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Oliver Freiberger

LOCATING THE
ASCETIC'S HABITAT:
TOWARD A MICRO-
COMPARISON OF
RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES

One day the desert father John Kolobos made a decision. He turned to the senior ascetic with whom he shared a *kellion* (a residential structure for ascetics) and said to him: "I want to be without a care, just like the angels are. They don't work but serve God unremittingly." He took off his cloak and walked into the desert. But after he had spent one week there, he returned to his brother. When he knocked at the door, the elder responded: "Who are you?" He said, "It's me, your brother John." The brother replied: "John has become an angel. He is not among men anymore." John begged him: "It's me!" But the brother did not open the door, and John was locked out until morning, deeply afflicted. Later the brother opened and said: "If you are human, you need to work in order to subsist." And John repented and said: "Forgive me."¹

This story seems to say that a down-to-earth take on life prevails over idealistic reverie. When John's lofty plan of becoming an angel fails, the elder offers him an object lesson by keeping him out for the night and by

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¹ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, John Kolobos 2 in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (1857–66; hereafter PG) 65:204C–205A. All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise noted.

declaring that one has to work for a living. Apparently, in his view it is not appropriate for an ascetic to drop out and abandon one's daily labor. This message may gain even greater weight for readers who are aware that it is not some ordinary ascetic that is humiliated here, but John Kolobos, who is known to be one of the most eminent desert fathers of Egypt and under whose name the story was recorded. If such an outstanding ascetic repents and asks for forgiveness, it may be concluded, one had better refrain from abandoning the kellion and one's work. And yet there is more to the story. At the risk of reading too much into it, one may find it conspicuous that John's original plan of leaving everything behind and fleeing into the desert is not criticized or even discussed. The elder takes John to task not when he leaves the kellion, but when he returns. John seems to be admonished not because the plan was fundamentally flawed or inappropriate, but because he comes back to the sphere of men, not having succeeded in becoming like an angel. Whether or not the author of the story would have acknowledged the value of John's plan, it seems that while clearly privileging one ideal, the story actually reveals two different ideals of an ascetic lifestyle: one featuring sedentariness, clothing, and work, the other wandering and nakedness.² The two ideals assume two different habitats for the ascetic: the kellion, "cell," or residential compound, and the desert or wilderness.

As I intend to show, the story exhibits aspects of a more complex discourse about the ascetic's habitat in the collection of texts to which it belongs, the early Christian Apophthegmata Patrum.³ This discourse consists of a variety of ideals, opinions, and arguments that interrelate in various ways and often conflict. In the second section of the article I will try to demonstrate that an equally complex discourse about the ascetic's habitat can be found in a historically and culturally unrelated collection of texts, the Brahmanical Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads. The separate analyses of these two narrowly defined religious contexts allow for a cross-cultural comparison on the micro level. In the third section I will try to demonstrate how the comparative analysis of the two discourses can produce a theoretical model of the discourse on asceticism that is useful for the study of religion. Put in general terms, I wish to suggest that the comparison of discourses—rather than of phenomena—solves certain problems with which comparative approaches in the study of religion are frequently

² It should be noted that the text does not talk about nakedness explicitly; it only says that John "took off his cloak." It is hard to imagine, however, what reasons the authors might have had to mention this, other than wanting to indicate that John intends to become an angel by wandering in the desert without a cloak, that is, naked. In other Apophthegmata such naked ascetics in the desert are mentioned with great admiration; see Makarios 2 (PG 65:260B–261A) and PJ 3, 10 in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne (1844–55; hereafter PL) 73:1008BC.

³ I am using the term "discourse" in a rather narrow sense. See more below, n. 59.

confronted, and that it facilitates the development of useful theoretical models and theories.⁴

1. THE DISCOURSE ABOUT THE ASCETIC'S HABITAT IN THE APOPTHHEGMATA PATRUM

John Kolobos's story belongs to the Apophthegmata Patrum, or "Sayings of the Fathers," a collection of sayings and stories ascribed to Christian ascetics who populated the Egyptian desert in the fourth and fifth centuries, the so-called desert fathers. The Apophthegmata have come down to us in various forms and languages. The early period of their formation is rather obscure, but scholars assume that the sayings had been orally transmitted for some time before they were collected and written down most likely in Palestine at the end of the fifth century. The two oldest versions are a collection in Greek, alphabetically arranged according to the names of the desert fathers; and a collection in Latin, which groups the sayings systematically, according to topics such as poverty, humility, prayer, obedience, and so forth. A number of other versions exists, also in Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, and Ethiopic, but these appear to be younger than the other two and largely dependent on them.⁵ The following study is based only on the two oldest versions, the alphabetic Greek collection and the systematic Latin collection (the latter referred to as PJ, after the names of the alleged translators, Pelagius and John). These versions are published in J.-P. Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* and *Patrologia Latina*, respectively (PG 65:71–440 and PL 73:851–1022).⁶

The majority of the ascetics represented in these texts were anchorites (or, more precisely, semi-anchorites), who inhabited the three ascetic

⁴ The article is based on research presented in my book, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung brahmanischer und frühchristlicher Texte*, Studies in Oriental Religions 57 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), which discusses a number of discourses about ascetic practices in those two collections of texts. The book also includes further discussions about the comparative method and the heuristic use of the term "asceticism," as well as an explanation for the selection of the two sources.

⁵ Presumably most desert fathers spoke Coptic, but the existing Coptic versions of the Apophthegmata are later translations of the earlier material.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion, see Freiburger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 135–41. The classic study on the early transmission of these texts is Wilhelm Bousset, *Apophthegmata: Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums*, ed. Theodor Hermann and Gustav Krüger (1923; repr., Aalen: Scientia, 1969). See also Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des "Apophthegmata Patrum"* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1962). Barbara Müller gives a useful survey of the state of scholarship on the early history of these texts in her book, *Der Weg des Weinens: Die Tradition des "Penthos" in den Apophthegmata Patrum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 16–38. William Harmless provides a useful bibliography of editions and translations of the existing versions and of some scholarly studies in his *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 183–86.

colonies Nitria, Kellia, and Sketis in Lower Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries. The ideals of *cenobitic* monasticism, which arose about the same time with Pachomius and others in Upper Egypt, are occasionally represented in the Apophthegmata as well.⁷ Most ascetics dwelled in their own kellion, or “cell,” a simple structure made of brick and clay.⁸ The kellia were ideally set up at a considerable distance from one another to provide a certain degree of solitude, but the colonies also had churches, and a number of ascetics would gather on Sundays to attend the service. Many desert fathers lived alone in their kellion, others shared it with a student. Most made a living from simple manual labor like weaving ropes and baskets that they would sell at markets to purchase the minimal necessities they needed to survive.⁹

WORLD RENUNCIATION AND THE DESERT

The most frequently expressed motive for living in the desert is the wish to renounce “the world.” As James Goehring puts it, “In the major sources of Egyptian monasticism that survive, separation from the *inhabited world* (οἰκουμένη) through *withdrawal* (ἀναχώρησις) into the *desert* (ἔρημος) or behind a monastery wall represents a central, unifying theme.” The desert serves as “a symbol of death and distinction from the inhabited realm. . . . Many early monks fled to the desert to symbolize while yet

⁷ Other sources provide various sorts of additional information about the desert fathers of Egypt, in particular Athanasius’s *Vita Antonii*, Palladius’s *Historia Lausiaca*, Timotheus of Alexandria’s (?) *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, and a number of letters, but for the following reasons I will not use these sources in this study. Not only are the Apophthegmata extensive and rich in content all by themselves, they also represent one specific literary genre. The other sources belong to different genres, and their authors have various political or devotional agendas, a close consideration of which would make the study extremely complex. Here I am interested in the views expressed in one textual corpus more than in the literary history connected to the desert fathers. Furthermore, microlevel comparison requires a narrow and manageable definition of the sources and of the objective of inquiry. The question pursued here is, How do the desert fathers of the Apophthegmata Patrum envision the ideal ascetic habitat? For references to editions, translations, and studies of the other sources see Freiberger, *Der Asketediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 136–37.

⁸ Excavations have shown that a number of kellia were more elaborate, included several rooms, a kitchen, a latrine, and a courtyard, and the walls were painted and decorated. See floorplans and photographs from the excavations of the Kellia settlement in Mission Suisse d’Archéologie Copte de l’Université de Genève, *Le site monastique des Kellia (Basse-Égypte): Recherches des années 1981–83* (Louvain: Peeters, 1984), 22 and passim.

⁹ See James E. Goehring, “The World Engaged: The Social and Economic World of Early Egyptian Monasticism,” in *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999), 39–52, esp. 45–46. For a general description of the ascetics’ daily life, based on various sources, see Lucien Regnault, *The Day-to-Day Life of the Desert Fathers in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1999).

alive their chosen death to this life and citizenship in heaven.”¹⁰ The texts emphasize the physical separation from the worldly realm (often simply labeled “Egypt”), but it should be noted that this separation was first and foremost an ideal. While founded in the desert, most ascetic settlements were located not too far away from villages, and many ascetics were in constant social and economic interaction with “the world.”¹¹ Thus, while maintaining that the desert is a realm that is fundamentally different from “the world” that they have left behind, the ascetics had to find ways of dealing with its proximity.

