# *Introduction*

The mid-fourth-century bishop Basil of Ancyra conceded in his treatise on virginity that goodness took many forms within the Church and that his readers could readily find works exalting different aspects of the good life. There were hymns on virginity, texts praising those who mortified the flesh by fasting and sleeping on the ground, and lengthy eulogies of those who sold their possessions for the sake of the Lord.[1] The existence of this growing body of literature justified the bishop's decision to restrict his theme to consecrated virginity and the godlike freedom which it won from all that was corruptible. Basil offers us a glimpse into the sustained promotion of different practices we commonly term 'ascetic' and neatly raises numerous questions about those practices. While the bishop associated different practices with different lives, to what extent were these practices common elements to one and the same life of renunciation? What beliefs gave meaning to these practices? Did the beliefs and practices known to Basil in the fourth century differ from those familiar to Christians in earlier centuries and what was their relationship to the rise of monasticism? While the bishop wrote only of their value within the life of the Church, to what extent were these practices and beliefs common to Christians, pagans, and Jews? And what might be meant by terming them 'ascetic'? These are the questions which this book aims to answer in its account of asceticism in the Graeco-Roman world.

The loose definition of asceticism which I shall use is that of voluntary abstention for religious reasons from food and drink, sleep, wealth, or sexual activity. Such abstention may be periodic or permanent. In matters of fasting it may involve abstention from particular items such as meat or

[1] Basil of Ancyra, *On True Purity of Virginity*, 1, PG 30, 669. I look further at this text in Chapter 5. For brevity's sake, in referring to texts of classical and Patristic literature, I note the book and chapter without page reference to the critical edition, except where I cite the Greek or Latin text. The most important editions are listed in the bibliography. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

wine, or a more comprehensive refusal to eat or drink for a given period. The key point, however, is that the understanding which informs a given pattern of religious abstention makes for a distinctive form of asceticism. The Graeco-Roman world contained many different forms of asceticism, with different meanings for those who practised them. It has been argued that 'virtually any cultural practice can have multiple social meanings'.[2] It is these meanings which I hope to elucidate.

Like his fourth-century predecessor, the twenty-first-century author must swiftly admit that much literature already exists in his chosen field. My readers can already find major studies on individual topics: the nature of asceticism, the figure of the holy man, consecrated virgins, and the rise of monasticism.[3] Indeed, one reason for the present book is to make this scholarship accessible to the non-specialist and integrate it into a single story. There is additional virtue, however, in a comprehensive study. Too narrow a spotlight may fail to illuminate significant connections between events. Histories of monasticism, and our understanding of why monasticism grew rapidly in the fourth century, have been impoverished through failure to recognize the powerful ascetic currents that already existed in the Christianity of the first three centuries after Christ. To miss connections can lead the historian to misconstrue the question: we need to ask not why Christianity took an ascetic turn, but why new forms of asceticism became fashionable.

Furthermore, monastic and other ancient hagiography is biased towards the individual holy man or woman at the centre of its story. This may lead us to think of asceticism as primarily marking out the individual over and against others, as essentially a tool in the construction of personal holiness. We may then overlook much that is important about the communal asceticism observed in the Early Church, including the degree to which different versions of Christianity partly defined themselves over and against each other through their divergent ascetic practices. Although this book will acknowledge the widespread (though patchy) influence on fourth- and fifth-century monasticism of Athanasius' *Life* of St Antony, the

[2] D. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex In Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 94–5.

[3] E.g., V. L. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (eds.), *Asceticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1995); P. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,' *JRS* 61 (1971), 80–101, and 'The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity', *Representations* 2 (1983), 1–25; P. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); S. Elm, *'Virgins of God': The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); M. Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); D. Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002).

Egyptian hermit so often taken as the 'father of monks', it also counters the undue and often unrecognized influence of the *Life* over modern views of Christian asceticism. It is neither accidental nor helpful that 'studies of asceticism usually begin with the late third and early fourth centuries'.[4]

