

Preface

I WAS HARD-WIRED FOR ASCETICISM SINCE I GREW UP IN A GREEK Orthodox community in Canton, Ohio, which, in former generations, took the disciplined Christian life very seriously. Fasting, very long liturgies, vigils, abstinence of all sorts, and ritual cleansings all built the ascetical foundation upon which I lived my life. Then as an Episcopal priest now of nearly 35 years, I realized that the Book of Common Prayer with its regular cycle of daily prayer and weekly Eucharist created the structure for myself personally and the communities of which I was a member, to live the ascetical life. This hard-wiring for asceticism enabled me to explore the depth and riches of human striving as a priest and scholar alone and in the various academic and ecclesiastical communities in which I served. So it is not surprising that my work over these years have explored the expanse of ascetical theory and practice. This volume documents that lifelong passion and interest.

I have discovered that asceticism constitutes a human impulse. Something drives humans to dream of being a better person in a more healthy society and in a cosmos that holds promise of helping them to flourish. In dreaming of that wholesome state for self, society, and the cosmos, humans become dissatisfied with their lives, relationships, and connection to the cosmos. The dissatisfaction births the ascetical impulse. Asceticism reflects that attempt to live a different sort of life, to resist the tendency simply to live like all other people, and to branch out into selves defined by dreams for flourishing, not resting in the various selves our societies and mundane living present, but resisting that ease to branch into new directions. Asceticism also drives the desire to create new societies, healthier ways of relating to others, more just ways of connecting to those close-by and far away, as well as biological and constructed families that create a human ecology filled with grace, harmony, respect, sensitiv-

ity, and honor. The ascetic impulse also fuels the desire for repairing the physical environment in which humans live after years of abuse, pollution, deforestation, and profligate use of natural resources. Of course all these ascetic dreams of people, societies, and environments depend upon creating a wholesome human, social, and natural ecology that contests the dominant structures that hold dreamers back, or impose debilitating and limiting social structures, and abuse the physical environment. Resistance to those dominant sources begins in the ascetic impulse for personal, social, and cosmic transformation.

I argue that this ascetic impulse is nothing new. Throughout history ascetics have dreamed and resisted. In my work, that historical asceticism began with the Greek and Roman philosophers and Gnostic literature of the Nag Hammadi Library; it continued to early Christian writers. Historically, asceticism was not relegated to the Christian monasteries alone, but began long before Christianity. Asceticism developed in attempts by Greeks and Romans to transform the moral and spiritual status of the person and society and it expanded as many different kinds of Gnostics forged new contemplative ground for the embodied person. Christians seem to have connected quickly with their ancient philosophical counterparts to embrace the ascetical impulse as a permanent way of life and they engaged in vigorous debate with the Gnostics about the parameters of orthodox asceticism and contemplation. If anything, history proves that asceticism pervades the Western intellectual tradition. I have worked to bring this ascetical substratum to light in antiquity, while at the same time to open other people and movements to analysis through the lens of asceticism. My theory of asceticism, now more fully elaborated in these essays, allowed a broader view of the ascetic impulse in historical contexts as well as our postmodern world.

In discussions over the years, some of my critics have argued that according to my theory of asceticism *anything* can be ascetical. And to my critics I answer a resounding “Yes!” I have tried to open the space to analyze a wide assortment of behaviors through asceticism in order to understand how societies operate hegemonically and with those who resist. So body-builders, monks, gang members, environmentalists, community organizers—in short, anyone who resists in order to create new selves, different ways of socializing, and a cohesive way to relate to the physical world bespeaks the presence of an ascetical impulse. I have a hunch that the more asceticism in religious communities becomes submerged,

that is, the more people limit asceticism to specific religious actions and groups of people in history, the more other forms of non-religiously specific asceticism emerge to fill the vacuum created by the submersion. The vigorous attention to the body, its health and transformation through exercise, emerged in postmodernity precisely at the point at which most churches completely ignored the ascetical practices that made religion vital, engaging, and transformative.

