
The title of this useful and learned book gives only a Delphic intimation of its contents. Asceticism, as Christians understand the term, implies a willing renunciation not only of things natural and pleasant, but of those that are customarily reckoned essential to the health or mere survival of the body. It is therefore to be distinguished from the frugality commended by Latin poets, the vegetarianism of Pythagoras and his admirers, the inadvertent fasting that accompanies any concentrated action, and the philosophical abstinenze from marriage which occasionally took the form of rigid celibacy. The antithesis between Christian self-abasement in the service of God and pagan self-denial in the pursuit of a stable happiness has been sharpened in the works of Peter Brown and Michel Foucault; Behr casts a keen and not unfriendly eye on their opinions in his introductory chapter, but he himself seems ready to sponge the boundaries at the outset in support of his contention that asceticism was a widespread phenomenon among pagans as well as Christians in the time of the Roman Empire. His claim finds little warrant in the sequel — a hundred pages on Irenaeus, thirteen of which are devoted to “human growth”, and another eighty on Clement, who, while his rules of conduct are both fuller and more severe, was still a libertine in comparison with some of his heterodox contemporaries. It is surely these contemporaries — the Encratites and Gnostics, as we call them — who justify the first word of the title, though they receive only brief and intermittent notice in the book.

This is not to deny that in the chapters on IrenaeusBehr has cut a clear path through some notorious thickets. Most valuable to those without Armenian or a knowledge of the manuscripts is the reconstruction of the Greek original from dissonant translations of Against Heresies 5.18.2, where Irenaeus, according to the text retrieved by Behr, maintained that Christ bestows the spirit of creation on all humanity and the spirit of adoption on the elect. This distinction silences the conflict between those passages in Irenaeus which indicate that the Spirit was imparted to Adam already at the creation and those which imply that God reserves this gift for those who have joined their lives to that of the risen Christ (102-105). It follows that on the one hand the perfected likeness of God was not vouchsafed to Adam in paradise; on the other hand, what he lost through his transgression was not merely the possibility of an immediate reception of the likeness, but the “breath of life” which, if retained and exercised, would have made him proof against sin (115). Thus, although salvation is conceived as an ascent from the state of Adam to that of Christ, Behr observes, in contrast to certain latter-day redactions of the “Irenaean theodicy”, that the tale unfolds between two catastrophes, one undoing the other: the sin of man, whatever God has made of it, is as truly sin as the death
of Jesus Christ is truly death. I fear, however, that the crucifixion has supplanted the incarnation when we read on p. 65 that the Passion has "destroyed death". In the passage quoted from Against Heresies (4.20.2-3), the Cross is not the organ but the concomitant of salvation; for Irenaeus Satan had been discomfited already by his failure to seduce Christ in the wilderness, and he never cites Col 2.14, in which the Cross appears as the seat of victory over principalities and powers. Calvary stands at the centre of Behr's discussion because he finds the eucharist at the centre of Christian life in the church of Lyons, and he wishes to urge that Irenaeus applauded martyrdom only as an extension of the eucharistic fellowship in Christ's sufferings, rather than as an independent avenue to heaven. The examples of Blandina (who is mentioned here) and of Ignatius (who is overlooked) suffice to make this a probable interpretation; and even if (as I suspect) Irenaeus regards the eucharist as a partaking of the risen flesh of Christ, it will remain true, as chapter 3 contends, that Irenaeus declines to subject the body to an arbitrary regimen, and believes that Christian continence should be practised through obedient engagement in the "concrete circumstances of [human] life" (127).

Whereas the ethical teaching of Irenaeus amounts to a few quick strokes on the canvas of salvation history, Clement is a miniaturist of the inner life, and he sees perfection not as a gift retained in the hand of God till the end of time, but as a prize that the individual must seek in "synergy" or co-operation with his Maker. Though Clement insists, against the so-called Gnostics of Alexandria, that mental cultivation and the extinction of the passions have value only as propaedeutics for Christian charity, Behr finds that the "magnanimous contempt" for flesh and blood which he imbibes from these precursors (205) makes him a thinker of a very different stamp from Irenaeus. Lacking any vivid apprehension of the incarnate Christ, he does not include the body in the image of the creator (212 etc.); in his precepts to married couples, he esteems not the conjugal bond in itself, but the service which each partner in the alliance renders to God (178); for all that he says of synergy, he goes so far with the Encratites as to hold that the ascetic preparation for grace is "within our own capacity" (206). For my part, I am not sure what is wrong in this view of marriage, and I wonder if it is fair to base a contrast with Irenaeus on such works as the Stromateis and the Paedagogus, when we have lost the dogmatic treatises of Clement, such as the Canon of the Church and the Hypotyposes. It is true that, since he represents the Christian life as a philosophical discipline or paideia, his work invites comparison at many points with that of the pagan moralists; but it is surely not unusual, then or now, for Christians to be more conformed to the world in daily conduct than in their metaphysical speculations. In any case, Behr's use of classical parallels is desultory, and the reader might be forgiven for imagining that "Isomachus" (a misprint for Iscomachus on p. 201) was a pagan author rather than a char-