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Source: *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 57, No. 4, ASCETICISM TODAY (WINTER 2008), pp. 481-497

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24461387>

Accessed: 07-09-2017 17:05 UTC

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ASCETICISM AND THE HOPEFUL SELF

Subjectivity, Reductionism, and Modernity

Gavin Flood

Recently at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem I was struck by an Orthodox nun who queued to kneel by Christ's tomb in a very pious way, to be ushered out after only a minute or so by a monk whose job it was to ensure a regular flow of pilgrims. Her journey was a kind of asceticism, along with her prayers and kneeling on the hard stone, but perhaps the greatest asceticism she undertook was, for her, the disappointingly short time she had before the tomb; hardly enough time to kiss the icon of the Theotokos or say a prayer. The intensity of her devotion sharply contrasted with the twenty-first century routinization of the site. Our nun's asceticism seems to have little cultural resonance or importance for our future and yet she bears witness to a culture of abstinence, attested from ancient times, that is remarkably resistant to erosion by modernity. Ascetical abstentions are still cultivated in religious and political traditions often in the service of fundamentalisms that seek not only personal soteriological goals but also broader political re-framings of the world. There are, of course, cultures of abstinence fostered for purely secular ends such as health or beauty, and a broad sense of asceticism has been placed at the very roots of culture,¹ but it is religious and political asceticism that demands our attention, for while asceticism in a broad sense is a resource for human achievement, when used in conjunction with some political and religious ideas it can become part of a threat to human communities. Both Theravada nuns and devout Moslem suicide bombers practice kinds of asceticism.

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Over the past few decades, academic discourses including Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies have addressed asceticism partly to account for its persistence in late modernity and partly to understand the place of asceticism in a broader sense in contemporary culture. These disciplines have offered accounts both in terms of a discourse about power and in terms of a discourse about cognition and evolutionary psychology. While many of these accounts offer fresh ways of understanding asceticism, both kinds of account are problematic in so far as asceticism remains resistant to explanation in purely materialist terms. We need to hesitate before accepting such accounts as they are often based on restricted descriptions that are too limited by the horizon of the world within which they are formulated. In this paper I wish to outline what I see as central features of religious asceticism that, in my view, point in the direction of more adequate descriptions, and secondly to suggest that accounts of asceticism which fall under two kinds of reductionism are inadequate. We might call these reductionisms, cultural reductionism which seeks to explain asceticism in terms of politics and control of the body linked to power structures in a particular society, and eliminative reductionism which seeks to explain asceticism in terms of neurology and evolutionary psychology. While both kinds of reductionism are in many ways compelling, both are problematic and ultimately inadequate as explanations *tout court* for the kinds of subjectivity or inwardness that asceticism entails. We need, rather, to understand asceticism in terms of a tradition specific inwardness and in terms of ritual. Indeed, this shows us that varieties of asceticism shared across cultures are formative of ideas of self and that such ideas pose a challenge to modernity and yet are also potential resources for modernity and the challenges facing human beings in the future.

General Features of Asceticism

But what do we mean by ‘asceticism’? On the one hand we have a broad understanding of asceticism and its function within human culture as the necessary condition for all human endeavor. Freud, following Nietzsche, formulated the idea that civilization is based on the renunciation of the instincts and so all culture, in one sense, is ascetical.² William James similarly developed the idea that asceticism is not restricted to religion³ and Weber has famously mapped the links between asceticism and socio-political formations through history, particularly the transformation from other worldly (*ausserweltlich*) asceticism before the Reformation to inner worldly (*innerweltlich*) asceticism that allows for the

development of capitalism. The theme of the link between asceticism and culture is taken up by others, particularly Harpham's excellent and still resonant study, treats the ascetic impulse as a transcultural structuring force that forms the basis of society.⁴ A range of definitions has been offered in general cultural terms or in a more narrow focus associated with religious traditions. We can take asceticism to refer very broadly to the renunciation of the instincts which forms the very basis of human culture or we can take the term to refer, more narrowly, to a range of behaviors and ideas inextricably linked in to religious traditions that involve restricting the impulses of the body (fasting, for example) and even involve more extreme intentional suffering (mortification, for example). Within the spectrum of definitions we have both positive and negative evaluations. Orthodox Christianity presents a positive evaluation in defining asceticism as a sense of freedom, beauty and joy⁵ while the Buddha disparaged extreme asceticism as not conducive to spiritual development.⁶ Asceticism denotes a wide range of practices designed to restrict, control, and weaken the body in some way and accompanying ideologies that justify these practices. Such practices and beliefs are specific and, as Wyschogrod observes, "ascetic phenomena must be allowed to emerge in discrete material and psycho-social meaning constellations."⁷

