1

INTO THE AFRICAN DESERT

O that I had wings like a dove,
to fly away and be at rest.
So I would escape far away
and take refuge in the desert.
(PSALM 54:7–8)[1]

Let us go outside the camp and bear the abuse Jesus endured. For here we have not a lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.
(HEBREWS 13:13–14)

Anthony persuaded many to take up the solitary life. And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens.
(ST ATHANASIUS)[2]

1. Gelineau, *The Psalms*.
2. Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 42–43.

> Here, on the boundary of the church, was the place where the awareness that grace is costly and that grace includes discipleship was preserved. People left everything they had for the sake of Christ and tried to follow Jesus' strict commandments through daily exercise. Monastic life thus became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity, against the cheapening of grace.
>
> (DIETRICH BONHOEFFER)[3]

During our visit to Egypt in 1997, we attended a Sunday evening service in St Mark's Coptic Cathedral in Alexandria. The huge building was overflowing with some three thousand worshipers; the service was conducted by several bishops, all of them monks. Pope Shenouda III gave a lengthy homily on angels and answered questions from the congregation on being a faithful Christian in an alien world. As patriarch of Alexandria, Shenouda was a successor to St Mark, the companion of St Peter. According to tradition, Mark brought Christianity to Egypt, became the first bishop of Alexandria, and died there as a martyr. Before the service we were taken to the crypt where Mark's head is preserved; the rest of his relics, kept for centuries in Venice, are now beneath the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo. This is a potent reminder that the Coptic Church is built on its martyrs, the supreme model of discipleship.

Reflecting on that visit to Alexandria, and on how immediate the legacy of saints and martyrs remains for Coptic Christians, I imagine what it must have been like for Christians who lived there in the late third and early fourth centuries. By then, the Coptic (that is, Egyptian) church was strong, its patriarch occupied the second most important episcopal see in the catholic church after Rome, its "noble company of martyrs" were universally revered, and its theologians were becoming influential in the shaping of orthodoxy and combatting heresy.

But the Upper Nile region was also a place of intellectual ferment. Second only to Rome in the empire, Alexandria was famous as the "new Athens" because of its distinguished academy. This was the birthplace of Neoplatonism, a philosophy integrating Hellenistic and Oriental wisdom, sponsored by Emperor Julian in a "last great attempt of paganism to express itself in terms of a philosophical theology" that could

3. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 46–47.

counter Christian claims and promote both "science and life for the ancient mind."[4] There was also a strong gnostic presence in the region, some of it predating Christianity, and some that arose within the church itself in an attempt to accommodate Christian faith to pagan ideas. Indeed, among the ancient Coptic texts found at the important archeological site of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945–1946 were some that were a mixture of gnostic and Christian ideas dating back to the fourth century, including the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel according to St. Thomas.

Alexandria was also home to the largest Jewish community outside Palestine. It was there that the Old Testament was translated into Greek (called the Septuagint, or abbreviated LXX), and there that Philo (20 BCE—50 CE), the Jewish philosopher, visionary, and mystic, brilliantly blended Neoplatonism with Judaism. But in Christian circles, Alexandria was best known for the Catechetical School, which was established in the second century and made famous by its founding theologians, St Clement (150–215) and Origen (185–254), who attempted to bridge the gap between the world of biblical faith and Hellenistic philosophy. Attempts to do so had already begun in Rome when Justin Martyr (100–165) followed Philo and adapted the Stoic understanding of the *logos*, the sustaining power of the universe, to the Word "made flesh" in Christ.[5]

It is also symbolic that we should begin our exploration of monasticism in Alexandria because there has always been a tension in its history between the city and the desert, as there has been between the academy and the monastery. When St Athanasius (296–373), patriarch of Alexandria, later wrote that the "desert was made a city by monks," he was being intentional, for the first monastics were engaged in building a new Jerusalem, firmly convinced that "here we have no lasting city, for we are looking for the city that is to come."[6] Monasticism might have been conceived and gestated in the city or its surrounding villages, but it grew and developed in the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Asia Minor out of a burning desire of some earnest Christians to know God. To what extent this desire was influenced by Neoplatonism is not certain, but we do know that Neoplatonism, especially as interpreted by Origen, was an important source for the Christian mysticism that would eventually flourish within monasticism.

4. Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 51.
5. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 56–64.
6. Hebrews 13:14.

The Desire for God

Nancy Maguire devotes a chapter to desire in her remarkable book on Carthusian monasticism, which she describes as the "most austere monastic order." The desire for God, she says, is that which compels people to become monks, in the same way as mountaineers "feel a compelling attraction for the extremes of human experience. They want to push the limits in their search for God."[7] This desire can sometimes become unhealthy, even demonic, as Thomas Mann so powerfully explored in *Dr Faustus*, because the desire *for* God can become the desire to *be* God, a desire for power and control, not a desire for love.[8]

The desire for God is fundamental to human experience, whether expressed in those words, or as a striving for transcendence, a journey into mystery, or simply as mysticism. St Paul acknowledges this in his famous sermon on the Areopogus in Athens where, having debated with the Hellenistic philosophers of the day, he recognizes the "unknown God" described by one of their poets as the One "in whom we live, move, and have our being."[9] Among his handful of converts that day was Dionysius the Areopagite, someone who was later confused with another Dionysius, a sixth-century Syrian monk, who had a great influence on the development of Christian mysticism, as we shall soon see.

Paul's sermon in Athens gave Christians the go-ahead to engage non-Christian poets and philosophers in expressing their faith.[10] Both Clement and Origen at the Catechetical School in Alexandria grasped the opportunity.[11] Following Philo, they brought biblical faith into conversation with the Hellenistic mystical tradition exemplified in Neoplatonism. Philo's achievement was no mean feat. Neoplatonism spoke of the transcendent in impersonal terms, the ultimate or absolute One, whereas the Bible speaks of God as personal, the God of Abraham and Sarah. The Bible also understands the human person in terms of the image of this God and speaks of a relationship of trust in God as creator and redeemer. And salvation is not absorption of the soul into the absolute, but redemption from sin, human wholeness, the reconciliation of relationships, and the resurrection of the body. The Bible includes myth and saga, but it is

7. Maguire, *An Infinity of Little Hours*, 120.
8. Mann, *Doctor Faustus*.
9. Acts 17:22–31.
10. Grant, *Greek Apologists*, 24.
11. Grant, *Greek Apologists*, 175.

held together by a historical narrative made contemporary through the celebration of defining memories and the expectation of promises yet to be fulfilled. It is not a perennial philosophy, but a journey or pilgrimage of faith and hope. So, as Merton tells us, while much in Christian tradition about contemplation derives from Neoplatonism rather than the Gospels, we must always remember its Hellenistic roots "and take care not to lose sight of Christ himself."[12]

This comparison indicates that while all mystical *experiences* might have much in common, they are often *understood* and *described* in different terms in the history of religions. For Christian mystics the desire for God is not fulfilled in an ecstatic flight from reality, but in an experience of God that leads to a call to action in the world. Such was Moses's experience of Yahweh at "the burning bush,"[13] Isaiah's experience of God in the temple,[14] Elijah's experience of the "sound of silence,"[15] and St Paul's experience of being "caught up to the third heaven."[16]

Both Clement and Origen were aware of the danger involved in engaging Hellenistic philosophy while interpreting Christian faith and experience, so they did so in ways that remained rooted in biblical tradition. Nonetheless, their language often reflects that of Neoplatonism. It was Clement who first described the Christian life as a "ladder of ascent" on which the "soul progresses from faith to knowledge" by suppressing "unreasoning passions," and "by works of love (it) mounts to union with God and the beatific vision."[17] And Origen, whose father had suffered martyrdom, was one of the first great systematic theologians to demonstrate that it is possible to combine "intellectual passion with warm personal devotion to God in Christ and the practical virtues of being Christian."[18] He was the founder of what Andrew Louth calls "intellectual mysticism," that is mysticism centered in the mind or *nous,* not just ecstatic emotions.[19]

12. Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*, 18.

