

THE INFLUENCE OF ASCETICISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH: A LESSON FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

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Abstract

Christian asceticism originated in the local churches during the first three centuries, not in hermitages or other monastic institutions. Teachings ascribed to Jesus Christ and the Apostles, in addition to earlier ideas from Judaism and Greek philosophers, had various effects on patterns of asceticism, both collectively and privately. This included self-denial, fasting and prayer, refraining from accumulating riches, and refraining from sexual activity. Most people observed communal fasting and prayer before the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection every week. Widows and virgins were revered for their abstinence from sexual relations, which promoted the moral purity necessary for prayer and prophesy. This work adopted a qualitative approach with a focus on historical and content analysis. The historical method is used, concentrating on a methodical approach to reconstructing the intricate details, the individuals, events, meanings, and even concepts from the past that have impacted and moulded the present. This study concluded that the church should still support asceticism in the form of fasting, prayer, abstaining from illicit sex, and avoiding the accumulation of wealth and money that would have improved the welfare of the general public.

Keywords: Fasting, Prayer, Self-denial, Sexual Renunciation, Abstaining, Asceticism

Introduction

The authors see Asceticism as a notion present in nearly all world religions. Most religious traditions have traditionally viewed or practised asceticism, and some religious believers still engage in it today. Adherents to this way of life voluntarily chose to live a life of abstinence, giving up sensuous pleasures in pursuit of spirituality, salvation, and redemption. Ascetics can choose to live a simple, modest, and austere lifestyle, giving up material belongings and bodily pleasures and representations in favour of focusing on religious practise and spiritual reflection. They can also choose to withdraw or draw back from the world for their practises, or they can choose to remain a part of their society. A lot of ascetics believe that when the body is purified, the soul is also purified, strengthening the spiritual relationship, and promoting inner peace. Self-mutilation or ritualistic abstinence from pleasure are two other ways this might appear. The ascetics, on the other hand, claimed that self-imposed restrictions give them greater freedom in a variety of areas, such as enhanced mental clarity and the ability to resist alluring situations.¹ The austere life is understood in the old theologies as a path to enlightenment, where an abundance of thrift and contentment await the simple. In light of this, this essay explores the significance of the belief that man must work out his salvation in a fearful and trembling manner, as well as the reason behind its adoption in the early church. The Early Church covers from 5 BC to AD 500.

Etymology

People who value living an austere lifestyle have always existed, both in men and women. Within the religious community, an ascetic is a person who prioritises spiritual considerations over bodily needs. Asceticism is the ongoing practise or manner of life where this takes place. *Askei*, a

¹ R. Finn. *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Up 2009), 94-97.

Greek word meaning practise or training, is where the name ascetics originates. Athletes used it while they trained for tournaments. Therefore, one could refer to the religious ascetic as a spiritual athlete.² The word asceticism is derived from the Greek verb *askero*, which means to practise or exercise. The verbal noun "askesis," on the other hand, was employed for moral practice—through education, self-control of passions, emotional restraint, and charitable giving. The term denoted a way of life characterised by austere selflessness and abstinence from modern conveniences. For Ferguson, it describes a spiritual guidance system centred around giving up worldly possessions to fight the devil.³ This is how Douglas and Tenney defined asceticism in the New International Bible Dictionary as follows. Though the Bible does not use this word, it does contain several references to the idea. Asceticism in terms of restraint, is typically seen in the Old Testament (OT) about specific situations like penitence (1 Sam 7:6) or religious regulations (Lev. 10:9; Num. 6:1-8). However, the New Testament (NT), calls for rejection of all that obstructs discipleship and has a comprehensive effect on lifestyle (Matt. 19:21–22; Mark 10:29–30).⁴ (Matt. 19:21–22; Mark 10:29–30). The physical preparation needed for sporting competitions was referred to as self-denial, rather than the traditional meaning of the word asceticism. Later on, its application spread to the austere practises that most religious traditions employ in varied degrees to bring about deeper spirituality and redemption.

² Henry R. Boer. *A Short History of the Early Church*. (General Rapids, Michigan: Ein B. Eerdinans Publishing Company, 2003), 128-129.

³ S. B. Ferguson, S. B. *New Dictionary of Theology*. (London: Inter-varsity, 1988), 47.

⁴ J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney *New International Bible Dictionary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zonderran Publishing House, 1987), 97.

