

Making Christians in the Umayyad Levant: Anastasius of Sinai and Christian Rites of Maintenance

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Toward the end of the seventh century, Anastasius of Sinai took it upon himself to offer advice to lay Christians facing a new Umayyad world. For Anastasius, Christian identity needed simplification. In his Edifying Tales and Questions and Answers, he would de-emphasize theology, arguing that Christian identity was a more basic affair, involving baptism, the eucharist and the sign of the cross. For him, these were 'rites of maintenance', acts which sustained Christian identity in a fluid world of religious alternatives. Such actions warded off the demonic and drew a clear boundary between Muslim and Christian. This was important for Anastasius, who considered it his pastoral duty to offer uneducated Christians a tangible sense of their own identity (and superiority). His ritualistic simplification bears witness to an important shift in Palestinian-centred Christianity, as intra-Christian disputes were set aside in an attempt to maintain a ritualistic boundary between Christian and non-Christian.

Anastasius of Sinai is an indispensable witness to the shifting fortunes of Christians in Syria-Palestine and the greater Levant during the second half of the seventh century. His assumptions concerning the place of Chalcedonian Christian communities under Islamic rule mark a distinct change. In the 630s, for example, Jerusalem's patriarch Sophronius could assure his audience that the Arab armies were God's temporary chastisement, and that repentance would shortly bear the fruit of political liberation.¹ Anastasius tells a different story. His was a world in which early Islam was not simply a matter of

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¹ See Sophronius, *On the Nativity of Christ* 25, in the recently edited Greek edition of John M. Duffy, *Sophronios of Jerusalem: Homilies* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 51. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

armies but a matter of neighbours as well.² He would encourage prayers for the Islamic caliphate, however begrudging.³ This was not the first time, he reminded his audience, that the faithful had been called to learn how to live under such uncomfortable arrangements.⁴ Indeed, Anastasius was keenly concerned to adjudicate this transition, serving as privileged midwife for a nascent Umayyad Christianity.⁵

Anastasius lived a busy life.⁶ Born on Cyprus in the 630s,⁷ his name would become associated with his residency at the Mount Sinai monastery now known as St Catherine's. He enjoyed travel. His stories offer a tour of the eastern Mediterranean from Egypt to

² For evidence of lives lived 'shoulder to shoulder', see *Questions and Answers* 9, 26, 76, 99, 102 (*Questiones et responsiones*, ed. Marcel Richard and Joseph Munitiz, CChr.SG 59).

³ *Ibid.* 60, 65.

⁴ *Ibid.* 101.

⁵ I borrow the paradoxical label 'Umayyad Christianity' from the provocative work of George Najib Awad, *Umayyad Christianity: John of Damascus as a Contextual Example of Identity Formation in Early Islam* (Piscataway, NJ, 2018).

⁶ The sole monograph on Anastasius's work is Karl-Heinz Uthemann, *Anastasios Sinaïtes. Byzantinisches Christentum in den ersten Jahrzehnten unter arabischer Herrschaft*, 2 vols (Berlin, 2015). See also John Haldon, 'The Works of Anastasius of Sinai: A Key Source for the History of Seventh-Century East Mediterranean Society and Belief', in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, 1: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 107–47; Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw it: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 92–103. Rich with biographical material is André Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte: "Récits sur le Sinaï" et "Récits utiles à l'âme"'. Édition, traduction, commentaire', 2 vols (PhD thesis, Université Paris IV, Sorbonne, 2001), esp. 330–59. On Anastasius's approach to lay piety, see Nicholas Marinides, 'Anastasius of Sinai and Chalcedonian Christian Lay Piety in the Early Islamic Near East', in Robert G. Hoyland, ed., *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ, 2015), 293–311. While much of Marinides's account is relevant to this article, my notion of 'rites of maintenance' offers a novel approach to his evidence.

⁷ Following the argument of Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte', endorsed by Joseph A. Munitiz, ed, *Anastasios of Sinai: Questions and Answers*, Corpus Christianorum in Translation 7 (Turnhout, 2011), 9–11. Stephen Shoemaker's argument concerning the dating of the Dome of the Rock may suggest that Anastasius was born earlier in the seventh century: 'Anastasius of Sinai and the Beginnings of Islam', *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 1 (2018), 137–54, at 147–8. Haldon seems to presume an earlier birth and a very long life: 'Works of Anastasius', 113–14. The argument here does not depend on a secure dating of his birth and death. There is a general consensus among scholars that Anastasius died around 700/701 CE. The *Synaxarion* of Constantinople (10th c.) calls him a 'very old man', as noted by Munitiz, *Anastasios of Sinai*, 11 n. 11; cf. Uthemann, *Anastasios Sinaïtes*, 3–14.

Palestine and Syria, and at times beyond.⁸ Anastasius's interests were not confined to the monastery, however; he showed a compassionate (if at times self-important) enthusiasm for the concerns of lay people, particularly evident in his *Questions and Answers*. He was shrewd in his advice, combining his own biblical exegesis with the rich patristic tradition as well as a substantial amount of medical and scientific speculation.⁹ His anti-Miaphysite writings, moreover, may have served as a how-to guide for middle-brow Chalcedonian Christians who lived as minorities in Syria and Egypt and who showed interest in theological disputation.¹⁰

Two of Anastasius's collections seem particularly directed to a popular audience: the *Questions and Answers* and two sets of pious stories, the so-called *Tales of the Sinai Fathers* and the *Edifying Tales*.¹¹

⁸ See Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte', 357–9. Like the travels of John Moschus several decades earlier, Anastasius's itinerary highlights the tight link between Sinai and the monastery of Mar Saba in the eastern Judean desert as well as the continued importance of Chalcedonian Christian communities even in the heart of Miaphysite Egypt. The writings of Anastasius and Moschus 'bear witness to an interconnected and mobile monasticism of the Eastern Mediterranean in which monks moved from Egypt to Palestine with ease and frequency, the Sinai Peninsula an open door to both': Benjamin Hansen, 'Bread in the Desert: The Politics and Practicalities of Food in Early Egyptian Monasticism', *ChH* 90 (2021), 286–303, at 289. Note also Binggeli's sense of the 'openness' of the Sinai peninsula: 'Anastase le Sinaïte', 443–7.

⁹ See Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte', 354–6. Medical references and references to contemporary scientific theory are found throughout his *Questions and Answers*. He seems to imply that he had at least witnessed medical dissection (Q. 22.8). If we accept the *Sinai Fathers* as a genuinely Anastasian text, we learn that Anastasius served as a warden of the infirmary in the Mount Sinai monastery at some point: *Sinai Fathers* 1.3, 19 (following Binggeli's numbering). For medicine, health, and healing in Anastasius, see Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, 'Médecine et théologie chez Anastase le Sinaïte, médecin, moine et didascalé', in V. Boudon-Millot and B. Pouderon, eds, *Les Pères de l'église face à la science médicale de leur temps. Actes du troisième colloque d'études patristiques, Paris, 9–11 septembre 2004* (Paris, 2005), 287–97.

