Monks and Their Children: The Ascetic Child in Late Antiquity

Medieval and Byzantine monasteries and convents were teeming with children. From orphans deposited on their doorsteps to become monastics, to pupils studying in their schools before moving on to an uncloistered adult life, to sick children seeking care from church hospitals, monastic institutions for men and women, in the East and the West, sheltered scores of children.

This project addresses the question of whether one may date the beginnings of this Medieval commonplace and its origins to developments in an earlier period. The book will interrogate the assumption that children were neither present nor welcome in the earliest forms of Christian asceticism and monasticism.

The movement during the fourth and fifth centuries is often characterized (even in early Christian texts) as purer and more ideal than later generations of monasticism. Early Christian asceticism has also been construed as “counter-cultural” by some, as a mode of living that stands in opposition to traditional Greco-Roman values, which promote marriage, reproduction, and parenting as crucial vehicles for continuation of social, cultural, and economic capital into future generations.

Late antique Christian ascetic texts indeed promoted an ideology of familial renunciation. Both men and women were encouraged to model themselves after the biblical exemplar Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his child Isaac for God. Some ascetic biblical interpretations even find elements to praise in the story of Jephthah ( Judges 11), who killed his virginal daughter as a sacrifice. Through hagiography, early Christians were taught to admire figures such as Melania the Elder, who left behind her ten-year old son to embark on her ascetic journey.

Despite such imperatives to renounce minor children, however, letters, monastic rules, hagiography, wills, contracts, and archaeological remains from late antique Christianity testify to the significance of children in early asceticism and monasticism. Thus, sources for early ascetic communities testify to the presence of children among adult monks and to the prevalence of Christian households raising ascetic youth.

The book’s working thesis is that Christian asceticism and early monasticism, even in the fourth century, already functioned as an institution parallel to traditional Roman familial structures which sought to provide intergenerational continuity of social, cultural, and economic capital.