In this valuable book, Caner has made an important contribution to the ever-increasing modern understanding of the emergence and development of Christian asceticism within the crucial formative period of Late Antiquity. Continuing the work of a number of modern scholars, including (as he acknowledges) Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Philip Rousseau and Peter Brown, Caner challenges the uniform representation of institutional monasticism that our ‘orthodox’ sources have constructed. His study focuses instead upon the alternative ascetic ideals and practices that those sources sought to condemn, an approach that brings into new relief the diversity and dynamism of the early monastic movement. As Caner demonstrates, the ‘official’ construction of monasticism that would eventually prevail in both east and west was neither the only possible model nor necessarily the most widespread or dominant interpretation of Christian asceticism in the seminal years of the fourth and early fifth centuries. The wandering, begging monks of the title are the archetypal representatives of the alternative and marginalised ascetic tradition that Caner here brings to light.

In order to achieve this purpose, Caner looks outside the ‘orthodox’ constructions of monasticism preserved in the writings of much-studied patristic authors such as Augustine, Jerome, Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian. Indeed, it is one of the great strengths of his work that Caner is able to draw out the implications of a variety of texts that have hitherto received only limited attention from modern scholars: the Acts of Thomas and the Pseudo-Clementine Letters to Virgins (Chapter 2), the Great Letter of Pseudo-Macarius and the Book of Steps (Chapter 3) and the Life of Alexander the Sleepless (discussed in Chapter 4, with a full annotated translation provided in the Appendix). All these texts testify to the existence of a widespread ascetic ideal, particularly prominent in Syria-Mesopotamia but also visible elsewhere, very different to the monastic institutions outlined by the famous Rules of Basil of Caesarea or Benedict of Nursia. In this alternative tradition, the
characteristic ascetic emphasis upon celibacy and poverty was combined with a rejection of the manual labour and self-sufficiency envisioned by the institutional model, claiming instead material dependence upon others in order to support an apostolic lifestyle of teaching and continuous prayer.

Within 'orthodox' monastic polemic, this wandering, begging lifestyle was condemned as the product of idleness and greed, and its proponents denounced as 'Messalians' ('People Who Pray' in Syriac). Yet Caner emphasises that the ascetic practices attributed to so-called 'Messalians', like Alexander the Sleepless, were not the product of a single 'heresy' but were representative of a widespread ascetic tradition which is also visible in other condemned 'sects' too often treated in isolation, notably the Manichees and the Circumcelliones of Donatist North Africa. By emphasising the breadth of this alternative tradition, and its genuinely Scriptural and ascetic foundations, Caner demonstrates in turn the influence that his 'wandering monks' exerted upon the theoretical and practical development of Christian asceticism. The eventual marginalisation of such holy men from the prevailing model of institutional monasticism, he concludes, was a product not only of differences in the interpretation of the Scriptural basis of the ascetic life (to which I will return below) but of the social and ecclesiastical implications of their ideals of homelessness and material dependency.

Throughout his book, Caner grounds his analysis in the socio-economic context in which his protagonists lived. The nature of Late Roman urban life and charity, the status of beggars, and the role of patronage all figure prominently in his arguments, and so too does the tension, both between different bands of monks and between monks and urban clergy, caused by what he describes as 'competing claims to material support made by ascetic laymen and church leaders' (1). The wandering monks who depended upon others in order to maintain their devotional lifestyle not only infringed on the rights of local clergy to material support from their communities, but by their assertion of privileged spiritual status they raised acutely the wider question of the authority of the official Church hierarchy in relation to the charismatic authority of ascetic holy men. As Caner observes, the hostility with
which bishops like Augustine or John Chrysostom denounced those monks who refused to endorse their model of monastic withdrawal was at least in part a defence of their own ecclesiastical position. It is again one of the merits of Caner’s work that he brings out the vital role that such social and ecclesiastical factors played in shaping Christian asceticism and the developing relationship between monks and the clergy, factors that help considerably to explain the ultimate triumph of ‘orthodox’ monasticism in the fifth century.

