desire or substance intake is suggested by Brown as actions that can free or confine the person. Brown introduces the idea that the Desert Fathers monastic life caused social change brought about by self transformation:

The most bitter struggle of the desert ascetic was presented not so much as a struggle with his sexuality as with his belly. It was his triumph in the struggle with hunger that released, in the popular imagination, the most majestic and the most haunting images of a new humanity. Nothing less than the hope of Paradise regained flickered, spasmodically but recognizably, around the figures who had dared to create a human "city" in a landscape void of human food. 218

Although the book primarily concerns the sexuality of early Christian life, the preceding chapter’s topic includes an analysis that connects mankind’s intertwined connection to that which he consumes to the physical, spiritual and social connection that occur due to that need for consumption in the 4th century monastic communities. In this Brown, like any good scholar, presents to his readers his argument in a logical fashion by presenting facts and theories as support for his own argument. Brown presents Anthony who lived a monastic life in the 4th century. Anthony’s monastic lifestyle choice is the outcome of him refusing to fallow social customs of taking a bride and all that which come with it.

The struggle to overcome his sexual needs, therefore, was a necessary byproduct of the self-imposed annihilation of Anthony’s social status as a whole, which had come about after he had abandoned his wealth, given his money to the local poor, settled his sister as a dedicated virgin, and taken up his position on the edge of the desert. 214

Although in the end Anthony is known to history as a famous early Christian monk, “The Christians of Egypt firmly believed that a few great monks had been able to make their way back to the imaginative antipodes of the sterile sands of the desert” 221. Anthony himself did not live

in solitude, as one would presume with a desert monk, but rather once he achieved this sense of self sustainability, he ventured out gathering followers to help achieve the same, in this creating a monastic community.

Brown notes that during the 4th century there were many who departed from the social norms to conduct themselves in a desert monastic community lifestyle. For instance, Amun and his wife live in the desert as an act of renunciation. After eighteen years in assumed solitary living and at the beckoning of his wife Amun decided that “it was inapposite to hide such virtue” thus he gathered a small congregation of people living the same monastic lifestyle in the idea they can support each other spiritually and physically. Although this early monastic society lived close to civilization, a day and a half from Alexandria, it was their myth of existence in the desert which fascinated those who gazed upon and knew about them.

It was, above all, a myth of liberating precision. It delimited the towering presence of "the world," from which the Christian must be set free, by emphasizing a clear ecological frontier. It identified the process of disengagement from the world with a move from one ecological zone to another, from the settled land of Egypt to the desert. It was a brutally clear boundary, already heavy with immemorial associations. 216

They unchained themselves from the lifestyle of civilization and society, and they were able to slow themselves down and focus on what was important to them. The world which they exited was suggested by Brown as that of a world of “crowded villages with ceaseless labor and ended concern of famine” (220). They chose a social alternative in the middle of nowhere, which led to at first, a state of *adiaphoria*.

In it, the boundaries of man and desert, human and beast collapsed in chilling confusion... In moments when he was close to breakdown, the ascetic felt driven to wander as free and as mindless as a wild beast, gnawing at the scattered herbs, mercifully oblivious, at last, to the terrible ache of a belly tied to morsels of human bread, cruelly spaced out by the human rhythms of prayer and fasting. 220

By allowing their human nature to take over then they were no longer bound to the social chains, which encompasses all. Along with the realization that the social chains and dependency were broken, Brown suggests that the many early monks believed and lived by the idea that the first sin of Adam and Eve was not sexual but rather that of greed. By living the monastic life style, people were allowed one to live outside society and avoid the temptations or at least lessen the temptations that would occur if part of the normal social environment at the time. As living the monastic lifestyle in the desert, they would be transforming themselves into the ideal image

in which God made mankind, and therefore better resemble the original state of Adam and Eve, which is a state without temptation.

