

Asceticism: an endangered value?

Mutations of ascetism in contemporary monasticism

At the conference, held in May, for the millennium of the Abbey of Solesmes in France, I asked an old abbot of the congregation of Subiaco: ‘Are you an ascetic?’ and he answered me: ‘No!’ as if it were a real mistake to consider it. Yet it is usually taken for granted that monastic life means asceticism, and Max Weber writes that monks are professional, virtuosi of asceticism:

As the exemplary religious individual, the monk was the first *professional*, at least in those orders that practised rationalized asceticism, most of all the Jesuit order. The monk lived in a methodical fashion, he scheduled his time, practised continuous self-control, rejected all spontaneous enjoyments and all personal obligations that did not serve the purposes of his vocation. (Weber 1978: 1172–3, italics in the original.)

In Weber’s books, religious virtuosity is especially defined by asceticism. Early monasticism was actually a real struggle against the body, as the stylites, or desert monks, show us, but this is no longer a kind of monastic life we can observe. So, in the face of these observations, some questions come to mind: Is monastic asceticism really changing and in which terms? Why has the place of the body in religious virtuosity changed? As religious virtuosity is based on ascetic practices, we cannot consider that monastic life nowadays has totally eschewed asceticism. So we have to understand the new sense given to this traditional religious practice.

The research I am going to present here is only at its beginning and I ask more questions that I give answers. In this article, I will seek to understand the shifts which are affecting monastic asceticism in modern society. After having stated some facts which demonstrate the decline of asceticism, I will make some assumptions about the reasons, religious and social, which can explain it. Finally, I will discuss the apparent disaffection with this practice, compared to a new goal of self-fulfilment that monks want to aim for in monastic life.

The decline of monastic asceticism

To start with, we have to explain what asceticism exactly is. Here is a definition by Max Weber:

Salvation may be viewed as the distinctive gift of active ethical behaviour, performed in the awareness that god directs this behaviour, i.e., that the actor is an instrument of god. We shall designate this type of attitude toward salvation, which is characterized by a methodical procedure for achieving religious salvation, as 'ascetic' . . . Religious virtuosity, in addition to subjecting the natural drives to a systematic patterning of life, always leads to the control of relationship within communal life, the conventional virtues which are inevitably unheroic and utilitarian, and leads further to an altogether radical religious and ethical criticism. (Weber 1963: 164–5.)

For the first ascetics, who were famous in society for their performances, we could think that asceticism is their purpose. But this is not entirely true. Asceticism is theoretically only a tool used in achieving the aim of a more perfect religious life. It is meant to control the body in order to make it be quiet, so as not to disturb the contemplation of God. Ernst Troeltsch says that 'asceticism always remained simply one element among others; it never became the logical expression of Christian morality' (Troeltsch 1992: 104), and he underlines that when it becomes a goal, it is suspect for the Church. All the mortifications of these first ascetics aimed to combat sexual desire because they thought they were able to overcome it. Some monks threw themselves into cold water, or fasted over many days. But this struggle was not the aim: they wanted to be closer to God and to go beyond original sin, as it will be in paradise.

Its drastic physical changes, after years of ascetic discipline, registered with satisfying precision the essential, preliminary stages of the long return of the human person, body and soul together, to an original, natural, uncorrupted state (Brown 1988: 223).

A monk wants to concentrate his being totally on God, but organic functions escape from him, because human judgement has no place in this. Monasticism wants, consequently, to regulate and control these functions, giving a place for judgment and, in particular, religious judgment. According to Max Weber, monastic asceticism

has become a systematically formed method of rational living, its aim being to overcome the *status naturae*, to release man from the power of irrational impulses, and from dependency on the world and nature, to subject him to the supremacy of the purposeful will and to subordinate his actions to his own continual control and to the consideration of their ethical consequences (Weber 2002: 81).