Some ascetics withdrew even further into the desert; others locked themselves in. But those who stayed close to “the world” developed several coping techniques. In the texts, some refuse to meet with visitors and do not shy away from lying—when a visitor asks for him, a father would hide his identity and declare that that ascetic was a fool.¹² One desert father, Arsenios, asks visitors whether they will act on his advice. When they agree, he says: “Wherever you hear Arsenios to be, don’t come close.”¹³

This method of self-denial and deception does not work, obviously, in the interaction with relatives. Several stories about Abbas Poimen illustrate ways of dealing with this rather delicate issue. In one story a provincial governor, after being turned away by Poimen, arrests his sister’s son and would release him only if Poimen intercedes and agrees to talk to him. Poimen’s sister begs Poimen to meet with the governor to save her only child, but after declaring that he had not begotten any children he sends the governor a note saying that the boy should be lawfully prosecuted and will be executed if convicted of a capital crime; if he is not guilty, Poimen says, the governor may act as he pleases.¹⁴ Here Poimen

¹⁰ Goehring, “The World Engaged,” 40. For the “myth of the desert,” see also his chapter, “The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert,” in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 136–49. An earlier study of this topos is Antoine Guillaumont, “Die Wüste im Verständnis der ägyptischen Mönche,” *Zeitschrift für Aszese und Mystik* 54 (1981): 121–37. The concept of the desert being the ideal habitat for ascetics remained attractive, also in the Western monastic tradition. It was employed, for example, by medieval Cistercians in (entirely desert-free) eastern France; see Christoph Auffarth, “Wüste und Paradies: Zur Wüstenvätertradition bei den Zisterziensern,” in *Von Cîteaux nach Bebenhausen: Welt und Wirken der Zisterzienser*, ed. Barbara Scholkmann and Söhnke Lorenz (Tübingen: Attempto-Verlag, 2000), 41–60.

¹¹ The hagiographical literature, most prominently the *Vita Antonii*, plays down this interaction, which has influenced scholarship as well; see Goehring, “The World Engaged,” 40–43. For the archaeological evidence, see already Alfred Ludwig Schmitz, “Die Welt der ägyptischen Einsiedler und Mönche: Auf Grund der archäologischen Befunde,” *Römische Quartalschrift* 37 (1929): 189–243, esp. 200.

¹² Or 6 (PG 65:438C–440A); Simon 1 (PG 65:412CD); Moses 8 (PG 65:285AB); see also Simon 2 (PG 65:412D–413A).

¹³ Arsenios 7 (PG 65:89AB).

¹⁴ Poimen 5 (PG 65:320AB).

does not only refuse to be blackmailed; he also asserts that he will not engage in worldly affairs, even if—or especially when—his own relatives are involved. In another story he does meet with the governor to intercede for an inmate, a compatriot from his home village. But he prays to God that his plea be denied, expecting that otherwise he would not be left alone anymore. (His prayer is answered favorably.)¹⁵ Again, ascetic interests trump worldly matters, but it is interesting to note that Poimen seems to be slightly more willing to intercede for a person who has no direct family ties with him. On another occasion, one of his relatives who was rejected by him approaches a group of desert fathers, begging them to heal his disabled child. Only after the other ascetics insist that everyone must bless the child does Poimen reluctantly agree, and after his blessing the child is cured.¹⁶ This tangible unwillingness to engage in family affairs is also apparent in Poimen's behavior toward his mother. Unable to get close to him and his brothers, his mother decides to wait until they leave their kellion at the time of service. But when they see her, they immediately return and close the door. Their mother cries and begs to see them, but they refuse. Poimen promises that she would meet them in the other world if she would not see them now. Comforted by this promise, the mother leaves the place.¹⁷

Whether or not such a promise could calm a desperate mother, it underscores a point that all these stories want to emphasize: Poimen's ascetic steadfastness in dealing with the world that he has left behind. By treating his relatives in a way that may appear hard-hearted, he demonstrates that he has not only fled "the world" generally but has also cut the emotional ties to his family, which—as these and other stories show—was considered to be a particularly difficult achievement. While the stories try to emphasize Poimen's ascetic greatness, they also reveal a lively interaction between "the desert" and "the world." In fact, for Poimen this interaction is one of negotiation and compromise, and while he tries to cope with it by assuming a hostile attitude he also seems to accept his spatial situation: living in the desert, but close enough to "the world" to be quite easily approachable for "worldly" visitors.

In addition, renowned ascetics may find themselves trapped in a dilemma that is most clearly illustrated by a story about a desert father who, although living in seclusion, "was famous in the city and enjoyed great prestige." One day this father wants to visit a fellow ascetic at his deathbed. If he were to leave his kellion during the day, he thinks to himself, many people would come and pay homage to him, and he would lose

¹⁵ Poimen 9 (PG 65:324B).

¹⁶ Poimen 7 (PG 65:322AB).

¹⁷ Poimen 76 (PG 65:340D–341B).

his calm. Therefore, he waits until dark, but as he steps out of his kellion two angels appear, sent by God to illumine the way. Seeing the luster (*dóxa*) the whole city congregates. “The more he thought he would escape the honor (*dóxa*) the more he was honored (*edoxástḥē*).”¹⁸ The term *dóxa*, used here both in its literal meaning (“brightness, shine”) and figuratively (“fame, glory”), refers to the ascetic’s prestige among the city folk. The ascetic’s dilemma is obvious: the more rigorous his practice, the more famous he becomes; the more famous he becomes, the harder it gets to maintain his rigorous ascetic lifestyle.¹⁹ The approaches mentioned above represent one attempt at solving the dilemma: adapting to the (spatial) situation, which entails the constant struggle to be left alone.

SECLUSION IN THE KELLION

Another way of solving the dilemma is radical renunciation. Some desert fathers declare that the best habitat for the ascetic is his kellion and that he should leave it as seldom as possible. For them the kellion is a refuge, a place “that teaches you everything.”²⁰ Many of them are said to leave the kellion only once a week, to attend the service.²¹ Reportedly, some ascetics do not leave the kellion during Lent, or for a whole year, or even for thirty years.²² While little is said about the exact spiritual practice that is to be exercised in seclusion, the Apophthegmata provide a number of reasons for staying in the kellion, many of which are based on a notion of spatial differentiation. Abbas Antonios uses a telling metaphor: just as fish belong in the water and die on dry land, ascetics belong in the kellion. If the ascetic were to spend time outside or to mingle with people of the world, Antonios says, his tranquility (*hēsychía*) would fade. Just as fish hurry to get back into the water, ascetics must rush into their kellion, in order not to lose sight of guarding the inside through spending time outside.²³ Antonios equates the “inside” space of the kellion with the “inner” spiritual path of the ascetic; everything “outside” distracts from the ideal way of life. For him the kellion is the natural habitat for true ascetics, outside of which they cannot survive as ascetics for long.

¹⁸ John Kolobos 38 (PG 65:216D–217A).

¹⁹ For a comparative study of this ascetic dilemma, see Oliver Freiburger, “Prestige als Plage: Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu einem asketischen Dilemma,” *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 16 (2008): 83–103.

²⁰ Moses 6 (PG 65:286C). See also Sisoës 37 (PG 65:404B); John Kolobos 25 (PG 65:213AB). Abbas Ammonas calls the kellion a grave (*mnéma*)—the appropriate place for ascetics who are dead to the world (Poimen 2 [PG 65:317B]).

²¹ Abbas Theodoros, for example, refuses to visit a dying brother during the week. If the brother is still alive on the Sabbath, he says, he will go; if not, they will see each other in the other world (Theodoros of Pherme 19 [PG 65:192B]).

²² Paul the Great 3 (PG 65:381C); Dioskuros 1 (PG 65:160C); Markos the Egyptian 1 (PG 65:304A–C).

²³ Antonios 10 (PG 65:77BC).

Responding to the question of why he flees the other ascetics, Abbas Arsenios explains his urge for seclusion as follows: “God knows that I love you. But I cannot be close to God and be close to men at the same time. Those thousands and ten thousands above have one will, but men have many wills. I cannot leave God and go to men.”²⁴ In this view a life in seclusion corresponds to God’s will; it is the true and ideal way of life. When asked why he rushes into his kellion when a fellow ascetic approaches, Isidoros the Elder uses a metaphor similar to the one ascribed to Antonios: “Animals too flee to their den, in order to be saved.”²⁵ It is certainly no coincidence that the verb *sōzein* is used here, from which our modern term “soteriology” is derived. Animals flee to be saved from their natural enemies, but the ascetic who stays in his kellion is saved in a soteriological sense. Still, for many desert fathers the idea of the kellion as a refuge that provides shelter and protection—just like an animal’s den does—has also a very real meaning. The natural enemies that threaten ascetics are demons and the devil, which are considered to be real and powerful forces that they must combat.²⁶ A number of sayings warn against the demons that are lurking outside the kellion, waiting to attack the ascetic when he steps out.²⁷ In one story the devil appears in the guise of a desert father and makes an ascetic leave the kellion by convincing him to attend the service—after six years in seclusion. On another occasion, the devil appears before the same ascetic in the guise of a messenger, reporting that the ascetic’s father, who had just passed away, had wanted him to return home to distribute the wealth among the poor. Right after doing this good deed, the messenger says, the ascetic could return to his kellion. The ascetic travels to his father’s house, only to find him in good health, but once he is back in the world, he becomes entangled and never returns to the desert. The conclusion is: “An ascetic must never leave his kellion, whoever may try to convince him to do so.”²⁸ Clearly this view could become an immunization strategy against any sort of criticism of the life in the kellion: it could be thought that whoever argues for a less secluded practice may really be the devil in disguise.

