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The Role of the Body in Early Christian Asceticism

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the various roles that the body played in early Christian understandings of asceticism. Asceticism was a readily available means for early Christians to attain closeness with God which surpassed mere sexual abstinence to extend to fasting, prayer, physical discomfort and a total physical withdrawal from society. This essay analyses how this concept or understanding of the body differed from pre-Christian or classical understandings of the body.

BIOGRAPHY

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The role of the body in early Christian asceticism

The topic of sexual abstinence, clerical celibacy, self-abasement and poverty within the Christian doctrine has been a topic of continued interest for historians of the early Church. This practice, known as asceticism, took root and flourished between the period from a little before the missionary journeys of Saint Paul, in the 40s and 50s B. C., to a little after the death of Saint Augustine, in 430 C. E. The age of martyrdom had passed, but the struggle against evil was being fought through other means, through the rejection of the outside world. Indeed, the word asceticism derives from the Greek akasis, meaning ‘practice’ or ‘bodily exercise’, and refers to a lifestyle that is characterised by the abstinence from a variety of worldly pleasures and comforts in pursuing spiritual enlightenment. In a more modern context, it could also be described as a collection of disciplines aimed at the construction of a new self. Nevertheless, the first ascetic forms of Christianity can be seen flourishing in places like Egypt, Syria and Palestine well before the fourth century with figures like Paul of Thebes, Symeon the Stylite and more importantly St Antony. The movement became so popular, however, that when Jerome came from Rome to the desert of Chalcis in northern Syria in 373 C. E., he complained that the desert had already become overcrowded. The immense success and popularity of the ascetic lifestyle during the early years of Christianity prompts us to ask, how can we account for the rise of the movement; and more particularly, what role did the body play in the early Christian views of asceticism? It shall be argued that, given the ascetic appeal revolved around a desire for spiritual enlightenment through worldly rejection, the body developed as the most obvious and readily available means to attain closeness with God. Thus, the body was a means to the quest of salvation and was used as an ‘imitatio Christi’ or an imitation of Christ.’ The desire for spiritual closeness with God therefore required that the rejection of the body surpass mere sexual abstinence and extend to fasting, prayer, physical discomfort and a total physical withdrawal from society. This essay will explore the role of the body in observing the above and also analyse how this concept or understanding of the body differed from pre-Christian or classical understandings of the body.

Christianity made its appearance in a world that was thoroughly acquainted with asceticism. Self-denial and self-abuse was not unknown to many schools in Greek philosophy, however, these practices fitted into a clearly demarcated space in civil society and were not encouraged. The realities of war during the height of the Roman Empire meant that only four out of every hundred men lived beyond the age of fifty. This meant that the majority of the population had to ‘expend a requisite proportion of their energy begetting and rearing children to replace the dead.’ The pressure on young men and women to reproduce would have produced a social expectation which would not have lent itself to an ascetic lifestyle. Thus, it is not surprising that the attitudes held by many scholars in the Roman Empire in relation to the body revolved around the concept of procreation, and the effect of social practices on the possibility and necessity of begetting children. The nature of relations between men and women were explained with reference to biology and the hierarchy of nature. Biologically, men were believed to be the result of foetuses who had realised their full potential, whereas women, by contrast, were failed males. As the procreation of the citizens was of critical importance to the survival of the state, the sexual lives of men and women were a matter of public control. Indeed, these expectations regarding eugenic sex committed both the man and the woman to codes of decorum in bed that was consistent with the public self. Philosophers regarded any other freedoms as ‘chilling assertions of an arbitrary freedom on the part of human beings to do what they pleased with their own bodies.’ It would be inaccurate to describe the Roman world immediately prior to the rise of early Christianity, therefore, as one which carried lax attitudes in relation to sex. By contrast, the regulated nature of sexual relations would have created an environment whereby it was used to maintain public order. These expectations of public decorum would have naturally led to expectations of puritanical rectitude. The shift in attitudes regarding the body were, therefore, very subtle and not as easily explained as a society moving from a tolerant one to an intolerant one. The history of the Roman Empire immediately prior to the rise of Early Christianity is fruitful in understanding the concept of sexual renunciation as a form of bodily denial when it did become popular in the 4th century.

The concept of sexual renunciation is important when considering the function and the role that the body played in the rise of asceticism. Any discussion of sexual renunciation, however, must be approached with caution. Impassioned dialogues of third and fourth century celibate priests on sexual purity in the desert cannot be translated that easily into a discourse more than fifteen centuries later. It is also important to note that attitudes over sexuality were not constant, and varied from region to region. As we have seen, ideas of body and mind, body and soul, flesh and spirit were already well developed from classical philosophy. Sexual renunciation, however, came to be seen as a mechanism to break the bondage with ‘creatureliness’ of human kind. The idea that the human body was susceptible to the ever lurking shadow of death needed to be overcome. The most obvious mechanism would have therefore been to curb its needs and requirements. Hostility towards the body and to marriage is collectively known as encratism and first made its presence known in the second century with
varying degrees of intensity. Encratism was ultimately aimed at moving away from a disengagement from the temporal and hence towards the reconstruction of a new Christian person.