Presuppositions about the novelty of Christianity, and about ancient religion generally as comprising discrete bodies of believers and doctrines; the disciplinary divisions in universities which traditionally separated Theology from Classics, Church History from Ancient History; a tendency within academia to favour classical Athens and Augustan Rome over Late Antiquity; these factors have together contributed to the lack of books which examine Christian asceticism in the context of pagan and Jewish ascetic practices.[5] Yet the danger of misconstruing the story through missed connections applies not just to those internal to Christianity; it applies equally to connections between Christians, pagans, and Jews. The history of Early Christian asceticism will be shown to involve not least the concurrence of Jewish penitential practices that belong to humble prayer with pagan philosophical beliefs about the role of ascetic restraint in securing the contemplation of God, a coexistence which was only partly a confluence. Looking to the wider picture can also throw up surprising blind spots elsewhere. When you look at pagan sources for Christian asceticism, you notice that the great interest which ancient writers expressed in the ascetic lives of the philosophers is not necessarily matched by modern scholars, even those concerned with the ethical teachings of those philosophers: the select index to Brad Inwood's *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* has no entries for 'asceticism' or 'ascesis', 'food', 'sex', or 'marriage'.[6] A valid interest in the meta-ethics of Stoicism has led to a relative neglect of ethics as a certain purposive lifestyle.

Studies may also adopt definitions of asceticism which emphasize certain continuities of practice and belief at the expense of others. Thus, Susanna Elm in her excellent book *Virgins of God* defines asceticism as a 'discipline' based 'on distinct stoic-platonic notions'. She understands it as 'a systematic method to achieve self-control' through which the 'practitioner' is transformed 'into a pure vessel of the divine will', thereby enabling 'communication with the divine through some form of *unio mystica*'.[7] This definition acknowledges the interplay of practice and belief, and stresses

[4] James A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), xv.
[5] On religion in antiquity, see further below.
[6] B. Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).
[7] Elm, *Virgins*, 13–14.

something of what one form of Christian asceticism in Late Antiquity owes to pagan philosophy (in part via the Hellenistic Judaism of Philo); but it obscures other significant continuities of belief and practice with Judaism, and does not do justice to the symbolic role played by consecrated virginity in the Early Church. It also has the odd (if interesting) result of excluding Augustinian monasticism from the Christian ascetic tradition. Niketas Siniossoglou, on the other hand, in a recent study of Theodoret which is influenced by the latter's praise for Syriac Christian solitaries, has described Christian ascetics as those who 'abandoned society in order to be ascetics' and further characterizes Christian asceticism as aiming at 'an annihilation of human nature and will as such'. He has argued on this basis against the 'dubious, yet widespread idea of a supposed continuity of Hellenic philosophical *paideia* within the realm of late antique asceticism'.[8] Yet this is to privilege another and contrasting form of Christian asceticism under the influence of Late Antique hagiography. It downplays the understanding of consecrated virginity explored by Elm, the role of the virgin as symbol of divine grace in the Church, and the concern of Egyptian monks to recover the human nature gravely damaged by the Fall with its original eagerness or zest for union with God.

Teresa Shaw adopts a wide definition of asceticism without reference to the philosophical tradition whereby asceticism is 'a way of life that requires daily discipline and intentionality in bodily behaviours'.[9] This leads to a focus on individuals 'who, by their physical renunciations, distinguish themselves from the wider Christian populace'. Yet, as she acknowledges, this is to privilege the *daily* ascetic practices of the few over the *periodic* ascetic practices of the many. Richard Valantasis in probing the Early Christian *Gospel of Thomas* depends upon an even broader anthropological definition of asceticism as comprising 'performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe'.[10] Nonetheless, this definition still emphasizes the transformative role which ascetic behaviour

[8] Niketas Siniossoglou, *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 31 and 129.

[9] T. M. Shaw, *The Burden Of The Flesh: Fasting And Sexuality In Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, *c.* 1998), 6.

[10] R. Valantasis, 'Is the Gospel of Thomas ascetical? Revisiting an old problem with a new theory', *JECS* 7.1 (1999), 64. Cf. the same author's, 'Constructions of power in asceticism', *JAAR* 63 (1995), 797. There, Valantasis draws fruitfully on Foucault to analyze asceticism as involving 'technologies' of self-formation and governance, and on social semiotic theory to examine ascetic solidarity. Repeated consideration of 'the ascetic' nonetheless indicates the understanding of asceticism as the lifestyle of a particular individual.

may have for a minority group or individual to the exclusion of the roles it may play in maintaining the communal identity of a dominant group or its hierarchy.[11] It proves unhelpful, for example, in understanding the role of communal fasting in early rabbinic Judaism. No one definition has commanded general assent.[12]