The Origin of Ascetic Living

Asceticism's origins are discovered in man's sincere and diligent efforts to achieve a variety of ultimate objectives or to live up to an ultimate standard of perfection or excellence, such as the growth of the full man—body, soul, and spirit—or in his creative ideas, self-expression, or technical skill. The goal of athletic asceticism (training), which encompasses the ideal of physical perfection and fitness, is to guarantee the maximum level of wellness in an athlete possible through rigorous training. The Greeks of antiquity thought that athletes practising for competitive events, like the Olympics, ought to exercise physical discipline by refraining from everyday pleasures like food, cigarettes, sex, and other things that can be physically demanding and stressful. This way, the athletes' bodies would be put through tests to succeed in the competition.⁵ To become highly proficient in the arts of battle, warriors also embraced a variety of austere lifestyles. For instance, to reach a high degree of competence in their military arts, the ancient Israelites embraced the idea of austerity. They had a practise of not having sex before engaging in combat or hostilities. This idea appeared in the story of Uriah, who said, "The chest and Israel and Judah are all living in tents," in response to David's request that he return home and eat, drink, and lie down with the woman. Uriah told David. "And my master Joab and my master's troops are camping in the open field. How could I go home and eat, drink, and have sex with my wife? I swear on your very life, I will not do that" (II Sam. 11:11 CEB).

The idea conveyed by askesis, and related concepts was extended to other ideals, such as ethics, as values other than physical prowess emerged. When the idea of such training was brought

⁵ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Asceticism". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 June 2013, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/asceticism>.

into the field of ethics, it changed from being the perfect way to prepare for a corporeal objective to the ideal of the sage who could act freely to obtain an appealing thing or pleasurable physical act to choose or reject⁶. The stoics, a school of ancient Greek philosophers who promoted emotion regulation by reason, represented this kind of austerity, it included strengthening the will to resist leading a life filled with sensual pleasures. A fundamental tenet of ethical philosophy is the belief that one should reject one's basic desires, which are characterised as sensual or physical desires, in support of one's moral and spiritual aspirations. According to Plato, one must repress corporeal appetites to allow the mind to be free to pursue knowledge.

Greek philosopher Plotinus, who lived in the third century AD, shared this opinion. The stoics maintained the honour inherent in human nature as well as the essential tranquillity of the wise, which they felt could only be attained by suppressing the emotive or appetitive portion of man. To them, abstinence was simply a way to regulate the arousal of feelings. Another shift in the understanding of askesis occurred in ancient Greece when the idea conveyed by askesis and its kin was extended to other ideals, such as intellectual prowess, moral vigour, and spiritual capabilities. The acquisition of knowledge or mental strength through the growth and exercise of intellectual faculties has replaced the focus on physical training. A result of this intellectual training among the Greeks was the Sophists' educational system, who were paid instructors, authors, and instructors in the fourth and fifth centuries BC⁷.

In a similar vein, numerous religions and ideologies throughout history have recognised the benefits of asceticism in strengthening one's will and more profound spiritual

⁶ Britannica "Asceticism", 2

⁷ Britannica "Asceticism", 2

capacities. His fellow German philosopher and former colleague, Immanuel Kant, embodied a moral ascetic living that fostered virtue in line with the Stoic maxims. Author Schopenhauer represented an asceticism that killed the will to live in the 19th century⁸.

The Causes and Emergence of the Cultivation of Religious Asceticism

Different authors have presented some causes responsible for the emergence and cultivation of religious austerity. These include among others the following:

- “As the church became free from persecution, it also became secular.
- Many who had no real interest in salvation entered the church.
- Worship was formalized and lost much of its force.
- Thousands of Christians who glorified martyrdom no longer had to endure martyrdom.
- In addition, the Greek belief that the body is the cause of sin influenced the thinking of many Christians”⁹.

Walker also cites some causes responsible for the emergence and cultivation of religious asceticism, as follows:

- “The condition of the church, emphasized by the influx of vast numbers in the peace from 260 to 303, and after the conversion of Constantine, led to enlarged valuation of the ascetic life by serious-minded Christians.
- The cessation of martyrdom left asceticism the highest Christian achievement attainable.
- The world was filled with sights that offended Christian morality, from which it seemed well to flee.

⁸ Britannica “Asceticism”, 2

⁹ Boer *A Short History of the Early Church*, 129

- The mind of antiquity regarded the practice of contemplation as more estimable than the active virtues.
- Above all, the increasing formalism of public worship, as developed by the close of the third century, led to a desire for a freer and more individual approach to God”¹⁰.