But while cultures of asceticism are particular to place and history, general features emerge that entail the restriction of biological and social life, such as fasting, celibacy, and even extreme bodily mortifications, in the service of a deferred or distant goal. I have developed this elsewhere, but we might say that asceticism prototypically denotes a range of habits or bodily regimes that restrict the instinctual impulses of the body, especially sexuality and hunger, alongside an accompanying belief system that claims that such restriction is conducive to a greater or higher good.⁸ While it is clear that asceticism operates in societies in a number of ways in the secular West from gym culture to over-work for a company, I wish here to delineate prototypical features of asceticism associated with religious traditions which then allow us a clearer understanding of other kinds of asceticism operative in societies. I am well aware of the controversy over the very category 'religion' and exactly what are we identifying when we use the adjective 'religious,'⁹ but while problematising the category opens out hidden assumptions and colonial projections, it has yet to be demonstrated that 'religion' does not have analogues in all cultures in so far as human beings construct meaningful narratives to account for their lives, offer accounts about death, and posit utopian states to end suffering. Politics, simi-

larly, could be said to have been 'invented' in the early Greek states but structures and processes of power can be identified in all human communities and clearly such structures of power are embroiled with religious institutions. Asceticism is most evident in religious and political cultures that make claims about transcendence of the human condition and the possibility of human effort to attain such transcendence. Our Orthodox nun at Christ's tomb is practicing asceticism but so is the suicide bomber preparing for martyrdom. We might therefore venture to make some generalizations that, I think, hold true for asceticism at least in India and the West, which can be summarized in four general claims. Asceticism entails what we might call the paradox of the will, asceticism is teleological, asceticism is performance, and asceticism involves the recapitulation of tradition.

Firstly ascetic practices are paradoxical in the sense that through an act of will the ascetic seeks to destroy the will. This general formulation might be understood as the elimination of the ego such that the 'I' is subsumed under a particular social or cultural formation in which the centre of gravity for an identity formation is, in sociological terms, the larger group. The 'I' is also overwhelmed by broader metaphysical goals such as detachment (*apatheia*) in Orthodox Christianity or *nirvana* in Buddhism. In theistic traditions this elimination of the will might be understood as God acting through the self such that God's will replaces the ascetic's will. This is not to minimize the differences in ascetic motivation but it is to recognize what seems to be a structuring principle of ascetic traditions. Secondly ascetic traditions are teleological; the bodily habits and accompanying belief systems are goal directed towards a social or political greater good or towards an individual salvation. Fasting, prayer, silence, and other ritual practices are performed in order to reach a goal either for the practitioner or for the larger group, to achieve a subjective salvation or a communal and political change. But such a greater good is always deferred and, in Harpham's phrase, 'the ascetic is constantly progressing but never arrives.'¹⁰ Thirdly asceticism is always performed; it is a bodily action that seeks to reverse the flow of the body or the orientation of the senses towards the world. This reversal of the flow of the body is the always performed by which I mean enacted within a community in public space. Asceticism is always in the public domain in the sense that ascetic acts that seek the destruction of the self and the reaching of the ascetic goal, are observable and enacted within community and tradition. Even when performed in solitude, the ascetic is participating in the wider tradition and seeking the eradication of the self. Ritual is therefore

central to ascetic practice, if by that term we mean conformity to a pre-existent patterning of speech and behaviour (see below). Ascetic practices are ritual in the sense of patterning actions of body, speech and mind in an invariant sequence handed down, and minimally modified if at all, from earlier generations. Part of this patterning involves restrictions on the intake of food and celibacy. This reversal of the flow of the body, of the instinctual life, is generally determined by tradition. Tradition patterns the body and imposes order upon it, thereby subjecting the body to an institutional power. This reversal of the flow of the body is simultaneously the formation of a subjectivity such that there is no individuality but nevertheless an intensification of inwardness. Inwardness cultivated within ascetic traditions is not simply the result of politics but more the result of the recapitulation of the memory of tradition in the repeated actions of liturgy. The ascetic self is a form of subjectivity formed through ritual practices in the public sphere and repeatedly enacted.

