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W. K. Lowther Clarke

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

ASCETICISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH

FEW movements in the religious sphere have received such unsympathetic treatment in the past at the hands of English writers as those ascetic tendencies of the early Church which found their expression in monastic institutions. The late Mr Lecky described the movement in these words: "There is, perhaps, no phase in the moral history of mankind of a deeper or more painful interest than this ascetic epidemic. A hideous, sordid, and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, passing his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious self-torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain, had become the ideal of the nations which had known the writings of Plato and Cicero and the lives of Socrates and Cato¹." Dr Inge, speaking of the development of the Church, can represent "the ascetic and monastic movement" as "the strangest aberration in its history²." Of late, however, partly owing to the wide influence of Dr Harnack's writings³, a more sympathetic spirit has prevailed. It is now generally recognised that an ideal which has enlisted in its service so many of the best of humanity, and played so important a part in the forming of the nations of modern Europe, deserves more respectful treatment.

In the fourth century A.D., there lived a number of great personalities, whose careers have a permanent attraction for the student of history. Prominent among these is St Basil of Caesarea; even during his life-time his reputation was

¹ *History of European Morals* (ed. 1911), II. 107.

² *Truth and Falsehood in Religion*, p. 163.

³ *Monasticism* (Eng. tr. 1901), and *What is Christianity?* pp. 242 ff.

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wide-spread, and after his death he ranked as one of the greatest saints and doctors of the Eastern Church. He was conspicuous as a preacher and skilful administrator, his theological writings were an important factor in the eventual triumph of Nicene orthodoxy; yet his main title to fame is his work as a founder of monastic institutions. As such he is a figure of considerable importance. He is revered to-day as the originator of the monasticism of the Eastern Church. If we reflect on the vast resources of the Russian Empire, the contributions which it has already made to the world's culture in the fields of music and literature, and the part that it will probably play in the history of the near future, we shall be led to pay serious attention to Eastern monachism, as one of the dominating forces in the Russian Church. The fact that Russian bishops are chosen from the monastic clergy is sufficient in itself to show the significance of monasticism. Recent events have reminded us that the Greeks and the minor Slavonic nations are in the full flush of a renaissance in which the various national Churches will be called upon to take their part.

But St Basil and his work come nearer home to us than this. During the early Middle Ages the Benedictine monks were one of the greatest spiritual and civilising influences of Western Europe, and through St Benedict St Basil has touched the West. According to Dom Butler, "St Benedict owed more of the ground-ideas of his Rule to St Basil than to any other monastic legislator¹." St Basil is therefore one of the outstanding figures in the history of monasticism, and in the following pages we shall try to estimate the value and permanence of his work.

Before attacking this special problem it will be well to put one or two questions with reference to the general subject. What, we may ask, is meant by asceticism? Was it of Jewish or pagan origin? Did Christ inculcate or even countenance it in His teaching? How came it to permeate the Church so completely? After briefly discussing these

¹ *Enc. Brit.* (11th ed.), art. "Basilian Monks" (all subsequent references are to this latest edition).

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points and sketching the development of the ascetic ideal during the first three Christian centuries, we shall be in a better position to appreciate the mental presuppositions of an educated Christian in the fourth century.

The word "asceticism," like many other words, is used in both good and bad senses. It is sometimes interpreted as connoting a rigorous maltreatment of the body, arising from a Manichean conception of the evil of material things. But we have not disposed of a thing by calling it Manichean. The Manichean position is after all but an exaggeration of an essentially religious attitude. It is no doubt truer to place the root of evil in the will, but for practical purposes the average man finds his flesh the greatest obstacle to the attainment of virtue, and all the higher religions have made energetic provision for the curbing of the flesh¹. However, the best exponents of Christian asceticism would not allow that material things are evil in themselves, for, as St Basil says, God would not have made them, had this been the case. They would only claim that the man who would be holy must attain a mastery over the material, and that he will do this rather by despising than by using it.

It is fairer to frame a definition that does not beg the question. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines an ascetic as "one who practises severe self-discipline." If we add a proviso that asceticism is severe self-discipline undertaken for religious ends, and that the discipline will be exercised with reference both to the natural desires of the body and the distractions of the outer world, we have a definition that will suit our purpose². No reasonable man will quarrel with this principle of discipline. Self-expression and self-restraint are two equally essential elements of religious life. In order to

¹ It is worthy of notice that the modern view of sin, which finds its essence in the survival of animal instincts which were once natural but now conflict with man's higher life, has considerable affinities with the ascetic position.

