

**ASCETICISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH OF SYRIA:
The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism
Sidney H. Griffith, *Asceticism*, Oxford University Press, 1995**

The first part of Father Sidney Griffith's article on early Syrian monasticism offered the hope of an interesting deconstruction of the seemingly bizarre practices of early Syrian monastics. He quotes Peter Brown saying that the Syrian conception of monasticism was a "freedom that resembled that of the beasts, wandering up the mountainsides to graze, with the sheep, on the natural grasses". He also refers to the stylite movement. When he made his recent BBC series on Christianity, Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch tells how he was fascinated by St Simon Stylite as a small boy and it was touching to see his enthusiasm and excitement when finally visiting the remains of Simon's pillar. Professor MacCulloch romantically speculates about the role of the stylite perched between heaven and earth as being a sort of living doorway that opens onto the next world. Yet Fr Griffith does not pursue this subject any further. He also mentions another exciting subject at the start of this essay - the alarm caused by the Messalians. That certainly sparked my interest. What could be more interesting than a hermeneutic of the theology of a monastic group that believed a demon was united to everyone's soul and, as the demon was not cast out at Baptism, one had to pray ceaselessly to dislodge it. With its dislodgment the soul would instantly be granted a vision of the Holy Trinity that the demon has thus far been obscuring. Wondering eccentric monks eating grass like the sheep in high mountain passes, monks trying to rip demons out of their chests, and monks living half way between heaven and earth are all interesting enough to keep even a modern teenager riveted. Yet Fr Griffith simply mentions them in passing.

It was difficult to figure out where Fr Griffith was going with this essay. In the first paragraph it looks as though he is going to discuss the specific characteristics of Syrian monastic life. In the second paragraph there are hints that the essay will instead be an exploration of non canonical texts, such as the *Odes of Solomon* and the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, that he believes provide a foundation for Syrian asceticism. He then moves quickly on to discuss the influence that Marcionism, Manichaeism and Bar Daysan played in the formation of the Syrian Christian mindset. Either of these two subjects would have most interesting.

In the next part of his introduction he delves into the problems in the academic study of Syrian asceticism. He claims that the prevailing views on the subject are flawed because they are based upon mistaken assumptions about the origins of the ascetic movement as well as on scholarly mistakes about the dating of several crucial source texts. It seems clear that the 'prevailing view' of

Syrian asceticism he is referring to is that which he references in his opening paragraph. Peter Brown is used as an example.

Fr Griffith goes on to discuss the problem of interpreting Syrian asceticism through Byzantine eyes by reading such texts as Theodoret of Cyrrhus's *History of the Monks of Syria*, Palladius's *Historia Lausiaca*, and Sozomen's *Church History*. He makes the point that these texts present hagiographical iconic portraits of important Syrian ecclesiastics such as Ephraem the Syrian and Jacob of Nisibis. At this point I was unable to follow Fr Griffith's argument. He points out that these Byzantine hagiographies conform to Syro-Byzantine hagiographies found in monastic circles in the 5th and 6th centuries. Yet he claims that the distortion of the Byzantine hagiographies do not shed light on the historical profiles of Syrian figures, such as Ephraem, the way that a Syrian manuscript would be able to. Yet he does not mention any such texts. Why does he explicitly mention distorting texts from the Eastern Empire and not mention the Syrian ones that presumably would be important for the current article? He also does not explain why a Syrian hagiography would distort the historical character less than a Byzantine hagiography. Hagiography by its very nature distorts historicity. Does he mean that the closer in time, culture and geography that a hagiography is written to its subject then the more likely it is that it will contain accurate historical information? If so, why does he not just say this? The impression is given that there is a problem with Byzantine hagiography of Syrians for some other reason. Perhaps it is a mistaken view about the nature of Syrian religious life that distorts everything written West of Edessa? He confuses the issue further by adding that even popular Syrians like St Awgin make the same mistake the Byzantines do. What is this mistake?