²⁴ Arsenios 13 (PG 65:92A).

²⁵ Isidoros the Elder 7 (PG 65:236BC).

²⁶ See the recent study by David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁷ See, e.g., Isidoros the Elder 1 (PG 65:234D–236A); Paul the Great 1 (PG 65:381B); Arsenios 11 (PG 65:89C); Isaac the Theban 2 (PG 65:241AB); Moses 1 (PG 65:281BC).

²⁸ PJ 7, 24 (PL 73:897C–900A). In a related article that is based primarily on the *Vita Antonii*, Kevin Coyle states: “But in general the *Sayings* show no great concern with neutralising the power of the devil, who is not considered capable of inflicting real harm, nor with getting rid of demons, who are portrayed as targets for the monks’ mockery, rather than as sources for their fear” (J. Kevin Coyle, “Early Monks, Prayer, and the Devil,” in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, ed. Pauline Allen, Raymond Canning, and Lawrence Cross [Brisbane: Watson Ferguson, 1998], 229–49, quote at 248). Already the few examples mentioned here show that Coyle’s statement is an unfortunate generalization.

Even those who view the kellion as the ascetic's ideal habitat acknowledge that living in seclusion is a demanding ascetic practice. Some desert fathers explain that either their own thoughts or certain demons frequently try to tempt them into leaving the kellion and visiting their fellow ascetics.²⁹ Abbas Matoes advises a brother, who cannot control his speech among people, to go into seclusion. Matoes admits: "I am sitting in solitude not due to virtue, but due to weakness. It is the strong ones who go among people."³⁰ Abbas Arsenios urges a brother, who is concerned about his inability to fast and work, to focus on only one thing: "Go and eat, drink, sleep, don't work—just do not leave the kellion."³¹ By linking the secluded life to other ascetic practices—fasting, sleep deprivation, work—Arsenius creates a hierarchy of values in which seclusion occupies the highest rank. In this view staying in the kellion is the supreme ascetic practice.

THE IDEAL OF SPATIAL DETACHMENT

A number of desert fathers, however, do not agree with this concept. They implicitly and explicitly criticize the ideal of strict seclusion in the kellion. One father, for example, goes to meet John Kolobos for a short visit late in the day. They begin to talk about virtues, and before they even notice, it is morning. John sees his visitor out, but outside they keep on talking until the sixth hour. Then John asks him to come in again to have some food, and only after the meal does the brother leave.³² Here the ideal of "keeping the solitude in the kellion, whatever it takes" is nowhere to be found. Indeed, the story is told to promote a different practice: a brotherly exchange about virtues that is not restricted by time or space. Note that leaving the kellion does not present a problem, neither for John nor for the brother who visits him. John Kolobos also expresses this rather open and flexible view about the kellion in a conversation with a brother who is worried about the fact that he is physically too weak to leave the kellion in order to join other ascetics for work. John says: "If you are capable of going in and out, then go. But if you cannot do it, sit in the kellion and mourn your sins."³³ The daily life of these ascetics in-

²⁹ Sarmatas 4 (PG 65:413CD); PJ 7, 30 (PL 73:900D); PJ 14, 14 (PL 73:950B–D).

³⁰ Matoes 13 (PG 65:293C). As Matoes does not identify who those "strong ones" may be, his modesty appears rather rhetorical. If even this eminent desert father is not strong enough to leave the solitude, then who is? Rather than seriously advocating a two-tiered model of ascetic practice, he seems to aim primarily at making his conversation partner go into solitude.

³¹ Arsenios 11 (PG 65:89C). In a parallel story, Abbas John adds that the brother should not even pray but just stay in the kellion. Paphnutios 5 (PG 65:380C). See also Herakleios 1 (PG 65:185B–D); PJ 7, 37 (PL 73:902A).

³² John Kolobos 26 (PG 65:213B).

³³ John Kolobos 19 (PG 65:212BC).

cludes working outside the kellion; staying inside is out of the ordinary and appears, in this hierarchy of values, merely as the second best option. Abbas Ammonas explicitly states that strict seclusion is of no advantage to the ascetic. One should rather sit in the kellion, eat daily, and “take the word of the tax collector to heart.”³⁴ The latter is probably a reference to Luke 18:9–14, where a pious Pharisee, who fasts twice a week, is contrasted with a tax collector who admits to be a sinner and asks for God’s mercy. It seems that Ammonas wants to point out that humility is more beneficial than radical ascetic practice.

While these fathers reject an ideal that regulates and restricts the ascetic’s habitat to the kellion, others go a step further by advocating an ideal of spatial detachment. In one story, Abbas Agathon and his students spend much time erecting a kellion. After its completion Agathon sees something that is not profitable (*prágma mé ōpheloun*)—we are not told what that thing is—and tells his students that they should leave the place. The students are distressed, having put so much effort in building the structure, and they argue that “the people” (*hoi ánthrōpoi*) would take offense at their sudden departure and would call them “the unsteady ones” (*akáthistoi*). Agathon responds by saying that while some may take offense, others will say, “Blessed are those who go somewhere else for God’s sake and despise all things.” He adds that he was going to leave the place and that whoever wishes may come along. Then they all want to join him.³⁵ Two aspects of this story seem particularly interesting for a discussion of the ascetic’s habitat. Agathon’s willingness to leave a place immediately and without hesitation when he encounters something unprofitable, no matter how much effort was put into getting settled, reflects an ideal of spatial detachment. Here, being ready to leave everything behind and flee a place promptly for the sake of God defines the ascetic accomplishment—as opposed to locking oneself in and fighting the demons. These two general images of the ascetic life—flight and fight—appear frequently in the Apophthegmata as alternative responses to the perceived threats the ascetic faces.³⁶ Second, the story indicates a tension between the two ideals. Agathon’s students suggest that their sudden departure may leave the (negative) impression of unsteadiness, and Agathon implicitly agrees with this prediction. “The people” who are expected to criticize the move could well be the same people who advocate sedentariness and the ideal of seclusion in the kellion. A different saying appears almost like a direct response to Agathon’s view: “If you are tempted where you live, do not leave the place while the temptation lasts.

³⁴ Ammonas 4 (PG 65:120BC).

³⁵ Agathon 6 (PG 65:109D–112A).

³⁶ This becomes particularly apparent when sexual temptation is discussed; see Freiberger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 217–26.

For if you leave, you will, wherever you go, find exactly what you have fled. Rather, be patient while the temptation lasts, in order not to create offense (*scandalum*) for others and suffering for those who live nearby.³⁷ Agathon, however, does not waver in the face of that criticism, and he is not alone; other desert fathers share his approach to ascetic practice.³⁸

While these ascetics believe that one has to be ready to leave a place anytime, they still build kellia and reside in them. Other desert fathers push the ideal of spatial detachment even further by advocating the ideal of constant wandering. The fact that this ideal does not appear very often in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* suggests that the majority of the ascetics represented in these texts did not live this sort of ascetic life.³⁹ But some fathers esteemed and admired it. As we saw at the beginning of this article, in John Kolobos's story, the idea of leaving the kellion behind, giving everything up—including one's clothes—and wandering freely in the desert had a great appeal. Some fathers, like Abbas Bisarion and Abbas Daniel, did wander themselves;⁴⁰ others talk favorably about the wandering life. One father says that a wandering monk (*peregrinus monachus*) may serve as a mirror (*speculum*) for settled monks, just like the latter are more honorable than people of the world.⁴¹ Abbas Makarios reports an encounter with two wandering, naked ascetics, whom he had spotted at a waterhole in the desert among drinking animals. They tell him that they had lived like this for forty years and that, due to God's provision, neither the heat nor the cold could affect them. To Makarios's question how he could become a true monk, they respond that he must renounce all worldly things. Makarios replies that he was too weak to do as they do. "Then," they say, "sit in your kellion and mourn your sins." Makarios concludes later that he had not become a monk yet, but that he had seen monks.⁴² In this description the desert is the (almost paradisiac) wilderness, in which ascetics freely roam, naturally naked, just like animals. This is portrayed as the natural habitat of true monks, while life in the kellion is considered merely second-best. Makarios may or may

³⁷ PJ 7, 32 (PL 73:901A).

³⁸ After having sown about 2,800 liters of grain, Abbas Ammoes sees something that is not profitable (same wording as above) and tells his students that they would leave. When they are concerned about the lost bread, he tells them about ascetics who had left freshly painted doors and manuscripts behind, not even closing the doors behind them (Ammoës 5 [PG 65:128AB]). Abbas Megethios is known to possess only a needle to slit palm leaves for making baskets. When he goes out, and the thought of leaving that place occurs, he would not return to his kellion (Megethios 1 [PG 65:300D]).

³⁹ Daniel Caner argues that wandering was more common than often suggested (*Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002], 19–49).

⁴⁰ See Bisarion 12 (PG 65:142D–144C); Daniel 5 (PG 65:156B).

⁴¹ PJ 10, 82 (PL 73:927D).