This last point needs more elaboration. The ascetic moulds his or her body in the shape determined by a tradition through ascetic practices of fasting, prayer, sexual abstinence and so on, thereby internalising the tradition and recapitulating the memory of tradition. The term 'tradition' is itself contentious, but following Shils we might take it to mean minimally that which is handed down from the past¹¹ or in the words of Maximus the Confessor tradition is received 'through succession from those who came before.'¹² Following Hervieu-Leger we might say that tradition is cultural memory, a 'chain of memory' that conveys transcendent authority on the past. Tradition, she writes, 'describes the body of representations, images, theoretical and practical intelligence, behaviour, attitudes and so on that a group or society accepts in the name of the necessary continuity between the past and the present.'¹³ There is a sense in which traditions are constantly reconstructed in the imagination of new generations, but this is not to minimize their reality for human communities but simply to say that traditions are in flux, a process of constant reconstruction in the temporal flow from the past.

Tradition, Sexuality and Agency

Key to the transcendent authority bestowed on tradition is revelation; a primary source of 'showing' to a human community something beyond it regarding its source. This idea of tradition flowing from a revelation is an important feature of religions—even 'atheistic' traditions such as Jainism and Buddhism trace their origin to the revealing by their founders of a condition beyond suffering

and the teachings that bring that condition about. These traditions also revere texts as foundational and have textual canons which, if not regarded as revelation in a primary sense are nevertheless seen as the conveyors of the revealed teachings. Revelation is the presupposition or defining feature of a religious tradition which we might even go so far as to say is defined by the way it reads its sacred texts and what marks off a religious asceticism from other forms of cultural abstinence is that the ascetic self is formed through the tradition in the light of its revelation. The tradition mediates the revelation, reads it in particular ways internalized by the ascetic. Indeed, an important component of ascetic practice is the internalization of the tradition-mediated revelation, as can be seen, for example, in Maximus the Confessor whose book on asceticism is a dialogue between teacher and student full of biblical quotation. The master brings the young monk to an understanding of the ascetic life through responding to his questions with biblical reference and quotation, each answer deepening the monk's understanding so that he comes to realize the heart of the ascetic life as fostering love (*agape*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*) and prayer (*proseuche*).¹⁴ Similarly Peter Damian some four hundred years later and in a different Christian tradition urges his monks to great ascetic achievement in following Christ, confession, and cultivating Christian virtue by "crucifying themselves through the practice of self-denial".¹⁵ Central to this self-denial is the internalization of scripture performed, for example, by the monk reciting the Psalter while scourging himself thereby bringing his body under control, binding "with the girdle of perfect mortification his loins and his kidneys, his belly and his flanks."¹⁶ In a tract 'In Praise of Flagellation' (*De laude flagellorum*) Damian advocates moderate mortification controlled by the recitation of the Psalter, thereby marking the body with revelation in a very fundamental way.

A number of issues are raised here concerning control of the body, sexuality, agency, and gender that have been a focus in humanities scholarship over the past forty years or so. The traditional discourse of asceticism in both the West and India is, if not exclusively, predominantly a male discourse. The texts of asceticism are mainly written for men by men although there are notable exceptions and we might cite important female ascetics and mystics in the West at the end of the thirteenth century and into the fourteenth who wrote significant works, particularly the Beguines.¹⁷ Similarly in India the discourse of asceticism is predominantly male although in the medieval period women articulated devotional and ascetic practice in vernacular languages rather than the Brahmanical Sanskrit. Indeed, the discourse of asceticism with its predominant

ideology of transcending the body or perfecting the body through strict corporeal control might be linked to the occluding of women's voices although we must be wary not to project late modern worries about gender onto the past. As Amy Hollywood observes with respect to medieval women ascetics, they were equally concerned about the body as the site of corruption and death as their male counterparts and less about sexuality.¹⁸ That being said, it seems clear that many ascetics are fundamentally concerned with sexuality and the control of concupiscence (*epithumia*), for the Greek Fathers, or lust (*luxuria*) in the West. For Peter Damian this is a basic drive that needs to be controlled and sometimes his writing verges on the obsessive on this matter. Indeed he is gently reprimanded by the Pope for his vehemence. In *The Book of Gomorrah* (*Liber Gomorrhiamus*) written to Pope Leo IX (1049–54) against homosexuality in the Church, he chides priests who have broken the rules on sexual behaviour and then confess to each other 'the wickedness' they committed together, arguing that Canon law is too lenient. The Pope responds that the Church needs to be 'humane' (*humaniores*) in this matter and that a penance of two years would suffice.¹⁹ Yet this critical attitude to sexuality is not universal and there are ascetic traditions, particularly in India, that have treated sexuality in a more positive light regarding it as a force that can be harnessed in the service of what is regarded as a higher good. There is brahmanical tradition that sees sexual pleasure (*kama*) as a legitimate human goal (*purushartha*) in itself and the bearing of children is, of course, an ideal for the householder. But some ascetical traditions view the transformation of desire as a means to a different end, what they regard as the higher human goal of liberation (*moksha*). In contrast to Damian's understanding of spiritual life as being antithetical to sexual desire, the older contemporary of Damian teaching in Kashmir, namely the *Shaiva* exegete Abhinavagupta, writes on the transformation of desire through sexualized ritual as being a path to liberation, the soteriological goal of the Hindu tantric tradition.²⁰ Here we see sex itself transformed into an ascetic practice.