¹⁰ Most importantly his *Hodegos (Viae Dux)*, ed. Karl-Heinz Uthemann, CChr.SG 8. See Uthemann, *Anastasios Sinaïtes*, 20–215, for an exhaustive analysis.

¹¹ Binggeli's dissertation offers the most up-to-date Greek edition of these *Tales* along with a French translation. He is currently working on a critical edition. His work follows upon that of François Nau, 'Les Récits inédits du moine Anastase. Contribution à l'histoire du Sinaï au commencement du VIIe siècle', *Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* 1–2 (1902), 1–70; idem, 'Le Texte grec des récits du moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sinaï', *Oriens Christianus* 2 (1903), 58–89; idem, 'Le Texte grec des récits utiles à l'âme d'Anastase le Sinaïte', *Oriens Christianus* 3 (1903), 56–75. An English translation of the *Sinai Fathers*, as well as a few entries from the *Edifying Tales*, is found in Daniel F. Caner et al., *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, TTH 53 (Liverpool, 2010), 171–98. Whilst I am well persuaded by Binggeli's argument that

The *Sinai Fathers* is an account of monastic life written for monastics and those lay Christians with a special enthusiasm for monks and miracles; the *Edifying Tales* serves as a sort of rousing pamphlet, promoting and reinforcing Christian religious superiority while tarring the competition. These texts are a treasure trove for the social historian, offering a precious glimpse into the socio-historical world of Levantine Christians under the early Umayyad caliphate. Questions of religious competition and religious neighbourliness are to the fore, combined with matter-of-fact discussions of sex, slavery, plague and money.¹²

Anastasius died around the year 700. The work he left behind, especially his *Edifying Tales* and *Questions and Answers*, bears witness to the extraordinary effort he put into a fundamental pastoral project. For Anastasius, in the novel and at times disheartening Umayyad world, Christian identity needed certain simplifications. In these works, Anastasius, quite a capable theologian, downplays sophisticated theology, arguing that Christian identity was a more basic affair, determined by baptism, the eucharist and the sign of the cross.¹³ For Anastasius, these three actions not only warded off the demonic, but they also drew a clear boundary between Muslim and Christian. This was important, as he considered it his pastoral duty to offer uneducated Christians a tangible sense of their own identity (and superiority), in spite of recent political and economic misfortune.¹⁴

Anastasius of Sinai was the author of both *Tales*, others have cast doubt on the *Sinai Fathers* as a genuinely Anastasian text. This article will therefore rely primarily on the *Edifying Tales* in addition to his *Questions and Answers*, making supplementary references to the *Sinai Fathers*. For an argument against attributing *Sinai Fathers* to Anastasius, see most recently Uthemann, *Anastasios Sinaites*, 456–63.

¹² As argued by Haldon, 'Works of Anastasius', 129–47.

¹³ As Jack Tannous has argued, the shared religious worlds of the early medieval Middle East were primarily those of ritual and rite. While religious elites promoted exquisite theologies, most 'simple believers' concerned themselves with basic and effective religious practices. Anastasius is exceptional in this respect, able to play to both audiences depending on the text and context: see Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2018).

¹⁴ I certainly do not want to argue that the late seventh century was a time of widescale persecution and discrimination. Archaeological studies have shown that the 'Byzantine-Islamic' transition in the Holy Land was, all things considered, remarkably non-destructive: see Gideon Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine; An Archaeological Approach* (Oxford, 2014); Robert Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: A Historical and Archaeological Study*

This pastoral concern led Anastasius to search for a discreet and streamlined piety, tacitly acknowledging the relative theological illiteracy of much of his flock. Anastasius expressed caution over what he understood to be the relative ‘weakness of the majority’ of his audience when it came to speculative theology.¹⁵ Certainly he was willing to address the learned among his fellow Christians, not least in his *Hodegos*.¹⁶ However, a late antique pastor needed to use more than one approach.¹⁷ This demand for pastoral flexibility when it came to a largely uneducated flock was nothing new. As Jack Tannous has shown, many Christian leaders between the fourth and the seventh centuries realized that circumstances required them to make accommodations for the ‘simple believers’ in their congregations.¹⁸ Moreover, that much of Anastasius’s teaching was directed towards

(Princeton, NJ, 1995). But even from the 630s, sermons such as those of Sophronius of Jerusalem mark a real sense of panic and disappointment. Moreover, Charlemagne’s embassy to the Holy Land c.800 bears witness to a church greatly diminished in clergy and finances: see Michael McCormick, ed., ‘The *Basel Roll*: Critical Edition and Translation’, in idem, *Charlemagne’s Survey of the Holy Land: Wealth, Personnel, and Building of a Mediterranean Church between Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Washington DC, 2011), 5–22. The concern elicited by the construction of the Dome of the Rock should tell us something about the state of unease in certain Christian communities: Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 7; Ps-Shenute, *Apocalypse* (Émile Amélineau, ed., *Monuments pour servir à l’histoire de l’Égypte chrétienne aux IVe, Ve, VIe, et VIIe siècles*, 2 vols [Paris, 1888–95], 1: 341). For the place of the Dome of the Rock in Anastasius’s work, see Uthemann, *Anastasios Sinaites*, 357–64. For the effect that the building of the Dome of the Rock may have had on Christian communities more broadly, see G. J. Reinink, ed., *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (CSCO 541), xxiv–xxv.

¹⁵ ‘τῶν πολλῶν ἀσθένειαν’: Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 20.14 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 249). This concern for the ‘simple’, however, was not limited to the *Tales* and *Questions and Answers*. Anastasius notes that expositions of contemporary Christological debates risked scandalizing ‘the simple’ (τοῖς ἀπλουστέροις) when not done with appropriate care: *Hodegos* 1.2.17–18.

¹⁶ As Jaclyn Maxwell has argued, one must be cautious in driving too deep a wedge between ‘theology’ and ‘popular religion’: ‘Popular Theology in Late Antiquity’, in Lucy Grig, ed., *Popular Culture in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 2017), 277–95. Maxwell’s analysis is largely based on fourth- and fifth-century sources and it is unclear whether popular debate concerning Arianism had an appropriate seventh-century parallel. Still, we might approach Anastasius’s *Hodegos* as an effort to gain ‘complete control over the discussions’ at hand, reflecting Maxwell’s estimation of episcopal sermons on complex theological matters: ‘Popular Theology’, 284.

¹⁷ A fine introduction to pastoral care in Late Antiquity is Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, ‘Through a Bishop’s Eyes: Towards a Definition of Pastoral Care in Late Antiquity’, *Augustinianum* 40 (2000), 345–97.

¹⁸ Tannous, *Medieval Middle East*, 46–110.

lay Christians by means of written questions and answers likewise reflected a venerable Christian practice.¹⁹ The letter collections of sixth-century figures such as the Gazan monks Barsanuphius and John or the patriarch Severus offer precious glimpses into the religious concerns of lay Christians, both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian.²⁰ While Anastasius's *Questions and Answers* and *Edifying Tales* owe much to this tradition, he nevertheless radicalized and reshaped this emphasis in response to the pressing concerns which Islam presented to Christian audiences.

