SHENOUTE OR THE PITFALLS OF MONASTICISM

Armand Veilleux

Preface to David N. Bell, *Besa. the Life of Shenoute.*

Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo. 1983

THE LIFE OF SHENOUTE is not one of the brightest pages of the history of monasticism. It deserves to be known nevertheless, for in monastic tradition the disconcerting figure of the great Shenoute constitutes a tragic phenomenon that compels us to consider seriously some pitfalls inherent in the monastic institution itself.

How can one explain that a man whom all agree in calling authoritarian, harsh, and violent, and whose spirituality, lacking any mystical dimension, his best specialist (J. Leipoldt) describes as `christ-less' *(christlose Frömmigkeit),* was able for more than eighty years-he died at the age of 118—to impose his authority on a host of disciples who seem to have reached at one point the startling figure of 2200 monks and 1800 nuns? What motives could have attracted to him those masses of disciples among whom, moreover, movements of revolt against the master's authoritarianism seem at times to have reached an endemic stage? Motivations of a socio-economic character must have played a role, but they were certainly not the only reasons. We believe that a more profound explanation is to be sought in the history of the religious phenomenon throughout the ages. Let try to situate Shenoute in that much broader context, rather than merely in that of monastic Egypt of the fourth and fifth centuries.

Primitive cultures are overwhelming. The great archetypes by which the collective subconscious expresses itself have a very strong hold on a people whose cohesion and unity are preserved by priests, soothsayers, and sorcerers through a well-structured system of myths, rituals, and moral codes. As long as collective survival is not firmly ensured, there is no place for the elaboration of an individual experience and for the blossoming forth of personal consciousness. Any effort by an individual to pursue a personal journey beyond the framework offered by the surrounding culture is excluded. In the beginning, such an effort would be simply impossible and therefore unthinkable; when it becomes possible it is forbidden; and, finally, when it becomes a temptation for a great number it is severely

repressed.

Once begun, however, that evolution is irreversible. A day comes when collective survival is sufficiently ensured to allow toleration of some degree of creative marginality. Then the person emerges. The individual relates not only to the group but to each member of it. Bonds are established between persons, and marriage, for example, becomes a relationship between two persons and no longer only between two clans. Then some individuals personally and consciously live the relationship to the Transcendent which had until then been kept in the collective subconscious. Personal vocations are discerned and mystical experiences are lived. It was at such a cultural and religious breakthrough that Abraham heard the call to leave behind all the security— material, psychological, religious—provided by his immediate environment in order to launch out on a personal journey whose various stages and final step he could not foresee. It was in the same period, in early India, that the *munis* fled to the forests to listen to their *Atman* and to encounter *Brahman,* the principle of Being.

Such individual experiences have an impact on the collective psyche, and a religious movement takes form. The number of those who hear the call and answer it increases. We think of the time of the *rishis* of Vedic India and of the patriarchs and Moses in Israel. A mystical experience develops and the collective memory of it comes to be recorded in traditions, beliefs, and rituals. A religion is born; by assuring a functional role the religious movement becomes a system. By this time a plateau has been reached in the pendulum movement between group spirit and personal creativity, in the tension between the collective and the individual poles. That equilibrium will, generally, last several centuries.

After a few centuries of what gradually becomes a respectable mediocrity, the movement toward a more personal religion manifests itself in personal experiences of a particular intensity, like that of Siddhartha Gautama in India, or of the great prophets in Israel. They are solitary seekers who do not try to gather disciples but are anxious to share their deep spiritual experience with all their people. When communities do form around their experience and teaching, they do so by the somewhat natural grouping of those who share the same experience under their inspiration. In this way the buddhist *Sangha* was born; and in the same way the fellowships of the poor of Yahweh developed in Israel during the exile, as, a little later, did the groups of *hasidîm* among whom there blossomed a spiritual attitude impregnated with mysticism that would serve as a seedbed for early christian asceticism.