Asceticism does not forbid human functions, but rationalizes them. So, we can say, as a definition, that asceticism is a religious rationalisation of organic life.

It must be underlined, as I said before, that monks are theoretically professionals of asceticism. When I went into monasteries to pursue my inquiries I had present in my mind this definition of the classical sociology. But I noted that monks did not speak about asceticism if I did not take it up directly. It was revealed that monks do not need this concept to define their own life. In addition, reading the commentary of the rule of Saint Benedict by the specialist Adalbert de Voguë, a French monk, I discovered a strange affirmation: 'asceticism no longer makes sense in your life' (Voguë 1977: 321). This amazing contradiction deserves therefore to be interrogated, to understand what is going on with this traditional characteristic of monastic life.

According to de Voguë, this monastic life discipline is organized around three main pillars, which are; food, sleep and sexuality. And before going further in explaining the meaning of asceticism in modern monastic life, we may note quantitative changes in these practices. The rule of Saint Benedict defines the correct amount of food and drink which can be given to monks. More precisely, Saint Benedict recommends to monks not to eat meat: 'Except the sick who are very weak, let all abstain entirely from eating the flesh of four-footed animals' (Voguë 1997: Chapter 24). Nevertheless, many communities eat meat nowadays even during Lent, as I was able to observe in an Italian community. Like other people in society, actual monks do three meals a day, and sometimes an afternoon tea. In this sense, we can conclude that food asceticism is weakening in regard to the recommendations of the rule.

The second observation concerns sleep. The early monks of the desert prayed throughout the night in order to be ready at any time to welcome Christ if he appeared. This is why monks of the Middle Ages awoke once or twice during the night to pray. Christ says 'pray in order to not enter into temptation' (Matt. 26:41); this is what monks want to do. The office of the night takes usually place, according to the Rule of Saint Benedict (see Voguë 1977), between 1 and 2 a.m. Although the rule has not been modified, it is

very rare that the first office takes place before 5 or 6 a.m. in modern monasteries.

At least, concerning corporeal exercises, some instruments of mortification, such as discipline, cilice and so on, are no longer used in the majority of monasteries. I say ‘in the majority’ because I visited a monastery where a monk told me that they may use it if they want to, but it is exceptional today. If monks wish to use these methods, they have to ask permission to do so from the abbot, but these practices are no longer imposed on the whole community. Monks in early Christianity lived without any comforts and maintained purulent wounds in order to share the sufferings of Christ on the cross. From the fifth century onwards, when, with Constantine, Christianity loses its status of persecuted religion, ‘the asceticism relieves the martyr’ (Kleinberg 2005: 152). It takes the form of what was called ‘a non-bloody martyr’ (Guy 1987: 15). So it was a form of martyrdom which was imposed by the individual on his own body, any external pressure is put on him. But this is no longer true, a modern monk does not impose wounds on his own body deliberately. This kind of asceticism can be called an asceticism of imitation, because it aims to imitate the Christ. It is a reproduction of his life and his sufferings. The other one consists of an exercise which aims to compel the body to focus only on God’s contemplation, what is not natural.

A modern monk eats meat, sleeps until 5 a.m., consults the internet and has heating in his cell: putting all this together, we can say that monastic asceticism is declining from a quantitative point of view. If we refer to the first ascetics, the Fathers of the Desert were indeed professionals of asceticism. Mortifications were at the heart of their life. We can quote a great number of histories, where, for example, monks lived on a column, refused all types of food, or flogged themselves.

Beyond these ancient practices, asceticism is mostly a discipline aiming at defining a perfect religious life. Asceticism finally concerns everything that could come between the monk and God. The body and the spirit have to be tamed by asceticism. In the early days of ascetic practice, it was thought that the spirit was directly influenced by the body’s humours.