Anastasius's 'ritualistic simplification' bears witness to an important shift for Umayyad Christians. While he was clearly competent in (and enthusiastic about) intra-Christian Christological disputes, *Questions and Answers* and *Edifying Tales* downplay these in an attempt to create and fortify a ritual boundary between Christian and non-Christian. He was concerned with keeping Christians Christian, with the maintenance of Christian identity. Indeed, he laid particular stress on what I call 'rites of maintenance', simple actions accessible to the widest variety of lay people, regardless of their theological literacy.

rites of passage or rites of maintenance?

I have chosen this somewhat clumsy term 'rites of maintenance', calling to mind 'rites of passage' while at the same time making a key

¹⁹ 'Questions and Answers' is a genre which raises a variety of scholarly problems concerning audience, interpretation and composition, none of which have found fully satisfactory answers. In Anastasius's case, a key clue is found at the end of Q. 81, where he presumes that at least some of his answers are being read aloud in churches. For a preliminary discussion of this genre, see Annelie Volgers and Claudio Zamagni, eds, *Erotapokriseis: Early Christian Question-and-Answer Literature in Context* (Leuven, 2004). See Munitiz, *Anastasios of Sinai*, 11–12, for a brief discussion of Anastasius's audience.

²⁰ For lay concerns in the epistolary corpus of Barsanuphius and John, see Jennifer Hevelone-Harper, *Disciples of the Desert* (Baltimore, MD, 2005), 79–105; eadem, 'The Letter Collection of Barsanuphius and John', in Cristiana Sogno, Bradley K. Storin and Edward J. Watts, eds, *Late Antique Letter Collections: A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide* (Berkeley, CA, 2016), 418–32, at 418–20; for a discussion of genre more broadly in these letters, see François Neyt, Paula de Angelis-Noah and Lucien Regnault, eds, *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza: Correspondance*, 1/1, Sources Chrétiennes 426, 50–3. Pauline Allen and C. T. R Hayward highlight Severus's correspondence with concerned lay people: *Severus of Antioch* (Abingdon, 2004), 53–4; Tannous also emphasizes Severus's concern for lay participation: *Medieval Middle East*, 48 n. 7, 68–9.

distinction. We associate ‘rites of passage’ with the ground-breaking work of Arnold van Gennep, although his well-known *Les Rites de passage* (1909) largely failed to attract scholarly attention in the English-speaking world until its elaboration and amplification in the work of Victor Turner.²¹ Both authors emphasize the threefold structure, or three stages, of all rites of passage: the pre-liminal, the liminal and the post-liminal. We might also call these the break, the transition and the final incorporation.²²

In this line of thinking, the pre-liminal demands a break with the past. Here, for example, we may think of the exorcism preceding baptism. The liminal is a stage marked by openness to transition and contains within itself an inherent and necessary vulnerability. The neophyte is naked, a *tabula rasa* for the ensuing ritual (van Gennep and Turner both draw our attention to the nakedness of early Christian baptism).²³ As the final stage, the post-liminal is an incorporation or welcoming into the new community. Here it makes sense to think of rites such as confirmation or chrismation and first communion.

The phrase ‘rites of passage’ presumes a movement from beginning to end; its connotations are those of completion. I wish to contrast this sense of completion with ‘rites of maintenance’ in the thinking of Anastasius.²⁴ For him, such rites were key to maintaining differentiation between one community and the other. As Catherine Bell has argued in her discussion of the nature and purpose of ritual, these rites are, among other things, ‘a strategic way of acting’ which effect differentiation between those who perform the rite and those who do not.²⁵

²¹ See now Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, transl. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, 4th edn (Chicago, IL, 1966); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY, 1969). Arpad Szakolczai offers a succinct account of the reception of van Gennep’s work and the concept of ‘liminality’ in other disciplines: ‘Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events’, *International Political Anthropology* 2 (2009), 141–72, at 141–6; Catherine Bell offers a discussion of van Gennep’s lasting contributions to ritual theory: *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 35–8.

²² Helpfully summarized in Szakolczai, ‘Liminality and Experience’, 147–8.

²³ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 93–5; Turner, *Ritual Process*, 103.

²⁴ Though it should be noted that van Gennep observed that many ‘rites of communion’ wear off and must be repeated: *Rites of Passage*, 29.

²⁵ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York and Oxford, 1992), 7. Bell emphasizes the stability (we might say ‘maintenance’) of identity which these rites provide for distinct communities in her discussion of van Gennep: *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 37.

She notes that ‘ritualization is the production of this differentiation’ between a host of binaries, marking the body with one identity while denying (or at least ignoring) another.²⁶ For Anastasius, ritual not only created difference, it constantly sustained it.

Indeed, in reading *Tales* and *Questions and Answers*, it becomes clear that Anastasius was especially concerned with keeping his audience in something akin to van Gennep’s notion of the post-liminal, serving as what Turner would call a ‘ritual elder’.²⁷ Anastasius was well aware that religious competition in the form of Islam, sorcery or Judaism held the potential to pull Christians away from their post-liminal state back into the ambiguous arena of liminality, making these Christians potential blank slates for alien rites and rituals.²⁸ It was ritual, therefore, which Anastasius decided was essential for Christian identity in the Chalcedonian Levant, a distinct shift from his emphasis elsewhere on intra-Christian credal competition.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid. 90; see also 101–7.

²⁷ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 96. Of course, Anastasius’s work also addresses rites of passage as such. His *Sinai Fathers* is particular concerned with death and burial (e.g. 1.8, 9, 14–16, 29); he addresses the when, whom and how of baptism in *Questions and Answers* (e.g. QQ. 9, 14, 28). His advice on marriage is, as a rule, more pastoral than ritual in *Questions and Answers*. Whether the *Hexaemeron* attributed to Anastasius is genuine is a subject of much debate: see the discussion in *Anastasius of Sinai: Hexaemeron*, ed. Clement A. Kuehn and John D. Baggarly, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 278 (Rome, 2007), xiii–xxiii. In *Hexaemeron* 9–10, the author emphasizes marriage primarily as the union between Christ and his church.

²⁸ Space precludes addressing Anastasius’s portrayal of Jews and Judaism. Along with anti-Jewish rhetoric in *Questions and Answers* and *Edifying Tales*, he may have been the author of a *Disputatio adversus Iudaeos* (*Clavis Patrum Graecorum* 7772). Uthemann dedicates a substantial portion of his monograph discussing this possibility: *Anastasios Sinaites*, 583–714. The sermons of Sophronius of Jerusalem likewise bear witness to virulent opposition to Palestine’s Jews in the seventh century. It seems more plausible that this virulence sprang from real religious competition rather than being merely a rhetorical ploy against heretics and Muslims, *pace* David Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia, PA, 1994).