On that spiritual movement of the *hasidîm* (or Hassidaeans) a few centuries before Christ, a kind of outgrowth developed called Essenism which expressed itself especially in the monastic community of Qumran and in the communities of Therapeutes in the *diaspora.* It was an involution rather than an evolution. In reaction to the religious and political compromises of the Hasmonaean dynasty, but also in reaction to the insecurity provoked by the opening up of Late Judaism to various esoteric currents, Essenism was a frantic search for security. These people left society to take refuge in the warm security of a religious system as all-pervading as that of primitive cultures, under the all-present personality of the Teacher of Righteousness.

Gnosticism, at the same epoch a very widespread current of thought throughout the East, and one which reached its peak during the first few centuries of the christian era, was also a movement of withdrawal into a form of collectivism leading to individualism rather than to personal development. The mythological frescoes and the philosophical and theological constructions of the gnostic systems were not lacking in grandeur and beauty. The masters of these various schools — Marcion, Basilides, Valentinus, for example — were brilliant, powerful personages, often more inspiring than the heresiologists who fought against them. It is not surprising that they attracted numerous disciples in search of security. At a time when mankind, especially after the revelation of a personal God in Jesus, was reaching a new awareness of the dignity and inalienable responsibility of the human person, gnosticism appeared as an escape into the past, as a search for security in well-organised systems where all human problems received a simple formulation and a firm answer, both guaranteed by the authority of a master invested with powers from above.

Jesus of Nazareth's message was much more disquieting. He did not elaborate a new mythology and did not propose a new doctrinal system or a new moral code. He simply witnessed to his own human and spiritual experience: he said that he had a Father with whom he established a personal relationship of love, from whom he had received a personal mission, and whose will he made his own. He and his Father were one. And he taught that all of us are called to live the same experience: if we love him and accomplish his commandments his Father will love us, he and his Father will come and make their dwelling in us, and we too will be one with his Father and with him. Everyone is invited to work out the consequences and face the demands which such an experience makes in his own personal life.

Christian monasticism, in spite of marked similarities to that of Qumran, is actually poles apart from it. And notwithstanding some

common concepts it may share with gnosticism, it manifests another world of thought and radically different spiritual attitudes. The first great figures of christian monasticism in Egypt—Antony, Makarios, Amoun, for example—were eminently liberated human beings, deeply in touch with their heart and with God. Out of fidelity to a clearly-heard call, they decided to pursue their spiritual journey beyond all that was offered them by the religious and cultural environment of the Church and society of their time. As much as they were free and intransigent in pursuing their pilgrimage on untrodden paths, they also maintained a profound solidarity with men and women of their time. Their aim was nothing less than a personal encounter with God beyond all human mediations.

They did not remain alone very long. Their example released a similar call in many others. Almost against their will they became guides on the way of solitary spiritual adventure. To no one did they offer ready-made maps for the journey; rather they helped each one invent his own unique path.

With Pachomius something different happened, although always in the same line. Pachomius founded a community and established a rule of life. He understood that if a solitary journey toward the discovery of God's will and the realisation of the unique and inalienable 'name' he has given each person can be accomplished in an anchoretic solitude, it can also be accomplished in a community of brothers who respect and support that maturation. In relation to the surrounding religious 'culture' the cenobitic community constitutes a form of 'sub-culture' where a particular type of experience of God is fostered and supported. The rule that structures the life of that group is conceived as a *way* and not as a limit. The various precepts of that rule are so many signposts along the road. The monk must be constantly listening to the Spirit and to his own heart.

Each form of monasticism has its advantages and its riches, but also its limitations and its pitfalls. The principal pitfall of cenobitism lies in the danger that pressure exercised by the collectivity on the individual can easily overwhelm and paralyse him, and risk hampering the growth of its members instead of fostering it. The cenobitic community fulfills its role of being a growth environment inasmuch as it maintains the proper balance between its various constitutive elements.

