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052160401X - The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition

Gavin Flood

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## THE ASCETIC SELF

This book is about the ascetic self in the scriptural religions of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. The author claims that asceticism can be understood as the internalisation of tradition, the shaping of the narrative of a life in accordance with the narrative of tradition that might be seen as the performance of the memory of tradition. Such a performance contains an ambiguity or distance between the general intention to eradicate the will, or in some sense to erase the self, and the affirmation of will in ascetic performance such as weakening the body through fasting. Asceticism must therefore be seen in the context of ritual. The book also offers a new paradigm for comparative religion more generally, one that avoids the inadequate choices of examining religions through overarching categories on the one hand and the abandoning of any comparative endeavour that focuses purely on area-specific study on the other.

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*For Luke*

Die Welt ist tief,  
Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.

*Nietzsche Also Sprach Zarathustra III, 'Das andere  
Tanzlied', 3.*

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## *Preface*

The question of the ascetic self that this book seeks to address arose from a range of questions about the nature of self and experience, about what is shared and not shared between cultures, and about the nature and possibility of comparative religion in a postmodern world. The renunciation and transformation of desire seem so fundamental to traditions founded on texts (oral and written) that I began to think about the links between text and renunciation, time and renunciation, and the ideals that make men and women live a life of austerity. It seems to me that central to this religious austerity is a textual tradition that claims that through what we might call a reversal of our orientation towards desire and the senses, a higher good and greater happiness can be achieved. Such claims would seem to be instantiated in the histories of the scriptural traditions and so go against the grain of contemporary, Western sensibilities as to be worth exploring. While asceticism has been a central theme of scholarship – one thinks especially of the sociology of Max Weber and his students – rather than simply develop the ramifications of this work, I wanted to explore the subjectivity of the ascetic self and examine subjective meaning rather than objective system.

But the subjective meaning of asceticism can be understood and located within traditions only in so far as the ascetic self is constructed in accordance with their goals and practices. Claiming that constraints within scriptural traditions form the ascetic self is not simply to give an account of a cultural construction but is also to give an account of the discovery or opening out of an interior world. My general claim is that asceticism can be understood as the internalisation of tradition, the shaping of the narrative of a life in accordance with the narrative of tradition that might be seen as the performance of the memory of tradition. Such a performance contains an ambiguity or distance between the general intention to eradicate the will or in some sense to erase the self, and expression, the affirmation of will in ascetic performance such as weakening the body through fasting. I think

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that this general structure holds true in the three scriptural traditions I examine of Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism.

There has been quite a degree of interest in the nature of asceticism in recent years, and this book is intended as a contribution to that literature. Of particular importance has been Geoffrey Harpham's *The Ascetic Imperative* and, in a very different way, the edited volume *Asceticism* by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis that has made important inroads into the subject. Valantasis in particular has developed a theory of the social function of asceticism and the place of power in ascetic formation. Many other scholars from a variety of perspectives, especially sociological ones, have added to this growing body of work; the names of Ilana Silbur on sociological comparison and Ariel Glucklich on a physiologically grounded comparison immediately come to mind; in Christianity the work of Peter Brown, Caroline Bynum, Elizabeth Clark, Susan Harvey, Amy Hollywood, Lutz Kaelber, Leif Vaage and many others; in Hinduism Walter Kaelber and Patrick Olivelle; and in Buddhism Steve Collins, Michael Carrithers, Richard Gombrich and Johannes Bronkhorst.

Many, if not all, of these share an assumption that the comparative endeavour is worth-while. I share that assumption and this book is an exercise in comparative religion, expressing a belief that comparisons are not odious but necessary for human understanding. It also expresses a belief that goes against the grain of some contemporary thinking, that there are common features of human being that cut across historical and cultural divides – an insight expressed in earlier centuries as a belief in a common human nature. Perhaps we can encapsulate the issue in the following question. When a teenage boy in the West enjoys Burton Watson's English translation of the poetry of Han Shan, is the Chinese T'ang poet speaking to him or does he simply see his own reflection? I would guess both. When speaking about the self, we are speaking about something highly amorphous (even though selves are always embodied) and while there are semantic equivalents in most, if not all, languages, it is clearly not the case that the identical meaning is conveyed. Cultural histories of the self form complex trajectories, but that Han Shan *can* speak to the teenage boy – even though filtered through translation and recontextualisation – implies that selves can speak, be heard and be received across cultures and histories.

A number of preliminary questions will arise in the reader's mind not only concerning the viability of such a project, but also about the reasons for undertaking it and the author's own situation with regard to it, the place from where I speak. One way of putting the question might be of

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which community of readers am I, the writer, an index? Because of the particularity of my own narrative, I would place myself at the confluence of a number of intellectual traditions, especially the phenomenological and hermeneutic. While I approach the 'phenomenology of religion' with monitory caution as well as with explicit critique, it does lay claim to be a tradition of thought with its 'canon' of texts that includes the names Van der Leeuw, Wach, Eliade and Smart. We could argue about the boundaries of this 'canon' and which texts could be included or excluded, but the point is that religious studies can claim to be a discipline partly because of the historical density of this literature that claims to be distinct from Christian theology. But although this is the school in which I was formed, I do not inherit it uncritically, and the present text can be seen as an implicit corrective reading to much of the work that has 'compared religions', often in an egregious way.

This corrective reading locates me secondly within a hermeneutic tradition that is open to postcritical developments within the academy. The book might therefore be open to the criticism that it is implicitly theological in taking seriously the writings of ascetics and about asceticism, and in taking seriously the claim about what the ascetic self hopes to become. In the sense that I do intend to take very seriously ascetic claims about the nature of the self and world, then the book is certainly implicitly theological, although it is not theology because it does not stand directly within a theological tradition of discourse. I do not explore the *theological* implications of asceticism, although this is a very rich theme, especially in relation to contemporary concerns about 'the gift'. Could asceticism be understood not only as voluntary discipline but as acceptance of suffering seen as divine gift? (Simone Weil's thought is very close to this.) But I do take seriously ascetic wisdom, and the dialogical interaction of the texts and traditions in the following pages can generate the energy necessary for the further exploration of the truth claims of ascetic traditions.

That religious studies should not go beyond description to explore the conditions for the production of certain kinds of cultural knowledge or even to explore, as David Ford has argued, the truth claims of traditions, is to place an arbitrary boundary around the discipline, although it is not the intention of the book to offer any adjudication on matters of ultimate truth. Religious truth, in the view of this writer, must be understood in tradition-specific ways (although this is not to deny the idea of common constraint), and there is no place outside of tradition from which to judge the broader architectonics of ascetic truth claims.



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The book will be in two sections, ‘The Ascetic Self in Text and History’ and ‘Theorising the Ascetic Self’. It will comprise nine chapters. The first chapter sets the parameters and discusses in more detail the issues raised here. Chapter 2 launches into the account of the ascetic self with a modern example in Simone Weil. From her we look back to examples from the history of South Asia in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Again looking back from Weil, we next focus on asceticism in Orthodox Christianity and move on to Western Christianity to complete the section. Following the discussion of particular traditions and examples in the first part of the book, ‘Theorising the Ascetic Self’ comprises Chapters 8 and 9, which locate the ascetic self in ritual and in modernity respectively.

The bibliography comprises abbreviations and references found in the notes. Sanskrit source material is listed in the bibliography. References to ancient and medieval theologians are to the PG and PL and I cite full bibliographical information about translations in the bibliography.

*Christmas, 2003*

LITTLE THETFORD

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