²⁹ Especially in his *Hodegos*. The latter presumes a context in which Chalcedonians would have been in the minority but in which public debate was possible (we might presume especially in Egypt). Still, it is important to note that in the *Hodegos* Anastasius mentions debates with (among other non-Christians) Muslims: *Hodegos* 1.1.43; 7.2.117–18; 10.2.4.9. See the preliminary remarks of Sidney Griffith, ‘Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodegos*, and the Muslims’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987), 341–58, at 347–58.

RITUAL AS SYNECDOCHE: BASIC CHRISTIAN ACTIONS

Throughout Anastasius's writings, but especially in his *Edifying Tales*, Christian ritual served as a synecdoche for the faith as a whole. Anastasius tells us, for example, of a certain Theodore the sailor who had renounced the Christian faith. What did such a renunciation entail? Theodore left the faith, Anastasius writes, by 'renouncing both the cross and baptism'.³⁰ We find a more explicit link between ritual and Christian identity, however, in Anastasius's descriptions of Christian interaction with the demonic.³¹ Thus Anastasius tells of one Moses, an on-again, off-again Christian: at times apostate, at times pious. Moses explained the troubles he had when a Christian, namely, demonic harassment. In fact, his demon was looking for a deal; the harassment would cease, the demon told Moses, if he would cease acting like a Christian.

The demon's instructions were straightforward, telling Moses: 'Do not bow down to Christ and I will let you be. Do not confess him as God and son of God, and I will not hinder you. Do not take communion, and I will not bother you; do not seal yourself [i.e., with the sign of the cross], and I shall be kind to you.'³² The stark simplicity of the credal content of Christianity in this story is striking, especially if we compare it to Anastasius's Christological polemics. A basic confession of the deity and sonship of Christ is thus here more concerned with nascent Islam than it was with Miaphysites. The emphasis on the practices of Christianity, that is, the sign of the cross and the eucharist, merits even more attention.

This ritual simplification is quite conspicuous when Anastasius takes his readers into a prison which housed, among others, several sorcerers awaiting trial. He tells us that one particularly forthright sorcerer gave friendly advice to his Christian interlocutor: the would-be interrogator of sorcerers should 'never do so without having first taken communion and without wearing a cross around your neck

³⁰ 'ἀρνησάμενος καὶ τὸν σταυρὸν καὶ τὸ βάπτισμα': Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 10.4 (Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte', 230).

³¹ See Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte', 395–7. Tannous discusses many of the following episodes: *Medieval Middle East*, 142–4.

³² 'Μὴ προσκυνήσης τὸν Χριστὸν, καὶ οὐ σιαινῶ σε, μὴ ὁμολογήσης αὐτὸν Θεὸν καὶ υἱὸν Θεοῦ, καὶ οὐ προσεγγίζω σοι. μὴ κοινωνήσης, καὶ οὐ παρενοχλῶ σοι. Μὴ κατασφραγίσῃ, καὶ ἀγαπῶ σε': *Edifying Tales* 13.20–3 (Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte', 233).

[ἐάν μὴ πρότερον κοινωνήσης καὶ φορέσης σταυρὸν ἐπὶ τοῦ τραχήλου σου]. For indeed my companions are wicked men and wish to do you harm. But if you do as I have told you, neither they nor others will be able to harm you.’³³ Anastasius later returns his audience to prison, introducing us to another sorcerer who made this confession before his looming execution: ‘My spells never worked against a Christian who had received communion that same day; for the demonic power of sorcery is rendered useless by communion.’³⁴

A final example is the most explicit endorsement of the apotropaic power of Christian praxis. Anastasius writes of a certain holy John from Bostra in southern Syria.³⁵ A local official recruited John to confront four young women, each demonically possessed. Before the exorcism itself, Anastasius describes an idiosyncratic (if not bewildering) interrogation,³⁶ including this exchange:

Then the blessed one ended the conversation by asking [the demons] the following: ‘What Christian things do you fear?’ They answered him: ‘Truly there are three important things. One is that which you wear around your necks. Another is that place in which you bathe in the church. Then there is that which you eat in your gathering.’ The slave of God John perceived that they had spoken of the honourable cross and of holy baptism and of holy communion. And then he asked them another question, saying: ‘Which one of these three things do you fear the most?’ They answered him and said: ‘If you guard well that with which you commune among yourselves, it is not possible to harm even one of you Christians.’³⁷

³³ Ibid. 14.14–17 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 235).

³⁴ ‘οὐδεπότε ἴσχυσαν αἱ φαρμακεῖαι μου εἰς ἀνθρώπων Χριστιανὸν κοινωνοῦνται τὸ καθ’ ἡμέραν: κατηγορεῖτο γὰρ ὑπὸ τῆς κοινωνίας πάσα μου ἡ ἰσχύς ἡ δαμονικὴ τῆς φαρμακεῖας’: *ibid.* 16.6–9. A contextual background for Anastasius’s portrayal of the power of the eucharist can be found in Vincent Déroche, ‘Représentations de l’eucharistie dans la haute époque byzantine’, *Travaux et Mémoires* 14 (2002), 167–80; Marinides, ‘Chalcedonian Christian Lay Piety’, 306–8.

³⁵ Anastasius tells us that this John held the office of *χαρτουλαρίος* (an official archivist) in Damascus: see Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 564 n. 2.

³⁶ Anastasius writes that other topics included the demonic fall from the angelic state; the nature of Eden; the type of fruit which caused Adam to sin; a discussion of the serpent and ‘many other topics which it is not necessary to report here, due to the weakness of the majority’ of his audience: *Edifying Tales* 20.10–14 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 249). This is the ‘weakness’ discussed above.

³⁷ ‘Εἶτα διακόνας τὸν περὶ τούτου λόγον ὁ μακαρίτης, ἠρώτησεν αὐτοὺς λέγων· Ποῖα πράγματα φοβεῖσθε ἐκ τῶν Χριστιανῶν; Λέγουσιν ἐκεῖνοι πρὸς αὐτόν·

These examples, though representative and not exhaustive, lay the foundation for understanding Anastasius's promotion of the very basics of Christian ritual. This notion of 'ritual maintenance', however, was part of a larger project which touched on Christian identity in the Umayyad Caliphate (especially Palestine) and centred on frequent lay communion with an eye toward religious competition, in the form of Islam or otherwise.

