

Asceticism: A Match Towards the Absolute

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Abstract

Asceticism is a means of realising the absolute, owing to the fact that man does not live in harmony with the ultimate reality, which is observed as a common notion in the world religious traditions of mankind, as they all strive to bridge the visible world with that which is unseen and unknown. Thus, human re-absorption into the divine essence became an ultimate concern. In achieving this spiritual ideal demanded the practice of self-denial of all conventional (physical and psychological) desires. However, to some people, such ascetic practices do more damage than good. The paper adopted the philosophical, historical and comparative method, using theoretical approach, the paper focuses on the meaning and forms of asceticism as well as its central position in different religious traditions – African Traditional religion, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism – Through this research effort, it was established that the practice of asceticism is obligatory in some religious traditions, while in others, it is optional and moderate. More significantly is the fact that some adherents of different religious traditions embark on ascetic practices without understanding the meaning and implication of what they are doing, thus, the need to take asceticism in the context of rituals and not a mere religious exercise.

Keywords: absolute, asceticism, religion

Introduction

All religions of the world have a way of propagating their principles and doctrines. Thus, asceticism has come to function cross-culturally to refer to a whole host of activities in the various religious tradition of mankind. “Ascetic practices are engaged in for a variety of ends. Many religious traditions encourage or demands asceticism at periodic or designated times of the religious calendar, usually for purification or preparation for a significant ritual event” (Smith, 2005, p. 345). Most religions have at least some practices that can be deemed ascetic; fasting, celibacy, seclusion, voluntary or complete abstinence from intoxicants, renunciation of worldly goods and possessions, and, in some cases religious suicide.

This principle of asceticism is often demonstrated as a rite of passage in Africa. Most rites of passage or life-cycle rites require some form of self-denial and self-discipline on the part of the person undergoing the rituals (Deezia, 2016, p. 59). In some cases, ascetic practices are employed as a sort of rituals to the deity or powers one is trying to influence to obtained fulfilment of a request, in other instances, asceticism is seen as meritorious in general, leading to or ensuring a good result in this world or the next. Asceticism can also include the cultivation of moral qualities requiring self-restraint and discipline, such as patience and forbearance. One sometimes reads an “inner asceticism”, which involves various practices where one learns to be “in the world, but not of it” (Smith 2005, p. 355). Max Weber expanded the meaning of asceticism and included “inner-worldly asceticism”. He made a distinction between “other-worldly” asceticism (the practice of monastics and renunciants) and “this-worldly” asceticism (the practice rooted in the vocational ethic of Protestantism). Here the ascetical achievement consists not in renouncing possessions, but in having no attachment to them. Such asceticism consists essentially of spiritual rather than physical discipline. This distinction has clearly provided the ground for an even more fundamental understanding of asceticism (Weber, 2005). Emile Durkheim in his book entitled *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* added that:

We cannot detach ourselves from (the profane) without doing violence to our nature and without painfully wounding our instincts. In other words, the negative cult cannot develop without causing suffering. Pain is one of its necessary conditions (Durkheim, 1961, p. 351).

Sequel to this, the new concept of askēsis, involving training the will against a life of sensual pleasure, was exemplified by the Stoics who advocated the idea of bringing the passion of the body under the kingly command of reason to achieve apatheia – a state of mind where one is not disturbed by the passions (Klosko, 2011). Robert Thurman points out that warriors practiced asceticism in many ways, in order to develop greater strength and prowess to assure survival and victory. He says:

It seems evident that an important source of asceticism is warrior training, as the life-and-death context of battle is what makes the heroic self-overcoming involved in asceticism realistic. Spiritual asceticism definitionally or essentially must be understood in parallel and contrast with military asceticism, tracing this polarity all the way back into the archaic to the complementary and yet rival figures of shaman and war chief (Thurman, 2012).

However, Wise Sloth (2013, p. 44) observed that asceticism is the standard people set for maturity; but asceticism does more damage than good. For as long as human have been demonising pleasure human have been needless suffering. He added thus:

Asceticism has failed humanity every time it has been tried. It's going to fail everyone who tries it in the future. Denying our self-pleasure is inherently painful. Demonising pleasure effectively glorifies pains. Even if that's not our intention that's the obvious inevitable result (Wise 2013, p. 45).