Perhaps the most important chapters of this book, however, at least for those readers interested primarily in the wider field of Church history, are Chapters 5 and 6. Here Caner develops the implications of his reassessment of the alternative ascetic tradition and its social background to draw important consequences for our understanding of the controversial careers of three leading Constantinopolitan figures: John Chrysostom (Chapter 5), Nestorius and Eutyches (Chapter 6). As bishops, Chrysostom and Nestorius came into direct conflict with leading monastic archimandrites, Isaac and Dalmatius, whose own authority within the city rested both upon the support that they drew from aristocratic patrons in return for spiritual guidance and upon the support that they in turn gave to other monks and to the wider body of urban poor. The fall of both Chrysostom and Nestorius was due in part to their failed attempts to break down the independent power of these archimandrites and bring monasticism and charity under episcopal control, attempts that caused first Isaac and then Dalmatius to turn to the bishops of Alexandria for aid against the see of Constantinople.

Yet Eutyches, the archimandrite heir of Isaac and Dalmatius, himself fell victim to episcopal power, condemned not only by his own ‘Monophysite’ doctrinal convictions but also by the changing relationship of monasticism to the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the first half of the fifth century. Caner highlights the Council of Chalcedon (451) as the ‘watershed’ in this relationship, for in addition to the excommunication of Eutyches at that council, the fourth canon of Chalcedon for the first time placed monasticism officially under ecclesiastical control. Monks were ordered to remain in seclusion, so upholding the ‘orthodox’ ideal of monastic withdrawal over the
wandering, begging tradition, and bishops rather than private patrons were henceforth to be responsible for the material welfare of monasteries. ‘Thus the ideal of economic self-sufficiency ... was eclipsed at Chalcedon by the more pressing need to keep monks in their place’ (238).

Two final observations slightly qualify my appreciation for this impressive book, although I would argue that here in part I reinforce rather than challenge Caner’s own conclusions. Both observations involve questions of terminology, an issue no less crucial to modern scholarship on the history of Christianity than it is to the primary sources from which so much of our terminology derives. My first point merely takes up Caner’s important emphasis, already commented upon above, that ‘Messalianism must be understood as a polemical construction rather than a historical reality’ (101). The entire argument of Chapter 3 emphatically demonstrates the truth of this assertion and the degree to which that polemic has distorted our understanding of the alternative ascetic tradition that he has so brilliantly reconstructed. Yet Caner continues to employ the term ‘Messalian’ without qualification to describe individuals, like Alexander the Sleepless in Chapter 4, who would never have described themselves in this way and who he has shown to be representative not of a single isolated ‘heresy’ but of a diverse and highly influential ascetic ideal. Such a criticism may seem trivial, but my own conclusion from this book is that the term ‘Messalian’ must now at least be relegated to inverted commas and preferably abandoned, for the continued use of such language only perpetuates the polemical construct that Caner has done so much here to undermine.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Caner argues throughout his book for the temporal and Scriptural priority of the alternative ascetic tradition that he reconstructs. ‘One purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the sequestered form of monastic life that the Council [of Chalcedon] favoured, as well as the self-sufficient, work-based ideal that authorities like Augustine promoted, were in fact novel developments in monastic history, supplanting an earlier, widely-practiced ideal in which an ascetic elite, observing apostolic principles,
provided spiritual edification to Christian communities in return for their material support’ (3-4). I am not entirely convinced by so complete a reversal of the older interpretation of the development of monasticism, nor by Caner’s choice of the terms ‘apostolic’ and ‘philosophic’ for the two ascetic traditions that he invokes, and his argument strikes me as excessively polarised.

The two traditions that Caner describes were never entirely distinct, for they shared a number of fundamental principles (such as celibacy and poverty) and should perhaps rather be viewed as distinct yet related positions within a single broad spectrum of Christian asceticism. Likewise, while it is unquestionably true that the monastic ideal of withdrawal and contemplation promoted by Augustine or John Chrysostom does draw heavily upon Greco-Roman philosophical traditions, the position defined here as ‘philosophic’ was also of course highly Scriptural. As Caner indeed demonstrates in the second half of Chapter 3, the critical distinction between his two traditions (at least at the theoretical level) lay in their radically different interpretations of the relationship between the call to a life free of care attributed to Jesus in the Gospels and Paul’s command that every Christian must labour. Further examination of these contrasting interpretations and the relationship between their different monastic ideals would seem necessary before we can justify the conclusions that Caner has reached. Yet it is precisely because of the work that he has done that such an examination is now possible, and it is this that represents the great achievement of his book.

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