Introduction

Christian asceticism assumes that it is possible for a human being to acquire special powers by a process of inner development, with the cooperation of divine aid. While realizing this potential to its full may have been reserved for a precious few, asceticism in the Eastern monastic tradition is based on the assumption that a profound self-transformation can take place in any individual who applies himself or herself with enough determination and faith. Invested with extraordinary psychological capacities and spiritual power as well as an imposing presence, acquired through years of withdrawal and ascetic training, Christian monks and holy men could then be called upon to offer advice and efficacious prayers, to treat physical and mental ailments, to ease social tensions, to mediate, or to provide protection.

In recent decades there have been great advances in the understanding of the social, spiritual, and supernatural power that monks and holy men wielded in late antique society. But one question still awaits an answer: how were they able to cultivate such exceptional capacities? *Asceticism of the Mind* seeks to address this question by exploring the strategies that enabled ascetic practitioners in the Eastern monastic tradition to transform their entire character and mental disposition, as well as the persistent problems that they encountered in the attempt to do so.

The transformation brought about by ascetic practice belongs to a general pattern of self-transformation in which the self is an active agent of its own transformation; however, the goal of this transformation and the conditions under which it can occur are different in each cultural and religious framework. This study focuses on the unique form that self-transformation took within the Egyptian, Gazan, and Sinaitic monastic traditions in late antiquity. While this transformative process eventually enabled Egyptian and Palestinian monks to fill important functions in Near Eastern society, for them asceticism was not a cultural phenomenon or a social institution, but part of their concrete daily life. It is this facet of asceticism – as a practical phenomenon and a method for promoting inner transformation – that I seek to reconstruct in this study.

In particular, this study argues for the need to broaden the scholarly emphasis on the ascetic body and to consider the role of mental training in ascetic processes of self-formation. While asceticism is ultimately expressed in the body, the problem that Egyptian and Palestinian monks sought to address was ultimately rooted not in the body but in the mind's failure to exercise control over the body. Thus, the form of asceticism at the centre of this study involves a disciplined and systematic effort to train and purify the mind and attention. This form of training, I argue, assisted Christian ascetics in the process of creating new psychological capacities and exceptional cognitive skills, in the service of contemplation. However, the monastic discipline of attention was not without risks. As will be shown, it was powerful enough not only to heal but also to harm, unless performed with sufficient experience and skill.

To fully appreciate the complexity and innovation of the early monastic discipline of attention, I propose to examine it from a joint historical and cognitive viewpoint. For Christian ascetics, attention was a way of restoring their relations with God, rather than a method for cultivating special cognitive skills; yet inasmuch as their attempt to do so relied on regular mental training, attention provides a useful bridge between the radically different explanatory models presumed by modern and late antique theories of mind. Accordingly, throughout this study the discussion shifts back and forth between these perspectives and their accompanying terminologies: "attentiveness" is employed when discussing the spiritual and religious goal of the monastic discipline of attention (προσοχή, νῆψις), whereas "attention management" and related terms are employed when discussing the cognitive underpinning of the monastic strategies.

Despite the shift in the study of asceticism in recent years towards embracing a wide range of approaches and methodologies in analyzing this multifaceted phenomenon, many historians still shy away from using cognitive research. This book seeks to demonstrate the benefits of working across the traditional divide between history and cognitive science. In particular, collaborative research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience is one of the most exciting domains of interdisciplinary research in this century. This study explores some of the ways in which historians can profit from these developments.

As will be shown, the converging evidence provided by neuropsychological and cognitive data underscores the beneficial potential and self-formative role of the monastic system of mental training, thereby confuting older views that emphasized the negative and repressive aspects of asceticism. At the same time, research on attention regulation and meditative practices in Asian religious and meditative traditions also reveals the risks inherent in systematic mental training. In this way it sheds new light on the nature of the challenges that late antique

monks encountered in their attempt to train attention, as well as on the expression of these problems in early monastic sources.

Monastic authors ascribe the challenges involved in ascetic self-formation to the sinister influence of demons. Accordingly, an additional goal of this book is to advance a better understanding of the demonology of the Egyptian desert. Drawing on cognitive research on attention, I argue that demonology provided late antique monks with tools that were subtle enough to map the complex cognitive mechanisms involved in attention regulation as well as the ways in which this effortful process can go wrong. While we have no direct access to the monk's experience of the demonic, which was clearly richer than modern scientific explanations allow, research on attention lends valuable insight into the representation of these experiences in monastic demonology, thereby underscoring its sophistication. My reliance on cognitive theories therefore should not imply doubt about the truth claims of the monastic sources. It is precisely because I take them seriously that I rely on these theories, rather than dismissing monastic demonology as literary elaboration, an expression of superstition, or something completely incomprehensible to modern readers.