It could also be argued that the rising cult of the Virgin Mary and the emphasis on Mary as the virgin bride of Christ led to a preoccupation of the early Church with the bodies of women, especially celibate women. Ascetic authors, therefore, devoted an extraordinary degree of attention to celibate Christian women as being the new ‘bride of Christ.’ Indeed, early Christian writers like Ambrose and Jerome applied this bridal imagery contained in the Song of Songs to the life of an ascetic Christian. Thus, the importance of sexual renunciation in the Early Church can clearly be associated with the rising preoccupation with Christ and the Virgin Mary. Imitating the Virgin and Christ would have been a mechanism by which the ascetics could use their bodies in the quest for salvation.

To analyse the role of the body in the views of Early Christians in terms of mere sexual renunciation would be to ignore the more pragmatic role that the body played and continues to play in society. To suggest that the body had a purely sexual role is to ignore the other more pressing worldly demands of the body, including hunger. It is well known that fasting was an important element in the rise of asceticism in early Christianity. It was widely believed, in Egypt and elsewhere, that the first sin of Adam and Eve had not been a sexual act, but rather one of ravenous greed. The longing for physical food led them to disobey God’s commandments, rather than sexual lust. Thus, the act of fasting, according to the desert fathers, allowed one to relive Eve’s temptation and more significantly overcome it. On a more pragmatic level, food and the abstinence from food, given a human’s reliance on it, would have been a greater challenge than sexual abstinence. The rationality behind the appeal of fasting rested on the notion of the human body as an ‘autarkic’ system. The Ascetic fathers believed that if the body was left running on its own, it was capable of sustaining itself on its own ‘heat.’ This natural state, according to them, would enable the body to continue functioning in an ‘idle’ state indefinitely. The act of eating, therefore, was seen to disturb this equilibrium and foster a surplus of energy that showed itself through hunger, appetite and sexual urges. Contemporaries believed that they had seen evidence of this when St Antony emerged from his cell after living a solitary life for over twenty years:

> When they beheld him, they were amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat for lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat from demons, but just as it was when they had known him previous to his withdrawal. The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection…He maintained utter equilibrium…

Fasting therefore was enabling the body to return to its original uncorrupted state, much like the state of Adam and Eve and of all humanity before the fall.

Fasting also played an important part of the ascetic ideal due to its place within the scriptures. Both Testaments are rich in examples of fasting. Elijah fasted to open himself to God’s voice and find direction and strength for himself and the Hebrews. In the New Testament, Jesus was portrayed as one who fasted on extraordinary occasions for the same reasons. This supports the idea, that for many, fasting and other types of bodily denial were emulations Christ and reflects their close reading of the scriptures. Discussions on the topic of food were being debated by early Church fathers like Tertullian who claimed that ‘slenderer 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.’ Asceticism, according to Tertullian, prepared one towards the incorruptibility of heaven, like the children of Israel who achieved on earth such changelessness that even their nails and hair avoided growth, as their clothes avoided deterioration. The preoccupation with the ugliness and the destruction of the human body, by Church fathers like Tertullian, indicates an aspiration to ensure a final victory over the disturbing reality of death. The most obvious means would be through the non-consummation of food. Thus, the body was used as tool in the quest of salvation or spiritual liberation.

Prayer was also important in early Christian understandings of the body and was another mechanism by which the body was used in the development of asceticism. Before the rise of the early Church, prayers were said out aloud, and private or silent prayer was regarded as an anomalous practice that was looked upon with great suspicion. The practice of saying prayers aloud came from the belief that the deities had ears that worked in much the same way as human ears did. Silent prayer was undeniably regarded as an anomaly in Greek and Latin sources until the Christian period. The importance of prayer, however, in the rise of asceticism resulted in renewed attentions to the practice and how it should take place. Tertullian, despite his impassioned delivery in other writings, presents a measured and well-ordered commentary on the Lord’s Prayer in his work entitled Prayer. In this treatise, amongst other things, Tertullian comments on various issues surrounding prayer
including the attitude required for prayer, the humble demeanour of those who pray and the dress required of women whilst praying. Tertullian places great emphasis on the physical elements required for prayer, stating:

On the other hand, when we offer our prayer with modesty and humility, we commend our petitions to God all the more, even though our hands have not been raised very high in the air, but only slightly and to a proper position, and even though our gaze has not been lifted up in presumption...The tone of the voice, too, should be lowered; otherwise, what lungs we will need, if being heard depends upon the noise we make!\textsuperscript{xxvii}