⁴² Makarios the Egyptian 2 (PG 65:260B–261A).

not view the wandering life as a realistic alternative, but placing it hierarchically above his own way of life certainly reflects a high esteem for wandering in the desert.⁴³ In a similar story, a desert father sees a naked ascetic pasturing like an animal. When he approaches, the ascetic flees because he “cannot stand the smell of humans” and stops only after the father has also taken off his clothes—the “matter of the world” (*materiam mundi*), as the ascetic calls it. He then advises the father: “Flee men and keep silent, and you will be saved.”⁴⁴ Space and scope do not permit me to discuss in greater detail many interesting aspects of asceticism that these stories raise, as, for example, the cultural meaning of clothing, the interpretation of the naked body, the opposition of culture and nature, the idea of returning to an “original,” “natural” state, and so forth. For the purpose of this article, which is concerned with the ascetic’s habitat, it may suffice to point out that the desert—here viewed as the wilderness, not as the location of ascetic settlements—is constructed as the true and natural habitat of ascetics, in which they roam like animals.

For some ascetics the contrast between the two habitats—the kellion and the desert as wilderness—is not as sharp. When a brother, who wanders about with Abbas Daniel, asks him when they would stay in the kellion, Daniel replies: “Who steals God from us now? God is in the kellion as he is outside of it.”⁴⁵ Abbas Gelasios makes a similar point from the other perspective. Tempted to leave his kellion and to become a wanderer, he tries it out by wandering in the courtyard, eating little, and sleeping outside. After a few days he gives up, exhausted, and concludes: “If you cannot do the works of the desert, be steadfast, stay seated in your kellion, mourn your sins, and do not stray. For the eye of God sees the works of men everywhere. For him nothing is concealed, and he recognizes those who do good deeds.”⁴⁶ While both Daniel and Gelasios use this argument to justify their own respective ways of life, they do not disparage or devalue the other one. For them God’s omnipresence dissolves the distinction between the two lifestyles, which thereby become two equally valuable options.

Other ascetics, however, are explicit in their opposition to the ideal of wandering. One desert father declares that a constantly wandering monk (*monachus frequenter migrans*) cannot bring any fruit, just like a tree that has been transplanted too often.⁴⁷ And Amma Synkletike, one of the few

⁴³ For other interesting aspects of the story, see my discussion in *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 215–17.

⁴⁴ PJ 3, 10 (PL 73:1008BC).

⁴⁵ Daniel 5 (PG 65:156B).

⁴⁶ Gelasios 6 (PG 65:152C–153A).

⁴⁷ PJ 7, 36 (PL 73, 902A).

desert mothers whose sayings were included in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, compares the wandering ascetic with a breeding bird that leaves its nest. Like the bird's eggs die, so an ascetic who wanders dies in his or her faith.⁴⁸

THE ANCHORITIC VERSUS THE CENOBITIC LIFE

Amma Synkletike advocates sedentariness, but unlike the ascetics who inhabit a kellion, she believes that the best ascetic habitat is the *koinobion*, that is, the monastic community. Those who favor this life offer several criticisms of seclusion in the kellion. They claim that mere spatial seclusion does not correspond to an inner spiritual progress;⁴⁹ they state that one cannot master solitude before having mastered communal life;⁵⁰ and they argue that dealing with others is more difficult—and more virtuous—than locking oneself in.⁵¹ Roughly put, they accuse the anchorites of hypocrisy and arrogance. One of the most outspoken critics, Amma Theodora, completely rejects the secluded life, arguing that the demons too lived in solitude. Only through humility, she declares, can one be saved.⁵² The main ascetic features of the communal life—obedience and subordination, which are meant to cultivate humility—are contrasted with the anachoretic life in seclusion that, for Theodora, produces nothing but arrogance.

Not surprisingly, some anchorites' views about the *koinobion* are hardly less explicit. They consider the wish to leave the kellion and to join a *koinobion* as a temptation that the ascetic must forcefully resist;⁵³ they state—mirroring exactly the point made above—that one can only master the life in the community after having completely stripped off selfishness by living in the kellion;⁵⁴ they despise the hierarchy within cenobitic communities, which, in their view, creates a temptation to pursue a career and the desire to achieve higher ranks;⁵⁵ they claim that the *koinobion* presumes to be entitled to judge its members and to punish them ruthlessly;⁵⁶ and they accuse the cenobites of caring more for material than for spiritual needs.⁵⁷ In short, for them the *koinobion* is a place that is ruled by

⁴⁸ Synkletike 6 (PG 65:421D–424A).

⁴⁹ See PJ 2, 14 (PL 73:860A); Kasianos (Cassian) 4 (PG 65:244C–245A).

⁵⁰ Longinos 1 (PG 65:256CD).

⁵¹ Serinos 1 (PG 65:417B).

⁵² Theodora 6 (PG 65:204AB).

⁵³ Paphnutios 5 (PG 65:380CD).

⁵⁴ Poimen 152 (PG 65:360B). Here Poimen explains to a brother who wants to join a *koinobion* that he first needs to overcome caring for all activities, because “(in the *koinobion*) you are not even entitled to a single mug.”

⁵⁵ Isaak 2 (PG 65:224CD); PJ 15, 85 (PL 73:967CD).

⁵⁶ Antonios 21 (PG 65:81D–84A); Antonios 29 (PG 65:85AB); Poimen 6 (PG 65:320B–322A); Poimen 70 (PG 65:337D–340A); Isaak the Theban 1 (PG 65:240C).

⁵⁷ Poimen 181 (PG 65:365C).

hierarchical arrogance and that invites the pursuit of nonspiritual goals (a monastic career or a comfortable life).

A third position exists besides these two opposing views. Abbas Joseph responds to a brother who asks him whether he should live in the koinobion or in solitude: "If you can become calm (*anapaúō*) both in the koinobion and in solitude, put both your thoughts like on a balance beam. Where you see the greater benefit and where your thought leads you, that you should do."⁵⁸ Unlike the above-mentioned fathers, Joseph has no categorical objection to either one of the habitats and lifestyles; he considers both as equally suitable options for an ascetic. Rather, his biggest concern is that the ascetic becomes calm.

THE DISCOURSE ABOUT THE ASCETIC'S HABITAT

The material presented here clearly illustrates that the authors of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* do not agree on where the ascetic should live. A close look reveals a plurality of voices and opinions, some of which are in stark contrast to each other. Very rarely, however, does one author refer explicitly to other positions; the opposing views are reflected, if at all, only in the subtext of a rebuttal. Therefore terms such as "debate," "discussion," or "dispute" do not apply. I prefer to use the term "discourse" to indicate a thematic field in which arguments are made that relate to and are interlinked with each other in various ways.⁵⁹

All voices in the discourse about the ascetic's habitat—which, I may add, is only one among several discourses in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*⁶⁰—share the general assumption that the ascetic has left "the world" in order to inhabit "the desert," but they disagree on what the ideal way of inhabiting the desert is. One feature of the discourse is what can be referred to as the intensity of world renunciation. While some ascetics live close to "the world," interact with it in various ways, and must therefore develop strategies for keeping a certain distance, others withdraw more radically, either by retreating into their kellion or by adopting a vagrant life. These latter lifestyles, again, can have various

⁵⁸ Joseph in *Panepho* 8 (PG 65:229D–232A).

⁵⁹ Note that this is not a "discourse analysis" focusing on power relations following Foucault, Saïd, or others. Rather, I am interested in the plurality of voices in the texts, in interlinking and conflicting positions and argument patterns. I am therefore using "discourse" in a narrow sense, somewhat in line with one of the meanings given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "A connected series of utterances by which meaning is communicated, esp. forming a unit for analysis; spoken or written communication regarded as consisting of such utterances." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://dictionary.oed.com>, s.v. "discourse."

⁶⁰ Other discourses address the issues of keeping silence, obedience, owning property, and dealing with food, clothing, and sexuality; see the analyses in Freiburger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*.

degrees of intensity: from locking oneself up in one's kellion for decades to frequently visiting and inviting fellow ascetics; from spontaneously moving someplace else to roaming naked like an animal. In short, the discourse exhibits a variety of ascetic habitats within "the desert" and a spectrum of practices associated with these habitats.

Most desert fathers state very clearly how ascetics should live in their habitat. According to some, one must never leave the kellion; others say that one must be ready to leave anytime. Some state that the demons must be fought in seclusion, others claim that only the humility that arises from living in a monastic community can defeat them. All those statements are meant to regulate the ascetic's life in one way or another. Some desert fathers, however, take an antiregulatory position. They claim that God can be found inside as well as outside the kellion, or that God sees good deeds of ascetics in both habitats. With regard to the two opposing regulatory views, this type of position can become optionalistic. For example, in one passage the ascetic is given the option of living in solitude or in the koinobion, if he can become calm in both.⁶¹

These antiregulatory positions display indifference toward defining the true ascetic habitat. They put the issue into perspective by declaring that attaining the goals—being close to God or becoming calm—does not require a particular habitat. Both regulatory and antiregulatory positions frequently produce varying hierarchies of values, both in view of spiritual goals and ascetic practices. Advocates of the cenobitic life rank obedience high in their hierarchy and seclusion low; for some anchorites, seclusion is, at least, the second-best option, ranked below working or below wandering in the desert. For others, however, seclusion in the kellion embodies the highest value and trumps other practices, such as fasting, sleep deprivation, or work. This position is clearly regulatory with regard to the practice of seclusion. But at the same time—and precisely for this reason—it can be indifferent toward the other practices, which are placed on a lower rank in the hierarchy of values that this position reflects.