² Heimbucher's definition may be cited as a specimen of a Roman Catholic view: "eine planmässige geordnete und beharrlich fortgesetzte fromme Lebensweise, verbunden mit freiwilliger Entsagung von dem, was nach dem christlichen Sittengesetze zwar nicht verboten ist, aber dessen Enthaltung durch die evangelischen Räte als besonders gottgefälliges Werk bezeichnet wird." *Die Orden und Kongregationen der katholischen Kirche* (1896), p. 31.

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live in the world at all, it is necessary to use the world ; but anyone who attempts to use it to the full must expect spiritual deterioration. But when we proceed to ask how far asceticism is a necessary constituent of religion, or to what extent the severity should be carried, we find ourselves on debatable ground, where there is room for legitimate differences of opinion. In particular there are a number of practices which have existed in non-Christian societies, but have been presented to the European observer mainly through the agency of Christian monasticism. Chief among these may be mentioned abstinence from marriage on religious grounds, renunciation of private property, and, less essentially characteristic, the rendering of absolute obedience to the will of another¹. It may be argued that these practices have proved disastrous to the higher life of Churches and nations, or that the ideals enshrined in them have been exaggerated out of all proportion, but no one could say that they are in themselves other than a legitimate exercise of individual liberty. Even in renouncing his own will the monk has not on the face of it done more than the soldier to whom he is often compared by the fourth century Fathers².

Assuming then that asceticism is best defined in neutral terms, we now ask how this tendency came to be so sharply emphasised in the Catholic Church of the fourth century. How, for instance, was it possible for a writer like Jerome to indite that terrible letter to Eustochium on Virginité, in which he describes motherhood in the most repulsive terms, and can only find one palliative of marriage, that without it virgins cannot be produced³?

To obtain an answer to this question we must go back to the beginnings of Christianity. Christianity was of course far more than the mingling of the streams of Hebraism and Hellenism—otherwise Philo might have founded the Church.

¹ The threefold vow of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience is not however primitive. In the rule of St Benedict there is a threefold promise of *stabilitas, conversio (morum), obedientia* (c. 58).

² St Basil works out the comparison in detail in his *Praevia Institutio Ascetica*. See p. 74.

³ *Ep.* 22.

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But it seems true to say that the human personality of Jesus Christ, the Founder of Christianity, was the finest flowering of the genius of the Jewish race, and that the particular form assumed by the Catholic Church was conditioned by the current Graeco-Roman civilisation of Mediterranean lands¹. To which of these two elements, the Jewish or the pagan, is asceticism to be ascribed?

There need be little hesitation in affirming that the Jewish spirit as a whole was not ascetic. In early times it was believed that prosperity was an outward sign of the Divine favour. The experiences of the Exile shattered this simple faith, and the book of Job is the classical treatment in Jewish literature of the perplexities that ensued. But even after the Exile asceticism never found an entry in any true sense. It is surprising how little trace there is of it in the last three centuries B.C., especially when we consider that Persian dualism has left a distinct mark on the later books of the Old Testament; the practical conclusions that might have followed from a dualistic theology were apparently not drawn. Generally speaking, the Jew continued to have a keen relish for the good things of life, and accepted them gladly as God's gifts. Marriage was and always has been the duty of the adult Jew. The astonishing numbers of the Jews in the early Christian centuries must be attributed partly to the fact that the race honoured and practised matrimony in a world that was growing weary of it². Nor was the Jew attracted by poverty; on the contrary, he was always alive to the possibilities of worldly advancement.

To this general statement of the case certain exceptions must be made. In the legal codes of the Old Testament

¹ Cf. Harnack's definition of Catholicism, "It is the Christian preaching influenced by the Old Testament, lifted out of its original environment and plunged into Hellenic modes of thought, i.e. into the syncretism of the age and the idealistic philosophy." *Constitution and Law of the Church*, p. 254.

² Of course only partly. Cf. Schürer, Hastings' *D.B.* v. 91, "It was not only to migrations and natural reproduction, but also to numerous conversions during the Greek period, that Judaism owed its wide diffusion over the whole world." Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, I. 10, lays stress on the conversions from kindred Semite races.

