The “Ecumenism” of the Desert Fathers. The Relationship with the Other in *Apophthegmata Patrum*

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Ecumenism is a 20th century concept that cannot be directly transposed in the everyday reality of the Desert Fathers, but the authority of the desert ascetics is still crucial to the monastic milieu of the Orthodox Church as well as other denominations. For this very reason, the present paper intends to investigate the stories recorded in the alphabetical collection of the Egyptian Paterikon in order to understand to what extent they may actually offer a guide to the complex relations with the Other. How do these stories illustrate denominational or even religious alterity? What types of rapports can one identify therein? Rejection? Separation? Acceptance of the other's difference? These are all legitimate questions and their significance is amplified in the context of our times – a period in which we see an increase in fundamentalist movements and tendencies, including in the Orthodox community.

Keywords: *Ecumenism, Desert Fathers, Paterikon, Apophthegmata Patrum, asceticism, spirituality.*

The recent concept of ecumenism dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and as such it would be difficult to transfer it into the reality of the every-day lives of the Desert Fathers. Even so the ancient ascetics of the desert still exert significant authority in the Orthodox monastic milieus and not only there; for this very reason the present paper sets out to investigate the stories recorded in the alphabetical collection of the Egyptian Paterikon in order to see if they may contain elements for a guide to relationships marked by confessional¹ or religious alterity. What types of attitudes could be identified therein? Rejection? Separation? Acceptance of the other person's difference? All these legitimate questions are of immense importance in today's context when fundamentalist movements are on the rise, including some of Orthodox persuasion.

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¹ I am using this term in its etymological sense: confessing a different faith.

Sources

The most appropriate source for such a research is the ‘Apophthegmata Patrum’,² more precisely the alphabetical collection of these sayings. This collection of sayings of the Fathers of the Egyptian desert from the fourth century possesses a series of major advantages. The Egyptian Paterikon is a fundamental synthesis of authentic Christian spirituality that enjoyed ample circulation and enormous popularity being intensely read especially in monastic milieus. The popularity of this collection also made it extremely influential and capable of shaping monastic spirituality. The Paterikon in its present form was born through the process of writing down sayings that had circulated within monastic communities over a period of 100-150 years.³ The pressure of orality distilled a text devoid of insignificant details and subjectivity, providing us with a comprehensive expression of the Tradition of the Church. The Paterikon was born of the Tradition and later grew to determine it due to its ample dissemination. It is therefore the most important source for such an analysis.⁴

The Egyptian Paterikon is a heterogeneous collection of stories that lend themselves under no circumstance to being transformed into a set of infallible ‘how-to’-methods. Quite to the contrary, they vibrate with the natural fluctuations of spiritual life: the Paterikon records the whole gamut of attitudes with which the Desert Fathers dealt with *the other*, oscillating from Agathon’s radical refusal of being considered a heretic⁵ (Agathon 5),⁶ or the advice to deny any heretic one’s friendship (Abba Matoes 11),⁷ to the gesture of Abba Macarius who blessed a pagan (Abba Macarius of Egypt 39).⁸ This list is completed by elements found in the other major texts of the ascetic literature created in the context of the Egyptian desert. The range of these

² Benedicta Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications Mich. 1984; for the Romanian translation see: *Patericul sau apoftegmele Părinților din pustiu*, trans. Cristian Bădiliță, Iași, Polirom 2003.

³ Cristian Bădiliță, “Culegerile *Apophthegmata Patrum* în monahismul Palestinian”, afterword to *Patericul sau apoftegmele părinților din pustiu*, Bucharest, Adevărul Holding 2011.

⁴ Lucien Regnault’s classical work overlooks the relationship the Desert Fathers had with the heretics and the pagans. See: Lucien Regnault, *La Vie quotidienne des Pères du désert en Égypte au IV^e siècle*, Paris, Hachette 1990; for the English translation see: L. Regnault, *The Day-to-Day Life of the Desert Fathers in Fourth-Century Egypt*, trans. Étienne Poirier, jr, Petersham, Massachusetts, St. Bede’s Publications 1998; see also: Daniel Lemeni, *Duhul a suflat în pustie: lumea duhovnicească a Părinților deșertului*. Monografii 5, Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea 2014.

⁵ The terms ‘heretic’ and ‘heresy’ have their own contextual ambiguity. In the present text these notions should simply be taken at face value.