To speak, as my title does, of the Graeco-Roman world is itself to employ a loaded and imprecise concept that requires clarification. This study has fuzzy edges which are geographical, chronological, and cultural. The book is concerned largely with the men and women who lived in the Roman empire from the first to the mid fifth century, but necessarily examines older Greek, Roman, and Jewish religious traditions because of their enduring significance for Hellenistic culture, and further describes one form of Christian asceticism that straddled the border between Rome and Persia. Within the empire, ruling urban elites from diverse ethnic groups observed Greek cults; they erected temples, shrines, and statues that displayed their loyalty to the Roman state; but they also in places retained and adapted traditional cults which differed significantly in practice from what was customary in Greek or Roman religion. Roman politics could significantly reshape older cults, as at Heliopolis (Baalbek), where the foundation of a colony under Augustus on the site of a much older city led to three Syrian deities being honoured as a triad identified with Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury.[13] The present book largely ignores the many native cults in the western provinces of the empire. They do not form a sufficiently close part of the religious thought-world which entered into the dominant culture to influence (and antagonize) Christians and Jews.

I have already noted the temptation in earlier studies to assume too neat a division between religions in the classical world. Recent scholarship has rightly stressed the danger in a simplistic use of the terms 'pagan', Christian', and 'Jew'. David Frankfurter has written that the use of the word 'pagan',

[11] For fasting and communal identity among Early Christians, cf. Chapter 3.

[12] Cf. Steven D. Fraade, 'Ascetical aspects of ancient Judaism', in A. Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality*, vol. 1, *From the Bible Through the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1986), 253: 'there is no scholarly consensus concerning how "asceticism" (and its related terms) should be defined . . . nor are the ways in which it is defined . . . consistently applied in the comparison of . . . religious traditions'. For further definitions and types of asceticism, cf. E. Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 3, and 8–12.

[13] On cults and loyalty to Rome, cf. S. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge University Press, 1984). For a non-Greek cult in the East (Atargatis at Hierapolis), cf. J. L. Lightfoot, 'Pilgrims and ethnographers: in search of the Syrian goddess', in Jaś Elsner and Ian Rutherford (eds.), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 333–52; for Heliopolis, cf. Youssef Hajjar, *La Triade d'Héliopolis-Baalbek: iconographie, théologie, culte et sanctuaires* (University of Montreal, 1985), 177–280.

an 'ancient term of bias for the unconverted rustic, has inevitably led to false contrasts between "pagans" and "Christians" and, despite contemporary scholars' earnest efforts to qualify their terminology, to the erroneous reification of two essential religious "halves" in Late Antiquity.'[14] Reference to two 'halves' suggests how far Judaism has remained a neglected 'third' in the religious history of the Graeco-Roman world outside Palestine, but Frankfurter's concern is with the risk of imagining there to be such a single thing as paganism practised by 'pagans', especially when educated pagans cannot be assumed to be polytheists in contrast to a simple Christian (and Jewish) monotheism. When the emperor Decius in AD 249 or 250 decreed that everyone in the empire should sacrifice to the gods, he may well have intended to secure divine favour by the display of piety, but those who sacrificed (to different gods) shared no single understanding of their worship. The pagan Maximus of Madauros could ask St Augustine in the fifth century, 'Who is so insane as to deny the indubitable truth that there exists one supreme god?'[15] The bishop of Hippo meanwhile had to rebuke those who saw themselves as Catholics for 'visiting idols'.[16] Ordinary church members, to the horror of their clergy, might have in common with pagans the wearing of amulets, or recourse to magic.

Likewise, though we speak of Christian and Jew, we must not overlook 'the persistently complex dynamics of Jewish–Christian relations', especially in the period before the fourth century.[17] Even to use a term such as 'Jewish Christian' may cover a wide variety of ways of being Jewish *and* Christian. We must be alert to the different varieties of Judaism and the many Christianities that flourished in the first few centuries after the birth of Jesus alongside, and sometimes within, what would later be recognized as an orthodox mainstream in each religion as they separated out. The inadequacy of neatly dividing up the Graeco-Roman world into Christians, Jews, and pagans, can be seen when we try to 'place' the various Gnostic texts found in the Nag Hammadi library, some of which interpret the Old Testament to posit a plethora of emanations cascading from the One God of the spiritual realm, and a disobedient demiurge Yaltabaoth, who falsely sets himself up as God and creates the first man in his own image.[18] The difficulty is not simply to decide what counts