To this end, one is tempted to ask the following fundamental questions; what is asceticism? What is the place of asceticism in the world religious traditions? What are the forms as well as the significance of asceticism to the practitioner? In an attempt to answer the above questions, this paper explores asceticism in African Traditional Religions, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism using the philosophical and historical approach.

Conceptual Clarification

Absolute: This simply refers to an infinite and perfect being that transcends and comprehends all other beings; it is often referred to as the Ultimate Reality.

Asceticism

Etymologically, the English term asceticism is derived from the Greek askēsis, originally mean “to train” or “to exercise” specifically in the sense of the training and self-denial that an athlete undergoes to attain physical skill and mastery over the body (Smith 2005, p. 153). However, in the context of this study, asceticism may be defined as the practice of self-denial, self-abnegation, self-inflicting pains and renunciation etc., for the purpose of achieving a transcendental goal; it is a conscious refinement of the physical, in order to be more accessible to the influence of a higher forces. In other words, it is the shaping of life in accordance with a particular textual and interpretive religious tradition.

Asceticism is classified into two types, “Natural asceticism” consisting of a lifestyle where material aspects of life are reduced to utmost simplicity and a minimum but without maiming the body or harsher austerities that make the body suffer, while “Unnatural asceticism” is defined as a practice that involves body mortification and self-infliction of pain such as by sleeping on bed of nails. (Wimbush 2002, pp. 9–10). Thus, the assertion:

Any supra-normal experience . . . reached after long spiritual preparation through the practice of virtues, asceticism and earnest mental prayer. . . . It is agreed to be the highest spiritual state possible in this life (New universal Library Volume NINE, as cited by Nabofa 1997, p. 55).

Religion: In the context of this study, religion could be described as a personal response, or an attempt to seek meaning in life and ones universe. It is an organised and integrated system of beliefs and practices, morals and symbols express out of experience in relation to sacred and profane, feelings and mysteries, resulting to self abasement and absolute dependency upon super being.

Theoretical Framework

This work is based on the thoughts of some of the early Greek Philosophers, such as Antisthenes who founded Cynicism (445–360BC). He holds that the purpose of life is to live a life of virtue in agreement with nature (Mastin, 2008, p. 95). This means rejecting all conventional desires for health, wealth, power, fame and living a life free from all possessions and property, and the Philosophy of Pythagoras, as enunciated in his Neo-Pythagoreanism (6th century BC). He emphasised on the fundamental distinction between the soul and the body. To them, the soul must be free from its material surrounding, the “Muddy Vesture of Decay” by an ascetic habit of life. Bodily pleasures, and all sensuous impulse must be abandoned as detrimental to the spiritual purity of the soul. Thus, God is the principle of good, matter the groundwork of evil (Charles, 2001, p. 85).

From the above philosophical view points, it is suggestive that man is innately evil, thus, the gap between man and the ultimate reality, and for man to commune or be in Union with the object of worship, which this paper terms “the producer and the product relationship” such re-union could only be possible through ascetic practices as a way of self-denial in the midst of abundance and burning off the evil nature.

Forms of Religious Asceticism

Asceticism is seen as an essential component for spiritual growth: It encompasses a broad range of practices intended to illuminate vices and inculcate virtue. The forms of asceticism found in the history of religions are manifold. The most common, however, are: renunciation or restriction of nourishment (fasting), sexual abstinence (celibacy), seclusion from society, renunciation of possessions (or at least restriction to the bare necessities), renunciation of everything that might be conducive to joy and in extreme forms self-inflicted suffering (such as flagellation and self-mutilation) (Fuchs, 2006). In today’s usage, the term describes the exercise of renunciation in one’s everyday life, and subordination of all daily living to the dictates of that renunciation. However, the methods of ascetics are quite naturally based upon the necessities of habitual life driven by natural instincts. Human beings variously need or want air, food, water, sleep, sex, clothing and shelter, companionship and status, communication, sense-pleasure, and a sense of identity. Therefore, in order to control these needs, asceticism involves the practices of breath retention, fasting, vigil, continence, poverty including nakedness and homelessness, isolation, silence, endurance of pain, and self-transcendence (Thurman, 2012). For the purpose of clarity, this study emphasises the following forms of ascetic practices:

1. **Fasting:** Fasting is refraining from bodily nourishment. It is restraining from food, on limiting its amount. Fast varies according to degree, duration and purpose, a complete fast is one in which all food and liquids are refused, and it is usually tied to private or public religious observances. For example; the Christians fast during lent (40 days). The Muslim fasts during the Ramadan’s Lunar month. The African Traditional Religious Priest fast as a form of purification etc.
2. **Celibacy:** This simply refers to total abstention from sexual activities for religious or spiritual reasons. The practice of celibacy is a complex religious

phenomenon. It can be used to extricate oneself from what is perceived as impure, or to distance oneself from the transient world. For the aspiring Buddhist monk or Catholic priest, celibacy appears to be the choice to enter into a new social order and construct a new identity and status. Within the religious sphere, celibacy is one of the most essential features of asceticism/monasticism. This regimen assumes a variety of practices, in particular renunciation of the world and vows of celibacy (Hemthep, 2014). More specifically, renunciation and celibacy is taken as a condition and an ideal for the ascetic/monastic life as one of integrity and incorruption in body and mind. In Christianity Jesus spoke of those who are “Eunuchs” for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 9:12), and Paul recommended celibacy as the best way of living, for it enabled a person to be free from distracting “worldly” concerns, especially the household children and sex. In Buddhism, celibacy is a permanent vocation for monks and nuns. In Hinduism celibacy is part of the fourth and final stage-Samsaya-for the Hindu, who is following the Vedic way (Brown, 1988). Islam is generally hostile to celibacy. In African Traditional Religion, some deities demanded their priest to stay off sexual intercourse as it is believed to defile the body, thus sex was a taboo. In fact, there are deities that accept only virgins as it priest.

3. **Solitude/Communal Asceticism:** Solitude refers to the complete withdrawal or renouncing the community for a religions purpose. Such isolation could be to the desert, forest, water front and mountains etc. in other words, the total physical and mental withdrawal from the society, meant that the chances of community sin were significantly reduced, considering that the temptation that lead to sin were removed. For instance, in African Traditional Religion, most shrines were built either at the water front or in the forest where the priest of such deity is expected to live. In Christianity, you have monks and hermits in the near East or modern day Egypt, Syria and Judia in the fertile Nile valley etc. While communal asceticism was in an organised form, in which the entire activities – eating, sleeping and daily worship etc., were regulated.
4. **Yogic Asceticism:** This refers to a form of self-discipline and contemplation to enable practitioners yoked with the ultimate reality. It involves restraints, observance, postures, breaths control, withdrawal of the senses, concentration and contemplation etc. this form of asceticism is very common in Hinduism.
5. **Nocturnal Vigils:** This refers to a conscious, self-denial of sleep; either to a certain time in the night or although the night. During such activity, the practitioner stay awake especially at night for meditation, pray and offer sacrifices for the purpose of achieving a transcendental goal. This form of ascetic practice is not only found in Christianity, as certain rites and rituals are done at night in the African Traditional Religion.
6. **Pain Producing Asceticism:** Pain producing asceticism has appeared in many forms, including exhausting or painful exercises, self-laceration, particularly castration and flagellation. It is believed that they enable the subject to voluntarily become disembodied, and hence experience ecstasy, self-transcendence, self-surrender and so on. For example; “In Christian Monasticism, most monks involved themselves in self-torture. That is, the monks chastised themselves by beating themselves with whips or scourge”

(Gbule & Ugorji, 2005, p. 154). In African Traditional Religion, the Amanikpo Secrete Society among the Ogoni indigenous people, and their painful initiation rites etc.

Asceticism in Some World Religious Traditions

1. African Traditional Religion: This refers to the faith that reveals the religious beliefs and practices of the people of sub-Saharan Africa (Quarcoopme 1987:12). It is the Religion founded and practice by Africans (Mbiti 1991:10), which has been handed down from one generation to the other through oral means. In African Traditional Religion, there is no universally acceptable form of asceticism as observed in other world religious traditions. However, man is seen as the creature of the highest Deity (God), and lives in dual nature; the physical and the spiritual. Though, man lost grip of this spiritual essence because of his evil and profane nature. Thus, to have that re-union, man now see God as too big to approach directly and prefer to approach God through the deities as intermediaries, with the condition of putting off the unholy nature through cutting, beating, piercing, burning, hair pulling and bone breaking etc.