⁶ B. Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 20-21.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 145.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

attitudes is so wide that it requires a detailed analysis; this could determine whether anti-ecumenist fundamentalists are justified in basing their views on the teachings of the Desert Fathers.⁹

Ecumenism can be defined as ‘the deep longing for unity which Christians of all times have felt’,¹⁰ a search born not only from our Saviour’s prayer for unity in the Gethsemane (Jn. 17.21), but also from the commandment to love our neighbour (Mt. 22.39). This is the perspective from which to investigate the desire for unity and, more importantly, the way in which the fathers of the Egyptian desert addressed the issue of alterity as reflected in the alphabetical collection of their sayings. The analysis will be mainly theological. I will not attempt to create an objective image of the Egyptian monastic life, because this topic is far too extensive and it has already been treated from a series of different perspectives. Additionally, the way the extant collections of spiritual sayings were formed, as well as the historical-critical analysis of these texts and the precise identification of their origins is outside the scope of this paper. I prefer to consider the already established ‘canon’ of the alphabetical collection that has already been selected and systematised when the spoken stories were recorded in writing. This process, which was a collective enterprise rather than a private initiative, is a testament to the fact that the Paterikon provides us with an accurate likeness of the entire monastic community and its ideals. What’s more, this collection had a wide circulation in all Christian areas and was translated in multiple languages from early on. The Paterikon has always been essential reading material for monks and is probably a close second to the Bible. However, academia has not paid due attention to it, despite the significant mark these texts have left on the conscience of generations of Christian monks and laypeople.

In order to address the concept of ‘ecumenism’ as a desire and a search for unity, we first have to see how the *Apophthegmata* describe the relationships and contacts to anything and anyone that embodies the idea of religious alterity:¹¹ Greek pagans,¹² heretics of various denominations, especially

⁹ For the complex relation of the Orthodox Church to the ecumenism see: Grigore Dinu Moș, *Ortodoxie și Occident. Problema influențelor eterodoxe în teologia ortodoxă*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Renașterea 2013, p. 397-417.

¹⁰ Cristian Sonea, *Teologia dialogului intercreștin. O introducere*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană 2017, p. 13.

¹¹ On religious tolerance in Antiquity, see: Peter Garnesey, “Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity”, in: *Studies in Church History* 21 (1984), p. 1-27; for the issue of religious tolerance in Apophthegmata Patrum, see: Nicholas Marinides, “Religious Toleration in the Apophthegmata Patrum”, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20 (2/2012), p. 235-268, but also Fabrizio Vecoli, “The Other in the Spirituality of the Desert Fathers”, in: Katell Berthelot, Matthias Morgenstern (eds.), *The Quest for a Common Humanity. Human Dignity and Otherness in the Religious Traditions of the Mediterranean*, Leiden, Brill 2011, p. 159-178.

¹² For instance: *Epiphanius* 12, *Macarius* 38 and 39, or *Olympius* 1.

Ariens,¹³ Meletians,¹⁴ and Manicheans.¹⁵ The Origenist heretics form a special category, with its own extremely complex set of issues, but it will not be a part of this analysis.

According to Nicholas Marinides, ever since Edward Gibbon,¹⁶ Christianity has been seen as marred by religious violence and intolerance and “in this narrative of intolerance, monks are often characterized as the standard-bearers of fanaticism”.¹⁷ This judgement cannot be applied to the monasticism practiced and understood by the great ascetics, or to that reflected in the alphabetical collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* – these texts, albeit not perfectly historically accurate, can be considered normative for how the monks saw themselves and how they understood living the Christian vocation. Leaving the world behind to live an angelic life had a paradoxical effect: “they influenced the world they left in as much as they succeeded in building a counter-world”.¹⁸ For all these reasons, an analysis of these short stories is always topical.

Discernment in one’s relationship to one’s neighbour

In order to analyse the relationships recorded in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* we should first note the centrality of the *diakrisis* (discernment)¹⁹ in everyday life. “By the very fact that it is a collection of stories that cannot be systematised, the Egyptian Paterikon attests time and time again that spiritual life is not lived according to a fixed formula”:²⁰ we must judge each situation differently, depending on its context, employing the “wisdom aided by the Holy Spirit”.²¹ Discernment is not only intra-personal, it is also inter-personal;²² the latter aspect is of interest for this paper.