[14] David Frankfurter, 'Beyond "Jewish Christianity": continuing religious sub-cultures of the second and third centuries and their documents', in Annette Yoshiko Reed and Adam H. Becker (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 131.
[15] Augustine, *Ep.* 16.1. [16] Augustine, *En. in Ps.*, 88.2.14.
[17] Reed and Becker, 'Introduction: Traditional Models and New Directions', in *The Ways that Never Parted*, 22.
[18] *The Apocryphon of John*, 1–15.

as Christian belief, but lies in recognizing the complex nature of a person's religious identity. Manichaeism, for example, may be understood as a dualist religion distinct from Christianity. Yet its syncretistic adoption and re-interpretation of much Christian scripture allowed it to claim certain Christian figures, histories, and texts for itself within the Graeco-Roman world. This resulted in such mixed allegiance as that of the elderly fifth-century Manichee, Victorinus, who also served as subdeacon in a North African Catholic church![19]

Despite these warnings, I have nonetheless structured my book into chapters which divide pagan asceticism from Jewish and Christian asceticism. Terms which must be treated with caution need not be rejected for that reason. We cannot tell the story at all unless we use these labels to differentiate, generally speaking, those who practised traditional cults from those who saw themselves as members of Israel awaiting the Messiah, and those who saw themselves as followers of Jesus Christ. Chapter 1 begins the story, therefore, by examining (and rejecting) the claim of Porphyry, a Neoplatonist philosopher, to identify a single ascetic discipline or wisdom common to the sages of the ancient world. I distinguish the role played by periodic abstention in Graeco-Roman cults from the different forms of asceticism practised in the pagan philosophical schools. Cynic asceticism is not to be confused with Stoic, nor Neoplatonic, asceticism, though these share a common virtue of frugality. I also distinguish between the asceticism practised by the philosophers from the asceticism which may characterize them as holy men in literary texts.

Chapter 2 concerns Jewish asceticism. It looks first at how the Alexandrian exegete Philo drew on Neoplatonism to reinterpret traditional Jewish ascetic practices. Just as Porphyry's totalizing discourse hid the varieties of pagan asceticism, so Philo has obscured for us the different meanings of asceticism for groups in Hellenistic and later Rabbinic Judaism. I have placed these chapters on pagan and Jewish asceticism before those (Chapters 3 to 5) on Christian asceticism, because the Christian asceticism of the Graeco-Roman world is only fully explicable in terms of its debt to pagan and Jewish thought. In so doing, I do not wish to suggest that Judaism was superseded by Christianity, or that Christian asceticism did not influence Late Antique paganism.

I have also written at greater length on Christian asceticism. This is principally due to my wish to clarify the complex nature of Early Christian asceticism too long ill-served by accounts which unduly privilege the

[19] Augustine, *Ep.* 236.1.

Egyptian monks. Chapter 3 therefore examines the evidence for the various forms of communal asceticism practised by different Christians in the second and early third centuries up to the time of Origen. Chapter 4 then focuses on the ascetic theology of Origen, the most important exegete and thinker of the third century, and his profound influence on much Christian asceticism of the subsequent two hundred years, both for consecrated virgins in the cities and monks in the desert. It is to Origen in large part that we shall trace the growth of Christian asceticism as constructive of personal sanctity. Here, again, the story is one in which Neoplatonist ascetic ideas are deployed to reinterpret traditional practices, but now these ideas find broad acceptance among their practitioners. Chapter 5 is concerned first with the strands of monastic life that are largely independent of Origen's influence, especially the monasteries of Pachomius in Egypt, the holy men of the Syrian East, and North African clerical monasticism, to ask why they developed as they did. The chapter closes by reflecting on monasticism's impact on the wider Church. The reader who perseveres to the end will thus appreciate the different forms of asceticism practised in the Graeco-Roman world and their significance, the varied roles which these disciplines played for individuals and groups.

