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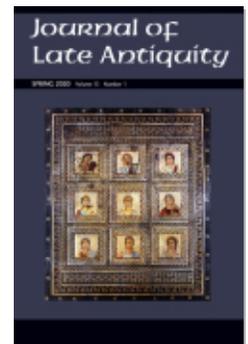
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*Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique  
Christianity* by Paul C. Dilley (review)

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sanctuary of John and Cyrus in the fifth century rests on a series of sixth-century homilies (134–35) and his suggestion that monks “might well have responded with an iconoclasm” when confronted with “pagan” beliefs in spirits at ancient temples (241–42) is based mainly on reactions by monks as described in hagiographical literature. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, this literature does not necessarily reflect reality.

In the afterword, Frankfurter returns to the theme of syncretism. Using this new approach, he is able to move away from the idea of conversion and towards the ways in which people interacted with these new ideas. His conclusion that their habit memories helped Egyptian Christians to formulate new stories in correspondence with their *habitus* is valuable, though he does not make full use of cognitive science in order to strengthen his argument. A stronger methodological approach would have made this well-written book an even better read.

### *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity*

PAUL C. DILLEY

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Pp. xii + 350. ISBN: 978-1-107-18401-5

Reviewed by Caroline T. Schroeder  
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In his compelling and meticulously researched monograph, Paul Dilley brings a fresh analysis of early Christian monasticism, one which I expect will influence most future studies in this area. *Monasteries and the Care of the Soul* centers “heart-work”: the “cognitive disciplines” that “trained *embodied* minds” through monastic practices such as prayer, scriptural exercises, repentance, and the very

ritual of committing to the monastic life (15). Applying insights about the mind from cognitive theory, the author asks how monastic disciplines helped to shape the late antique mind (and thus, late antique life). Dilley focuses on Egyptian communal monasticism, particularly sources from the Pachomian Federation and Shenoute’s Federation, but includes in his analysis a wide-ranging set of material from Syria, North Africa, Palestine, Italy, Gaul, and elsewhere in Egypt.

The book itself is well-organized and beautifully written, with clear prose, helpful introductions for each section, and conclusions for each chapter. The Introduction provides an overview of early monasticism as well as Dilley’s method. The author builds on aspects of cognitive science to create a “cognitive historicism” (10). Dilley considers three key monastic cognitive disciplines (“study, meditation, and recitation of Scripture” [15]), as well as metacognition (knowledge and thinking about the process of cognition). In doing so, he develops a new monastic “theory of mind” (14).

The book contains three parts: Evaluating Postulants, Cognitive Disciplines, and Collective Heart-work. Part I contains two chapters on the entrance and ascetic formation of new monks. Augustine’s reflections on two dilemmas in examining postulants launch this unit: Is an aspiring monk’s “social background” a reason to “suspect their motivations”? How can the examiner “determine a postulant’s character,” especially their “propensity for sin and capacity for obedience?” (37–38) The first chapter on “Discerning Motivation” is subtitled “Status and Vocation.” It breaks down motivations—and monastic leaders’ perceptions of such motivations—by gender, legal status, and life stage, including children and older

adults. For some populations, Dilley has multiple sources; for others one or few. Across these groups, Dilley finds three typologies of narratives of “conversion” to monasticism, none of which conform to William James’s paradigm of conversion; all require the sustained “heart-work” of personal reflection, labor, and renewed commitment.

“Trials of Commitment” subtitles the second chapter on “Discerning Motivation” and delves into *how* monastic leaders assessed entrants’ motives. Not all postulants were accepted; leaders feared that repeated sinners and people with motives other than eternal salvation either would not pull their weight in the monastery or, worse, “corrupt” other monks (69). At the entrance or gatehouse, postulants were tested anywhere from 10 days to three years. They often were required to renounce family and property and were subjected to extensive interviews by the leader. Some communities implemented “hazing”—ordering postulants to commit “unreasonable” deeds—to test their obedience, while others (i.e., monasteries associated with Basil, Shenoute, and Pachomius) required entrants to take an oath, which functioned as a legal and spiritual document attesting to their relinquishment of property and the consequence of breaking the oath (eternal damnation). Only then would postulants don the habit, the final sign of their joining the monastic community.