We turn from this argument to his assertion that a major scholarly mistake made in modern times has been to attribute several key texts to St Ephraem. These texts tell the stories of the Syrian Ascetics who went out to the mountains or into the deserts to live out an anchorite ideal. He gives us the names of some of the more important ones: *Letter to the Mountaineers*; *On the Solitary Life of the Anchorites*; *On Anchorites, Hermits and Mourners*; another similar work of the same name as the previous; and *On Solitaries*. Fr Griffith claims these were written well after the time of St Ephraem sometime in the 5th century probably around the time of Isaac of Antioch. Thus these stories tell us nothing about the origins of Syrian asceticism but rather later developments of the anchorite ideal. Yet again, I had trouble following his logic. I am sure Fr Griffith has excellent reasons for being so precise about the importance of the dates he uses. He is adamant that the writings of the later part of the 5th century (c.475) can show nothing about the character of early Syrian asceticism that would have begun in the first quarter of the 4th century and the beginning of

anchorites with Julian Saba (d.367). It is probably one hundred and fifty years after the beginning of Syrian asceticism that the stories of the Syrian anchorites flourished with the tales of extreme practices. I understand why these later texts will have little in them to illuminate the beginnings of Syrian asceticism but I do not understand why they would be seen as totally different phenomena instead of a continuation of a specific cultural expression of asceticism? This is especially true if the claim made by Fr Griffith that Syrian asceticism, although sharing some similarities with the proto-monasticism in the Egyptian desert personified by St Anthony and St Pachomius, had from the beginning some very specific cultural and theological particularities is true.

Fr Griffiths backs up the obvious point that to understand the beginnings of Syrian asceticism the best sources are the earliest, in this case Aphrahat 'The Persian Sage' (died c. 345CE) and Ephraem the Syrian (306-373CE). Yet the waters become muddied again, for he then claims that the development of the first concept of ascetics as 'singles' like those of the Biblical widows and virgins eventually became the anchorite ideal in Julian Saba. He claims that Ephraem's hymns about Julian Saba are written

"in a religious vocabulary that had already become traditional, while at the same time they indicate a paradigm shift in the forms of asceticism that, in an uncanny way, transmutes traditional ascetical terminology."

How does an ascetical terminology become traditional in such a short period of time? St Anthony, who was living an ascetical life before that of the Syrian ascetics, only died in 356CE during the lifetime of both Ephraem and Julian Saba. It seems as if the time frame must be much shorter if the beginning of Syrian asceticism and the rise of the anchorite ideal both happened in the early to mid 3rd century. I am sure that Fr Griffith understands his subject matter thoroughly and that the evolution of the different types of early Christian asceticism in Syria is clear in his mind. He is, therefore, able to see the rise of a terminology and 'traditional' form being transmuted into something else. Yet he does not make this clear to the reader. Considering the short period of time begin discussed (over one lifetime) this is a problem.

Strangely, he then jumps to a brief discussion about Syrian monasticism in the late 4th century and all of the 5th century. He discussed the establishment of monasteries and the merger of these into hierarchical structures of 'Eusebius's Constantinian Great Church'. *The Liber graduum* of the late 4th or early 5th century exemplifies this new ascetic ideal. This is the ideal that Peter Brown (mentioned now for the third time in three pages) sees as typically Syrian. Later exemplars of the tradition that dominate the Syrian ascetical understanding of itself are found in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus,

Palladius and Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Yet Fr Griffith, once again, reminds us that these are not the original Syrian ascetics. This, he claims, is a new form of asceticism that emerged after the Peace of Constantine and that at this point the movement can now properly be called monastic.

Finally, after a few pages, Fr Griffith lays out the real purpose of the essay:

“to look again at several key terms in the traditional Syriac vocabulary of asceticism and monasticism with the intention of highlighting their denotations and connections within the Syrian hermeneutical horizon.”

He then proceeds, in great detail, to explore the way Aphrahat and Ephraem use the words: *ihidaya*, *bnay qyama*, and *abila*.

It is at this point that I felt led down the proverbial ‘garden path’. There were numerous hints that a feast with fine wines awaited one at the end of one of the several various paths the good Father seemed to be about to lead us down. Instead he suddenly darted down a side path not even alluded to beforehand and at the end of this path one found only a bowl of cold, lumpy, day old porridge. Nourishing it might be, but rather a let down compared to the tantalising other possibilities one was imagining.

I am at a loss to understand the substantial lead up to the meat of this essay. It seems as if Fr Griffith wants everyone to understand that their view of Syrian asceticism is wrong because it is based on a later development of the movement. Instead they should focus on the earliest form of Syrian asceticism to truly see its character. This is simply bizarre. You would no more tell someone speaking about the Monastic ideal of the Benedictines or the spirit of the Franciscans that they were missing the point and that they needed instead to look to *The Life of Saint Anthony*. Even this is not a good enough analogy as Fr Griffith believes the hagiographical works obscure the real asceticism. So instead you would have to tell someone not only to ignore Benedict and Francis but also to ignore Anthony himself and look instead to the theological terminology used by St Athanasius when writing the *Vita Antonii*. No one would normally do this. Things evolve and the most striking manifestations tend to get the most attention. Although chickens may get annoyed that the ostriches and peacocks get all the attention, this in no way makes them any less representatives of the avian family. More specifically, no one would tell someone interested in the study of birds alive today that, if they really want to understand birds, they should rather study the fossils of the reptiles that eventually became birds. The only people who would take this approach so unconsciously are specialist academics who take it for granted that one must try and reconstruct the past by looking at source material. Fr