Among the Ikwerre people of Niger Delta, some of ways of receiving information include “Palm reading, mirror gazing, the interpretation of bird behaviour as messages from the spirits; the casting of bones, cowries, or lobes of kola nuts and the interpretation with which they fall as messages from the gods; and divination through spirit possession (Tassie 1992:155 as cited by Olumati 2013:111). In another view a priest who practice solitude to avoid distraction, continuously pour libation to his deity, rhythmically beats a small drum and metal gong, chants eulogies of the deity and finally becomes possessed by it and begins to prophesy (Olumati 2013:111). To maintain such union with the divine, the priest or the diviner is subjected to certain taboos, such as:

The consumption of certain foods. Others forbid mundane activities on days set aside for communion with deities... the diviner have to avoid defilement of any sort (Tasie, 1992 as quoted by Olumati 2013, p. 112).

Among the Ogoni indigenous people of Southern Nigeria, a young girl does not lose her virginity before her puberty rites, as such rites prepares her for the “yaa” culture (Culture of nudity) which serves as a means of purification. Among the Ibibio, during “Ekong” initiation rites, all other activities including market and farming are suspended. In this case; food, water and firewood etcetera, must have been obtained in advanced (Deezia 2016:63), during this period, the people withdrew from every other activities, in order to commune with their deities.

2. Asceticism in Judeo-Christian Tradition: The usage of the term “Judeo-Christian” tradition here is understandably deliberate . . . because Christianity is probably the only religion that accepted or incorporated the scriptures of another religion (Judaism), and made it part of its own (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2005, p. 194). Thus, Christian monasticism draws the influence of the Judaic tradition. The "Essence", a Jewish mystical sect, was similar to monks. However, Christianity is said they were founded by Jesus Christ; the religion began in the life, ministry, death

and resurrection of the founder, Jesus Christ, and exhibited lots of ascetic practices hence, He commanded thus:

If anyone would come after me
he must deny himself and
take up his cross daily and
follow me (Luke 9:23 NIV).

Both testaments are rich in example of fasting. Elijah fasted to open himself to God's voice and find direction and strength for himself and the Hebrews. In the New Testament, Jesus was portrayed as one who fasted on extraordinary occasions for the same reasons. It was in this view that Tertullian is quoted to have said:

Slanderers flesh will go more easily through the narrow gate of heaven; that "lighter" flesh will rise more quickly; and that drier flesh will experience less putrefaction in the tomb (Bynum, 1995, p 41).

In similar view, the Bible book of Luke is quoted to have asserted thus:

. . . John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking wine, and you say "He has a demon". The Son of man came eating and drinking, and you say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard" (Luke 7:33-34 NIV).

It is therefore not an aberration to say that all Christians are ascetics, as up until date, Christians continue to practice asceticism through which they claimed to have gotten divine revelation and so on.

3. Asceticism in Islamic Religious Tradition: The Islamic Religion is known as the religion of "allegiance to God". This simply means that man must submit himself unconditionally to the will of God. History has it that it was when Muhammad was journeying as a trader in the desert that he was inspired to found this religion. This religion according Keith is:

Far from being a religion built upon reflection on the nature of the world and its causes. It is built upon the prophetic warning of a coming day of judgment, when those who care for the joys of this life only will taste the fire of hell forever, and those who practice compassion mercy and faith in God will be raised to the joys of paradise (Keith 1987, p. 117).

In Islam the word asceticism is called "*Zuhd*". The mainstream Islam has not had a tradition of asceticism, but its Sufi-sects-a minority within Islam-have cherished an ascetic life for many centuries (Pew Research 2012, p. 140). Among the Muslim Sufist, the asceticism that they practice focused upon forms of spiritual excess (staying the night in prayer; doing supererogatory actions, machinations) bodily deprivation (fasting, extensive denial of sleep), and embracing holy poverty. That is to say that the Muslim ascetic was the one who embraced contempt of early Muslim elites, dressing in rags, associating with the poor, and performing base occupation (like herding animals, bloodletting and professional mendicancy).