In the next section I will discuss a discourse about the ascetic's habitat that appears in a different and historically unrelated collection of texts, the Brahmanical Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads. I shall present and analyze the material in its own terms, as I did in this section, and will refrain from re-

⁶¹ Against the good advice of my colleagues I decided to stick to the neologism "optionalistic." Apart from the fact that I use the word *optionalistisch* in German publications and would like to maintain a certain consistency across languages, the word is also immediately comprehensible and seems to capture the issue best: it denotes the view that for a certain practice equally valuable options exist from which an ascetic may freely choose. That position is not "optional" in itself but refers to an option, hence "optionalistic." The term "pro-choice" would work too but might distract the reader from the issue at hand.

ferring to the views of the desert fathers discussed above.⁶² Subsequently, in the third section, I will undertake a comparison of the two discourses.

II. THE DISCOURSE ABOUT THE ASCETIC'S HABITAT IN THE SAMNYĀSA UPANIṢADS

As all literary products of Brahmanical culture in premodern India, the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads were composed in Sanskrit. They are not, however, part of the corpus of the famous classical, or “major,” Upaniṣads, which were composed in late Vedic times, but belong to what scholars call the “minor” Upaniṣads. While composed much later than the classical Upaniṣads, these texts claim for themselves the category, or genre, “Upaniṣads” and thus present themselves as *śruti* literature, that is, as authoritative revelations of ancient Vedic seers. The Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads form a group of twenty “minor” Upaniṣads whose theme is *saṃnyāsa*, or renunciation. While this particular classification is not traditional but was created by Western scholars, examining those texts as one group makes sense. They have a common subject matter, show a great number of specific parallels, frequently refer to each other, and are often quoted in later commentaries and handbooks of renunciation. Roughly speaking, the twenty Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads include an older group, composed probably during the first three centuries of the Common Era, and a younger group, composed between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries.⁶³ Despite this considerable temporal gap, the texts are remarkably consistent in the issues they discuss and also in their disagreements and controversies. Each of these texts, whose authors are unknown, has a rather loose internal structure with few narrative elements. They are highly prescriptive and focus on explaining how the ideal renouncer should live. The Brahmanical renouncer tradition holds them authoritative.⁶⁴ My study is based on Friedrich Otto Schrader’s critical edition of the texts, and it owes much to the work of both Joachim Friedrich Sprockhoff, who thoroughly studied the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads in terms of their literary dependencies

⁶² For two reasons the section on the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads will be shorter than this one: the Apophthegmata Patrum provide slightly more material for discussing the issue of the ascetic habitat, and their narrative style uses more space than the short prescriptive statements in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads.

⁶³ See, for the dating, my summary of the discussion in *Der Askese Diskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 43–44.

⁶⁴ As Patrick Olivelle puts it, “From the viewpoint of Brāhmanical theology, these Upaniṣads provide the basis in Vedic revelation for the institution of renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) and for the rules and practices associated with that state. They played a central role in the theological reflections and disputes concerning that key institution of Brāhmanical religion” (*Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], 5).

and religious history, and Patrick Olivelle, who translated them into English and, in a substantial introduction, discussed major issues addressed in these texts.⁶⁵

WORLD RENUNCIATION AS THE RENUNCIATION OF RITUAL

The authors of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads agree that *saṃnyāsa*, “renunciation,” means, first and foremost, the renouncing of ritual. According to Brahmanical ideology, all “twice-born”—the members of the three highest classes—and especially the householder-brahmin, live in a world which is determined by a complex system of ritual purity and ritual action. The nucleus of this system is the ritual fire. The Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads define a renouncer as a person who has left the ritual sphere behind and who is “without fire” (*anagni*). Renouncing the ritual world, however, is not viewed as a rebellious act—Brahmanical renouncers do not “flee” the world. The authors of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads, themselves brahmins, portray *saṃnyāsa*, the state of the renouncer, as complementary to the ritual sphere rather than antagonistic. In nine of the twenty Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads we find descriptions of a rite of renunciation that includes symbolic acts of ending the previous life as a householder (cutting the sacrificial string, shaving the head, giving up all possessions, burning the drills that are used to kindle the sacrificial fire, etc.) and of beginning the new life as a renouncer (internalizing the fire, speaking the formula “I have renounced” three times, declaring that no being needs to have fear of him, receiving ascetic requisites such as the staff, the loincloth, the water pot, etc.). This renunciation rite, however, has no standardized form in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads. It appears in shorter and in more elaborate versions, which suggests that the act of renouncing took place in various ways, sometimes perhaps even without a ritual.⁶⁶ But common to all descriptions is the view that the transition from householder to renouncer is a transition from one legitimate state of life to another.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *The Minor Upaniṣads*, vol. 1: *Saṃnyāsa-Upaniṣads*, ed. F. Otto Schrader (Madras: Adyar Library, 1912); Joachim Friedrich Sprockhoff, *Saṃnyāsa: Quellenstudien zur Askese im Hinduismus. Teil 1: Untersuchungen über die Saṃnyāsa-Upaniṣads* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976); Olivelle, *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*. In addition to these works, both Sprockhoff and Olivelle have published extensively on the renouncer tradition.

⁶⁶ See for a discussion of the ritual of renunciation, Freiburger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 47–76. See also Oliver Freiburger, “Resurrection from the Dead? The Brāhmaṇical Rite of Renunciation and Its Irreversibility,” in *Words and Deeds: Rituals in South Asia*, ed. Jörg Gengnagel, Ute Hüsken, and Srilata Raman, Ethno-Indology: Heidelberg Series on South Asian Ritual, 1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 235–56.

⁶⁷ The existence of the rite is an obvious indication of this. No rites exist that mark the transition to a state that is considered illegitimate (e.g., for becoming a criminal); no community develops rites that initiate a person into a state that is opposed to the laws and worldviews of that community.

Because the state of renunciation is defined as a nonritual state, the ascetic's habitat is, generally speaking, the nonritual sphere. As we will see, the authors of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads map this sphere out in different ways, but they generally agree with the idea that it is fundamentally separate from the "worldly," ritually determined, sphere of the householder. Consequently, since the ascetic's habitat is defined not primarily by geography, there is no tangible, physical boundary between the two spheres; the boundary is a conceptual one, which can be drawn in various ways.

WANDERING WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS

The authors of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads often point out that renunciators, rather than living in one place or in a house, must lead a life of continuous wandering.⁶⁸ Also, the renouncer should wander alone.⁶⁹ For some authors, who seem to embrace fully the idea of the renouncer's nonritual state, wandering has no spatial restrictions whatsoever. In their view a renouncer leads a wandering life solely for its own ends, without being restricted to specified locations and without having certain destinations in his travels. These authors express their view with animal metaphors: the renouncer should wander about shyly like an antelope and not stay in one place; he must not restrict himself to specific roads but should roam like a worm, along the path shown by the sun.⁷⁰ Another passage says that the renouncer should roam everywhere, like the wind.⁷¹ And he is supposed to sleep at the spot where he finds himself at sunset.⁷² These statements clearly state that the ascetic's habitat must not be specifically defined. The reference to the animal realm indicates that the authors envision an ascetic who is indifferent toward culturally—and thus ritually—determined spaces. This renouncer does not select his whereabouts; his habitat has no boundaries.

WANDERING WITH RESTRICTIONS

Other passages, by contrast, determine in great detail the locations that are permitted for the renouncer. A list in the *Jābāla Upaniṣad* includes almost all the locations that are also mentioned elsewhere: "In deserted houses, in temples, on haystacks, by anthills, at the foot of trees, in potter's

⁶⁸ See *Nāradaparivṛājaka Upaniṣad* (NpU) 177,3; NpU 196,6; NpU 198,6–7; NpU 199,2–3; also *Kuṇḍikā Upaniṣad* (KU) 18,5; *Jābāla Upaniṣad* (JU) 68,1–4. The abbreviations follow Olivelle, *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*; the numbers refer to pages and lines in Schrader's edition.

⁶⁹ NpU 145,11–146,2; NpU 145,5–6; NpU 143,10.

⁷⁰ NpU 198,7; *Kaṭhaśruti Upaniṣad* (KśU) 41,1; NpU 183,12; see for the worm analogy also NpU 181,1–2.

⁷¹ NpU 186,10.

⁷² NpU 182,12.

sheds, in sheds for fire sacrifices (*agnihotraśāla*), on sandy banks of rivers, in mountain caves, in glens, in the hollows of trees, in lonely spots, or in open fields, he lives without a home.”⁷³ Other places include mountain caves, deserted houses, and cemeteries.⁷⁴ Also, certain types of religious sites (*puṇyāyatana*, *kṣetra*) as well as sacred bathing places/pilgrimage sites (*tīrtha*) are regarded as permitted locations.⁷⁵

Prohibited places are mentioned as well, and some of them seem to conflict with the just-listed, permitted locations. While *tīrthas*, bathing and pilgrimage sites where considerable numbers of people gather, are permitted in the above list, other passages say that a renouncer should avoid crowded places and never go to religious processions or festivals (*devayātrotsava*).⁷⁶ He should also avoid places of assembly (*sabhāsthala*), as one passage declares, “as he would a cremation ground (*śmaśānasthala*).”⁷⁷ The above-quoted list, however, includes the cemetery (*śmaśāna*) as a permitted location. Furthermore, according to the list a renouncer should live in “lonely spots” (*nirjana*), while a different passage says that he should avoid deserted and inaccessible regions (*śūnya*, *durga*).⁷⁸

Other prohibitions complement the permitted locations, in that they also reflect the ideal of a solitary life. A renouncer should avoid capital cities (*rājadhānī*) as he would the Kumbhīpāka hell,⁷⁹ or shun cities (*purāni*) in general.⁸⁰ The time a renouncer may spend within settlements is precisely determined: outside the rainy season, he should spend no more than five nights in a city and no more than one night in a village.⁸¹ Spending more time in a village “will give rise to passion and the like, as a result of which he will go to hell (*nāraka*).”⁸² Other passages add that he may spend three nights in a town, six nights at a religious site (*kṣetra*), and seven nights at a sacred bathing place (*tīrtha*); or, three nights at a sacred bathing place, five nights in a town, and seven nights at a religious

⁷³ JU 70,6–71,3. The rendering “temple” is used broadly here. The respective passages have various terms: *devagrha*, *devālaya*, *devāgāra*, *devāgnyagāra*. For references see Freiburger, *Der Asketediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 78 n. 137. See also NpU 154,4–6, with the following additions: “in the southeastern quarter, in cellars, by waterfalls, in a forest”; translations from Olivelle, *Śaṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, 146 and 184. It is unclear what “southeast” (*agnidigantara*) refers to here.