In conclusion, Britannica explains some of the causes responsible for the emergence as well as the practice of religious austerity

- “The fear of hostile influences from the demons.
- The view that one must be in a state of ritual purity as a necessary condition for communing with the supernatural.
- Desire to draw the attention of divine or holy beings to the self-denial practised by their supplicants.
- The idea of earning pity, compassion, and redemption through merit from self-inflicted acts of ascetic practice.
- The sense of guilt and sin that creates the need for atonement.
- The view that asceticism is a means of gaining access to supernatural powers and the power of dualistic concepts, which were at the source of efforts to free the spiritual part of man from the defilement of the body and the bodily oriented way of life”¹¹.

For these reasons, many Christians in the early church adopted an ascetic way of life to remain close to God and not to lose themselves in the cares of this life.

The Biblical Foundation for Asceticism

¹⁰ Willston Walker. *A History of the Christian Church*. 3rd Edition. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970),125.

¹¹ Britannica “Asceticism”, 3

As the founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ demonstrated several austere behaviours. He gave the following instruction: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23 ASV). According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ fasted on unusual occasions to seek direction and to remain open to hearing from God and support for both humanity and himself. Tertullian is reported to have stated in this regard: "Slanderer's flesh will go more easily through the narrow gate of heaven: that "lighter" flesh will rise more quickly: and that drier flesh will experience less putrefaction in the tomb"¹². In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he wrote: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure" (12b-13 ASV). Asceticism was defined by the Apostle Paul as (a) practice and (b) strength in weakness, which encapsulated the idea of asceticism in his writings. For the sake of this essay, only a few of the many important components in this paragraph will be highlighted. Paul first challenges the Christians at Philippi to find their way to salvation. This implied to Paul that salvation does need human labour. Paul did not, however, intend for this explanation to be a means of obtaining salvation. Instead, Paul explained his statement right away, saying that God is at work in you. This indicates that since God works through man, the true worker is God himself, not the working man.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Paul provides a clearer explanation of the sports metaphor. Here, Paul made a racial comparison between the circumstances facing Christians. Paul taught that Christians should behave like athletes—they should run a race and maintain discipline. He therefore asserts, "Rather, I'm landing punches on my own body and subduing it like a slave" (verse 27a CEB), in other words, Paul exercised self-control and discipline. Like athletes, but with

¹² Caroline Walker Bynum. *The Resurrection of the body in Western Christianity: 200-1336*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 41.

a completely different goal in mind. In 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, Paul freely and forthrightly acknowledged that he had a thorn in his flesh, which he accepted even if he desired it were not the case. Rather, he was happy to be weak since he said "I'm stronger whenever I'm weak." Paul claimed that the spike was administered to him to keep him calm. Paul added that, in truth, his weakness made him stronger. Maybe because of the humiliating thorn, he became humbler. For whatever reason, Paul was glad of his frailty and the strength it bestowed upon him. Paul's ascetic existence was, in many respects, a method of accepting one's own need and frailty while yet taking pleasure in it because of God's providence.

The Early Church and the Practice of Asceticism

Asceticism was widely accepted in early Christianity, and characterised by abstinence from sexual activity, continuous prayer and devotion, sacrifice of all riches and other belongings, and a basic diet. The conscious cultivation of moral virtues like patience and forbearance, which call for self-control and discipline is regarded as asceticism¹³.

Asceticism was defined more broadly by Max Weber to encompass austerity on an inner level. He distinguished this ascetic living in the world—which is rooted in Protestant professional ethics—from otherworldly asceticism, which is the practice of monks and enunciates. In this case, the ascetic accomplishment is not giving up ownership but rather refusing to cling to it. This kind of

¹³ B. Smith. "Hindu and Buddhism, Asceticism". In *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. 2021
<http://www.encyclopedia.com>.

asceticism is more about mental than physical discipline. This contrast undoubtedly established the foundation for a deeper comprehension of asceticism¹⁴.

The following presentation of the aforementioned thesis in Emile Durkheim's book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* supports it: We can't break away from (the profanity) without terribly hurting our instincts and going against our nature. Put another way, the negative cult cannot grow without bringing about misery. One of its essential criteria is pain¹⁵. Asceticism was brought to Christianity by the early church and eventually played a significant role. It is not until the third century AD that Christianity starts to become ascetic. Both Jesus and Paul specifically encouraged fasting, sharing belongings with those in need, and celibacy in certain instances throughout the New Testament. However, these principles were not widely applied in the form of asceticism throughout the first 250 years of Christianity¹⁶.