13. Exodus 3.

14. Isaiah 6.

15. 1 Kings 19:9–13.

16. 2 Corinthians 12:2.

17. "On Christian Perfection," book 7, in Oulton and Chadwick, eds., *Alexandrian Christianity*, 93–101.

18. Oulton and Chadwick, eds., *Alexandrian Christianity*, 186–87.

19. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 74.

Origen also developed the allegorical method of interpreting the Bible that subsequently had such an influence in the church and particularly on monasticism until the time of the Reformation. Indeed, writes Merton, "Origen is perhaps the one who remained the most influential in Western monasticism" even though Origenism, under questionable circumstances, was declared a heresy.[20] In fact, Origen is regularly associated with monastic revivals over the centuries, whether the Carolingian reforms of the ninth century or those associated with St Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth.[21]

Origen's theology was handed on especially by St Basil of Caesarea (330–379), the erudite monastic theologian from Cappadocia, whose *Philokalia* ("the love of the beautiful") is a well-known compendium of Origen's writings. Usually referred to as Basil the Great, he was one of the most remarkable and highly educated monastics of his day, and his *Rule* and influence remain fundamental to Eastern Orthodox monasticism to this day. Indeed, Basil along with St Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389) and St Gregory of Nyssa (330–395), the Cappadocian Fathers as they are generally called, are the theological fountainhead of Orthodoxy. But it was especially Basil's student Evagrius Pontus (346–399), an Egyptian monk, who spread Origen's teaching and influenced succeeding generations of monastic theologians. Evagrius wrote extensively on Christian spirituality and was widely regarded as the "greatest theologian of the desert."[22]

Origen's mystical theology, as passed on by Evagrius, was later referred to as *apophatic theology*, especially with reference to the writings of the anonymous sixth-century Syrian monk Dionysius, who adopted the name Areopagite after Paul's first convert in Athens (hence he is also called Pseudo-Dionysius). His *apophatic mysticism* is about experiencing God through a process of *unknowing* (that is, getting beyond conceptualizations of God) and remains at the heart of Orthodox spirituality. In his words:

> Unto this Darkness which is beyond Light,
> we pray that we may come, and
> may attain unto vision through
> the loss of sight and knowledge,
> and that in ceasing thus to see or to know,

20. Merton, "Cassian and the Fathers," 23.

21. Leclercq, *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 94.

22. Merton, "Cassian and the Fathers," 88; Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 74.

we may learn to know that which
was beyond all perception and understanding,
for this emptying of our faculties
is true sight and knowledge.[23]

The root meaning of *mysticism*, which is a constant theme in what follows, is "full of mystery," which, as Karl Rahner says, connects the everyday "experience of transcendence" with the most profound or "strange experience" of the transcendence we name God.[24] Rahner also tells us that theology is all about "being led into mystery," something that I have discovered in my own life.[25] If God is "the One in whom we live, move, and have our being," as Paul says in apparent agreement with a pagan poet,[26] then a mystic is someone who lives with an intimate awareness of being embraced by the mystery of God. This is not a question of us finding God like we might "get religion," but of us discovering that God has all the time been drawing us towards himself as a magnet draws metal.

Dionysian apophatic mysticism is, as Vladimir Lossky tells us, "the fundamental characteristic of the whole theological tradition of the Eastern church";[27] but although regarded with some official reserve, it has also had its exponents in the West, notably Meister Eckhart (1260–1329), a Dominican who greatly influenced John Tauler (1300–1361), St John of the Cross (1542–1591), Julian of Norwich, and Martin Luther, as well as the Quaker George Fox (1624–1691). But in neither the East nor the West is Christian mysticism about the absorption of the soul into the divine. It is about the gracious restoration of the divine image in human beings, that is, "the divinization of the human." This does not happen in a moment of ecstasy but is a never-ending process of conversion in union with the love of the triune God. This mysticism of love, understood as both contemplation and conversation, is motivated by our desire both for God and for the fulfilment of God's purpose for the world. It is at the heart of prayer, that is, the conversation motivated by our desire for God and our desire that God's purpose for the world and our own lives be fulfilled.