A RENAISSANCE OF LAY PIETY: ANASTASIUS AND THE EUCHARIST

Anastasius's concern with frequent communion comes at the end of a hundred-year reform movement to that end. As Phil Booth has shown, seventh-century Palestine bears witness to a sustained pastoral effort to redefine ecclesiastical community and to encourage lay participation.³⁸ John Moschus and his companion, Sophronius (later patriarch of Jerusalem) began this pastoral effort, constructing a new Chalcedonian literary republic, one notably inclusive of lay piety and optimistic about the potential of Christian society.³⁹ Maximus the Confessor worked toward the same end, providing a dense metaphysical coherence to what he argued was a symphony of church, world and sacrament.⁴⁰ This reform movement, in Booth's words, was one primarily of 'sacramental reorientation' – a firm emphasis on participation in the church's rites – which marked 'a seminal shift in emphasis within the Roman East', one centred now more than ever on 'sacramental mediation'.⁴¹ From Moschus to

Ἔχετε ὄντως τρία πράγματα μεγάλα· ἐν ᾧ φορεῖτε εἰς τοὺς τραχήλους ὑμῶν, καὶ ἐν ᾧ ὅπου λουέσθε εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, καὶ ἐν ᾧ ὅπερ τρώγετε εἰς τὴν συναξίν. Νοήσας οὖν ὁ τοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος Ἰωάννης, ὅτι περὶ τοῦ τιμίου σταυροῦ εἰρήκασι καὶ περὶ τοῦ ἁγίου βαπτίσματος καὶ περὶ τῆς ἁγίας κοινωνίας, πάλιν ἠρώτησεν αὐτοὺς λέγων· Εἶτα ἐκ τούτων τῶν τριῶν πραγμάτων, ποῖον φοβεῖσθε πλέον; Τότε ἐκεῖνοι ἀπεκρίθησαν αὐτῷ καὶ εἶπαν· Ὄντως εἰ ἐφυλάττετε καλῶς, ὅπερ μεταλαμβάνετε, οὐκ ἴσχυεν εἰς ἐξ ἡμῶν ἀδικῆσαι Χριστιανόν': Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 20.24–33 (Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaité', 250).

³⁸ See Phil Booth, *The Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA, 1999). Booth's argument in part builds on that of Olster in *Roman Defeat*.

³⁹ See Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen, *John Moschos' Spiritual Meadow: Authority and Autonomy at the End of the Antique World* (Abingdon, 2014); Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 90–139, 241–50; Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 99–115. The themes of Sophronius's sermons are also discussed in Jeanne de la Ferrière, *Sophrone de Jérusalem. Fêtes chrétiennes à Jérusalem* (Paris, 1999).

⁴⁰ See Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 170–85.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 4–6.

Anastasius, authors centred this vision of the church on lay piety. It was, furthermore, inclusive of monastics who were willing to commune and submit to episcopal authority;⁴² and conspicuously ambiguous about (if not implicitly hostile to) the spiritual relevance of the Roman Empire.⁴³ It was a heady and delicate reorientation.

Yet we cannot include Anastasius in this 'reform movement' without noticing a striking discontinuity. Booth rightly places the eucharistic focus of Sophronius and John Moschus's *Miracles of Cyrus and John*, for example, into the context of intra-Christian disputes.⁴⁴ Proper eucharistic piety (and consequent eucharistic miracles) codified boundaries between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christians.⁴⁵ This was, in short, a eucharistic practice that bore the weight of continual Christological competition. Anastasius, however, directs his audience to the power of eucharistic piety over against non-Christian communities. Thus, for Anastasius, the power of the eucharist was not simply that it clarified Chalcedonian orthodoxy, but rather that it codified Christian supremacy.

Fundamental to all this was frequent communion, and Anastasius is exemplary in this regard. As for monks, a cohort which included many great teachers often ambiguous about the need for communion, he tells his audience in his *Sinai Tales* that even severe ascetics who had achieved a sort of bodiless invisibility in this life still sneaked into the church to communicate.⁴⁶ But the *Questions and Answers* best

⁴² We find a special emphasis on submission to bishops and monastic-ecclesial harmony in Cyril of Scythopolis's late sixth-century *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*. For Cyril, however, the role of empire is still prominent, not least in the Origenist controversy. For Cyril's hagiography and its Palestinian context, see Lorenzo Perrone, *La chiesa di Palestina e le controversie cristologiche* (Brescia, 1980); more recently, Daniël Hombergen, *The Second Origenist Controversy: A New Perspective on Cyril of Scythopolis' Monastic Biographies as Historical Sources for Sixth-Century Origenism* (Rome, 2001). On the relationship between the monks of the Judean desert monasteries and the Jerusalem patriarchate, see also Christopher Birkner, 'Kirche und Kellion. Zum Verständnis von "Kirche" bei Kyrill von Skythopolis', in Peter Gemeinhardt, ed., *Was ist Kirche in der Spätantike? Publikation der Tagung der Patristischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft in Duderstadt und Göttingen (02.–05.01.2015)* (Leuven, 2017), 163–76.

⁴³ See the argument in Ölster, *Roman Defeat*, 99–115.

⁴⁴ See Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 54–9.

⁴⁵ See the rich discussion of eucharistic competition in Tannous, *Medieval Middle East*, 156–9.

⁴⁶ Anastasius, *Sinai Fathers* 1.2 (Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte', 172); cf. *ibid.* 1.20 (communion before death); 1.33 (distributing communion in the Sinai desert). The *Hexaemeron* 10.4.2, however, allows for advanced ascetics who in fact do not need to communicate by receiving the eucharist in church. If this is a genuinely Anastasian text, this

reveal Anastasius's ardent endorsement of frequent lay communion, along with the disquieting concerns that could keep a lay person from communicating. Two examples are particularly salient:

Question 38: Is it a good thing for somebody who has been in bed with his own wife or who has had nocturnal emission of seed, to wash himself with water and then go straight to church?⁴⁷

Question 40: If somebody involuntarily drinks water when washing out one's mouth or when in the bath, should such a person go to communion or not?⁴⁸

These two examples have corollaries elsewhere in Anastasius's collection.⁴⁹ His pastoral instincts and visceral grasp of the nature of lay piety allow him to address these concerns with creativity (and some degree of playfulness). As for sexual activity and the need to bathe, Anastasius admits that it would be far better for the questioner to bathe himself in tears on account of his wicked capitulation. Yet, given that this rarely occurs, Anastasius suggests that a simple bath will suffice, 'and then certainly partake of the holy mysteries'.⁵⁰ Moreover, whilst getting water into one's mouth was a technical violation of a pre-eucharistic fast, Anastasius still urges his audience to take communion under these circumstances. Otherwise, he writes, Satan will make it his aim to get a little water into a Christian's mouth on a regular basis, having 'found the occasion for preventing such a person from taking communion'.⁵¹ Elsewhere Anastasius allows for the fact that some may communicate daily while others may be wise to abstain for a while on account of their sins.⁵² He

concession would reinforce our perception of Anastasius as a pastor willing to offer simpler as well as more complicated explanations depending on the composition of his audience.
⁴⁷ Ἄρα καλὸν τὸ ἀπὸ τῆς ἰδίας γυναικὸς ὄντα, ἢ πάλιν ἀπὸ ἐνυπνιασμοῦ λούσασθαι ὕδατι καὶ εἶθ' οὕτως ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ εἰσερχεσθαι; Q. 38 (translation from Munitiz, *Anastasios of Sinai*, 142).

⁴⁸ Ἐάν τις νιπτόμενος τὸ στόμα ἢ πάλιν ἐν βαλανείῳ καταπιεῖ ὕδωρ μὴ θέλων, ὀφείλει κοινωνῆσαι, ἢ οὐ; Q. 40 (Munitiz, *Anastasios of Sinai*, 146).

⁴⁹ See, for example, QQ. 39, 64, 67.