More generally, this study seeks to explore the potential for constructive dialogue and theoretical refinement across history and cognitive science. By situating key monastic insights into the operations of the human mind in the context of contemporary cognitive science, it aims to advance a better understanding of Christian monasticism and asceticism as well as the religious practices of late antiquity. At the same time, by presenting culturally specific ways in which pan-human cognitive phenomena were understood, articulated, and manipulated in late antiquity, this book seeks to contribute to current discussions in the cognitive and social sciences on the relationship between cognition and culture. Finally, analyses conducted in this study uncover processes related to the production of psychological knowledge in late antiquity and reveal the extent to which such knowledge is socially constructed. The fact that psychological knowledge bears the mark of the cultural context in which it is produced does not necessarily mean that it is merely a reflection of this context, yet it is only by comparing different types of psychologies that we can recognize what is perhaps cross-cultural in psychology and what is culturally constructed. I thus offer this book for the benefit of psychologists interested in the history of their discipline, as well as those interested in gaining reflective distance from its explanatory models.

With this varied audience in mind, this introductory chapter has a double purpose: first, to situate Egyptian and Gazan monasticism within its historical and intellectual context, and second, to contextualize the research approach to be employed in this book in view of recent research on Christian asceticism

and monasticism. Chapters 1 and 2 then provide a theoretical introduction to the central themes to be addressed in this study: the ascetic self, self-control, and attention. Chapter 1 describes the opposing modes of self-constitution between which the ascetic process of self-formation unfolded: an ideal self model that gave direction and motivation to this process, as well as the actual constitution of embodied monastic selves. The tension between these opposing modes of self-constitution will run throughout the present study. Monastic asceticism sought to resolve this tension, and one of the ways in which it did so was by defining specific areas where self-control (ἐγκράτεια) should be exercised. Chapter 2 therefore elucidates the meaning and significance of self-control, particularly control of attention, in Christian asceticism.

Ascetic practitioners were expected to achieve ambitious goals of self-control, especially attentional control. Chapters 3 and 4 investigate the problems and setbacks that they encountered in their attempt to do so. Drawing on research on attention and on the complications that can arise from systematic mental training, chapter 3 shows that various forms of misuse of the monastic discipline of attention could unwittingly serve as the source of these problems, and that demonology enabled monastic writers to cope with questions concerning this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon. In other words, what was ascribed to demonic machinations were the very risks inherent in the effort to train attention, and hence in monastic asceticism.

To further investigate how problems related to attentional control were interpreted within the explanatory framework of monastic demonology, chapter 4 focuses on monastic accounts of a demonically induced psychological state characterized by uncontrollable preoccupation with some sinful or otherwise unwanted thought. This state was described using Greek verbs meaning "to besiege," which were rendered into Latin as *obsidere* – the etymological root of the English word "obsession." I argue that the interpretation of siege as a phenomenon of the mind enabled monastic authors to develop their own representation of what is known today as obsession, or obsession-like symptoms, which thwarted the ascetic process of self-formation.

In chapter 5 I draw on cognitive research on attention and brain neuroplasticity in order to explore the beneficial potential of the challenges involved in the monastic discipline of attention. While demonically induced siege or obsession may have been a "risk of the trade" in the monastic system of mental training, I argue that when skilfully handled it could serve as the positive condition of its own negation and eventual supersession: those who were able to withstand the siege would eventually gain control over automatic patterns of thinking and reacting that lie beyond ordinary control, in order to renounce

them. The chapter ends with an attempt to reconstruct some aspects of the new subjectivity that accompanied these cognitive changes.

Asceticism and Christian Monasticism

Christian monasticism is perhaps the clearest historical manifestation of asceticism, but it is not the only one. Asceticism appears in many guises and in a variety of cultural contexts. Attempts to define this multifaceted phenomenon vary from broad definitions that see asceticism as continuous with cultural formation itself, to narrow delineations that portray it as a specifically religious phenomenon, often associating it with the Christian monastic movement that emerged in the fourth century. Those who adopt broad definitions of asceticism point to a shared disposition among humans to ascetic behaviour – an "ascetic imperative" or "ascetic instinct."[1] On this view, a certain level of ascetic self-denial is always necessary for cultural functioning, and hence "asceticism" will include any disciplined, goal-oriented behaviour in the service of social formation.

While broad definitions include within the framework of asceticism practices and modes of being that go beyond the domain of religious asceticism, narrower delimitations of the term assume that asceticism is always set within specifically religious traditions.[2] In a religious context, asceticism involves a voluntary, sustained, and systematic programme of self-discipline and self-denial, in which immediate gratification is renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state.[3] By shaping a completely new identity, religious asceticism allows ascetic practitioners to attain a higher, more spiritual plane of existence.

However, the ascetic ideal looks different in various religious frameworks, each of which presupposes a different understanding of human nature. In

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1 Most notably, Geoffrey Harpham argues that asceticism is "sub-ideological" and common to all cultures; see *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xi. For a similar view based on evolutionary biology, see Robert A.F. Thurman, "Tibetan Buddhist Perspectives on Asceticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Richard Valantasis and Vincent L. Wimbush (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 108–118, at 108; and Johannes Bronkhorst, "Asceticism, Religion, and Biological Evolution," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 13 (2001): 374–418.

2 Some scholars situate asceticism within specifically *cosmological* religious traditions. See Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

3 See Walter O. Kaelber, "Asceticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987), 1: 441; Rebecca Krawiec, "Asceticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 764–785.