Contrary to the assertion that asceticism is limited to the Sufist, this study discovered that, in Islam, a fasting person empties his stomach of all the material things; to fill his soul with peace and blessings, to fill his spirit with piety and faith, to fill his mind with wisdom and resolution (Abdulati, 2004). In Ahadith Qudisi; Allah said:

Every action of the son of Adam is given manifold reward for it, he leaves off his desires and for me and I will reward for it, he leaves off his desire for food for me. For the fasting person there are two times of joy; a time when he breaks his fast and a time of joy when he meets his Lord (Al-Bukhari).

Allah further said:

Whoever fast during Ramadan out of sincere faith and hoping to attain Allah's reward, then all his past sins will be forgiven (Al-Bukhari).

In Islam, fasting, prayers and other ascetic practices are considered obligatory, hence Allah is quoted thus:

Woe unto those performances of Sulat (prayers) who delay their salat prayer from their slated fixed times and those who do good deeds to be seen of man) (Quran 107:4–6)

4. Asceticism in Hinduism: Hinduism is one of the dominant religions of the Asians. It is acclaimed as the oldest religion. The word “Hinduism” is a derivative of “Hindu” which means “India” (William, 2003, p. 268). Based on this fact, it can be said to be the religion, culture and philosophy of the India people. Their oldest writings are the Vedas, a collection of prayers and hymns as the Rig-Veda, the Sama-Vedas, the Yajur-Veda, and the Atharva-Veda. (Omeregbe, 2002, p. 75). Brahman is the concept for the ultimate reality or Supreme Being for the Hindu.

Asceticism in the form of Yoga and meditation possibly goes back to the earliest period of Indian history, the seals depicting a figure sitting in what looks like a yogic pose have been found at site of the Hindus Valley. References are made to long-haired silent sages (Munis) Clarol in soiled yellow garments or naked; who are depicted as a result of their ascetic practices (Smith, 2005, p. 108). The Vedas in some places say that the deities gained their status, or even created the entire universe through the power of their inner, ascetic heat (Tapas), acquired through the rigorous practice physical and spiritual self-discipline and modification of the body (Bhagat 1976).

It is important to note that one may gain this ascetic heat of get united, or get yoked to the Brahman (the universal soul) through a variety of ascetic techniques, including fasting, chastity, and various yogic techniques such as breath control (Panayama), through it the adept can procure tremendous supernatural powers and even the status of a god (Eliade, 1969, p. 100). Some ascetics, for example, stay totally stationary for years at a time or remain standing or in water for weeks on end. Some ascetics subsist solely on fruits, wild plants, and roots, or they live only on grain left in the field. “Among the most famous are ascetics who practice the “five fires” rituals (building four fifth) and “spike-lying” ascetics who sleep on beds of nails” (Haripada, 1973, p. 140). Summarily, Hindus practice asceticism in order for the Atman (Single Soul) to

get yoked to the Brahman (Universal Soul), and when that is achieved they become Brahmatman.

5. Asceticism in Buddhism: According to Buddhism texts, Siddhartha Gautama (C.563–C.483BCE) the founder of Buddhism, was born into the royal family and raised in the lap of luxury. Upon learning of the true nature of the world outside insulated life – a world full of suffering, sickness, old age and death – Gautama left his family and joined a group of ascetics in the Jungle (Smith, 2005, p. 105). The time of the Buddha seems to have been one in the inhabited regions of North India, he experimented with various techniques – ascetic, yogic, philosophical, and meditational – to attain release from suffering and rebirth. Early Buddhist text are replete with references to ascetics of various types, one such text depicts the typical ascetic (tapasvin) of the time as one who:

Goes naked, is of certain loose habit, licks his hands, respects no approach nor stop; accept nothing expressly brought, not expressly prepared, nor any invitation. . . . He takes food once a day, or once every two days, or the powder of rice husks, on rice scum, on flour of oil, seeds, on grasses, on cowdung, or on fruits and roots from the woods. . . . He wears coarse hempen cloths, discarded corpse cloths discarded rags or antelope hide, or back garments, (Digha Nikaya, as quoted by Smith, 2005, p. 108).