The reasons for mutations of asceticism

To face these quantitative shifts, this research seeks to understand the main causes of this evolution. We argue that this quantitative decline in asceticism does not mean that monks are no longer virtuous, and that they live the good

life. In order to understand what is really taking place in monastic life concerning the body, we have to investigate three kinds of influence which are changing asceticism in monastic communities. The first one takes place in the monastic life in itself; other changes concerning the community influence the way asceticism is practised. The evolution of the religious system, just as the general evolution of society, have furthermore, implications for asceticism and its meaning in monastic life.

To start with, asceticism takes place in the monastic system and it can be influenced by other changes in monastic life arising from modernity. In the secular society, gifts are no longer sufficient for the subsistence of monasteries. In addition, in France monks have to pay social contributions to the state. As a result, economic autonomy is no longer possible and monks have to develop efficient activities which can supply them with money in order to live and pay the social contributions. So monastic work is undergoing massive changes, and transformations affecting monastic work also have an impact on the way asceticism is practised. Work indeed is in the Rule of Saint Benedict; the first tool of asceticism by the implication of body that it supposes. It is the only physical activity in monastic life and in tiring the body, it constitutes an equilibrium with contemplation. The human body is not adapted to the rigours of remaining in continuous contemplation and it needs this physical equilibrium. Nowadays monastic work must be competitive on a global market. For these reasons, monks use new technologies to increase their efficiency. And because of computer work, which is sedentary, monks do not have any physical activity and as a consequence, the ascetic dimension of work is no longer corporeal. A French monk I interviewed said: 'Computer work is a work which is becoming more and more important in a monastery. But it is a sedentary work, there is no physical effort. It does not have the equilibrium value of manual work.' Computer work is dissolving the physical equilibrium given to work and in this way it can no longer have this hygienic role, as Max Weber puts it. Consequently the use of information technology in religious community is considered by monks as an abdication of asceticism in order to address constraints of efficiency and profitability.

Material evolution in monastic life can explain why asceticism is changing. But more relevant are changes of the meaning given to asceticism. This evolution is not peculiar to monastic ethics, but is a factor in the global religious system, which is undergoing massive changes. The Christian religion was based on eschatological salvation and sin, forming a system described by a process of asceticism–mortification–sin–eschatological salvation. Feeling guilt was at the heart of the relationship between God and the human being.

	Saint Bernard			“Jour du Seigneur” French television mass		
	Number of homilies	Percentage of homilies	Occurrences	Number of homilies	Percentage of homilies	Occurrences
Love	19	34.50	54	45	81.80	202
Salvation	27	49	48	10	18.20	18
Total	55			55		

The vocabulary used in medieval and current homilies.

To work for salvation meant praying and repenting in order to expiate sins in the service of a God who judged humanity. And this expiation was mainly a physical act. In the same way as Jesus had suffered on the cross, man had to suffer to show his gratitude and continue to expiate his sins.

The first step which occurs in the redefinition of this whole system is the change from a severe God to a God who is love. In my doctoral dissertation I compared the vocabulary used in medieval homilies of Saint Bernard and current homilies from the French television mass. We can see here the results, and the importance taken by the term ‘love’ and how the term ‘salvation’ is collapsing. At the time of Saint Bernard, salvation was a common topic which was often tackled. By contrast, priests today do not speak about this topic in their homilies. The believers have stopped being concerned with their salvation, mostly because it is no longer mentioned to them.

If God, as father, loves humanity, he cannot wish that it suffers because of him: this God does not condemn his children and relegate them to Hell, but forgives them everything. Yves Lambert notes that ‘the theme of Pope John Paul II is not focused on salvation in the hereafter, which he almost never speaks about, except for in terms of the resurrection, but on the construction of a “civilisation of love”’ (Lambert 2000: 19). In addition, Lambert noted that the rate of confessions has been falling rapidly between 1952 and 1974 in France: in 1952, 15 per cent of Catholic people said they went to confession at least once a month, and only 1 per cent in 1974 (Lambert 1985: 259). This indicator reveals the way God is represented in society. In this system, mortification or penitence are no longer necessary since goods of salvation can be obtained without suffering. Monastic spirituality is not independent of the global evolution of the religious system and only one nun in all my inquiries spoke about work as penitence. In the Middle Ages noble families gave some of their children to monasteries, so that they could work for the salvation of all the family. Monks today entering into the religious life do not make their

choice in order to be sure to be saved. Their first work is not to ensure their salvation, but to live already with God.

