

Saintly Sexlessness.

Notes on the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

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The textual proximity of “woman” and “apocryphal literature” in a fragment included in the Apophthegmata Patrum may seem paradoxical. Abba Sopatrus’ apophthegm must be understood against the background of the theological debates of Origenists and non-Origenists during the 4th – 6th centuries, in Northern Egypt, and consequently needs to be exegetically enframed between Emperor Justinian I. (l. 482-565; r. 527-565) Edictum contra Origenem and Archimandrite Shenute of Atripe (348-466)’s Contra Origenistas. In fact, the contemporary Gnostic literature was able to generate heretical sexual imagery. The Apocryphon of John (II, 1; III, 1; IV, 1; BG 8502, 2), included in the Nag Hammadi Library, explains in a sexual manner the origin of evil. Abba Sopatrus’ apophthegm testifies about the proximity of Christianity and Gnosticism in Northern Egypt during the period of the Desert Fathers, and also about the effort of the abbas to establish firm limits against sexual lust and the lust of the erroneous dogmata. Both posed tremendous potential danger of disintegrating the monks’ peace of mind and peace of soul.

Keywords: *Christianity; Gnosticism; Origenism; Wadi-n-natron, the “Desert of niter”; Apophthegmata Patrum; Nag Hammadi Library; Edictum contra Origenem; Contra Origenistas.*

Horror against the human body as a receptacle of sin and against human sexuality as a reiteration of the primordial sin dominates the vast process of the conversion of Europe to Christianity¹. From the beginnings of Christianity in Europe, North Africa and the Near East, human sexuality and Christian monasticism were positioned as mutually exclusive ontological realms or micro-universes, at least in principle, as an ideal monastic prohibition of the mingling of the two. Ascetical life in the existential void of the desert unveils the image of the heavenly God in front of the perpetual endeavors of human contemplation through the shedding of the excess layers of the human being, the abandonment of the dead layers of the flesh². After all, how “dead” were those “dead layers”?

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¹ See: Jacques Le Goff, *Imaginaire médiéval*, Paris, Gallimard, 1935, Marina Rădulescu (trad.), *Imaginarul medieval*, București 1991, p. 176-180.

² See: John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert. The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Bloomington 2003, p. 34, p. 83: “In the desert, you were invited to shake off all