Christian monasticism, the ultimate goal of ascetic practice was the reconstitution of the prelapsarian self in order to unite it with God. Ascetic practitioners within the early monastic movement thus employed asceticism in distinctively Christian ways, to which broad definitions of asceticism cannot do full justice. On the other hand, to apply the term only to the Christian monastic movement is to neglect the cross-cultural importance of asceticism in a variety of religious traditions as well as the ascetic streams already present in Greco-Roman culture prior to the fourth century CE.

In fact, the Christian use of the word "asceticism" (ἄσκησις), which does not occur in the New Testament,[4] derives from its earlier use in classical Greek thought, where ἄσκησις meant practice or training, particularly the physical training required for athletic events.[5] In the subsequent philosophical tradition the term gradually transitioned from the public arena into the sphere of moral philosophy, in which it came to represent a regimen and discipline designed to inculcate virtuous habits.[6] But it was only in the first century CE – in exactly the period when the New Testament literature was written – that asceticism became a major factor in the philosophical and religious life of the Roman Empire.[7]

Whereas earlier generations of scholars tended to downplay the very early manifestations of asceticism within Christianity,[8] recent scholarship suggests that asceticism was indigenous to the early Christian movement, and that ascetic impulses are already present in Paul's letters and in the synoptic Gospels.[9]

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4   The substantives ἄσκησις and ἀσκητής do not occur in the New Testament, and the verb ἀσκέω is used only once, at Acts 24:16. On Paul's advice concerning asceticism in this passage, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 44–57. On asceticism in early Christianity, see Duncan M. Derrett, "Primitive Christianity as an Ascetic Movement," in *Asceticism*, ed. Valantasis and Wimbush, 88–107.

5   See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 76–77. On Greco-Roman asceticism, see John Pinsent, "Ascetic Moods in Greek and Latin Literature," in *Asceticism*, ed. Valantasis and Wimbush, 211–219.

6   The Stoic philosopher Epictetus explains in the first century CE: "Whatever things are applied to the body by those who train (τῶν γυμναζόντων) it, so may these be used in our [philosophical] training (ἀσκητικά)" (*Dissertationes* 3.12.16, ed. Henricus Schenkl [Leipzig: Teubner, 1916], 270). Cf. *Dissertationes* 2.18.27 (ed. Schenkl, 188).

7   See Richard Valantasis, "Musonius Rufus and Roman Ascetical Theory," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 40 (1999): 207–231.

8   E.g., Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 79.

9   See the contributions in Lief Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (eds), *Asceticism and the New Testament* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Nevertheless, ascetic practices and principles are not systematically formulated in these texts, and asceticism is presented in the specific context of following the historical Christ.[10] In the second and third centuries, Christian theologians trained in Hellenistic ways of thought became dissatisfied with the absence of systematic analysis. At this stage, the philosophical vocabulary and techniques of ἄσκησις were introduced into Christian spirituality.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 CE) was among the first Christian theologians to use the term ἄσκησις.[11] In Clement's teaching this term came to represent a search for unification with God through contemplation, rather than an imitation of Christ through faith and good deeds. In Clement's view, through mastery of the passions and contemplation, the Christian believer can transcend his corporeal state and become like God, who is free from passions.[12] A further step in the development of a systematic ascetic theology occurred in the first half of the third century, when Origen of Alexandria (185–254 CE) further developed Clement's theories of the spiritual life.[13]

Although the ascetic impulse is clearly seen in the writings of the Alexandrian theologians, it was only in the fourth century that organized and well-defined ascetic communities emerged in Egypt and elsewhere. Henceforth, Christian asceticism forms a part of monasticism and cannot be studied separately from it. The methodological distinction between asceticism and monasticism is not only unnecessary but also anachronistic.[14] In what follows therefore the terms "monk" and "ascetic" will be used interchangeably.

10 On the ascetic principles and practices promulgated in the Gospel of Matthew, see Anthony Saldarini, "Asceticism and the Gospel of Matthew," in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Vaage and Wimbush, 11–28. For a similar conclusion with regard to the Gospel of Luke, see Turid Karlsen Seim, "Children of the Resurrection: Perspectives on Angelic Asceticism in Luke-Acts," in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 116–117.

11 See Bernard McGinn, "Asceticism and Mysticism in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," in *Asceticism*, ed. Wimbush and Valantasis, 58–74, at 61.

12 Clement teaches, for example, that the commands to give up all one's possessions (Luke 14:33) and to sell all one's property (Matt. 19:21) refer to the passions (*Quis dives salvetur?* 14.5–6 [SC 537: 138]). See also Clement, *Str.* 4.151.1 (SC 463: 308). On Clement's moral theology, see Michael White, "Moral Pathology: Passions, Progress, and Protreptic in Clement of Alexandria," in *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald (London: Routledge, 2008), 284–321.

13 See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 204; Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 80–81.

14 See Samuel Rubenson, "Christian Asceticism and the Emergence of the Monastic Tradition," in *Asceticism*, ed. Valantasis and Wimbush, 49–57, at 49; Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 14; Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12.