CHAPTER 1

# *Pagan asceticism: cultic and contemplative purity*

## THE OLYMPICS OF THE SOUL

Shortly after the death of the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus (*c.* AD 205–70), his pupil and literary executor Porphyry (AD 234–*c.* 305) urged another member of the school, the wealthy Roman Castricius Firmus, to join him in renewed intellectual endeavour: they should together 'go stripped, without tunics, to the stadium, to compete in the Olympics of the soul'.[1] Porphyry understood the goal of philosophy as that contemplation in the soul of divine truth which was also an act of union with the divine. The athletic metaphor of his appeal to the dedicatee of *On Abstinence*, and through him to its readership, glorified both the goal and the philosopher who attained it; the image bestowed on the latter the prestige of victory in these most famous of all Greek games, and something of the victor's numinous power.[2] The metaphor further located this goal as the fruit of a strict training (in Greek *ascesis*) comparable to the diet, sexual abstinence, and exercises of the naked Olympic athlete.[3] It was an apt metaphor in as much as the philosopher had to divest his mind of the multiple concerns and passions which distracted it through its relationship to the body; such concentration could easily be envisaged as a stripping naked of the self, because Plato had long since characterized the body as clothing worn by the soul.[4] The figure was all the more apt in so far as the disciplined training which Porphyry thought would facilitate contemplation involved,

[1] Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, 1.31.3, tr. G. Clark (London: Duckworth, 2000), 43. For the date of composition, cf. J. Bouffartigue (ed.), *Porphyre: De l'abstinence*, with introduction by J. Bouffartigue and M. Patillon (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1977–), vol. 1, xviii–xix.

[2] L. Bruit Zaidman and P. Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, tr. P. Cartledge (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 120.

[3] For the athlete's sexual abstinence, cf. M. Dillon, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 222. For the metaphor in Greek thought, cf. M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*: *The History of Sexuality,* vol. II, tr. R. Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 72 and 119–20.

[4] Plato, *Cratylus*, 403b; *Gorgias*, 524d.

amongst other things, a daily practice of ascetic abstention in matters of diet, sexual activity, wealth, and wider social intercourse, all elements in a thoroughgoing detachment from the material and mortal.[5]

Porphyry's writings reveal much about this asceticism. It did not demand renunciation of all sexual activity, but a reduction towards the minimum which nature necessitated for the survival of the species.[6] Though Porphyry married, he advised Marcella (in a treatise masquerading as a letter) not to see herself as a woman or wife (in Greek *gyne*), just as he did not see her in this superficial way.[7] How much the philosopher ate was likewise to be reduced towards the minimum required for health, a level which liberated him from concern for the riches to fund more lavish fare and the slaves to prepare it.[8] The contemplative could thus refuse the wealth which was offered to him.[9] He was to practise a lifestyle marked by temperance and by frugality or simplicity (*to liton*).[10]

Detachment further involved an unspecified disengagement from civic life. The *Life of Pythagoras* presents the sage as exhorting people to avoid the twin desires characteristic of Graeco-Roman politics: love of honour and fame.[11] *On Abstinence* adduces the example of Pythagoras' followers. These had reportedly either sought the most deserted locations in which to live or had inhabited religious sanctuaries within the cities where they were undisturbed by mundane business. Porphyry then cites Plato's *Theatetus* (173c–174a) which describes the philosopher's lack of interest in public affairs.[12] What Porphyry urged above all, however, was complete and permanent abstention from meat in adoption of a vegetarian diet.[13] Such ascetic practices together made for a purity and holiness essential in the contemplative assimilation to God: 'inasmuch as the father of all is simpler and purer and more self-sufficient, being established far from the impact made by matter, the one who approaches him should be pure and holy (*katharos te kai hagnos*) in all respects, beginning with the body and culminating in the inner man, assigning to each of his parts, or altogether to what is his, the holiness (*hagneia*) that is natural to each.'[14]

To persuade the reader of *On Abstinence*, Porphyry marshalled a host of authorities and examples. From earlier Greek and Roman philosophy he drew explicitly on Plato and the Pythagorean tradition as mentioned above, on the Platonist Plutarch (pre AD 50–post 120), and on the Stoic Chrysippus (*c.* 280–207 BC) for arguments about the nature and purpose of different

[5] Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, 1.30.4–5 and 41.1. [6] Ibid., 1.41.4.
[7] Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 33. [8] *On Abstinence*, 1.46–7. [9] Ibid., 1.31.4.
[10] Ibid., 1.56.1, in Bouffartigue, *Porphyre*, vol. 1, 88. [11] *Life of Pythagoras*, 32.
[12] *On Abstinence*, 1.36. [13] Ibid., 11.3.1. [14] Ibid., 1.57.3, tr. Clark, *On Abstinence*, 54.