

**Inbar Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism*. Studies and Texts 213, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2018, x + 238 pp., ISBN: 9780888442130. Cloth \$80**

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This is an interesting and important study of the strategies for mental training that were developed by Christian ascetics in Egypt, Palestine and the Sinai in late antiquity. Although the extensive use that the author makes of modern cognitive and neuroscientific research means that the book will perhaps not be to everyone's taste, the book articulates a convincing argument about the motivations inspiring the cultivation of practices for cognitive formation and regulation. This argument is based on a thorough reading of a wide range of Christian ascetic and monastic writings from the second through to the sixth century that provides insights into the very human processes by which aspiring ascetics struggled to control their minds. Graiver's ascetics are not Peter Brown's virtuosi holy men, nor are they the identikit soldiers of Christ of some monastic rules; rather, they are individuals who strove to control their minds by processes of trial and error, via an ongoing iterative internal struggle. The book demonstrates that those who offered advice to their fellows drew on hard-won practical experience of inner struggle to achieve mastery of their minds in pursuit of true asceticism. In demonstrating that the ideal internal monastic subjectivity was not often achieved in practice – a fact of which the authors under consideration were acutely aware – the book therefore focuses on an aspirational process of psychological training rather than an achieved mental state.

The Introduction (pp. 1-29) lays out the scope of the study, makes a convincing justification for the use of modern research into cognition, and offers a thorough overview of the wide range of sources consulted. The *Lausiac History*, the *Apothegmata patrum*, and the writings of Evagrius and John Cassian all loom large, but these are deployed alongside a plethora of other sources from the fourth and fifth centuries, with occasional references to earlier and later texts. Throughout the book, Graiver demonstrates how Christian practices of ascetic mental training drew on – and intensified – pre-existing philosophical, intellectual, and religious traditions.

The first chapter, 'The Ascetic Self' (pp. 30-71) begins by addressing understandings of the 'self' in Pauline discourse and in ancient philosophy before moving on to examine late antique Christian – specifically monastic/ ascetic – conceptions. Graiver argues convincingly that monastic writers aimed to address the practical concerns of their monastic audiences: «What these audiences needed was a practical guide dealing with actual occurrences and experiences. At the same time, these authors sought to shape their readers

and promote their spiritual formation. They did so by presenting them with an ideal self model, whose inner unity and peace would allow them to devote themselves single-mindedly to the contemplation of God.» (p. 34)

The rest of the book explores the various strategies for cultivating the ideal ascetic self that such authors suggested to their audiences. The chapter includes a fascinating discussion of how modern research into 'mind wandering' can help us to understand the methods that were proposed to help ascetics to maintain mental focus. Graiver suggests that the prevalence of demons in writings about the ascetic experience 'gives concrete expression to the tension between the ideal self model prescribed by monastic theology and the actual constitution of embodied selves' (p. 65).

Chapter 2, *Control of the Self* (pp. 72-95), examines the programmes that were laid down to achieve the 'ambitious goals of self-control' that were expected within the 'Eastern monastic tradition' (p. 72). Here psychological literature on self-control is brought usefully to bear, while Christian ascetic discourse on the topic is situated in relation to the well-known focus of Graeco-Roman philosophical and ethical literature on self-mastery. Christian ascetic literature focuses on the need to direct attention towards God via an intensely contemplative process.

In the next chapter, 'The Challenges of Attentiveness' (pp. 96-128), Graiver surveys the recurrent problems that early monks faced through analysis of the questions that they posed to their spiritual fathers. Interestingly, it seems that misguided strategies of attentiveness had the inherent potential to cause of such problems in the first place. The fourth chapter, 'The Besieged Mind' (pp. 129-162), examines a regular challenge faced by late antique monks: «a demonically induced psychological state characterized by uncontrollable preoccupation with sinful thoughts» (p. 129). Such states of mind find expression in the prevalent use of vocabulary and metaphors relating to sieges. The idea of demonic siege seems to have been virtually ubiquitous. As a response, ascetic authors began to distinguish between different degrees or stages of demonic assault, in the process laying the ground for more nuanced responses to the needs of their interlocutors. Chapter 5, 'Removing the Blockage' (pp. 163-187), focuses on one of the approaches that ascetic writers proposed for dealing with 'the tyranny of afflictive thoughts' to 'help them develop healthier ways of thinking': a confessional procedure that the Greek fathers termed self-disclosure (p. 163). The chapter argues that self-disclosure – especially when carried out repeatedly and accompanied by detached introspection – helped to heal dysfunctional patterns of thinking. In summary, Graiver is to be commended for producing a book that so consistently and successfully marries the disciplines of history, theology, and psychology; that the volume closes with a call to further transdisciplinary research is therefore entirely fitting.