The alphabetical collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* begins with a series of sayings attributed to Abba Anthony; when read together apo-

¹³ See: *Sisoës* 25.

¹⁴ *Sisoës* 48.

¹⁵ Amma Theodora 4.

¹⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols., New York, Modern Library 1900.

¹⁷ N. Marinides, “Religious Toleration”, p. 235.

¹⁸ Andreas Merkt (ed.), *Das frühe christliche Mönchtum: Quellen und Dokumente von den Anfängen bis Benedikt*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2008, p. 8.

¹⁹ For an ample analysis of this concept see: Antony D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers 2007, p. 123-229.

²⁰ Paul Siladi, *Oraşul-deşert: reflecţii citadine despre Părinţii pustiei*, Bucureşti, Trinitas 2018, p. 359.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 290.

²² A.D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers*, p. 189.

phthegms 8 and 9 provide a good introduction for understanding the relationship to one's neighbour. First of all, Anthony warns us that discernment is paramount: "Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God".²³ Asceticism devoid of discernment does not bring you closer to God, however all relationships are possible paths to getting closer to or away from Him: "Our life and our death is with our neighbour. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalise our brother, we have sinned against Christ".²⁴ The same idea is reprised in a different form by Abba John the Eunuch:

Abba John said, "Our Father, Abba Anthony, said he had never put his own personal advantage before the good of a brother".²⁵

The two apophthegms touch on two themes central to our discussion: discernment and the relationship to one's neighbour. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* is a book about solitary people but, at the same time, one about relationships; its entire discourse is built around the relationships that are essential for the spiritual life: the connection with God, with the elder who guides and advises, and with one's neighbour. Although the ascetics were solitaries who had forsaken the world and the tension of the relationships in which people's contradictory wills could keep them away from God,²⁶ they still cherished and observed the commandment to love their neighbours (Mt. 22.39). Echoes of this Gospel are found in a saying belonging to Abba John the Dwarf:

Abba John the Dwarf said, "A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top". They said to him, "What does this saying mean?" He said, "The foundation is our neighbour, whom we must win, and that is the place to begin. For all the commandments of Christ depend on this one".²⁷

Abba Apollo says the following:

With regard to receiving the brethren [...] the same Abba said that one should bow before the brethren who come, because it is not before them, but before God that we prostrate ourselves. "When

²³ Anthony 8, in: B. Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 3.

²⁴ Anthony 9, in: *Ibidem*.

²⁵ John the Eunuch 2, in: *Ibidem*, p. 105.

²⁶ "Abba Mark said to Abba Arsenius, «Why do you avoid us? » The old man said to him, «God knows that I love you, but I cannot live with God and with men. The thousands and ten thousands of the heavenly hosts have but one will, while men have many. So I cannot leave God to be with men»." Arsenius 13 in: *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²⁷ John the Dwarf 39, in: *Ibidem*, p. 93.

you see your brother”, he said, “you see the Lord your God”. He added, “We have learnt that from Abraham, (cf. Gen. 18) When you receive the brethren, invite them to rest awhile, for this is what we learn from Lot who invited the angels to do so”.²⁸

The Gospels²⁹ are never ignored; quite to the contrary, Abba Anthony the Great believes they are sufficient when he talks to some brothers who came to ask for his advice. His words are just a detailed meditation on the commandment of Mt. 5.39): “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also”.³⁰

Even if we find sayings such as the one attributed to Abba Alonius “if a man does not say in his heart , in the world there is only myself and God , he will not gain peace”,³¹ or sober instructions such as the one given by Evagrius Ponticus: “Restrain yourself from affection towards many people, for fear lest your spirit be distracted, so that your interior peace may not be disturbed”³² they do not abolish in the very least the Gospel’s commandment to love one’s neighbour or the definition of this notion given by Christ Himself in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10.25-37).

Loving your neighbour has only one limit: sin. Abba Agathon clarifies this when he says “if someone were very especially dear to me, but I realized that he was leading me to do something less good, I should put him from me”.³³ Even more, Christians must fight with all their might so as to not put distance between them and God:

If your brother hurts you by his arrogance and you are angry with him because of it, that is getting angry without cause. If he plucks out your right eye and cuts off your right hand, and you get angry with him, you are angry without cause. But if he separates you from God, then be angry with him.³⁴

Loving one’s neighbour is fraught with dilemmas and difficulties. The *neighbour* is a generical notion encompassing pious monks, sinners, barbarians, thieves, enemies, heretics etc. Love must cover everyone, but according to each of their characteristics. In the case of sinners, Abba Achilles

²⁸ *Apollo* 3, in: *Ibidem*, p. 37.