⁷⁴ NpU 202,1; *Bhikṣuka Upaniṣad* (BhU) 235,3.

⁷⁵ NpU 183,8–9; NpU 201,7–202,1; *Paramahamsaparivrājaka Upaniṣad* (PpU) 284,5–6.

⁷⁶ NpU 192,7–8.

⁷⁷ NpU 200,4; *Bṛhat-Śaṃnyāsa Upaniṣad* (BSU) 268,7–8.

⁷⁸ NpU 159,4.

⁷⁹ NpU 200,4–5; BSU 268,8. The inhabitants of this hell are continuously boiled in caldrons; see Olivelle, *Śaṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, 214 n. 95.

⁸⁰ PpU 285,2.

⁸¹ KśU 33,3; NpU 158,5; NpU 159,5–6.

⁸² NpU 158,7–8.

site.⁸³ Some passages specify the proper time for wandering: “not at night, at midday, at dawn and dusk,” and generally not during the four months of the rainy season.⁸⁴

Broadly defining the appropriate territory, some passages state that the renouncer must not stay in his homeland: “A sage should leave his native land right after he has renounced. He should live far away from his own, like a thief just released from jail.”⁸⁵ He should avoid a region where he is well known, as he would avoid a place in which low-caste people live (*caṇḍālavāṅikā*).⁸⁶ And he should also not wander in a country without a king.⁸⁷

The authors of these passages disagree about particular provisions, but all statements have in common that they regulate the ascetic’s movement in space. They map out his habitat by defining proper and improper spaces. Broadly speaking, the proper ones are either religiously defined *temenoi* or places in the wilderness, which reflects the solitary ideal. The improper ones are either places that bear the risk of becoming entangled in worldly matters or places that are viewed as being ritually impure, such as cremation grounds or low-caste settlements.⁸⁸

SEDENTARINESS

While all the passages discussed so far promote continuous wandering, some authors of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads advocate staying at one place. One passage states metaphorically: “A mendicant who is tongueless, a eunuch, lame, blind, deaf, and stupid, will be released undoubtedly by

⁸³ NpU 201,7–202,1; PpU 284,5–6; see also BhU 234,4.

⁸⁴ For the daily schedule see NpU 159,3–4. For the rule about the rainy season, see KśU 33,3–4; NpU 141,9; NpU 198,6–7; NpU 158,10. During this time the renouncer must observe, according to PpU 285,1, the vows and restrictions relating to the rainy season (no details are given). According to *Āruṇi Upaniṣad* (ĀrU) 8,2–3 he can also keep a fixed residence (*dhruvaśīla*) only for two months; see also PpU 283,10–284,1.

⁸⁵ *Maitreya Upaniṣad* (MU) 115,5–6, translation from Olivelle, *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, 162; see also NpU 201,1.

⁸⁶ NpU 200,2–3+7; BSU 268,6–7.

⁸⁷ NpU 197,11.

⁸⁸ Patrick Olivelle rightly points out that cremation grounds and low-caste settlements appear only in the second half of the rhetorical figures (“as he would avoid a cremation ground”), just like the Kumbhipāka hell does. He suggests that they may be meant only metaphorically, referring to general Brahmanical notions and not specifically to the behavior of a renouncer (personal communication). While this is a plausible reading of those rather ambivalent passages, I would still argue that drawing on cremation grounds and low-caste settlements as examples of undesired places is not accidental. Apparently it is meant to invoke a certain aversion or disgust in the renouncer, and thus it is not unlikely that the authors want the renouncer to avoid those places as well. Other passages in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads, for example regarding the nonacceptance of food from low-caste persons, clearly show that for some authors Brahmanical notions of purity still apply to renunciators. See Freiburger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 108–9.

these six means.”⁸⁹ Of the subsequent explanations of these metaphors the one on “lameness” is relevant for the present discussion: “A man who travels only to beg his food or to answer nature’s calls, and who even then does not go beyond a league (*yojana*), is indeed totally lame.”⁹⁰ Again, this “lameness” is understood positively, as one of six means for attaining liberation. In this concept, the ascetic deliberately confines himself to a limited space and attempts to move as little as possible. Remarks in other passages seem to follow the same approach, saying that a renouncer “should not wander about everywhere” (*na sarvatra samṅcāret*), or that one who meditates on the self should carefully avoid long journeys (*dūrayātra*).⁹¹ Corresponding to that restriction in space is the practice of obtaining food “in the manner of a python” (*ajagaravṛṭtyā*), for which the renouncer stays in one place and waits for someone to bring him food—like a python that waits for its prey. This practice is associated with the highest-ranking type of renouncer, the Avadhūta.⁹²

It is hardly surprising that the proponents of the wandering life do not agree. The *Bṛhat-Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣad* states in one passage that a “young and healthy mendicant should not live in an ascetic residence (*āvasatha*).”⁹³ While the qualification might suggest that the authors consider sedentariness adequate for elderly and weak ascetics, they strongly oppose it for physically strong ascetics. Other passages are more explicit. Rather than being one of six means for attaining liberation, sedentariness (*āsana*)—spending more than a few days at one place outside the rainy season—is, according to some authors, one of six fetters (*bandhakara*) for the ascetic.⁹⁴ And a passage in the *Nārada-parivṛājaka Upaniṣad* unequivocally states that for a renouncer a residence (*pratiṣṭhā*) is equal to the dung of sows.⁹⁵

In the *Śāṭyāyaniya Upaniṣad* we find a third position. Its authors let the renouncer choose: “During the four months (of the rainy season) . . . let him reside in one place. During the remaining eight months . . . he may either wander or dwell in one place with the desire of performing his own duties (*svakarma*). Let him reside in a temple, or in a fire hall, or at

⁸⁹ NpU 146,12–147,1, translation from Olivelle, *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, 180.

⁹⁰ NpU 147,6–7, translation from Olivelle, *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, 180.

⁹¹ NpU 199,3; NpU 148,7.

⁹² NpU 175,5–6; NpU 204,4–5; BSU 255,6–8. See Olivelle, *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, 199 n. 62.

⁹³ BSU 271,5. Olivelle translates *āvasatha* as “monastery.” The technical meaning of this word, which generally means “domicile, residence,” is attested in Hemacandra’s lexicon of synonyms, *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi* (twelfth century), where it appears besides *maṭha* and *āvasthiya* as “residence of students and ascetics” (*chātravrativēśman*) (no. 994). See Hemacandra’s *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi: Ein systematisch angeordnetes synonymisches Lexicon*, ed. Otto Böhtlingk and Charles Rieu (1847; Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1972), 185.

⁹⁴ BSU 268,11–269,1.

⁹⁵ NpU 181,1–2.

the foot of a tree, or in a cave, unattached and without exhibiting his virtue or conduct. Coming to rest (*upaśānta*), like a fire when its fuel is spent, let him neither fear nor cause fear anywhere at all."⁹⁶ According to this passage, the ascetic has two options—wandering or living sedentarily—which the authors do not rank. They are indifferent in view of this decision but emphasize that the renouncer needs to come to rest or calm.

THE DISCOURSE ABOUT THE ASCETIC'S HABITAT

Most passages in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads that address the ascetic's habitat envision the renouncer as a wandering mendicant. Some authors view wandering as an expression of the ascetic's freedom from the culturally and ritually determined world. For them wandering is an end in itself, with no limitations or restrictions. Others, perhaps more realistically, seem to expect that the renouncer could be tempted by "worldly" things. They determine proper and improper spaces, delimitating his habitat to locations in the wilderness—aloof from cultural determined spaces—and to religious temenoi, and they restrict the time he may spend in towns and villages.

The authors of these regulatory statements themselves, however, do not agree about all provisions. The most striking variances pertain to ritual purity—whether or not a renouncer should live on cremation grounds or may come close to settlements of low-caste people. The prohibitions of these spaces indicate that for some authors Brahmanical ritual concepts still have some significance—a fact that is observable in other parts of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads as well.⁹⁷ The texts thus distinguish between the ritual and the nonritual sphere in various ways, making the renouncer's abandonment of ritual a matter of degree—for some he lives an entirely nonritual life like an animal, for others he remains sensitive of the distinction between ritually pure and impure spaces.