This theme of desire and the control of desire in order to attain a goal determined by tradition and its revelation are very important in ascetic traditions. What John Bowker has called 'somatic exploration' is fundamental to religions²¹ and asceticism can be seen as a somatic exploration which pushes the boundaries of the kinds of beings humans are in order that they can realize possibilities beyond the limits of everyday transaction. The kinds of somatic exploration that asceticism promotes are both performed and reflected upon, sometimes critically, within religious traditions.²² More recently, scholarship about

asceticism has extended critical discourse in laying bare the historical conditions and systems of power under which asceticism flourishes,²³ particularly scholarship which has viewed the history of asceticism through the lens of gender.²⁴ This scholarship has its roots in the critique of religion that has developed in two trajectories, one from Marx into critical theory, the other from Nietzsche into genealogy and deconstruction. The critique of asceticism finds particular voice in the work of Nietzsche. In the *Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche argues that the self is formed through historical process, a view that is often taken as self evident today, and that a social distinction between good and bad that referred to the slaves (bad) and their masters (good) came to be replaced by the triumph of Christianity with a moralistic distinction between good and evil. The emergence of Christianity, which Nietzsche calls the 'slave revolt,' resulted in this reversal and the 'internalization of man' produced the inner space which became known as 'the soul'.²⁵ Christianity triumphed and any pre-Christian life affirming philosophy was replaced by a life denying asceticism and the earth became 'the ascetic planet par excellence,' 'an outpost,' Nietzsche continues, 'of discontented, arrogant and nasty creatures who harboured a deep disgust for themselves, for the world, for all life and hurt themselves as much as possible out of pleasure in hurting.'²⁶ In tracing the genealogy of this ideal Nietzsche hopes to reveal the wrong path humanity took in adopting the ascetic ideology of Christianity.

Taking up Nietzsche's critique, Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* tries to expose the ways in which the self has been constructed in the West from the Greeks. Asceticism is a practice and accompanying discourse which forms the self at particular junctures in history. An ethical subject is formed who has self mastery and is free from the passions. Such self mastery is the goal of ascetic practice and a discourse that is the product of power relationships within a civilization. Thus the self is formed through practices and technologies of the self, *techniques du soi*, construct a certain kind of subjectivity. This kind of subjectivity is historically contingent and Foucault seeks to show the conditions under which subjectivities are formed. While in some ways Foucault, in contrast to Nietzsche, is sympathetic to ascetic practices, the genealogy of historical conditions whereby the ascetic self is formed is critical in the sense that it seeks explanations of asceticism in terms of power in a frame of reference outside of ascetic discourse. On this view power as a property of relationships within a community is fundamental to asceticism. The ascetic self is constructed through the internalization of power. Agency is thereby taken away from the ascetic subject.

Two Reductionisms

Scholarship which has developed from this line of genealogical thinking has emphasized the constructed and historically contingent nature of asceticism. What is important is not the ascetic vision of the purpose of her life, but the ways in which asceticism serves the interests of preserving power relationships and has functioned to oppress one gender. Asceticism can be explained in terms of power and the interactions within a community. An ascetic subjectivity is generally in the service of the dominant ideology which seeks to preserve the status quo within a society. A feminist critique of asceticism has developed along Foucault's lines, attempting to show how asceticism is the inscribing on the body regimes of power that have been antithetical to women. Yet a language of power tends to downplay the role of agency and sees ascetics almost as objects of a discourse that they themselves have little control over. Indeed, Foucault is arguably guilty here of underemphasizing the role of agency as Lois McNay has pointed out. Through stripping away subjectivity in his analysis, Foucault undercuts agency and just as feminist scholarship is beginning to recover female agency in history, genealogical critique attempts to strip it away.²⁷ Women's subjectivity has been erased, or attempts made to erase it, not only within male dominated ascetic religions but now by genealogical explanation itself.