⁵⁰ Q. 38 (Munitiz, *Anastasios of Sinai*, 142).

⁵¹ Q. 40 (Munitiz, *Anastasios of Sinai*, 146).

⁵² Q. 41. Though Anastasius errs on the side of frequent communion, he allows a great deal of flexibility in his elaborate answer, arguing that much depends on the conscience of the individual.

proposes, however, that a sinner can bridge the cavern between his own failings and the need to receive communion with acts of almsgiving.⁵³

Anastasius's *Edifying Tales* offer further insight into his thinking on lay concerns and the eucharist. The collection begins with an account which assures his readers that the eucharist remains the eucharist even in the hands of an unholy and tainted priest.⁵⁴ Anastasius recounts a surprising story, moreover, concerning a pious woman who kept a bit of eucharistic bread in her hand after communicating and took it home to ward off a demon, who straight away ran off and disappeared.⁵⁵ What is surprising about this story is not the woman's impulse, for the eucharist's purported apotropaic powers are evident in other late antique Christian texts. Rather, what is surprising is Anastasius's tacit endorsement of her actions; other Christian authorities of late antiquity condemn similar expressions of lay piety without reserve. Jacob of Edessa (c.640–708), for example, provides an exhaustive list of dos and don'ts concerning the eucharist.⁵⁶ His *Canons and Questions* allow that the eucharist be taken home only for the sick and then only with permission.⁵⁷ Anastasius, however, lets the story stand, prefacing it with the simple observation that this woman's boldness stemmed from an intimate relationship with the divine.⁵⁸

‘GREAT IS THE GOD OF THE CHRISTIANS’: RITUAL
MAINTENANCE AND POLEMIC

We have thus far approached Anastasius in his *Tales* and *Questions and Answers* as a man concerned with describing Christians as those who take communion (as well as using other signs and rituals),

⁵³ Ibid. He notes that God forgave even Emperor Zeno's sexual misconduct on account of the emperor's magnanimous charity to the poor, following the story in John Moschus, *Spiritual Meadow*, 175.

⁵⁴ Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 1, in which the question is quite explicit. Binggeli notes similar concerns in Anastasius's corpus at *ibid.* 1.5.38–41 and *Homilia de sacra synaxi* (PG 89, cols 825–49): Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 528 n. 11.

⁵⁵ Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 4.

⁵⁶ See Tannous, *Medieval Middle East*, 137–42.

⁵⁷ *Questions which Addai the Priest and Lover of Labors asked Jacob, the Bishop of Edessa* 3 (François Nau, *Les Canons et les résolutions canoniques de Rabboula, Jean de Tella, Cyriaque d'Amid, Jacques d'Edesse, Georges des Arabes, Cyriaque d'Antioche, Jean III, Théodose d'Antioche et des Perses* [Paris, 1906], 39).

⁵⁸ ‘μητέρα ἐκέκτητο τῷ θεῷ οἰκετούμενην’: Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 4.1–2 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 222).

rather than relying on dense Christological formulae. As such, he was not simply a theologian or exegete, but played the role of what Turner called the ‘ritual elder’, overseeing the communion and community of those who practice the rites he endorsed.⁵⁹ But to what end? If ‘rites of maintenance’ served to differentiate Christians, then clearly there was an ‘other’ from which Christians (in Anastasius’s eyes) needed strict differentiation. As we have seen, he was certainly concerned with assuring his audience that these rites offered protection from the demonic.⁶⁰ But his demonology goes further, highlighting the alliance of demons with two distinct groups: ‘Arabs’ or ‘Saracens’ (he does not use ‘Muslim’)⁶¹ and sorcerers or magicians. In doing so, he betrays his own concern with the state of religious competition in the late seventh-century Levant. For Anastasius, Christianity was, in spite of its veracity, one option among others.⁶²

This comes across most clearly in his *Edifying Tales*, a text with two primary goals.⁶³ The first, clearly, was to encourage Christians who found themselves discouraged by their novel status in an Umayyad world. The second was simply to slander the opposition in tabloid-like hit pieces. The target of this slander was very often Islam. In

⁵⁹ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 96.

⁶⁰ The Christian sense of the demonic threat, while evident in the New Testament, received enthusiastic emphasis in the literature of the early Christian monks: see David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA, 2006). For the popularity of this literature and the development of demonology thereafter, see now Eva Elm and Nicole Hartmann, eds, *Demons in Late Antiquity: Their Perception and Transformation in different Literary Genres* (Berlin, 2020).

⁶¹ He does use the term *μαργαρίτης* at *Edifying Tales* 10.10 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 230), a word which connotes defilement but becomes a slur for those who have abandoned Christianity for Islam. Cf. Leontius, *Life of Stephen Sabaitè* 52.3: in the early tenth-century Arabic translation of the *Life*, we read *muqmis*; the later medieval Greek translation uses *μαργαρίτης* (*ActaSS*, July 3, 531–613). John C. Lamoreaux offers alternative explanations in *Leontius of Jerusalem: The Life of Stephen of Mar Saba*, CSCO 579 (Leuven, 1999), 81 n. 223. See further Charles du Fresne du Cange, *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae graecitatis* (Lyon, 1608), cols 849–50; E. A. Sophocles, *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods (From B.C. 146 to A.D. 1100)* (New York, 1900), 725.

⁶² By ‘religious competition’ I mean evidence in Christian texts of the temptation of religious alternatives. From the eastern Levantine milieu of the sixth and seventh centuries, examples abound, such as *Life of George of Choziba* 4.15, 18; 10.50, 52; John Moschus, *Spiritual Meadow* 26, 30, 36, 47, 48, 85, 177, 199; Sophronius of Jerusalem, *On the Annunciation*, 10.3–6. Whilst some of these episodes and Sophronius’s homiletical rhetoric may be merely tropes, they nevertheless betray a marked anxiety.

⁶³ Binggeli notes this bifurcation: ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 395.

fact, Anastasius ends several *Tales* with series of exclamations expressing a similar sentiment: the superiority of the Christian faith. These exclamations include: ‘Great is the faith of the Christians’,⁶⁴ ‘Great is the God of the faith of the Christians’⁶⁵ and, simply, ‘Great is the God of the Christians’.⁶⁶ They conclude some of Anastasius’s stories like a catchy political slogan or a rhythmic chant or mantra. Acclamations as such, whether political or theological (if we dare distinguish these), were certainly commonplace in the late antique world.⁶⁷ Yet given the context and purpose of Anastasius’s *Edifying Tales*, it seems quite possible that such acclamations were meant to hold a special meaning for an audience probably familiar with another very similar confession: *Allāh Akbar*, the Islamic *Takbir*, ‘God is great!’

If so, Anastasius was giving his audience a pithy riposte, something of a Christian *shahada*.⁶⁸ Ritualization of the tongue and voice would therefore go hand in hand with physical action in tracing the sign of the cross or approaching with hands open to receive the sacred

⁶⁴ ‘μεγάλη ἡ πίστις τῶν Χριστιανῶν’: Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 15.38 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 237).