It was at this point in the evolution of christian monasticism in Egypt that Shenoute came into the picture. The great *White Monastery* near the town of Akhmîm, where he spent some one hundred years of monastic life, was never a pachomian monastery. Its founder,

Pjol, Shenoute's uncle, had simply adopted the rule of the pachomian monasteries, modifying it in many respects, especially in the direction of greater austerity. Shenoute accentuated still more that tendency to exaggeration. With that, we are very far from real pachomian spirituality.

In the case of Shenoute and the monastic movement which he directed and by which he was borne, just as in the cases of Qumran and of gnosticism, we are confronted with a kind of fall-back. In opposition to a developing community spirit and a greater importance given to personal vocation and its demands, there is manifested an instinctive reaction toward the old, well-structured collectivism, which always remains a temptation to human beings. In a massively insecure society, the strongly structured form of monasticism at the White Monastery and the very strong personality of the `prophet' Shenoute (for so he is called) provided thousands of Egyptian *fellahîn* with the dose of security they needed to quieten their existential and religious anguish. They did not come seeking—and Shenoute did not offer them—guidance and support to help them walk confidently in the way of a fuller realisation of their personal spiritual self and of their identification with Christ, but rather they were looking for strong authority and a rigorous and detailed rule that would assure their escape from perdition and their eternal salvation.

Pachomius came to know Christianity through experiencing the active charity of a community of Christians, and he found his spiritual food in the Gospel, which he knew by heart. It was in the New Testament that he had discovered his sense of Community. Even without the philosophical jargon of the School of Alexandria he was profoundly mystical. He was a demanding spiritual father, always calling his disciples to further growth, but he also had an understanding of human weakness and was attentive to the laws of spiritual growth. Shenoute, on the other hand, was a force of nature, a volcano in perpetual eruption. Generally leading his troops with a rod, he could also at times forget himself to the point of being meek. (According to the witness of one of his own letters, we know that one of his monks died as a consequence of blows he administered.) He acted as an inspired prophet and founded his teaching on an inspiration received directly from above. Without theological formation, he made himself a hunter of heretics, besides leading armed expeditions to overthrow idols and pagan temples. There was nothing mystical about him, but he had a greatly voluntarist approach to spiritual life, He was also an enemy of studies and science, although he himself had received a good intellectual formation (which is generally the case with all those who throughout monastic history have been opposed to studies by monks; de Rancé is another example).

Shenoute's monasticism, like his religion, was a functional one: a certain number of conditions had to be fulfilled in order to obtain a certain result. Everyone knows that a functional religion never leads to a personal experience of God, but history oftentimes proves that it is the best means for engendering mediocrity. To believe that one is a monk because one lives in a monastery, observes all the precepts of the Rule and has firmly poured himself into the 'monastic' mold is the best means never really to become a monk at all. Benedict of Nursia was very conscious of this when he observed at the end of his Rule that he had simply indicated a minimum by which to reach a respectable mediocrity; to those who wanted to pursue the journey and to pass beyond what the support of the collective structure could give, he proposed the examples and the teachings of the Elders.

If it is interesting and useful to analyse the case of Shenoute and of his White Monastery, this is because it is far from being an isolated one. Of course, few abbots were at the head of their communities for over eighty years, few also used violence as Shenoute did, and few monasteries were ever as populous as the White Monastery! But it is a fact all the same that if we consider the formal aspect, that is, the type of superiorship exercised by Shenoute, many a Shenoute can be found in monastic history, and his kind is not altogether absent from the contemporary scene. In general they are men who are superior and fascinating in many respects. In the Middle Ages a Bernard of Clairvaux, though without the harshness, had much in common with Shenoute. Think of the crowds of disciples brought back to Clairvaux after each *razzia* in the capitals of Europe, at odds with the tradition of the Elders and with the Rule of Benedict, which insists on the necessity of adequately testing the right intention of the candidates. Think most of all of his zeal against heretics. Although he used different methods, his relentless hounding of Abelard was as violent as Shenoute's actions toward Nestorius.