Yet surely McNay is right in arguing the importance of agency that can act upon a community and not simply an illusion of agency created through a discourse that expresses power. Forms of subjectivity are clearly created in asceticism that function not only in conformity with power and maintaining the status quo but also are kinds of resistance to power. While, as we have seen, the ascetic self wishes to eradicate the self through an act of will in which the tradition is internalized through bodily regimes or discipline, this very internalization contains the potential for resistance to power and resistance to injustice. Thus Marguerite Porete, burned at the stake for heresy in 1310, resists the power of the dominant ideology and institution of the Church through her assertion of the non-assertiveness of the self; that the will must be annihilated in order to realize the truth of the soul's nothingness and leaving only the will of God. Moreover this is the teaching of the 'greater Church' in contrast to the 'little Church' which is the social institution. Marguerite's annihilation of the self through a strong act of will is simultaneously a spiritual death of the self and a political act of resistance to the dominant ideology and structures of power.²⁸ It seems clear that forms of subjectivity created through asceticism can be both affirmative of the status quo and critical of it, but the important point is that

the ascetic self affirms agency that can support power relations or can reject them, in both cases endeavoring to pursue the goal of the ascetic life independently of the power imposed of them from the political structures of the society or religious institution.

While in some ways it is a compelling picture that asceticism is always dominated by male power and can be explained in materialist terms as the internalisation of the dominant ideology, it is rather too limited in that it does not take seriously the kinds of subjectivity that asceticism claims to attain and the possibilities of resistance to that dominating power, especially by women ascetics. The kinds of self formation that asceticism achieves resist explanation in purely in terms of power relationships within a society. When Peter Damian advocated penance for sexual misdemeanor he was not simply executing canon law to keep power safe in the hands of a few, rather he was giving advice that he believed would transcend the human, gendered condition. Porete is not simply offering resistance to a regime of oppression but giving voice to an experience and way of understanding self and world that she regards as transcending limitation and receiving the grace of a theistic reality.

Leaving aside for a moment what we might call a cultural reductionism that sees asceticism in terms of the internalization of regimes of power in history, let us turn briefly to a second kind of reductionism that views asceticism in terms of neuropsychology. This kind of eliminative materialist reductionism offers an explanatory account of religious phenomena such as asceticism by showing how perception, emotion and rationality are closely linked together and our responses to the world deeply determined by the way evolution has produced the human brain. On the strong account, the brain determines cultural production and asceticism must be understood as within an evolutionary mechanism that is conducive to the betterment and survival of the species. While such a claim might be a crude rendering of the neurophysiological perspective, this is at the heart of the strong claim. I am not in a position to assess the adequacy of the science in this area but the broader problem of reducing cultural transactions in this way is problematic, as others have shown, in that an explanation (which we might say is the location of a cause) in terms of physiology cannot adequately account for cultural meanings and historical processes.²⁹ A weak claim is less problematic that all cultural production (such as asceticism) is accompanied by correlative brain states. Indeed, one would be surprised were this not the case. Work by Rolls, LeDoux and others so clearly described by Bowker,³⁰ shows how perception, brain events and the world are linked together.

er. Indeed, central to these accounts is the claim that perception and cognition are partly determined or rather constrained by objective properties that lie in the objects of perception themselves. That is, perception of an object leads, in John Bowker's words, 'from the perceived object to one set of events within us rather than another, and they do this with a highly stable consistency.'³¹ Emotions such as fear and disgust are common to all human beings because of the way in which pathways in the brain function to protect the individual and in so doing protect the group to ensure evolutionary success. There are conducive properties in objects of perception—such as a snake—that evoke shared responses across cultures. Bowker extends this kind of thinking to art, ethics and religious experience raising the question that there are indeed objective constraints upon these realms of human experience and that conducive properties lead to common perceptions of beauty and ethical decisions.