⁶⁵ ‘μέγας ὁ θεὸς τῆς πίστεως τῶν Χριστιανῶν’: *ibid.* 9.19 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 229).

⁶⁶ ‘μέγας ὁ θεὸς τῶν Χριστιανῶν’: *ibid.* 15.37 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 237); cf. 10.16–17; 17.173–4; 27.1.

⁶⁷ See Charlotte Roueché, ‘Acclamations’, in G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar, eds, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 274–5.

⁶⁸ Binggeli briefly claims as much, but offers no elaboration: ‘Diegemata psychophelē kai steriktika genomena en diaphorois topoīs epi tōn hēmeterōn chronōn’, in David Thomas and Alex Mallett, eds, *Christian-Muslim Relations Online*, 2010, online at: <https://referenceworks-brillonline.com.ezp3.lib.umn.edu/entries/christian-muslim-relations-i/diegemata-psychophelē-kai-steriktika-genomena-en-diaphorois-topoīs-epi-ton-hemeteron-chronon-COM_23478>, accessed 26 January 2022. Yet a tentative case can be made. There is archaeological evidence for the use of the *Takbir* in the second half of the seventh century, albeit limited: Tareq A. Ramadan, ‘Religious Invocations on Umayyad Lead Seals: Evidence of an Emergent Islamic Lexicon’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 78 (2019), 273–86, at 280–1. For an analysis of later Byzantine misunderstanding concerning the *Takbir*, see Tarek M. Muhammed, ‘The Concept of *al-takbir* in Byzantine Theological Writings’, *Byzantinoslavica* 1 (2014), 77–97, which presumes that an author such as John of Damascus misunderstood the Arabic of the *Takbir*. I find this unlikely and assume that John was not above distorting the *Takbir* for polemical purposes. As for Anastasius, we may guess that he heard the cry of the *Takbir* in his travels and probably knew enough simple Arabic (even from Arabic-speaking Christians) to grasp its basic meaning.

communion meal. To Mary Douglas's assertion that 'ritual is preeminently a form of communication'⁶⁹ we might respond that many forms of (spoken) communication are likewise pre-eminently a form of ritual. In this light, it is no surprise that the so-called *Pact of Umar*, however far back we date it, should seek to regulate the ritual soundscape of the Levant, implicitly acknowledging that ritual contagion is not only tangible and visible, but aural as well.⁷⁰ Elsewhere Anastasius describes Christian psalmody as an effective riposte to demonic cacophony.⁷¹

Returning to the *Edifying Tales*, we catch Anastasius also emphasizing the thinly veiled alliance between Islam and the demonic.⁷² After describing demonic aversion to the image of the cross, for example, he makes an obvious allusion to other contemporary 'enemies of the cross' who seem to pose a pressing problem for his audience.⁷³ Such allusions are completely unveiled when we return to John of Bostra, and to his exchange with the demons. John, Anastasius tells us, followed up his first set of questions with a question which served as a complementary opposite: if demons hated the cross, baptism and the eucharist, what sort of religion did they prefer? "That of our companions", they answered. "And who are they?" John asked. They answered: "Those who have none of what we have just spoken [i.e., the three

⁶⁹ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York, 1973), 41; cf. Frits Staal, 'The Sound of Religion', *Numen* 33 (1986), 185–224, at 213: 'In ritual we are primarily dealing with sounds and acts, and these correspond to each other'.

⁷⁰ Traditionally dated toward the end of the seventh century, the *Pact of Umar* contains regulations governing a number of non-Islamic ritual activities, including sounds. Scholars debate how far back this tradition goes, many dating the composition of something like the *Pact* to the eighth or ninth centuries: see, inter alia, Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge and New York, 2011), 58–87; Mark R. Cohen, 'What was the Pact of 'Umar? A Literary-Historical Study', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (1999), 100–57; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīna Dimashq*, 80 vols (Beirut, 1995), 2: 120, 174–9 (includes five different versions); translated in A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their non-Muslim Subjects* (London, 1930), 5–6; A. Noth, 'Abgrenzungsprobleme zwischen Muslimen und nicht-Muslimen. Die "Bedingungen 'Umar's" (*ash-shurūt al-'umariyya*) unter einem anderen Aspekt gelesen', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987), 290–315.

⁷¹ Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 7.

⁷² Briefly discussed in Uthemann, *Anastasios Sinaites*, 529–32. A broader overview is Bernard Flusin, 'Démons et Sarrasins. L'Auteur et le propos des *Diègnmata stèrikika* d'Anastase le Sinaïte', *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991), 381–409.

⁷³ Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 14.21–2 (Binggeli, 'Anastase le Sinaïte', 235).

Christian things – BH]. Those who do not recognize the son of Mary as God or as the Son of God.”⁷⁴

For Anastasius, then, Islamic identity is something completely negative. ‘Islam’, by this definition, is to be without the cross, baptism and the eucharist, and thus a Muslim is one who lives outside the order of Christian ritual. Likewise, Anastasius presents the credal content of Islam in a completely pessimistic light. Islam, in this account, is a series of negations, a nihilistic un-belief. Of course, Anastasius may have also had in mind the very concrete inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock; he was aware of ‘Abd al-Malik’s monumental shrine and very conscious of the anxiety it caused some of the Christian faithful.⁷⁵ But regardless of the role of this architectural novelty in the crafting of such a story, the sharp rhetorical critique remains. Anastasius’s demons emphasize simple Christian ritual in contrast to simple Islamic belief (or disbelief, as it were).⁷⁶

Yet Islam was not the only temptation Anastasius’s audience faced. We conclude with a brief observation on the place of sorcery or magic in his thinking. The vocabulary in the *Edifying Tales* includes roles such as φάρμακος (sorcerer / poisoner / magician) or even φάρμακος πρεσβυτέρος (priest-turned-sorcerer), as well as terms relating to the content of their craft such as φαρμακεία (drugs, medicine, poison or witchcraft).⁷⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to explore concepts of magic and sorcery in the late antique world.⁷⁸ For

⁷⁴ ‘τὴν τῶν ἐταίρων ἡμῶν. Λέγει πρὸς αὐτούς· Καὶ τίνες εἰσὶν οὗτοι; Λέγουσι πρὸς αὐτόν· οἱ μὴ ἔχοντες μήτε ἐν πράγμα ἐκ τῶν τριῶν, ὧν εἶπαμεν πρὸς σε, μήτε ὁμολογούντες θεὸν ἢ υἱὸν θεοῦ τὸν υἱὸν τῆς Μαρίας’: *ibid.* 20.36–9 (Binggeli, ‘Anastase le Sinaïte’, 250); discussed in Tannous, *Medieval Middle East*, 360; cf. Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 7.

⁷⁵ Anastasius addresses the issue of the Dome of the Rock in *Edifying Tales* 7; see n. 14 above. I refer to the inscriptions on the Dome emphasizing that Jesus is the son of Mary and deny that he is divine or the Son of God: see the translation in Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), from the transcription in Christel Kessler, ‘Abd Al-Malik’s Inscription in the Dome of the Rock: A Reconsideration’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 10 (1970), 2–14.

