CHAPTER FOUR

PRAYER AS THEOLOGY

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There is an old joke about a man who went into a meditation class puffing on a lit pipe. The instructor said, “Excuse me, sir, but you can’t smoke your pipe while you meditate,” to which the man replied, “Do you mind, then, if I meditate while I smoke my pipe?”

It might be tempting to apply this framework also to the relationship of prayer and theology, as if they are two independent actions which might sometimes coincide, but not always. On the one hand, we could imagine a person praying while thinking theological thoughts—to that theologian’s credit in circles which find theology to be dry and erudite, and to that theologian’s discredit in circles which eschew mixing piety with objective thought. On the other hand, we could imagine a person theologizing while engaged in prayer—to that doxologist’s credit in circles which emphasize meaning over performance, and to the doxologist’s discredit in circles which fear an over-intellectualization of prayer. In this framework, it would not seem difficult to imagine someone theologizing while meditating, or meditating while theologizing, rather like the pipe smoker. Two discrete activities could be combined, with emphasis placed sometimes upon the one and sometimes upon the other.

The desert tradition invites us to deepen our concept of prayer by declining this compromise. The understanding of prayer and theology in the Desert Fathers is different from ours, and we are tripped up by the very bluntness of Evagrius of Pontus: “If you are a theologian you

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1 I shall use both the word “monk” and the title “Desert Fathers” to refer to both men and women, both Abbas and Ammas, because both sexes may achieve virility in their asceticism, and because women ascetics also implant the seed of wisdom. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* records this story: “Two monks came from Pelusium to see Sarah. On the way they said to each other, ‘Let us humiliate this amma.’ So they said to her, ‘Take care that your soul be not puffed up, and that you do not say, ‘Look, some hermits have come to consult me, a woman!’” “Sarah said to them, ‘I am a woman in sex, but not in spirit.’” *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, trans. by Benedicta Ward (London, 2003), p. 10.
truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian.”2 Prayer and theology are very nearly convertible as terms. If the theological act is the fruit of prayer, then one cannot be said to import theology as an accompaniment to prayer, nor seek ways to adjoin prayer to the theological act. According to the lesson learned in the desert school, the ascetical path to prayer results in a theologian, and a theologian may be defined as someone capacitated to pray. These are not two activities to be coordinated (like meditating and smoking); they have an inherent connection (like music and the stroke of a bow across violin strings).

This point of view is not Evagrius’ invention, though he was among its earliest and most systematic recorders. Evagrius lived in the theological orbit of the Cappadocians.

He was of the Pontic race, of the city of Ibora, son of a chorbishop, and he was ordained lector by Saint Basil, bishop of the church at Caesarea. Then after the death of Saint Basil, the bishop Gregory of Nazianzus, a man most wise, most serene, and brilliant in learning, took note of his fitness and ordained him deacon. Then in the great synod at Constantinople he left him to the blessed bishop Nectarius as one most skillful in confuting all the heresies. He flourished in the great city, confuting every heresy with youthful exuberance.3

He left for Jerusalem in 382 after an amorous affair with the wife of a nobleman. Evagrius had a dream or vision in which an angel cast him into prison, and then promised him deliverance if he would depart from the city. He swore he would. “And when Evagrius woke up from his sleep, he thought within himself and said, ‘Although the words of the oaths have been uttered in a dream, it is right that I should fulfill that which I have promised’; so he put his things in a ship and departed to Jerusalem”4 where he first dwelled at the monastic communities of Rufinus and Melanie on the Mount of Olives, but from there was pointed toward the deeper Egyptian deserts where he lived the remaining sixteen years of his life until his death in 399. “While in Egypt he had as his spiritual father the priest of Kellia, St. Makarios of Alexandria, and it is probable that he also knew St. Makarios the

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4 The Paradise, trans. by E. A. Wallis Budge, vol. 1 (London, 1908), pp. 222–24. The wording in the Lausiac History is, “As the oath was finished he came back out of his ecstasy. He got up and decided that ‘even if this oath was made in my vision, nevertheless I did swear it.’ Putting everything aboard ship, he went onto Jerusalem,” p. 112.