It seems to me that the strong neuro-psychological account that emphasizes the evolutionary function of asceticism,³² cannot adequately explain the particular kinds of subjectivity entailed. The ascetic's life resists purely physiological explanations which cannot take into consideration the narrative accounts of a life, socio-political power, broader historical processes, and, indeed, the possibility of the truth of theological claims made in ascetic traditions. Similarly, accounts of asceticism that treat it in terms of the brain malfunctioning, such as accounts of ascetic fasting in terms of anorexia, cannot adequately account of ascetic inwardness even if particular ascetics were subject to that condition. Subjectivity which, minimally, we might take to be the use of the first person pronoun, is filled out with different contents and the 'empty signifier' of the 'I' takes on a culturally determined content; in the case of asceticism a content constrained by traditions. The weak claim that conducive properties in objects of perception lead to particular kinds of response in human brains might be relevant in that ascetic subjectivities might be formed through conducive properties in ascetic behaviours themselves. Peter Damian's fasting and prayer contribute to the formation of a certain kind of subjectivity which is further filled out by the doctrinal content of the tradition he inhabits. Conducive properties in ascetic actions combined with ideologies of ascetic traditions form the kind of subjectivity that asceticism entails, most notably the assertion of the will to eradicate the will and the mimesis of tradition that involves developing the virtues of tradition. Even minimally, ascetic behaviors such as giving up funds for one's child's education or giving up food for another might be seen in this light. But the conducive properties that lead to particular kinds of inward-

ness are above all formed through ritual. Indeed we might say that one of the important and defining characteristics of asceticism within religions is that it is inextricably linked to ritual. It is to this idea that we must finally turn.

The Ritual Formation of the Ascetic Self

The kinds of deprivation entailed by asceticism are ritualized. The Jain monk who starves to death does so in a ritual way; the flagellants in Damian's monastery do their practice in a regular, ritualized way while reciting the Psalter. Ritual forms the patterns of the ascetic's life which is ordered in a tradition determined way from the time she wakes to the time she sleeps. Indeed, anthropologists have regarded ritual as antithetical to individuality because of the necessity of conformity to a pattern shared by the group and ascetic ritual is no different, although here we have simultaneously the eradication of individuality accompanied by the intensification of subjectivity. The ascetic self is not individual because she attempts to eradicate individuality and conforms to the broader social group; in monasticism all dress alike and all take on a new name. Yet while there is an erosion of individuality there is at the same time an intensification of subjectivity or inwardness. The kind of subjectivity formed through asceticism is mimetic in that it conforms to what has been handed down and in contrast to the citizen, the ascetic self receives tradition generally without question. This reception is actually a reconstruction in so far as tradition is constantly renewed and reconstructed. This ascetic mimesis occurs in a ritual context in which the ascetic, guided by the teacher, performs regulated sequences of action. If we accept Rappaport's general definition of ritual as 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers'³³ then asceticism falls within this definition. While ritual repetition is never completely identical there is an 'adherence to form' that is invariant or changes very slowly over a long period. Asceticism is performance and the ascetic self develops and flourishes in cultures that are rich in ritual, especially in those traditions which emphasize cosmology. The ascetic self is performed through ritual embodying a kind of somatic, cultural memory. Thus even when performed in solitude, the ascetic participates in a public realm, a point made by Damian when he exhorts his monks to ascetic endeavor even when alone because they are, in fact, participating in the life of the Church.

Given that asceticism as performance is a ritualized kind of activity, we might make three concluding points. Firstly there is no *direct* link between ritu-

al and broader cultural politics. Certainly ascetics can be embroiled in the politics of their institutions and asceticism itself used for a direct political end (as fasting for Gandhi or Simone Weil) but the ritual life of tradition passes through the generations in a number of different political contexts with little, if any, ritual modification. Secondly, while asceticism is performance, we can distinguish it from related kinds of performance such as athletics. While the gay body builders described by Halperin³⁴ undoubtedly use ascetic methods to produce a beautiful body, they are not prototypically ascetic in the sense understood here because they do not recapitulate the memory of tradition (and revelation) and their goal is not a transcendence. Thirdly the ascetic self as performed is generally antithetical to modernity yet in some ways in consonance with it; antithetical in the sense of modernity's profound scepticism to ascetic claims and the yet sympathetic in the sense that both asceticism and modernity are attempts at moving away from death. If modernity is characterised by an 'astounding historicism,' in Badiou's words, in which there is a movement towards a political heroism that seeks to defy history and assert life,³⁵ then asceticism shares the heroism and defying of history through its attempts to take control of the body. Our nun at Christ's tomb ironically points a way forward in her heroic stance against death, in her attempt to take hold of her life through ascetic assertion, and in her standing firm against the kinds of historical process that would define human reality in terms of market forces and the commodification of human aspirations. The ascetic self is a hopeful self.

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