²⁹ The Gospel is so present, either directly or indirectly, in the apophthegms of the Desert Fathers, that Lucien Regnault names his series of commentaries of these sayings “The Gospel lived out in the desert”: L. Regnault, *L’Évangile vécu au désert: paroles des Pères du désert*, Paris, Sarmient-Fayard 1990.

³⁰ See *Anthony* 19, in: B. Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 15.

³¹ *Alonius* 1 in: *Ibidem*, p. 35.

³² *Evagrius* 2 in: *Ibidem*, p. 64.

³³ *Agathon* 23, in: *Ibidem*, p. 23.

³⁴ *Poemen* 118, in: *Ibidem*, p. 184.

warns us that they need more love than the others, precisely because they must be supported and helped:

Three old men, of whom one had a bad reputation, came one day to Abba Achilles. The first asked him, "Father, make me a fishing net". "I will not make you one", he replied. Then the second said, "Of your charity make one, so that we may have a souvenir of you in the monastery". But he said, "I do not have time". Then the third one, who had a bad reputation, said, "Make me a fishing-net, so that I may have something from your hands, Father". Abba Achilles answered him at once, "For you, I will make one". Then the two other old men asked him privately, "Why did you not want to do what we asked you, but you promised to do what he asked?" The old man gave them this answer, "I told you I would not make one, and you were not disappointed, since you thought that I had no time. But if I had not made one for him, he would have said, «The old man has heard about my sin, and that is why he does not want to make me anything», and so our relationship would have broken down. But now I have cheered his soul, so that he will not be overcome with grief".³⁵

Monasteries often fell prey to violent plundering barbarians, so the monks met them frequently. Abba Sisoës discussed such a situation and outlined what the norm of relating with aggressive barbarians should be:

One of the Fathers asked Abba Sisoës, "If I am sitting in the desert and a barbarian comes to kill me and if I am stronger than he, shall I kill him?" The old man said to him, "No, leave him to God. In fact, whatever the trial is which comes to a man, let him say, «This has happened to me because of my sins», and if something good comes say, "It is through the providence of God".³⁶

An attitude that does not exclude violence completely is borne out of total confidence in the providence that governs the world. Trusting God and loving your neighbour are fundamental to understanding certain stories that show the ascetics not resisting robbery, because they believe that their neighbour, be that even the lowliest of thieves, is more important than themselves. This what Macarius of Egypt,³⁷ John the Persian³⁸ or Theodore of Pherme³⁹ chose to do. The consequence of their loving non-violence is in most cases the

³⁵ *Achilles* 1, in: *Ibidem*, p. 28-29.

³⁶ *Sisoës* 34, in: *Ibidem*, p. 219.

³⁷ *Abba Macarius the Great* 40, in: *Ibidem*, p. 137-138.

³⁸ *John the Persian* 3, in: *Ibidem*, p. 108.

³⁹ *Theodore of Pherme* 29, in: *Ibidem*, p. 78.

robbers’ repentance and conversion: their aggression was met with love and that changed their lives.

With regard to enemies, Abba Zeno is categorical when he says that praying for them is the condition that our own prayers be listened by God:

Abba Zeno said, “If a man wants God to hear his prayer quickly, then before he prays for anything else, even his own soul, when he stands and stretches out his hands towards God, he must pray with all his heart for his enemies. Through this action God will hear everything that he asks.”⁴⁰

The same topic of loving one’s neighbour is addressed in an apophthegm attributed to Abba Matoes (5), where Christ’s commandment is applied specifically to one’s enemies, when a brother asks Abba Matoes, full of admiration: “How is it that the monks of Scetis did more than the Scriptures required in loving their enemies more than themselves?”⁴¹

A very different category encompasses the relations with pagans and, even more importantly, with heretics. On an affirmative level, the standpoints are extremely uncompromising: ascetics must seek separation at all costs. In order to understand this correctly we should confront the principal programmatic issues with the reality of several concrete meetings between monks and various heretics.