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there are some ascetic injunctions, which may however be plausibly explained as survivals of primitive taboos. Of more importance is the quasi-ascetic life lived by individuals and families during many centuries of Hebrew history. Its purpose was to revert to the traditional simple life of the desert, as a protest against the temptations to apostasy arising from the Canaanite customs which were connected with agriculture. The Nazirites and Rechabites are the chief representatives of this tendency, but many of the prophets shared the same views. Elijah and Amos especially were prophets of the desert type. In New Testament times there are some few indications of an ascetic tendency among the Jews. The Essenes and Therapeutae are generally quoted in this connexion. But they seem to have been syncretistic sects, influenced by Hellenistic ideas, and have little bearing on Judaism properly so-called. Dr Schweitzer has warned us¹ of the false impression that we get of Jewish eschatology in the first century A.D., when we leave out the two most significant figures, Jesus Christ and John the Baptist. Similarly in the present connexion, these two are the most important witnesses for first century Jewish asceticism. We shall return presently to the witness of our Lord, but the Baptist deserves a word here. He was, apparently, unmarried and lived an ascetic life in the wilderness. Clad in the traditional garb of the prophets of old, he preached to the crowds who sought him in his retreat, and urged a faithful performance of everyday duty. Besides these hearers he had a number of disciples in a special sense of whom very little is known. It is clear then that the Baptist is a characteristically Jewish figure, standing in the line of the prophetic tradition, which has little in common with the later Christian conception of asceticism. After the fall of Jerusalem great changes took place in Judaism, which now provided more congenial soil for the growth of the ascetic spirit. "The destruction of the Holy City—" says Mr Box, "and above all of the Temple—in 70 A.D., gave rise to a widespread ascetic

¹ *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 366.

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movement among the Jewish people who survived, especially in Palestine¹."

If asceticism, as displayed in the Catholic Church, is not a product of Judaism, where it was only a late appearance of secondary importance, is it to be traced to the Gentile environment which modified the primitive Christian community so profoundly? There is much in favour of this view at first sight. The Greeks and Romans had not been ascetically inclined in their best days. But in the early years of the Empire nearly all earnest religious strivings assumed an ascetic form. The old national faiths proved inadequate amid the changed conditions, and men's eyes turned eastward. With the mixing of nationalities came a mixing of religions, and the Oriental cults with their promise of purification met the needs of a world in which moral earnestness had awakened to new life. The priests of Isis and Serapis, Cybele and Attis, were to be found in all the big cities, celibates of both sexes abounded, and, apart from the official priesthoods, wandering devotees, proclaiming each his own way of salvation, penetrated into the remotest districts². Now these Eastern religions were definitely ascetic in their aims and methods. It is an obvious deduction that Catholic asceticism was a Gentile perversion of the original pure deposit of Christianity. And yet such a conclusion would be in the highest degree superficial. It is singularly difficult to substantiate any actual borrowing from pagan sources, and the true solution would seem to be on quite different lines.

We are driven therefore to seek an origin for Christian asceticism in the original deposit of Christianity. Asceticism seems to be present potentially in all religions, and makes its appearance in the higher religions, as soon as the child-like simplicity of primitive races has been replaced by some measure of introspection. In some nations, the Jews for instance, it plays little part; amongst others, such as the

¹ *The Ezra-Apocalypse*, p. 209. Note the emphasis on fasting (ix. 24) and chastity (vi. 32).

² Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, p. 11. Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (2nd ed.), p. 34 and *passim*.

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higher races of India, it is almost identical with religion itself. The specific forms which asceticism assumed in the Church during the first four centuries after Christ may well have been conditioned by the existing state of society, but the thing itself was inherent in Christianity from the beginning. It could hardly have been otherwise, seeing that the Church was composed of men and women of a certain stage of civilisation, who were obviously children of their own time. Let us now attempt to trace the primitive Church conception of asceticism.

We have grown accustomed to a certain clearly-defined picture of Jesus Christ, such as is presented to us in modern literature and art. We see Him moving about in the towns and villages of Galilee, sharing the life and joys of common people, looking at the world with fresh, unspoiled interest, as if it had come straight from the Father's hand, loving birds, flowers, mountain-tops and little children, seeing, both in the operations of Nature and the social relationships of human life, analogies to the dealings of God with souls. The correctness of part, at least, of this impression is guaranteed by the fact that contemporary observers dubbed Him "gluttonous and a wine-bibber." And so we find it difficult to sympathise with the Church Fathers, when they see in Christ the typical ascetic. And yet there is much in the Gospel presentment of Christ's teaching and example that accords with this interpretation. Our Lord lived a virgin life in a land and among a people where marriage was well-nigh universal. His example was reinforced by direct teaching, as when he speaks of men becoming eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven¹, or of the call to hate wife and family for His sake², or when He describes the angelic life as one in which there is no marriage³. It would be a mistake to underrate the social

¹ Mt. xix. 21. It is not necessary to investigate the meaning of this and other passages as originally spoken. It is sufficient for our purpose to show that the ascetically minded could appeal to the recorded life and teaching of Christ in support of their position.