⁷⁶ Anastasius tells a lurid story concerning crude Islamic sacrifices: *Edifying Tales* 11. The following story is an elaboration on the Christian liturgy as a pure and effective alternative: *ibid.* 12.

⁷⁷ See Uthemann, *Anastasios Sinaïtes*, 525–9.

⁷⁸ See Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco Roman World* (Abingdon, 2001); Henry McGuire, ed., *Byzantine Magic*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA, 2009); David Frankfurter, ‘Beyond Magic and Superstition’, in Virginia Burrus, ed., *A People’s History of Christianity*, 2: *Late Ancient Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN, 2005), 255–84, 309–12.

our purposes, it is sufficient to point out that for Anastasius, to practise sorcery was to engage in an illicit rite, one which risked compromising Christian identity at its very core. Thus his ritual-based approach to maintaining communal boundaries over against Islam paralleled a venerable tradition of Christian polemic against a host of magical practices.⁷⁹

The problem of what we would call sorcery is present in the *Edifying Tales* and the *Questions and Answers*.⁸⁰ Other Christian texts from seventh-century Palestine share this concern.⁸¹ Illicit rites were very much a live option for Anastasius's Christian audience, an old problem which continued alongside novel forms of Islamic piety. His community, like so many others, was very much willing to mix and match rituals, preferring what was effective to that which was strictly canonical. Even his 'sorcerer-priest' appears notably creative in his synthesis of disparate rituals.⁸²

However, this attraction to non-Christian ritual would have presented an existential problem for someone like Anastasius. If Christian ritual maintained Christian identity, alien rituals would, practically speaking, be tantamount to apostasy. Using van Gennep's categories, we might say that non-Christian rites snatched the participant from their post-liminal state back into the relative fluidity (and vulnerability) of religious liminality. Here one risked becoming again a cultic *tabula rasa* and a potential candidate for inclusion into some other form of ritual community. As Turner noted, unsanctioned liminal activity is 'almost everywhere attributed with magico-religious properties', and is thus 'regarded as dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting to persons, objects, events and relationships'.⁸³ Paradoxically, this blurring of boundaries which Anastasius was so concerned to prevent may well have been the very source of

⁷⁹ See, inter alia, Joseph E. Sanzo's 'Magic and Communal Boundaries: The Problems with Amulets in Chrysostom, *Adv. Iud.* 8, and Augustine, *In Io. tra.* 7', *Henoch* 39 (2017), 227–46.

⁸⁰ See Q. 57; cf. Q. 62, which addresses 'signs' or 'wonders' performed by non-Christians or heretics.

⁸¹ For example, *Life of George of Choziba* 4.15, 18; 10.50, 52.

⁸² Anastasius, *Edifying Tales* 15. Jacob of Edessa condemns the resort of his flock to non-Christian 'demonic' practices in their care for fields and cattle: *Questions which Addai asked Jacob* 46 (Nau, *Les Canons*, 58); cf. Tannous, *Medieval Middle East*, 148.

⁸³ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 108. Of course, in this sense, magic is in the eye of the beholder, religion (in some sense) being sanctioned magic by another name (and magic, following van Gennep, simply unsanctioned religion).

magic's appeal. To combine diverse rites, as Vicky Foskolou has suggested, appeared sophisticated and also held out the promise of being more effective (like visiting several doctors and taking several treatments for the same set of symptoms).⁸⁴

ANASTASIOS OF SINAI AND THE CHRISTIANS OF THE UMAYYAD LEVANT

Anastasios of Sinai was many things to many people. To the Chalcedonian minorities in Syria and Egypt, he was a fierce promoter of Christological orthodoxy and a thoughtful, if idiosyncratic, theological polemicist. To the monks of Mount Sinai, he was especially a storyteller, a man steeped in the tradition of monastic travelogues and *apophthegmata*, providing a sort of literary charter for the monks who walked in Moses's footprints. His three homilies on the creation and nature of human beings betray Anastasios as a sophisticated theological communicator, trained to offer an elaborate and nuanced anthropology for those with learned interests.⁸⁵ For many, however, especially perhaps for the Christians of the largely Chalcedonian lands of Palestine, he had another project in mind.⁸⁶

As a 'ritual elder' or 'ritual specialist', Anastasios sought to offer his audience a simple and coherent form of Christianity consisting of basic credal content combined with familiar rituals which he invested with special significance for their pressing contemporary concerns. As Bell has argued, ritual power, although often tailored by literate specialists, is not primarily concerned with the power and prestige of the specialists themselves. Rather, rituals empower communities as communities.⁸⁷ Here, in Bell's words, 'ritual does not control; rather, it constitutes a particular dynamic of social empowerment'.⁸⁸ To put it

⁸⁴ Vicky A. Foskolou, 'The Magic of the Written Word: The Evidence of Inscriptions on Byzantine Magical Amulets', *ΔΧΑΕ* (2014), 329–48, at 346.

⁸⁵ *Homilia i, ii, iii de creatione hominis* (Clavis Patrum Graecorum 7747–9). See Karl-Heinz Uthemann, ed., *Anastasioi Sinaïtae: Sermones duo in constitutionem hominis secundum imaginem Dei necnon opuscula adversus monotheletas*, CChr.SG 12.

⁸⁶ On the eventual triumph of Chalcedonian Christianity in Palestine, see Lorenzo Peronne, "'Rejoice Sion, Mother of All Churches': Christianity in the Holy Land during the Byzantine Era", in Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds, *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: From the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms* (Turnhout, 2006), 141–73, at 164–8; Lorenzo Peronne, 'Christian Holy Places and Pilgrimage in an Age of Dogmatic Conflicts', *Proche Orient Chrétien* 48 (1998), 5–37, at 22–33.

⁸⁷ Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 182–93.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 181.

another way, Anastasius was giving his audience tools with which they could build and sustain their own Christian identity as a ritually coherent community. As such, he was surprisingly open to certain charismatic impulses, which were evident, although often condemned, in other pastoral authors.⁸⁹ Certainly his work furthers our understanding of laity in late antique Christian contexts, not as passive recipients of theology, but rather, as Georgia Frank has argued, as ‘religious agents’.⁹⁰

Anastasius’s primary concern, then, was to contrast the effective and licit rituals of Christians with the (purportedly) nihilistic confession of Islam and the illicit ritualization of sorcery. In doing so, he provided a straightforward way of being Christian for an audience which included very few theological connoisseurs. In this literature (and in contrast to his other works), Christological formulations – debates on natures, persons, wills and energies – all took a back seat to public, practical and physical acts: truth codified in a democratic simplicity. This is how Anastasius went about making and maintaining Christians in the Umayyad Levant.

⁸⁹ As can be seen in his treatment of the woman: *Edifying Tales* 4. Note also his cautious endorsement of the use of the Bible as an omen text: Q. 57.

⁹⁰ Georgia Frank, ‘Laity Lives: Reclaiming a “Non-” Category’, *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5 (2021), 119–27, at 119.