Ascetic practices have to be resituated from the perspective of the evolution of a global society. Food asceticism, for instance, reflects the status of diet in society. At the time of writing of the monastic rules, scarcities and famines were current. That is why, if monks wanted to live in poverty and chastity, in order to testify that God is more important, they had to have a very strict diet. Meat was a symbol of abundance and wealth, and to refuse it affirmed the ethics of poverty. In addition, a link was thought to exist between food and fornication, and this was particularly true for meat, which had the power to cause excitation in the body. Food frugality was, according to Cassius, the ground of all monastic asceticism, because diet is the means of overcoming fornication and therefore is the origin of the causal chain (Foucault 1994: 297). The food limitation of monks thus takes root in this social background, which is nowadays very different. The question of food became commonplace in western society; the fear of seeing it drying up gave place to that of excess. In this context, food asceticism will mean eating less than society—but not less than the body needs—and especially eating healthy and simple food.

Concerning sleep asceticism, the same fluctuation can be observed according to social characteristics of this activity. Léo Moulin points out that in the Middle Ages everybody got up very early, at dawn, so if monks wanted to have an exemplary life, they had to awake at a moment when everybody else still slept (Moulin 1978: 30). That is why the first office was at 1 a.m. Changes in asceticism are contingent on the evolution of society, but we can observe that monks always live a degree of comfort below that of society. Thus, we cannot speak about asceticism without referring to society: the lifestyle of a society establishes a sort of yardstick by which the degree of asceticism can be measured. Moreover this ensures plausible practices, which they will not be if they are relatively too hard.

It is relevant to notice that the change in ascetic practice in monastic life has both material and rational reasons. So, if two of these three main pillars of asceticism—food and sleep—are no longer considered to be a pertinent means of perfection, maybe we have to search for them in another place. What is the best way to achieve religious perfection nowadays?

From asceticism to self-fulfilment

Young people in modern society do not enter monastic life to become ascetic. They do not decide to suppress their desires or self-aspirations, but to concentrate them on God, aiming at self-realization.

I may emphasize that we are witnessing a shift in emphasis in the perceived meaning of asceticism. For the Fathers of the Desert, asceticism was above all an exercise of suffering: it aimed at wounding the monk in his flesh; blood flowed from wounds that monks did to themselves for the glory of God. This is no longer plausible in modern society, due to the new image of God. As Peter Berger says, ‘the peculiar Christian theodicy of suffering lost its plausibility’ (Berger 1969: 125). More than a disappearance of asceticism, it is voluntary corporeal suffering which has left monastic life. But asceticism is actually not necessarily a form of suffering. A French monk of Landevennec told me that asceticism does not necessarily mean penance, harshness. For him, to live in community is an exercise which is not easy: this is an ascetic practice which is not physical suffering. In entering into religious life, monks seek to reach self-fulfilment, which can be reached for them by the religious vocation. When they say ‘yes’ to God, they do not agree to have a life of compunction, it represents for them the best way to realize themselves. Danièle Hervieu-Léger underlines that ‘the world renunciation is perceived as an access... to the self-fulfilment’ (1986: 11) by society, even if it would not live it!

The second point is that such practices were considered in the Middle Ages as incentives to God. In medieval spirituality the practice of the ‘fast is a joining with famine, death, and hunger. It is a choosing of lack that induces God to send plenty: rain, harvest, and life’ (Bynum 1987: 39). The modern rationalisation of religion has suppressed incentives to God which man generated thanks to his hardships. Modern asceticism is no longer directly aimed at obtaining salvation, it is not perceived as a gift to God to make him grant salvation.