Gautama hooked up with such a group and practiced and mastered the radical ascetic regimen they advocated, to such an extent that he virtually shrivelled to nothing more than skin and bones.

Then, Sāriputta, when I tried to touch the skin of my belly, I took hold of my backbone, and when I tried to touch my backbone, I took hold of the skin of my belly. Because I ate so little, the skin of my belly stuck to my backbone. And because I ate so little, when I thought, “I will evacuate my bowels” or “I will urinate, I would fall down on my face then and there. Sāriputta, when I stroked my limbs with the palm of my hand to soothe my body, the hairs, rotted at the roots, came away from my body as I stroked my limbs with the palm of my hand, because I ate so little (Nakamura, 2011).

After realising that the path of severe self-denial was too extreme and not helpful in attaining enlightenment, the bodhisattva then rejected the ideals of austere asceticism as well as self-torture. He devised a path balancing extreme asceticism (self-mortification) and hedonism (self-indulgence), which can lead to the achievement of bodhi (awakening). The Buddha called his path the Middle Way or *madhyamā-pratipat* (P. *majjhimā paṭipadā*). All the Buddha’s essential teachings were given in his First Sermon, “the Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Law” (Skt. *dharmacakrapravartana*, P. *dhammacakkappavattana*), in which he clarified the doctrine of the “Four Noble Truths” (Skt. *catvāri āryasatyāni*, P. *cattāri ariyasaccāni*) and the “Eightfold Path” (Skt. *aṣṭāṅgika mārga*, P. *aṭṭhaṅgika magga*):

There are two extremes, O monks, which he who has given up the world ought to avoid. What are these two extremes? A life given to pleasure, devoted to pleasures and lust; this is degrading, sensual, vulgar, ignoble and profitless. And a life given to mortifications; this is painful, ignoble and profitless. Both these

extremes the Perfect One has avoided, and found the middle path, which makes one both to see and to know, which lead to peace, to discernment, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.

Gautama rejected the ascetic path and pursued what he called the “Middle Path” between the poles of sensuality and asceticism. Thus, Buddhism denies that such physical asceticism alone can procure for the practitioner the highest spiritual goals. However, Buddhism requires its more serious practitioners not only to renounce worldly life but also to train diligently in self-discipline and self-control through the “eight-fold path” these paths include:

1. Right to knowledge
2. Right to intention
3. Right to speech
4. Right to conduct
5. Right to means of livelihood
6. Right to effort
7. Right to mindfulness
8. Right to concentration.

Hence, it is only through the practice of the eight fold path that one can attain the permanent peace and happiness known as Nirwana, which also require the elimination of desire and aversion through self-discipline and abnegations, though moderation.

The Significance of Asceticism

According to Robert Thurman, the ultimate goal of asceticism can be divided into two levels, mundane and spiritual. The former would be asceticism aspiring to states of extreme and permanent pleasure and calm, or some form of permanent oblivion. However, the latter works methodically to achieve the highest goal of the spiritual system, which might be self-absorption in an all-powerful God, as in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, or self-extinction in a form of liberation, as in Buddhism (Thurman, 2012). Ascetic techniques in many traditions are also said to bring magical or supernatural powers. So the ascetics naturally become the special mediators between the human, superhuman, and subhuman realms. Consequently, asceticism is essentially elitist and always regarded as superior (Fuchs, 2006).

In other words, the first priority in ascetic practices in that of spiritual formation, which is the cultivation and acquisition of the values and perception of reality that is consistent with the will of the ultimate reality. It is easy to notice from the history of asceticism that it involves the performance of certain acts; fasting, withdrawal from society, silence, physical prayer, and taking certain posture to name just a few. These acts function as signifiers in a semiotic system. Hence, James Clerk (2008) asserted that, asceticism enables the integration of an individual into a culture. Through asceticism, integration into a culture occurs at every level of human existence; consciously and unconsciously; voluntarily or involuntarily; somatic and mental; emotional and intellectual; religious and secular. This means that asceticism functions as a system of cultural formation; it orients the person or group of people to the immediate cultural environment and the unexpressed, but present, system that underlies it. In other words, asceticism significantly creates a new identity.