This quote emphasises the great importance placed on the body as a means to attain spiritual enlightenment. It was the most readily available means, apart from celebrating in communal religious sacraments, to observe religious requirements. Furthermore, the abstinence practiced by the ascetics in relation to sexual conduct, food, water and sleep was believed to cleanse their body and allow them free reign of thought in contemplating Christ as they ought to. The aim was a ‘redirection’ of the energies of the body from objects and desires that were inherently harmful to its spiritual wellbeing to the contemplation of the divine.\textsuperscript{xxviii} Prayer was also a mechanism to ward off demonic forces and, as made clear by Agathon, the most effective means to ward off demons was prayer: ‘No other labour can be compared to praying to God. For when a person wishes to pray, the adversaries rush to distract, for they are aware that nothing slows them down except prayer to God.’\textsuperscript{xxix} The physical act of prayer was important in preventing the body from being corrupted by demons, and therefore free to contemplate the divine.

Another central tenet of asceticism was the practice of solitude. It was thought that one could seek to gain grace via a divine encounter with God if they were free from worldly distractions. The origin of renouncing community to seek a life of solitude was a practice first observed by the hermits in the near East or modern day Egypt, Syria and Judea in the fertile Nile Valley. It is unsurprising that this practice arose in these areas considering that they were dominating in the theological debate and philosophy surrounding Christian doctrine. Essentially, there was a growing theological chasm being drawn between two closely juxtaposed spaces: the ‘desert’ (which was associated with the ‘angel-like’ life of the ascetic) and the ‘world’ (in which Christians were caught up in the obligations of society).\textsuperscript{xxxi} Total physical and mental withdrawal from society meant that the chances of sinning were significantly reduced, considering that the temptations that led to sin were removed. Even family relations and familial ties of love and obligation were viewed as being an impediment to spiritual enlightenment. According to Augustine, Adam, Aaron and Solomon had all experienced this sense of obligation (a \textit{socialis necessitudo} as expressed by Augustine), towards their loved ones or to society as a whole which led them to err.\textsuperscript{xxxii} Basil, however, asserted that life should not be about leading a solitary life, but being part of a Christian community.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} The involvement of a Christian in a social environment would further enable them to fulfill the Christian commandments and with it, the opportunity to practice humility. However, amongst the ascetics, there was most definitely a perception that a rejection of society and the rejection of the body was the better route to Christ. The most probable explanation for the rise in the popularity of the desert and the solitary lifestyle was likely intrinsic in the harsh nature of the desert itself. Physical suffering through the depravity of their surroundings can be seen to be a form of an \textit{imitatio Christi}, and a desire to emulate his actions and would have been a mechanism to attain spiritual closeness with the divine. The imitation of Christ could be seen not only in the form of adopting a desert lifestyle but also in the adoption of self-mortifying practices like thrusting oneself into a bush of nettles, binding one’s flesh tightly with twisted ropes, enduring extreme sleep and food deprivation and praying barefoot in the winter.\textsuperscript{xxxiv} Blood and the act of bleeding were furthermore seen as a purging away of excess, just as Christ, by bleeding on the cross, purged away humanity’s sin in the atonement.\textsuperscript{xxxv} This focus on the body and reliving the extreme suffering of Christ affirms the religious significance of physicality and emotionality in the lives of Christians. It is clear that physical deprivation and suffering were important roles of the body in the rise of the ascetic movement in the 4th century in liberating the soul.

Asceticism from the 4th century onwards was a constant force, although it had many forms and lacked the clear direction and order later associated with Benedictine monasticism.\textsuperscript{xxxvi} It is correspondingly difficult to assess the role that the body played during the rise of this movement. Despite Peter Brown’s deeply insightful commentary in his discussion of the body and society, it is clear that sexual renunciation was not the primary function or role that the body played in the rise of asceticism. The ascetic appeal revolved around a desire for spiritual enlightenment through worldly rejection. The body, therefore, developed as the most obvious and readily available means to attain closeness with God. Indeed, the body was a means to the quest of salvation and was used as an \textit{imitatio Christi} or an imitation of Christ.\textsuperscript{xxxvii} The desire for spiritual closeness with God required that the rejection of the body surpass mere sexual abstinence and extend to fasting, prayer, physical discomfort and a total physical withdrawal from society. This essay examined the role of the body in observing the above and also addressed how this concept or understanding of the body differed from pre-Christian or classical
understandings of the body. The rise of asceticism in the Early Church has not yet been fully accounted for and it is likely, therefore, that it will remain an area of academic interest to many historians in the future.

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xvi David G. Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine,” *Church History* 69 (June, 2000): 283.

xvii Ibid.

xviii Ibid.


xx Ibid., 223.

xxi Ibid.


xxvi Ibid., 41.


xxxv Ibid., 100.