The first radical declaration is found at Abba Agathon, a monk well-renowned for his discernment. He accepts a long list of accusations without flinching, but he draws the line at being called a heretic:

It was said concerning Abba Agathon that some monks came to find him having heard tell of his great discernment. Wanting to see if he would lose his temper, they said to him “Aren’t you that Agathon who is said to be a fornicator and a proud man?” “Yes, it is very true”, he answered. They resumed, “Aren’t you that Agathon who is always talking nonsense?” “I am”. Again, they said “Aren’t you Agathon the heretic?” But at that he replied “I am not a heretic” So they asked him, “Tell us why you accepted everything we cast you, but repudiated this last insult”. He replied “The first accusations I take to myself, for that is good for my soul. But heresy is separation from God. Now I have no wish to be separated from God”. At this saying they were astonished at his discernment and returned, edified.⁴²

When Abba Agathon accepts the various accusations pertaining to the sphere of morality, he actually practices a widely-spread form of ascetism:

⁴⁰ Zeno 7, in: *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁴¹ Matoes 5, in: *Ibidem*, p. 143.

⁴² Agathon 5, in: *Ibidem*, p. 20-21.

self-accusation. He only ceases when he is accused of heresy and his attitude towards heresy is complete and utter separation.

Abba Theodore of Pherme also takes a radical stance against heretics:

If you are friendly with someone who happens to fall into the temptation of fornication, offer him your hand, if you can, and deliver him from it. But if he falls into heresy and you cannot persuade him to turn from it, separate yourself quickly from him, in case, if you delay, you too may be dragged down with him into the pit.⁴³

Once again, we are offered a general, programmatic observation in which the ascetic elder puts forward a hypothetical problematic situation and provides an (equally theoretical) ideal solution. We can read apophthegm 118 from Abba Poimen in the same key; the desert father recommends showing anger to those who wish to separate someone from God.⁴⁴

And as we've already seen in apophthegm 5 of Abba Agathon, the thing that cuts our ties with God is heresy. Abba Macarius gives an advice along the same lines, when he tells a brother who had come seeking guidance: "do not be friendly with a boy nor with an heretical friend",⁴⁵ as does Abba Chomas: "Do not dwell with heretics, and do not have anything to do with rulers, then your hands will not be opened to gather together, but open to give".⁴⁶

Theological disputes are frowned upon by the ascetical fathers. Abba Sopatrus forbids his followers to read apocryphal writings and commands them to "not get involved in discussion about the image. Although this is not heresy, there is too much ignorance and liking for dispute between the two parties in this matter".⁴⁷

The most important story on a practical level is the first one from the section attributed to Abba Lot. In it we see a sick old man come and ask for a cell from Abba Lot, who gave him a place to stay and took care of him. Whenever someone came to see Abba Lot, he would also have them see the ill man. But when the latter started to "quote the words of Origen to the visitors",⁴⁸ Lot became uneasy. He did not want the others to think he was also an origenist, so as not to confuse them. At the same time, he feared chasing him away, as this would have meant going against the commandment to love thy neighbour, which was extremely important for the ascetic fathers

⁴³ *Theodore of Pherme* 4, in: *Ibidem*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ *Poemen* 118, in: *Ibidem*, p. 184.

⁴⁵ *Abba Matoes* 11, in: *Ibidem*, p. 145.

⁴⁶ *Abba Chomas*, in: *Ibidem*, p. 244.

⁴⁷ *Sopatrus*, in: *Ibidem*, p. 225.

⁴⁸ *Lot* 1, in: *Ibidem*, p. 121.

of the Egyptian desert. It is for the first time that this practical dilemma is expressed: how does one distinguish the heretic from the heresy? Abba Arsenius provides Lot with an answer:

Do not drive him away, but say to him: look, eat that which comes from God and drink as much as you like, only do not make such remarks any more. If he wants to, he will correct himself. If he does not want to change his ways, he will ask to leave this place of his own accord. Thus, his departure will not come from you.⁴⁹

In other words, the separation, the fracture cannot be initiated by those within the Church. Christ’s commandment is stronger than anything else; loving thy neighbour knows no bounds, no conditions, and yet their freedom remains intact, so that if and when the separation occurs, the only thing left to do is to acknowledge it. The apophthegm ends with the words of the sick old man: “For the Lord’s sake, send me away from here, for I can no longer bear the desert”.⁵⁰ The separation is acknowledged, but this does not hinder the love from flowing and connecting those who seek unity. The brothers lovingly see the old man off after he himself decided to leave.