A few authors prefer a certain type of sedentary life. Their ideal is a renouncer who moves only for the most basic needs and otherwise focuses on the practice of meditation. This is the opposite of wandering as an end in itself—here every single move must have its purpose, and these purposes are exactly defined. Finally, in one passage we find an optionalistic view that leaves it to the renouncer to wander about or to stay in one place. The authors are indifferent about this issue, but they emphasize, at the same time, a different value: that the ascetic finds calm. This ranks higher, in their hierarchy of values, than defining the ascetic's habitat.

⁹⁶ *Śātyāyaniya Upaniṣad* (ŚU) 328,4–329,1, translation from Olivelle, *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, 285.

⁹⁷ It becomes most obvious, for example, in the question from whom the renouncer may accept food. See Freiberger, *Der Asketediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 101–18.

III. A MICRO-COMPARISON OF THE DISCOURSES ABOUT THE
ASCETIC'S HABITAT

For the academic study of religion, cross-cultural comparison is one of the most fundamental undertakings. William Paden remarks that “comparativism . . . is the central and proper endeavor of religious studies as a field of inquiry and the core part of the process of forming, testing, and applying generalizations about religion at any level.”⁹⁸ The development of the discipline’s metalanguage relies on it, and virtually the entire theoretical vocabulary is based on some sort of comparison, from “everyday terms” such as “deity,” “sect,” or “temple worship,” to more complex categories such as “myth,” “ritual,” “cosmology,” “canon,” and “religion.” While comparative research has been carried out in the study of religion since Friedrich Max Müller and the very beginnings of the discipline, comparative approaches have also been criticized in various ways. One line of criticism is concerned with the goal of comparison. Max Müller, for example, was interested in pointing out the positive, common elements in religions, in order to demonstrate the fundamental unity of all religions—a goal that has been popular with some scholars of religion until the present day. Müller’s younger contemporary, James George Frazer, had a similar approach, but his goal was to show that religions represent merely a passing phase, located between magic and science. In these and other cases comparison serves the purpose to provide support for postulated theories. As has often been noted, the major flaws of such deductive endeavors are their emphasis on sameness and their tendency to argue ahistorically by essentializing phenomena and taking them out of their historical contexts. One constructive response to this critique is to narrow down the scope of a study. Instead of laying out grand schemes that either aim at comparing entire religions with each other or claim to comprehensively describe religion as a whole—as in the schemes developed in the approaches of the classical phenomenology of religion—scholars focus on certain themes and/or define their material more narrowly.⁹⁹

Another line of criticism is grounded in postmodern, postcolonial, and postorientalist theories. It emphasizes difference (*différance*) rather than commonalities and views cross-cultural comparison as an act of abstraction and therefore domination of “the other,” which ultimately leads to its

⁹⁸ William E. Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 5–14, quotation at 12.

⁹⁹ See, for example, the suggested themes in the Comparative Studies in Religion section’s Call for Papers for the American Academy of Religion meeting in 2009, which include: “global gurus,” “nature myths,” “sacred trees,” “comparative contemplative techniques,” “religion and sports,” “religion and architecture,” “possession, mind, and society,” and others.

annihilation. In its most radical form of cultural relativism, this critique rejects cross-cultural comparison altogether. Although this categorical criticism of comparison is extremely rare within the discipline of Religious Studies itself, scholars of religion feel challenged to respond to it by arguing in various ways for maintaining the comparative method.¹⁰⁰ Based on the material presented above, I wish to propose a comparative approach that shows an awareness of the perils of comparison and is constructive at the same time.

Many comparative studies on religion employ a macro-level approach, looking at broad themes in the history of religions, such as myth and ritual, or, more specifically, religious attitudes toward death, violence, nature, and so forth in several religious traditions. Those studies can provide useful heuristic frameworks that are indispensable for the theoretical discourse in the study of religion, but they cannot, naturally, be in-depth studies for each and every source they are dealing with. This needs to be done on a micro level, by radically narrowing down the material that is to be compared. I shall try to demonstrate that an inductive approach of microcomparison can be useful beyond the immediate contexts as a basis for developing a theoretical terminology on the meta level.

It goes without saying that the two collections, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the *Śaṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, do not represent Christianity and Hinduism, respectively, as a whole. In addition to that, the preceding study has shown that even with the focus on these two narrowly defined contexts we cannot compare a putative singular concept of the ascetic's habitat in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* with a corresponding concept in the *Śaṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*. Rather, both collections contain a variety of voices about all kinds of aspects of this issue, advocating positions that can be in tension with, or even contradict, one another. Making a generalizing statement about each textual source would mean that we either ignore some voices and play down certain tensions, or remain imprecise—neither of which would be helpful to a comparative study. Deliberately ignoring the existence of discourses means essentializing the data.

A way out of this dilemma is to compare the discourses themselves. The material presented here can stimulate a number of interesting questions that are worthy of lengthy discussions, for example about the imagery of

¹⁰⁰ See the contributions in Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Robert Segal argues even more vehemently against the postmodern critique of comparison: "In Defense of the Comparative Method," *Numen* 48 (2001): 339–73, and "Postmodernism and the Comparative Method," in *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?* ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos, Brian C. Wilson, and James C. Hanges (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 249–70.

“wilderness”/nature versus “world”/culture,¹⁰¹ about the role and function of the ascetic for “the world,” or, most fundamentally, about mapping out the ascetic’s habitat as a form of “home-making,” which can be viewed as one of the core functions of religion.¹⁰² Given the scope of this article, however, I will not address such issues here but confine myself to discussing differences and similarities in the structures of the two discourses without reiterating all the details provided in the first two sections.

First, the discourses in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads* clearly differ in their respective quantitative emphases: the textual accounts present the majority of the desert fathers as living a sedentary life and the majority of Brahmanical ascetics as wandering mendicants. Furthermore, in the Indian sources we do not find an equivalent of the Egyptian kellion and therefore no debate about the benefits of a secluded life. Also living in a monastic community is hardly ever mentioned—let alone seriously considered—as an alternative to the wandering life. The early Christian texts, on the other hand, do not discuss wandering extensively, nor do they separate proper and improper spaces for wanderers. The latter is also because they are not based on an equivalent worldview of ritual purity and the renunciation of ritual.

There are also similarities. In spite of the different quantitative emphases, in both sources the ideal of spatial detachment stands in contrast to the concept of restricting one’s living space. These two opposing ideas are reflected in continuous wandering and the permanent readiness to move on the one hand, and in restraining one’s habitat to a small, clearly circumscribed space (e.g., the kellion) on the other. Another element that both discourses have in common is a third, optionalistic position that lets the ascetic choose between the two opposing ascetic lifestyles.

If we want to describe the differences and similarities in more theoretical terms, we can speak of a common discourse about the ascetic’s habitat that has several subdiscourses, which are particular to each context (such as those on seclusion in the kellion, on the value of a monastic life, or on proper and improper places for the wanderer). This discourse and its subdiscourses feature three common characteristics that I wish

¹⁰¹ See already Patrick Olivelle, “Village vs. Wilderness: Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World,” in *Monastic Life in the Christian and Hindu Traditions: A Comparative Study*, ed. Austin B. Creel and Vasudha Narayanan (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 125–60, and “The Beast and the Ascetic: The Wild in the Indian Religious Imagination,” in his *Ascetics and Brahmins: Studies in Ideologies and Institutions* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2006), 91–100.

¹⁰² See Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 73–79 and 80–122.

to discuss briefly: (1) a certain pattern of argumentation, (2) a variety of hierarchies of values, and (3) various ways of localizing a behavior within a spectrum of an ascetic practice.

A common pattern of argumentation includes two opposing approaches: the regulatory/selective and the antiregulatory/indifferent approach. The regulatory/selective approach seeks to define and regulate the ascetic's habitat: by declaring that the kellion is the safest and most appropriate place to live and that one should leave it as seldom as possible; or that one must leave one place immediately whenever a bad sign occurs; or that the best place is the monastic community rather than the kellion; or that there are permitted and prohibited locations for a wandering ascetic; or that an ascetic must not leave a restricted territory. The antiregulatory/indifferent approach, on the other hand, disregards regulations and exhibits indifference toward the selection of the habitat: by declaring that God can be found inside as well as outside the kellion, or that an ascetic should wander about like an animal and sleep wherever he finds himself at sunset. When two regulatory/selective approaches conflict, an antiregulatory/indifferent approach can appear as a third, optionalistic position, for example in the statements that the ascetic may choose between a solitary and a monastic life, or that outside the rainy season he may either wander or stay in one place.

It is important to note that regulatory/selective and antiregulatory/indifferent approaches are always linked to specific aspects of the ascetic life. One position can be antiregulatory/indifferent toward one practice but regulatory/selective toward another. When a desert father states that an ascetic may eat, drink, sleep, and refuse to work, as long as he stays in the kellion, the author has an antiregulatory/indifferent position toward ascetic practices of fasting, sleep deprivation, and manual labor, but a regulatory/selective position toward seclusion in the kellion. This desert father creates a certain relation between various ascetic practices that reflects his specific hierarchy of values.¹⁰³ Generally put, if practice A (or a specific form of it) is ranked higher in one's hierarchy of values, one may be indifferent towards practice B (or a specific form of it). When a passage in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads states that a renouncer may either wander or stay in one place but needs to find calm, the latter value is imperative while the former decision between the two lifestyles is less relevant to the author.

¹⁰³ I borrow the term "hierarchy of values" from Ulrich Berner's discussion about critical views on asceticism in Europe (Ulrich Berner, "Epicurus' Role in Controversies on Asceticism in European Religious History," in *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Oliver Freiberger [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006], 43–59).