Providing great psychological security by their skill in formulating simply and solving radically any given problem, the Shenoutes are always very influential in deliberative assemblies. Moreover, the great number of disciples they often attract to the monastery seems to prove the correctness of their approach. But beyond the work of grace, the recruitment of a community depends on various other factors, one of them being the type of equilibrium established within the given community between the various elements of common life.

Saint Benedict defines cenobites as monks who have chosen to live in a community, under a rule and an abbot. The community's equilibrium implies a healthy tension among those three poles: community, rule, and abbot. That equilibrium is difficult to maintain; the tension is demanding and rarely attracts crowds. But as soon as the tension

is broken in favour of one of the poles, everything becomes easier and the takers are usually more numerous.

A few decades ago, when a type of democratic spirit was popular, a monastery where the communal and dialogal aspects were strongly stressed had a good chance of attracting many candidates. That period seems to be over. Nowadays, young persons who have grown up in a universe of insecurity (in political, economic, and social life as well as in school and often also in the family) gather more easily where a strong stress is put either on the rule (i.e. a firmly structured life-style), or on the charismatic role of the father or the mother. This corresponds fairly well to a fundamentalist tendency found at all levels of society in the West nowadays. But it is an alarming tendency, for the demarcation line between fundamentalism and fanaticism is very tenuous and very easily crossed—generally in the name of very high ideals.

For many candidates today, the monastery is a port of arrival, where a difficult and at times tormented journey on the stormy sea of the world comes to an end. They contemplate spending their lives in harbour, as in a kind of spiritual refugee camp. They need a White Monastery; and every White Monastery needs its Shenoute. For others, however, the monastery is not a port of arrival but a port of call from which constant expeditions on the high seas are possible (which in no way implies leaving the enclosure of the monastery). It is the place they have chosen for carrying on an ever new journey, a search beyond all institutional mediations toward the encounter with God who is beyond everything that can be said of him and who is other than everything that is taught about him by those who think they can easily speak of him. These pilgrims of the Absolute need to live in communion with other frontier runners, under the guidance of *higoumenos,* according to the beautiful name given the abbot by an ancient tradition, that is, someone who guides others on the way. Neither a White Monastery nor a Shenoute could answer their spiritual needs.

At every moment of history, religious movements are coming to birth; most of them have an ephemeral existence of a few decades or a few centuries. Monasticism is a trans- cultural phenomenon that has existed for thousands of years. It has been able to survive not only all the crises of society and of the Church, but even its own periods of decadence. Like the phoenix it renews itself. Periodically, after, sometimes rather long, phases of larval existence, it recovers the freshness and the dynamism of a butterfly emerging from the cocoon. But much collective discernment is required to be able to recognise in today's chrysalis tomorrow's butterfly; for it is not enough to enter one's cocoon to be borne anew.

Throughout the world, in every culture, in all religions and every walk of life there are nowadays—as much as at any earlier time and probably more than at any earlier time— women and men thirsty for the Absolute, open to the Breath of Life of which Paul speaks in chapter 8 of his Epistle to the Romans, and straining toward that surplus of life, unforeseeable and unimaginable, that is always offered to them from on high. They live in a tent, nomads of the Absolute, frontier runners, always ready to receive under a new form the 'name' that engenders in them their inner being, accepting the various institutional mediations, but refusing to be imprisoned by them. In them, the monastic charism survives, more perhaps than in all the official institutional forms, even if these have been retouched according to Vatican II.

And when the monastic institution itself comes to realise a new phase of growth, as it has done at various times in the past, it will not be through a reform (`adapted' though it be) of its existing structures, but by the regrouping of all these solitary wayfarers, in one form or another, in a sort of great universal monastic order. That network exists already; it has still to invent its visible mode of expression. One must hope that a few elements of that network will then be found in every White Monastery.

Armand Veilleux

N.D. de Mistassini