The cognitive disciplines essential to ongoing monastic formation are the subject of three chapters in Part 2. The heart figures as the center of monastic cognition and discipline, where emotions and thoughts are connected, sometimes indistinguishable, concepts. Chapter 3

describes how oral, aural, and written exercises ranging from literacy to catechesis inscribe scripture on the monks’ heart, to the point where monks develop scriptural speech. These exercises are both hierarchical and compulsory. Their rhetoric and structure provoke particular emotions in the monks and engage them actively in crafting mental images or developing corporeal practices (recitation, prostrations, labor, etc.). These practices produce a “monastic soundscape” of scripture and scriptural exercises that cultivate the cognitive discipline necessary “to eliminate evil thoughts” and enact obedience.

The fourth chapter describes ways monastic discipline cultivates a continual “fear of God.” Dilley rightly notes that the “fear of God” pervades monastic literature yet remains undertheorized in academic analysis; this chapter fills that gap. Dilley defines the “fear of God” as an *internal* disposition requiring training and discipline both to acquire and to maintain. Monastic homilies conjure vivid images of divine judgment and corporal punishment, simultaneously drawing on rhetorics of shame and guilt. Monks internally visualize the spectacle of the final judgment, imagining themselves receiving punishment before God, angels, and saints. These mental images deter bad behavior and inspire the fear of God. In anticipation of this moment, monastic leaders exhort monks to constant self-scrutiny during prayer and recitation of monastic rules. Corporal punishment (at times extreme) foreshadows the final judgment and instills fear, repentance, and obedience to the rules, leadership, and God. The fear of God, thus, was “a form of cognitive, emotional, and bodily knowledge that fundamentally

structure[d] one's way of life" in the monastery (183).

Chapter 5 addresses prayer as a cognitive discipline, one piece of a behavior modification plan to prevent sin, such as succumbing to sexual temptation. Communal prayers, whether in services or during daily labor, collectively reorient the mind from demonic attacks or sinful topics to God and the divine kingdom. Intentional and continual prayer practices also were believed to result in gifts of the spirit, which included recognition of the Holy Spirit's presence, joy, and visions or revelations. Such revelatory visions, however, were, controversial, and the Pachomian sources express ambivalence about their value.

Part 3 on "Collective Heart-work" contains two chapters about collective rituals of commemoration and repentance that work to create monasteries of a "single heart" in the federations once led by Pachomius and Shenoute. Both federations were rocked by rebellions and leadership crises. In the Pachomian Federation, leaders initiated communal meetings for the remission of sins and joyful mutual fellowship to achieve unity and monastic purity of heart. In Shenoute's federation, the community collectively read or heard selections from Shenoute's written *Canons* four times a year. Shenoute would also urge repentance and mutual forgiveness, and after his death his successor initiated a ritual of commemoration that memorialized this practice. Chapter 6 ("The Lives (and Minds) of Others") examines how the hagiographical tradition in Pachomian sources developed and documented these rituals of commemoration that encouraged identification and imitation of monastic leaders, guided collective repentance during

praise and veneration of those leaders, and bade collective obedience in order to ensure the deceased leaders' blessings. In this chapter (and throughout the book) Dilley carefully manages the use of hagiography as a historical source; hagiography is not a reliable witness to the events it describes but rather is an artifact of the values of the period of its composition and circulation. Moreover, Dilley argues persuasively that the hagiography of the Pachomian tradition was written as a vehicle for the rituals of repentance and community cohesion he describes. Chapter 7 ("Shenoute and the Heart of Darkness") addresses how Shenoute's compositions managed conflict in the community (including complaints about expulsions and severe corporal punishment) by crafting an image of a leader with gifts of divine revelations and authentic discernment. Shenoute represented himself as a sinner who publicly performs his own heart-work of repentance and prophetic empathy (defined as strongly affective rhetoric drawing especially on grief). These acts functioned to inspire the community's collective heart-work of self-examination, repentance, and obedience.

*Monasteries and the Care of Souls* is a masterful book that should inspire new forms of research in both monasticism and late antique Christianity. Dilley fills the book with rich examples of sermons, ritual practices, pedagogy, and rhetorical strategies, too many to mention here. The book would work well as a core text in a course on monasticism or asceticism will be useful to anyone interested in the history of Christianity in Late Antiquity, the application of cognitive theory for Religious Studies or pre-modern history, and the history of leadership and authority systems.