Whenever a hierarchy of values is reflected in a statement, the practices pertaining to the ascetic's habitat are placed in a certain relation to other ascetic practices. In the just-mentioned example, seclusion in the kellion is viewed as superior to fasting and other practices. Such other practices are themselves the subject of discourses in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and, for that matter, also in the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*. I have discussed those other discourses elsewhere, and it may suffice here to note that one can find a variety of hierarchies of values in the texts in which ascetic practices are ranked and linked to each other in many different ways.

The third feature of the discourse pertains to the ways of dealing with the spectrum of the ascetic practices associated with the ascetic's habitat. "Spectrum" here refers to the various forms and the intensity of the practice. For those who consider a specific habitat to be a highly relevant aspect of their ascetic life, the practice related to it can be severe and intense: leaving the kellion as rarely as possible; or wandering with a large number of specific restrictions, and so forth. Others who rank the relevance of the habitat lower in their hierarchies of values may advocate a less restricted practice: going in and out of the kellion as one pleases; or wandering about wherever one wishes. While the "intense end" of a spectrum is often well described in the texts (or easily inferable), the other end is more difficult to define. When a desert father views the kellion not as the place for intense ascetic seclusion but merely as his residence, how does this differ from the attitude a nonascetic person has toward his or her house? Certainly, the kellion is located in the desert, not in a city, and this particular desert father probably performs other ascetic practices that are ranked higher in his hierarchy of values (fasting, celibacy, keeping silence, or others). But with regard specifically to this issue there may not be a great distinction between the ascetic and the nonascetic.

The question is, at what point within the spectrum does an ascetic practice become nonascetic? Or, more fundamentally, where exactly can we draw the boundary between the ascetic and the nonascetic? The observation that the spectrum of an ascetic practice can extend into the nonascetic sphere shows that asceticism is a cultural technique that is located on a continuum in relation to the surrounding cultural context. Patrick Olivelle outlines a model of cultural theory that distinguishes three levels of "asceticism" (in the broader sense of self-control or self-restraint):¹⁰⁴ "Root Asceticism" is the self-restraint at the very root of culture, or of social living in general, manifested in restrictions related to the respective desires of the individual. Like a linguistic root, it is a postulate rather than

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Olivelle, "The Ascetic and the Domestic in Brahmanical Religiosity," in Freiburger, *Asceticism and Its Critics*, 25–42, esp. 28–31.

a phenomenon. “Cultural Asceticism” is comparable to the conjugated verb. It refers to the specific tools that each culture has developed for its members to practice the self-control demanded of them—for example, initiation rites for learning the control of pain that the individual needs as an adult. “Elite Asceticism,” finally, refers to extraordinary forms of self-control and self-restraint that only a small group of religious virtuosi in a society practices in order to achieve specific social, religious, and personal goals. As Olivelle acknowledges, while there is a certain risk of losing analytical precision when every form of restraint becomes “ascetic,” the merit of his model is that it emphasizes the embeddedness of asceticism in its cultural context. “The ascetic is at the very root of the cultural, and it is this deep association with culture that gives the extraordinary forms of asceticism their extraordinary power over human society and over human imagination.”¹⁰⁵ Because an ascetic practice can be identified as the extraordinary variant of an existing cultural technique, an extraordinary value gets attached to it.

One might still inquire where exactly the boundaries are between regular and extraordinary practice, between Cultural and Elite Asceticism, between the nonascetic and the ascetic. Clearly, this is a culture-specific assessment and cannot be answered universally. Even within one culture the question may be answered in different ways—the ideas about which behavior is “not yet ascetic” or “not ascetic anymore” can themselves be the subject of a discourse in that cultural context.¹⁰⁶ This does not mean that it is impossible to determine the boundary, or that boundaries “blur”—it merely means that different actors in the discourse draw different boundaries.

The starting point for these considerations was the observation that the spectrum of an ascetic practice extends, at one end, into the worldly sphere. According to the quoted passage, an ascetic may eat as much as he wants—just like a nonascetic person—as long as he does not leave the kellion. But the ascetic life as a whole, as this passage also illustrates, is constructed as a combination of various practices, each of which appears in a certain form or intensity. These practices are arranged in a ranked order and reflect certain hierarchies of values. On the basis of these observations, I would like to suggest a tentative new definition of asceticism: Asceticism is a combination of practices of self-restraint, at least some of which are viewed as extraordinary in the respective cultural context. How this combination is ideally designed—what practices are included,

¹⁰⁵ Olivelle, “The Ascetic and the Domestic,” 40.

¹⁰⁶ The discourses in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the *Śaṃnyāsa Upaniṣads* sometimes allude to the authors’ perspective on this, when an author criticizes a certain practice of other ascetics as being “worldly.” See Freiberger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 252–53.

what form and intensity each should have, and how they are ranked—is the subject of the *asceticism discourse*.¹⁰⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

A close look at the statements about the ascetic's habitat in both the Apophthegmata Patrum and the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads has shown that simply comparing "the early Christian concept" with "the classical Hindu concept" of the ascetic's habitat is impossible. In order to do so, the comparativist would have to ignore the complex discourses in the texts and essentialize certain views and positions. Sadly, this essentialization by selection has been a common practice for much comparative work in the academic study of religion. It results in inaccurate generalizations and is one of the major causes for the more legitimate critiques of comparative approaches. Generally speaking, two types of criteria can be—and have been—used for selecting and essentializing the data: (1) Qualitative criteria determine the "most authentic," "most essential," or "true" view in the texts. Normative approaches use these criteria to show that, for example, all religions have a common goal, or that one religion is superior to another. (2) Quantitative criteria determine the view that "appears most frequently," "is shared by most adherents," or "had the greatest impact on the subsequent tradition." While using quantitative criteria might generally appear reasonable, it creates a number of pitfalls for comparison, particularly in studies that are based on historical sources. Apart from the fact that it is often difficult to decide to what degree the proportion of the views represented in the sources accurately reflects the proportion of the views that actually existed in that historical context—note that most sources were edited by compilers and redactors—the modern assessment of what was predominant is often influenced by later constructions within the respective religious tradition. A "great philosopher" that stands at the beginning of a "school" may not have been all that outstanding and eminent in his or her own time. The same applies to a text that has inspired the creation of many commentaries. Each may have been merely one among several. Therefore, using quantitative criteria in selecting data for comparison means trusting that the texts are representative or, even more problematic, following the later tradition in what it deems essential or true. Moreover, favoring a majority position over a minority view for the purpose of comparison is in itself a normative decision and thus

¹⁰⁷ I do not take this definition to be superior to other definitions, nor do I believe that scholarship needs to settle on only one. It merely highlights certain aspects that are less prominent in other definitions, especially the role of the internal discourse on asceticism. For a longer discussion about definitions, see Freiburger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*, 11–16 and 33–37.

eventually also a qualitative assessment. Every selection, based on either qualitative or quantitative criteria, implicates an exclusion of some voices in the texts and facilitates essentialization.

With these methodological considerations I certainly do not intend to invalidate all comparative studies in the study of religion that select certain topics or views for comparison. On the contrary, I believe that, as matter of principle, every datum in the history of religions can be compared with any other datum, if the scholar expects to gain an interesting insight from this comparison. The problem lies in essentialization, in drawing conclusions that go beyond the particular phenomenon studied, conclusions that construct an “essence” of that phenomenon in a broader religious context by selecting some voices and excluding others.

I claim that focusing the attention upon discourses eliminates the need to select and the very possibility of essentialization. In this article I have summarized the discourses about the ascetic’s habitat in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the *Śaṃnyāsa Upaniṣads* and have tried to demonstrate what the possible benefits of discourse comparison are. Differences and similarities can be conceptualized and integrated in a model of the discourse about the ascetic’s habitat that has certain subdiscourses particular to each context. Elsewhere, I discuss and compare discourses about a number of other ascetic practices in the two collections of texts—related to food, clothing, keeping silence, obedience, sexuality, and so forth.¹⁰⁸ In this broader perspective, one can conceptualize the discourse about the ascetic’s habitat (with its subdiscourses) as one subdiscourse of the general discourse about asceticism. This asceticism discourse (in the singular) I envision as a comprehensive model that is entirely constructed in an academic metalanguage. Its major features are certain patterns of argumentation (with regulatory/selective and antiregulatory/indifferent approaches and optionalistic positions), various hierarchies of values, and definitions of the forms and the intensity of ascetic practices within each particular spectrum. So far this model is based on those two collections of texts—and thus only partly described—but can be enlarged, modified, and refined by integrating data from other religious contexts.

Looking beyond the two specific contexts examined here and even beyond the topic of asceticism, I believe that the micro-comparison of discourses¹⁰⁹ can prove useful for the study of religion in many areas. It bypasses the pitfalls of essentializing, of overemphasizing similarities or differences, and of making grand, top-down, largely unsubstantiated claims. By contrast, models and theories are developed in a bottom-up fashion with this approach. Such models and theories are flexible, open

¹⁰⁸ See Freiberger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte*.

¹⁰⁹ The equivalent German phrase that I use is *Diskursvergleich auf der Mikro-Ebene*.

to modification, and not only capable of being enlarged and refined but meant to be. They are grounded in—and closely linked to—material data, which makes them practical and immediately applicable, and they are extremely useful for describing and understanding religion in a more comprehensive way.

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