Sequel to this, the re-envision of the world and of human life in it requires intensive perceptual transformation. In order to achieve a different state, as visualised or pictorialised by a religion (Clerk, 2008), there must be at the most basic perceptual level of the senses, and perceptions and experienced, a form of retraining geared toward the re-envisioned world. Asceticism therefore provides the means for this retraining. It is at the level of ascetical performance that the ascetic experiences and perceives the world differently. The novice who enter a monastery must learn at the outset the differences between, for instance, “eating in the world” and “entry in the monastery; both relate to food, but the significant of the food and its eating will differ, in referent and in content, from cultural domain to cultural domain. At this most basic level, asceticism retains the senses and perception of the ascetic, a retaining based upon the theological culture and its articulated goals. To be specific however, asceticism enhances the following:

1. Healings, purifications, and spiritual rejuvenation;
2. To maintain virtuous life and preparation for divine encounter;
3. To attain enlightenment and self-realisation;
4. To improve both the moral and spiritual content of a person as well as to define the essence of existence and life; and
5. To give strong aspiration for the hereafter, for divine blessings/gifts and protection etc.

Asceticism and Modernity

Modernity has affected lots of ascetic practices, especially in the contemporary society where religious virtue is at its declined. Asceticism is something that the modern world has left behind, together with the Christianity that formerly underpinned it. Asceticism is therefore not disappearing, but transforming into intellectual practices and no longer corporeal sufferings. This reveals a change in emphasis concerning the body in the religious system. Although, the the early Christian religion for instance, rehabilitated the body in comparison with the Ancient philosophies, the condemnation of the body increased gradually until the Middle Ages when, according to Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong, the “body was despised, condemned, humiliated” (Le Goff & Truong 2003).

Thus, the way to practice it and to define it has been changing, and this is contingent on other evolutions of the religious system and of society. The new kind of asceticism which monks are living nowadays is mainly intellectual asceticism. The monastic body is the sublimated body of the resuscitated Christ-it does not suffer any longer but can express emotions, such as love of God. This body communicates with God through prayer, and blooms. At this point, whereas the ascetic body was only a tool to perfect contemplation, this expressive body can become an aim. And finally, asceticism in modern monastic life remains a way to conduct monastic life, but it is no longer directly correlated with salvation.

Monks today do not speak anymore about asceticism. They prefer to speak of spirituality because the term of asceticism gained a negative connotation: “mortification” for instance, is not easily understood in modern society. Monks agree that asceticism is still present in modern monastic life, even if there is a quantitative decline in the main pillars of ascetic practices like diminishing sleep and fasting. But

this quantitative decline does not cause a qualitative decline (Jonveaux, 2012). Ascetic practices are shifting to new habits in term with modernity; for instance, some of the Christian fathers who practice celibacy are "more married than married men" (with traces of unfaithfulness and immorality etc.). Again, monks in some modern and secularised societies need to earn their living. Nowadays monasteries receive fewer and fewer donations and may have to pay taxes and security contributions.

However, the great pillars of the traditional ascetical system are still playing an important role in monastic life, some of which include; fasting, sleeping and chastity etc. Asceticism is still a discipline to reach a more religious life, a renunciation of that which is profane.

Conclusion

It is discovered that in every religious tradition, the goal of all adherents/humans is the re-absorption into the divine essence. This re-absorption has been accomplish through various processes including meditation and contemplation, celibacy, fasting, yoga, self-inflicted pains, as well as complete withdrawal and other ascetic disciplines. Thus, asceticism serves as the gateway through which man experiences and communicates with the ultimate reality. Sequel to this, many founders of different religious traditions have been spiritually enlightened people who had their illumination through such direct experience. But unfortunately, when such illumined individuals were translated into the great beyond, their successors and followers tended to distort the original teachings (practices), and ideas under the influence of political, or economic factors or racial pride or power seeking, self-aggrandisement, inordinate ambition, imperialism or an acculturation drive (Nabofa, 1997, p. 59). Thus, there is a need to maintain asceticism in its ritual context and not just a mere exercise. Thus, the relevance of this study as it explored the meaning of asceticism, its forms and significance as well as the continuity and discontinuity as a result of modern influence.

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