Abba Poemen also runs into a group of heretics (we do not know who they were exactly). He receives them and listens to what they have to say up to the point when they “began to speak evil of the archbishop of Alexandria”.⁵¹ The ascetical father asks the brother who was helping him set the table to feed them and then to send them away in peace. The Paterikon once again lays emphasis on the peaceful parting with the heretics.

This beautiful observance of Christ’s commandment to love one’s neighbour is also present in the sayings attributed to Abba Poemen. He himself profoundly disliked all disputes and contradictory discussions because they drive the Holy Spirit away and prevent the souls from bearing fruit.⁵²

When Abba Sisoës, one of the great ascetics of the Egyptian desert, is visited by Arians, he refuses to use his own words and instead asked his disciple to read from the book of Saint Athanasius, which lays bare their heresy. As always, the end emphasises the peace with which the two sides part ways.⁵³ Nevertheless, Abba Sisoës does not have his heart set on living separated from the heretics. In apophthegm 48 we are told that “Abba Sisoës left Abba Anthony’s mountain to go to the outer mountain of the Thebaid

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Poemen* 78, in: *Ibidem*, p. 178.

⁵² *Poemen* 205, in: *Ibidem*, p. 195.

⁵³ *Sisoës* 25, in: *Ibidem*, p. 217.

and there he stayed”.⁵⁴ Meletians lived there and the fear of him being caught in their deceit caused some of the brothers to visit Abba Sisoës.⁵⁵ In this example we see how the fundamental principles of ascetic life meet their practical embodiment and we could conclude that the dialogue with someone representing confessional or religious alterity is a test of personal and communal maturity.

A special chapter of the topic of how the Desert Fathers related to religious alterity is dedicated to their meeting pagans. There are no clear rules in this case. Abba Olympius even accommodates a group of pagan priests without making too much of it.⁵⁶

The prayers of desert ascetics go beyond any given boundaries: in one of the most beautiful apophthegms there is an account of Abba Macarius taking a walk through the desert. He finds the skull of a pagan priest and communicates with him; the spirit of the priest tells him that the sole comfort they have in hell is when Macarius is praying for the damned.⁵⁷ This story is very significant because it is a testament to the universal conscience of the Desert Fathers and at the same time to their capacity to pray for the whole of humanity, including those suffering in hell.

The ideal meeting between desert Christians and pagans is recounted by Abba Macarius the Great.⁵⁸ A very important detail is that this account is immediately preceded by the one mentioned above, about the pagan priest tormented in hell. This time, the episode has two distinct stages. Macarius was travelling to the mountain of Nitria; he told his disciple to go ahead and as the brother did so, he saw a pagan priest running, so “he shouted after him saying «Oh, oh, devil, where are you off to?».” The priest is incensed by this, so he turns back and beats the disciple to an inch of his life, then sets off. On his way he encounters Macarius, who says to him “Greetings! Greetings, you weary man!” Being treated with such welcoming candour and love wins the priest over and he eventually converts to Christianity.

This last story compares two different attitudes and unequivocally suggests which of the two is the best. The love for one’s neighbour, so cherished by the Desert Fathers, has no limits of any kind and it leads to naturally pursuing the unity Christ prayed for. This pursuit needs to ignore the fractures caused by sin, heresy or any other thing.

⁵⁴ *Sisoës* 48, in: *Ibidem*, p. 221.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ *Olympius* 1, in: *Ibidem*, p. 160.

⁵⁷ *Macarius* 38, in: *Ibidem*, p. 136-137.

⁵⁸ *Macarius* 39, in: *Ibidem*, p. 137.

Conclusions

Would it be legitimate to talk about the ecumenism of the Desert Fathers? Definitely not in the contemporary sense of the word. However, we could talk about religious tolerance: the ecumenism of the Desert Fathers manifests itself as tolerance. The Desert Fathers “held to a certain orthodoxy and sought to share that orthodoxy with others. But they choose to do this through peaceful rather than violent means”.⁵⁹ In other words, their tolerance meant unambiguously acknowledging difference without wanting to get rid of that difference by means of violence and coercion. And this is an early form of ecumenism, one that grew and matured over the ages.

⁵⁹ N. Marinides, “Religious Toleration”, p. 237.