23. Quoted in Housden, *For Lovers of God Everywhere*, 172.
24. Quoted in Kelly, ed., *Karl Rahner*, 227.
25. De Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 4.
26. Acts 17:22–28.
27. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 26.

The attempt by Christian theologians to engage creatively with non-Christian philosophy has always been opposed by those who fear compromise with paganism. One of the first to reject the attempt was Tertullian (160–220), Origen's contemporary living near Carthage, a brilliant lawyer and theologian. With Clement and the Alexandrian school in his sights, Tertullian exclaimed, in words that have echoed across the centuries:

> What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research.[28]

Tertullian's counsel to Christian disciples was to resist the seductions of philosophy and follow Jesus "in simplicity of heart." For him, it was the "blood of the martyrs that is the seed of the church," not the wisdom of the theologians. Tertullian, in all probability, also coined the word *monasticism* to describe what he called a new form of martyrdom, and likened a hermit's cave to a prison cell in which so many persecuted Christians had languished.[29]

Tertullian eventually joined the Montanists, an apocalyptic and ascetic sect, which was declared heretical because it rejected the legitimacy of the institutionalized imperial church and its clergy. But his suspicion of academic theology has remained constant through the centuries among those for whom scholastic endeavors have little to do with the gospel. Tensions between the academy and the church, scholastic and monastic theology, philosophy and science, and Christ and culture, are perennial, whether in the history of monasticism or more generally in the history of the church.

Certainly, the first monastics were not intellectuals who felt at home in the academy, any more than they were priests comfortably at home in the church. They were lay men and women, mostly unschooled, and decidedly uncomfortable about the worldly condition of the church. Some were influenced by the teachings of Clement, Origen, Evagrius, and

28. Tertullian, "On Idolatry," in Greenslade, ed., *Early Latin Theology*, 36.

29. See the introduction in Oulton and Chadwick, eds., *Alexandrian* Christianity, 38

Basil of Caesarea, but their thirst for the living God was awoken when they first listened to the gospel story read to them in the churches in Alexandria and its surrounding villages. They soon concluded that their desire for God could not be met in the city or the urban church any more than it could be explained in the academy. Instead, they decided to follow Jesus and, like the first disciples, left their nets, families, and friends, and journeyed with him into the wilderness in search both of their true selves and the living God.

Following Jesus

The Gospels, written several decades after Jesus's death, in the light of faith in his resurrection, are not biographies. They were written to proclaim the call to follow the crucified Jesus of Nazareth as the risen Christ. Coptic Christians would have had a special interest in the Gospel of Mark, their patron saint who, omitting the birth narratives found in Matthew and Luke, and offering no profound prologue as in John, gets straight to the point:

> Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news (*euanggelion*) of God, saying, "The time (*kairos*) is fulfilled, and the kingdom (*basilea*) of God has come near; repent (*metanoia*) and believe the good news."[30]

The coming of Jesus was a *kairos* moment—a moment in time when God judged the old world or passing age, and in which God's new age or reign of justice and peace was revealed. This is the good news Jesus proclaimed, and in which he invited his hearers to believe when he called them to follow him. But to do so required *metanoia,* a fundamental change of heart and mind. For those who followed Jesus, this became an ongoing process of conversion, described by the evangelists as they recount the journey of the disciples with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The Gospels also told those early Coptic Christians that it was only after his baptism by the ascetic John the Baptist, followed by his forty-day-long struggle against temptation in the wilderness, that Jesus called men and women to follow him. Even Jesus, so they thereby learned, had to endure rigorous testing before he could begin his life's task. In addition, the Gospels told them that not everyone called by Jesus could literally leave

30. Mark 1:14–15.