Spiritual growth was occurring in the Roman Empire at the same time that Christianity was attempting to define formal doctrinal beliefs and obtain legal authority. For instance, Christianity drew many who chose to forgo worldly comforts and sensual pleasures in favour of spending time in prayer and spiritual development for God's kingdom. Some adopted celibacy, poverty, and adherence to Christ's teachings. Some people chose to partake in Christ's suffering while others lived in caves or remote locations depriving their bodies of food, clothing, water, and comfort from agony. Some wanted the stigmata—marks left by his nails—to emerge in their hands as a symbol of their identification with him, while others sought visions of Christ. Still others were happier living in communities, supporting one another, and discovering more fruitful and fulfilling

¹⁴ Burabari Sunday Deeza. "Asceticism: A Match Towards the Absolute" in *IAFOR Journal of Ethics, Religion & Philosophy*, vol. 3, Issue 2, (Autumn 2017), 86.

¹⁵ Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 351.

¹⁶ Lewis M. Hopfe. *Religions of the World*. 9th Edition, (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005), 300.

spiritual lives. Some women pledged to remain virgins and devote the rest of their lives to serving Christ by fasting and praying¹⁷.

Palestine had both solitary and community ascetics during the time of the New Testament. A hermit named Bemus is credited with imparting some of his teachings to the Jewish historian Josephus¹⁸. Jesus Christ and John, the Baptist, who both fasted for forty days, are two documented instances of asceticism. John the Baptist led a lonely, austere life. St. Paul was celibate, the early Judeo-Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 4:32) practised not having personal belongings and observed times of prayer and fasting (Acts 13:2), and Jesus Christ commanded his disciples to fast, sell what they owned, and give the money to the poor (Mathew 6:16)¹⁹.

It seems that none of the early Christians ever lived as hermits or in a society of ascetics. On the other hand, people were renowned for their strict lifestyles and strong religious beliefs. For instance, the brother of the Lord, James, was greatly loved by many non-Christian Jews for his unceasing fasting and prayer²⁰. Most men and women devoted most of their lives to contemplation, seeking direct communion with Christ. For example, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) received her first vision of Christ at the age of six. She swore her virginity and devoted herself only to Christ, whom she often saw in visions. Saint Ambrose of Milan (339-397) praised and built houses for men and women who preserved their virginity (Mathews 295, 294). Lending credence to the above, Bokenkotter writes thus: Origin saw ascetic lives as a type of spiritual marriage with Christ—a view that quickly gained widespread acceptance, Methodius equated ascetic lives to martyrdom²¹.

¹⁷ Warren Mathews. *World Religions*. 5th Ed., (Belmont, CA, USA: Thomson Wadsworth, (2007),294.

¹⁸ Michael A. Smith. “Christian Ascetics and Monks” In *the History of Christianity: A Lion Handbook*. (Tring, Herts, England: Lion Publishing Plc, 1987), 204,355.

¹⁹ New World Encyclopedia “Asceticism” (2021),2 <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Asceticism>.

²⁰ Smith “Christian Ascetics and Monks”, 204b

²¹ Thomas Bokenkotter *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*. (USA: Doubleday, 2005), 54.

Antonius, who was born in the village of Koma around 250, practised asceticism. Motivated by Jesus' instruction to the affluent young ruler, "Go, sell everything you own, and give the proceeds to the needy," In paradise, you at that point will then possess a pearl. Accompany me now while I lead the way. At the age of twenty, Antony threw away his money and quickly started living a penitentiary life²².

A Lesson for the Church Today

Asceticism is the practice of self-denial as a means of becoming closer to God. These can include practises like fasting, celibacy, avoiding needless fundraising that shouldn't be sentimental, dressing simply or in an uncomfortable manner, going without sleep, and not using deceit to steal money from churches. Early Christians often practised asceticism, pooling their resources with honest people and leading modest, uncomplicated lives. Theoretically, it suggests that asceticism should remove ambiguity between believers and God, help in overcoming one's animal nature and foster growth in one's spiritual nature. To achieve this, one must get rid of one's ego, ambition, avarice, and satisfaction from sexual relations and food²³.

Christians need a revitalised ascetic practice culture today. This is because contemporary Christians prioritise earthly things or pleasures over heavenly things. That is, they give the material world top importance and the spiritual low concern. For millennia, the church has understood that putting earthly pleasures above everything else results in poor physical and spiritual health. This does not imply that a person's diet, sleep schedule, or sexual activity are detrimental to their overall

²² Bruce L. Shelley *Church History in Plain Language*. Updated 2nd Edition, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 118.