By excusing oneself from temptation one becomes an outcast of society, one who must rely on others in the same position for basic needs. This self-reliance with others for nutritional needs is part of the monastic lifestyle described by Brown. With self sustainability people who followed the monastic lifestyle had the view that body has, or originally had the capability of self sustainability. The ascetics of late antiquity tended to view the human body as an "autarkic" system. In ideal conditions, it was thought capable of running on its own "heat"; it would need only enough nourishment to keep that heat alive. In its "natural" state-a state with which the ascetics tended to identify the bodies of Adam and Eve-the body had acted like a finely tuned engine, capable of "idling" indefinitely. 223

Yet through time the human body became dependent and out of shape. Increasing intake caused an excess need, but by trainings one's body, one can achieve that original state of self sustainability, "Its drastic physical changes, after years of ascetic discipline, registered with satisfying precision the essential, preliminary stages of the long return of the human person, body and soul together, to an original, natural and uncorrupted state." 223

This state is often referred to as the "state of Adam". At this state there is no physical temptation on to the heart of man,

Physical temptations had vanished as mere epiphenomena; there lay an unbroken love for will of one's own, "deep down in the heart, like a snake hidden in the dung." Only when that will lay buried in a heart that had become as dead to self as the sterile sand of the desert would the monk be at peace: for he had learned, at long last, to take into his heart "the humility and the sweetness of the Son of God." This sweetness could be gained and shown only in the hard school of contact with others-with one's spiritual guides, with one's cell-mates, with the neighboring villagers, and with the crowds of visitors that were never far away, in Egypt, from the imagined stillness of the desert. 225

In this uncorrupted state one reaches the position which early Christian monks found in themselves "the humility and the sweetness of the Son of God". In having the ability of opening ones heart to this realization, one will not want to maintain this realization to oneself; they would undoubtedly yearn to spread it. By accepting the desert and a monastic community as the sole resources of one's own life allows one to live outside the system, one will regress to the natural state of mankind, the "State of Adam".

These monks brought forth a radical form of social behavior. Their survival, although not dependent upon the amount of pre-monistic requirement of substance, still needed a minimal intake of food and water. The little substance which they needed was given to them from those

who followed and those whom they served. A desert monk's social relationships, whether in or outside the monastic community, is that which defines his attitude concerning himself and his position in the world.

One saying of Anthony was held to have set the tone: "From your neighbor comes life and death." To the unchanging nexus of food and work that maintained the monk's humanity in the desert at all times, the Egyptian tradition added the nexus of acute dependence on other. 227

Brown made it clear that being free from temptations is one of the major components of the monastic lifestyle, but community and social interaction is still needed due to human nature. Thus monastic life at this time took on a new social role of its own. It became its own social powerhouse for a way of life. From renouncing "the world" to finding a position in the world in which mankind can live and coexist under the will of God with fellow mankind is the outcome of Desert Fathers monastic lifestyle.

2. Evaluation

The author's insights to early Christian monastic life are interesting. However, the connection to sustainability within that particular society in regards to human attempt of spirituality and living with nature is somewhat oblivious. If one were to understand the monastic lifestyle from this particular reading then one would be fairly lost. I do not blame or criticize the author, but rather I applaud him. His writing wants me to dive deeper in the subject. The bits and pieces he gave are only part of a bigger story in relation to a Christian monastic life as it could be connected to personal and nature/environmental sustainability from personal and community endeavors.

3. Relevance

Although the author's subject matter is that of sexuality and our class is studying sustainability of within the world, especially considering the aspect of agriculture, then this connection to the author is not clearly defined. Yet as majors and grad-students in the field of Humanities and Religious Studies (and other studies) one could make the connection on the bases of human need. Sexuality is not just the act of intercourse, but the love between all human beings, a sense of belonging and wanting is that which emerges through love. As early Christians lived a life under the guidance that Jesus Christ set, which was that of "Live a Life of

Love”. The basic human need for connection, which came out from Christ teachings could by far pass any cultural borders.

Likewise, food too is a basic human need for all. Many monks who chose to leave “the world” and live a life outside the chains of society still had basic human needs. For them, they tried to live as sustainable as possible, yet the help of fellow mankind would ease their eternal hunger. One can see that with this early monastic culture their need to follow their faith and Christ led them away from social norms to their own path. This path held them to a life where they relied on Nature, God, and the will of man to survive. One must acknowledge that this is one particular path in mankind’s search to coexist within “nature”, and ultimately preserve ourselves.