Griffiths endeavour is as proper an exercise for an hermeneutical historian as the study of the evolution of dinosaurs into birds is for an avian palaeontologist. What I do not understand is all the meandering around at the beginning of the essay and the attempt to suggest that his exploration of early Syrian ascetic terminology in some way more real than the later development of Syrian Monasticism or more worthy of attention. He himself even says they are two different things.

Although I was disappointed that he did not take any of the paths he hinted at at the beginning the essay, the discussion on early Christian asceticism was quite interesting. However, the entire rest of the essay is in a realm that no non expert can possibly comment on. I do not speak Syriac let alone early Syriac. Nor do I speak Persian. My Greek and Hebrew is also not up to scratch to be able to have any comment whatsoever on the conclusions Fr Griffiths draws from comparisons between these languages and terms within them. He refers to a twenty year debate in academic circles on the use of the term *ihidaya* and mentions the main contributors but does not give the reader a thorough enough background on each of the arguments to follow the debate but rather only the different conclusions they each came to.

It was interesting to see the subtle and multifaceted meaning that can be drawn from a single word. It is also clear that the use of these words to describe the earliest ascetics in Syria had deep theological meaning for the theological writers who used them. However, nowhere does Fr Griffith tie the use of the words back to the reality of practice by these same early ascetics. At the most you can see that the concept of what they were and what they represented was clear to Aphrahat and Ephraem. It is not clear that the ascetics themselves had such a sophisticated interpretation of their own spirituality or Christological typology.

Fr Griffith makes it clear that one of the meanings of *ihidaya* to describe the early ascetics was 'oneness with the Son'. Aphrahat's Rule reads:

"These things are fitting for the *ihidaya*, those who take on the heavenly yoke, to become disciples to Christ. For so is it fitting for Christ's disciples to emulate Christ their Lord."

Thus the *ihidaya* came in early Syrian Christianity

"to anticipate symbolically, almost in an iconic fashion, the situation of paradise restored, he represented publically and liturgically humanities' response to the salvation offered to them in the incarnation (Passion, death, Resurrection) of God's only son."

Interestingly, what connected with me the most in the main body of the essay was not this point made by Fr Griffith but rather this point coupled with the point made about Stylites by Professor

MacCulloch. If the ihidaya was a public icon of Christ, especially the restored character of man in paradise shown in the Resurrected Christ, then where else would he be but on display on a platform between heaven and earth for all the world to see? The idea of the Stylites all of a sudden made perfect sense to me. Yet I may be wrong as Fr Griffith makes no connections between his theological terminology and actual practice and Professor McCulloch was only romantically speculating.

Fr Griffith makes no concluding observations or statements and does not address any of his opening forays down other paths again. The essay just stops after discussing some technical aspects of the last word he is exploring.

A.N. Wilson, in the Anglican Theological Review of the Summer of 2000, said of the book this essay is contained within, that with a few exceptions (Fr Griffiths was not one of the ones signalled out)

“this collection suffers from the weaknesses almost ineluctably attendant on its genre: each essay is, necessarily, highly specific, yet the collection as a whole is very broad. The result is that most essays are too specialized to profit any single reader, including most professional scholars. The lack of any real unity among the essays is indirectly suggested by the frequency with which "response" papers do not in fact comment on other papers, but end up becoming mini-papers of their own on yet another topic.”

In conclusion, I found the topic actually addressed interesting and educational although it is so specialised I have no basis on which to judge his conclusions rather than Fr Griffiths excellent academic reputation. However some of his methodological criticisms were not just weak but odd and sometimes self-contradictory. My assumption is that he was writing to a very specialised audience and that those familiar with the academic landscape in which this essay is found would have easily followed his thoughts and speculations as the presuppositions would be well known. It was also probably a given, to those in the field, that he would concentrate on the historical terminology as a balance to the current discussion on early Syrian asceticism. Yet I do not know what this discussion is and so his emphasis, taken out of context, seemed quite unbalanced. To an outside reader it was not an effective or convincing way to introduce the subject of early Christian Syrian asceticism. I am afraid I am with Professor MacCulloch; I would rather explore Saints living on top of pillars and monks living like wild men high up in the mountains.