Asceticism, broadly defined as I describe it, opens the way to investigating difference, which has become a pervasive theme of postmodern critical theory. Asceticism's focus on resistance, on the difference created by a person's or community's self-definition in opposition to dominant social, religious, and political structures, opens the way to understanding the various means of personal and cultural transformation. To see the interplay of dominance and subversion within a person and within a society lays bare the contours of desire to change, to renew, to transform, to articulate in often dramatically different modes a way of life that fulfills that desire. By documenting the practices that articulate that difference, ascetical historians and theorists document the practices that articulate the fault lines within a person and society. The ascetical theory developed in these essays point the way to documenting that difference in whatever arena it may be found, wherever desire to be someone different and to live in a different sort of society with a different understanding of the way the world operates. Excavating difference through documenting subversive practices defines the ascetical task. And many of the essays that follow show how that has been accomplished in various historical contexts in order that scholars and religious practitioners today may extend that analysis into the social, religious, and political modes of postmodernity.

This connection between asceticism then and now, between history and contemporary society, is an important one. I have studied asceticism not only to understand the lives of historical people, but also to enrich the lives of people living in colleges and universities, churches, cities and towns, and nations today. I have used the historical sources not only to understand the dynamics of transformation in the past, but to understand and equip myself and others to understand the dynamics of transformation, resistance, and renewal in our own lives and societies today. As a priest-historian my focus always seems to bridge what happened then to what is happening now, so that, in the end, I can not only understand Roman ascetics, but also understand our contemporary ascetics like the

Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, or the body-builders we all see at the gym, or even the mentally ill colleague struggling to create a self that can flourish and thrive through daily practices that lead to mental health. All these connect with the work of the monks in the desert, and the Roman moral philosophers, and the Gnostic writers as well. My theory of asceticism as it is developed in these essays tries to connect these events and to open them for analysis, scrutiny, and discernment.

It is precisely this desire to connect past and present that forced me to define asceticism more generally. If we restrict asceticism to specific practices like fasting, or sexual abstinence, or withdrawal from society, we so limit the arena that other performances are occluded. A restricted definition of asceticism allows us only to see the foreground of the social painting, whereas asceticism may also be seen in the background. By shifting the definition away from these specifically religious actions (fasting, chastity, withdrawal), it becomes possible to see in the foreground elements of ascetical activity otherwise occluded by a restrictive definition. I understand that not everyone is interested in connecting the past to the present in the same way, but for me it seemed such a logical and necessary move that I felt compelled to open the definition to the broadest perspective possible to account for our contemporary actions that seemed so ascetical at heart. Again, I suspect that the suppression of asceticism in religious contexts has led to the rise in secular ascetical activities to fill the void created by the impulse to define an alternative body, society, and cosmos.

In the end, however, it has been religious communities that most have benefited from this expansive definition of asceticism. Over the years I have taught in parishes, led retreats for clergy, conducted renewal programs for monasteries of men and women, supervised quiet days for seminarians and lay people, organized weekly meetings to study the scriptures in preparation for the Sunday Eucharist, and engaged actively in the life of the church—in every occasion this expansive definition of asceticism has opened new ways of living for searching religious folk and helped them to look at their own lives and the lives of those with whom they live. Asceticism broadly defined has enabled religious practitioners to renew their own lives and communities, to connect deeply and intimately with their own yearnings and desires to become someone more transparent to the presence of the divine, and to envision ways of living that transform and renew their communities, their societies, and their

relationship with the physical universe. This alone has made it worthy of my effort at defining and studying asceticism. The benefits of this kind of study reach far beyond the academic journals, the seminary classroom, and the professional academic meetings to touch the lives of people living out their desires in a complex and often debilitating social and religious context. And it has been worth every minute of study and frustrating analysis and writing to make this available to those outside the academy and university.

So these essays stand as an ending and a beginning. The essays here collected bring together many specific studies as in a pointillist painting to present asceticism as an important instrument for understanding the past. It brings together many past studies as a kind of summary of my work. In that sense it brings to a close an era of my own research and writing. At the same time these essays represent a beginning. They open doors for analysis of historical and postmodern resistant performances that allow postmodern people to analyze, investigate, scrutinize, and transform aspect of self, society, and cosmos, and in the end, as the Roman philosophers would put it, to discern what is truly good (as opposed to what is merely an apparent good) and what is truly bad (as opposed to what is simply an apparent evil). It is my hope that just this sort of discernment about good and evil present in both the dominant context in which we live and in the resistant modes that respond to our deepest desires will begin a new phase in ascetical studies. For this beginning, I offer these essays here collected that have emerged from a hard-wired life of asceticism, a long priestly ministry, and a lifetime of historical study.