²³ Jack Zavada. "Asceticism". 2019. <https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-asceticism-700046>.

health. However, it implies that our hearts are pulled away from heaven when we centre our affections on these worldly pleasures. Ascetic practice requires a revitalization in the Christian church today. The fundamental contradiction of this spiritual reality is that actual goodness in the world can only be experienced by holding the material world in low regard and giving the spiritual world top importance. The biblical perspective of reality does prioritise heaven over earth and the soul above the body²⁴. “Don’t store up treasures on earth... Instead, store up your treasures in heaven, ... your heart will always be where your treasure is” (Mathew 6:19-21 CEV). We focus our thoughts on things that are invisible rather than things that are visible. What is visible only exists momentarily, while what is invisible endures forever (2 Corinthians 4:18 GNBDK). Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is valuable in every way because it promises life both for the present and for the future (1 Timothy 4:8 GNBDK).

Jesus Christ advises us to focus our desires on heaven rather than on this world. According to Paul the Apostle, spiritual activities are significantly more beneficial than Yoga. In Colossians 3:2, the writer provides a summary of this truth: “Set your mind and keep focused habitually on the things above (heavenly things), not on things that are on the earth (which have only temporal value)”. Jesus Christ advises us to focus our desires on heaven rather than on this world. According to Paul the apostle, spiritual activities are significantly more beneficial than CrossFit. For this reason, Paul says. “I discipline my body and make it my slave” (1 Corinthians 9:27). The term used to describe discipline in this context means "hit" or "bludgeon," and it has strong connotations. We must assert our physical dominance. The spiritual should dominate the physical

²⁴ Owen Kelly. “Redeeming Asceticism”. 2019. <https://cfe.sebts.edu/faith-and-economics/redeeming-asceticism/>

because it is superior to the other one. Paul's use of images alludes to Jesus' extreme directive to amputate our body parts to rescue our souls from damnation.

How can we practise asceticism and such spiritual instruction? In reaction, the body of Christ has arisen to understand distancing oneself from the outside world, even if it is generally a pleasant place. For instance, the goal of fasting is to reduce one's appetite by consistently declining all heavenly favours, including food and marriage. In this sense, the body is well-trained to submit to its master, the sanctified, sensible intellect, when a sinful temptation piques the hunger. Today is a good day for the church to fast and pray a lot and to avoid taking advantage of any chance to embezzle church or public funds. With God's help, we Christians can be empowered by these self-denial practises to reclaim our glory, align our desires with invisible truth, and experience the dazzling pleasures of paradise right here. Herein is the journey of the spiritual athlete. Therefore, let's join the race and rescue the church in the middle of a culture that has given up on winning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the influence of asceticism in the Early Church cannot be overstated. This powerful movement had profound effects on the development and identity of Christian theology, spirituality, and even the greater society in which it existed. Ascetic practices and ideals, such as renouncing worldly desires, self-discipline, and strict adherence to a life of prayer and self-denial, shaped the lives of countless individuals and communities, leaving an indelible mark on Christian history.

One of the most significant impacts of asceticism was its role in shaping Christian doctrine and theology. Ascetics, through their commitment to a life of purity and detachment from material

possessions, emphasized the importance of the spiritual realm over worldly pursuits. Their radical devotion and self-sacrifice compelled theologians of the time to grapple with questions regarding the nature of the soul, the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, and the role of the body in the pursuit of holiness. This led to the formulation of theological concepts such as the distinction between the soul and the body, the importance of humility and self-control, and the elevation of spiritual purity.

Furthermore, asceticism served as a powerful catalyst for widespread social and cultural change within the Early Church. Ascetics often formed intentional communities, such as monastic orders, where individuals lived together in pursuit of spiritual growth and communal support. These communities became centres of education, literacy, and healthcare, fostering a spirit of learning and service that extended beyond their confines. Additionally, ascetics challenged societal norms and prevalent values, advocating for a simpler way of life that rejected the excesses and materialism of the time. Their example inspired many to reconsider their priorities and embrace a more contemplative and disciplined approach to life.

The influence of asceticism also had a profound impact on the lives of individuals. By renouncing worldly attachments, ascetics sought to overcome the temptations of the flesh and draw closer to God. Their ascetic practices of fasting, celibacy, and self-imposed poverty aimed to cultivate virtues such as self-control, humility, and detachment. Through these practices, ascetics aspired to transform themselves into living examples of spiritual excellence, providing inspiration and guidance to others in their journeys of faith.

In conclusion, the influence of asceticism in the Early Church cannot be underestimated. Through its profound effects on theology, societal values, and individual spiritual growth,

asceticism gave rise to a transformative movement within Christianity. Its enduring legacy continues to shape the understanding and practice of the faith to this day, reminding us of the power of self-discipline, self-sacrifice, and the pursuit of holiness in our own lives.