² Lk. xiv. 26, xviii. 29. In Mk x. 29, Mt. xix. 29 "wife" is absent from the best texts. See Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity*, pp. 119, 120.

³ Mk xii. 25, cf. Lk. xx. 34, 35, where the heightening is marked.

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rank of Jesus and His disciples, yet it is clear that they were poor during the travels of the Ministry. The Son of Man had not where to lay His head. The utmost simplicity of food and clothing was enjoined on the disciples. The rich young man was bidden to part with all his possessions and follow Christ, and, according to St Matthew, this was represented as being, for him at least, the perfect way¹. In fact Western Christianity has never really faced the full implications of Christ's teaching on poverty and riches. Jesus is represented as having fasted Himself, and having contemplated the continuance of the practice by His followers². And, generally speaking, the precepts about cutting off the hand or foot and plucking out the eye readily lent themselves to an ascetic interpretation.

The above is sufficient evidence of the existence of ascetic traits in the earliest strata of Christianity. But the question as to the real meaning of Christ's teaching is of such interest that a few words must be given to its consideration.

What has been said above with reference to John the Baptist is also applicable here. Our Lord stands, as regards the external conditions of His ministry, in the line of the prophetic tradition. During the greater part of His public career His work was to proclaim the nearness of the coming Kingdom and the necessity of repentance as a preparation for it. In the opening verses of St Mark we find Him taking up and reinforcing the Baptist's message³. It was only to be expected that His own life, in certain aspects, should recall the desert type of prophet. In so far as the disciples shared His life, it was necessary to prescribe for them a similar detachment from worldly ties. The practical necessities of evangelism will thus have dictated the ascetic precepts of the gospels⁴.

True as this argument no doubt is, it seems, to the writer at any rate, not strong enough to bear the full weight of the

¹ Mt. xix. 21, Mk x. 21, Lk. xviii. 22.

² Mt. iv. 2, vi. 16, ix. 15, Mk ii. 20.

³ Mk i. 14, 15.

⁴ Cf. *Didache*, 11, where the apostles and prophets seem to be classed together as travelling evangelists.

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evidence. There is more in Christ's words than these considerations can explain. An alternative solution of the problem is offered by what has been called *Interimsethik*.

According to this theory¹, the key to the teaching of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, lies in the fact that it was never intended for a permanent rule of life, but only for the brief period that was expected to end presently in the passing of the existing world-order. If this be granted, the ascetic precepts become intelligible at once, and form an integral part of an "anti-family and anti-social" teaching².

The strength of the arguments in favour of the eschatological view is not to be ignored, but it is difficult to imagine that such an interpretation is much better than a caricature of Christ's ethical demands. "The theory gives a low and unworthy colouring to the teaching of Jesus, since it represents Him as laying the whole stress on the self-centred desire of the individual for his own salvation, and as caring little or nothing for the effect of good actions on others and the world as a whole³." Besides, there are a number of passages which support a different conclusion and indicate that Jesus looked forward to a prolonged absence⁴. They are an integral part of the Synoptic tradition⁵, and are in fact so opposed to the general Church sentiment of the first decades that their authenticity is indubitable. We conclude that the ascetic precepts are no *Interimsethik*, but are part of a body of teaching adapted to the needs of Christ's followers during a period of indefinite prolongation.

Jesus then recognised a life of asceticism as necessary for some of His followers, in view of the requirements of the Gospel preaching or the needs of individual souls. There is no evidence that He required it from all, or that He made it

¹ Expounded by J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, and Schweitzer, *The Quest*.

² Felix d'Alviella, *Évolution du Dogme Catholique*, p. 33 (quoted by Emmet, "Is the teaching of Jesus an Interimsethik?" *Expos. Nov.* 1912).

³ Emmet, *loc. cit.*

⁴ Mt. xxv. 5, Lk. xii. 45, xix. 11 ff. Cf. also the parables of the Wheat and Tares, Mustard Seed, and Leaven, which contemplate a period of slow growth.

⁵ See the index references to the above passages in *Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem*.