Asceticism is therefore not disappearing, but transforming into intellectual practices and no longer corporeal sufferings. This reveals a change in emphasis concerning the body in the religious system. Although the early Christian religion rehabilitated the body in comparison with the Ancient philosophies, the condemnation of the body increased gradually until the Middle Ages when, according to Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong, the ‘body was despised, condemned, humiliated’ (Le Goff & Truong 2003: 11). The key point was virginity, which increased in value when sexuality lost its dignity. Conversely, the body in monastic life nowadays is no longer denied,

as the products of cosmetics and of activities of well-being prove very well. I have not yet mentioned sexual asceticism in current monastic life. At first sight it seems to be the least changed aspect because sexual asceticism is still very clearly observed. But with the same result, the sense given to this kind of asceticism has actually changed. Not denying desires of the body, monks try to express them in a religious way. The body is no longer hostile to religious life, as well as the soul, it has its place in monastic life and particularly in prayer, as a means to communicate with God. The weeks of 'dance and prayer' or 'yoga' proposed in monasteries prove how the body is acquiring a new place in the religious sphere.

Self-fulfilment is increasing in monastic life, but it does not mean that will replace asceticism. More precisely, the body in modern monastic life is no longer an object of suffering but of fulfillment; it is no longer the way to penitence but the way to prayer and to glorify God. As we said before, however, asceticism is necessary to religious life in order to achieve a self-mastery for contemplation and to give meaning to all acts of religious life. Thus asceticism, as an exercise, has not disappeared from monastic life; however it is now not physical, but intellectualized. A nun affirmed that they highlight more an inner asceticism than a corporal asceticism and a monk from Solesmes said that asceticism for him consists, above all, in accepting what we are—our human and biological condition with our limitations. According to Otto Zöckler, a theorist of asceticism in religious history, two kinds of asceticism can be discerned: a 'negative method of abstention' (Zöckler 1897: 6–8)—which concerns sex and food asceticism in particular—and a positive method, which is essentially an intellectual asceticism, adopted in order to focus the spirit on the contemplation of God. This second kind of asceticism seems to be the most widespread today.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would say that this paper is only an introduction to an ongoing research project and there is still a lot of work to do. But I am convinced, with Giuseppe Giordan, that 'the body is a privileged observation point for following the changes that are taking place within the contemporary religious field' (Giordan 2009: 227). According to classical sociology, asceticism defines religious virtuosity, so it is one of the main dimensions of monastic life. This is why it is very relevant to study these changing practices, which can engage a redefinition of religious virtuosity. Putting all these quantitative and

qualitative shifts together, it seems that both asceticism and the place of the body in monastic life are changing. Rather than a decline of asceticism, it is more accurate to say that its meaning is being redefined and it becomes more intellectual than physical. At the same time, the body acquires a new position: from mortification to self-fulfilment, it becomes a new ally—and no longer an enemy—of monastic life.

So, is asceticism an endangered value? Yes, in the sense that it is no longer a religious value, as was proved by monks who said they are not ascetics, or the nun who said that her community lives a ‘non-ascetic asceticism’. However this does not mean that it has disappeared. The practice of asceticism is necessary to religious virtuosity, but the way to practise it and to define it has been changing, and this is contingent on other evolutions of the religious system and of society. The new kind of asceticism which monks are living nowadays is mainly intellectual asceticism. The monastic body is the sublimated body of the resuscitated Christ—it does not suffer any longer but can express emotions, such as love of God. This body communicates with God through prayer, and blooms. At this point, whereas the ascetic body was only a tool to perfect contemplation, this expressive body can become an aim. And finally, asceticism in modern monastic life remains a way to conduct monastic life, but it is no longer directly correlated with salvation.

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