

# THE GREENING OF ASCETICISM

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**A**SCETICISM IS A VITAL PART OF Christian life because Christianity is inevitably experimental. Although we speak of 'spirituality', our spirituality is always and everywhere incarnational: God in human flesh stands among us as the reminder that creation is transformed in Jesus Christ. Christians walk in spirit and in flesh wary of the dangers of entirely spiritualized experience on the one side and unperceptive consumption of creation on the other. One of the greater challenges of the Christian life—perhaps the greatest because of its centrality to the mystery of Christian belief—is to attune oneself as acutely as possible to both dimensions of human experience, the intangible, invisible encounter with God and the contemplation of God's work in creation. Such attunement is an ascetical labour which requires patience and perseverance. Such attunement is the entire purpose of asceticism.

The recovery of a truly incarnational understanding of asceticism from false spiritualization is critical for Christians who want to engage with the deepest crisis of our time, the systematic ravaging of our primary contemplative medium, the earth on which we live. A renewed asceticism with its emphasis on encountering God through God's creation shifts our perspective from the natural desire to possess and consume to the realism of assessing our needs and reverencing the source of our sustenance. Asceticism can take many forms, can be practised in a variety of situations and locations, can be mild or severe. For some people it comes utterly naturally, for others it is definitely working against the grain. In every case asceticism is rescued from Pharisaism or works-righteousness only if its goal is understood: ever-deeper insight.

The greening of asceticism begins with a recovery of the early Christian ascetical perspective exemplified by the first monks of the Egyptian desert. Their teaching is profound, direct, cogent. They understood the full trajectory of the Christian progress to God and they set about living in a way that would keep them moving towards their goal. The sublime simplicity of their teaching and example can set us on our way.

*Asceticism and contemplation*

Early Christian theologians and mystics were profoundly aware of the significance of God's creating work in the universe. They knew not to confuse God and creatures; Abba Antony, great monk of the desert, chastened a group of philosophers for making that fatal mistake (*Life of Antony* 76). They looked upon creation as God's self-expression, as the creative work of the *logos* or Word of God. Undergirding the entire universe is this *logos*, this constitutive principle for all that exists: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people' (Jn 1,1-3). The Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, manifesting the creative principle of the universe in the most vivid and accessible manner possible. The significance of this doctrine of creation cannot be overemphasized. It is the presence in creation of this divine principle which makes the created universe a genuine communication of God and God's will. The reality of sin may have distorted but has not obliterated this source of divine revelation. Seen in this way, created things are not simply gifts of God or signs of divine favour, but they are shot through with the love which is the very creative principle of God. They are not God, but they are of God.

Christianity is the dogma of Christ our Saviour, and consists of the ascetical life, of the contemplation of the nature of things, and of the contemplation of God. (Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 1)

One of the wise people of that time came to the just Antony and asked him: 'How do you endure, Father, deprived of the consolation of books?' He replied: 'My book, O philosopher, is the nature of existent things, and it is there when I wish to read the words of God'. (Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 92)

In the first quote above, Evagrius sketches the Christian life in three stages, which are best thought of as interwoven rather than successive. The groundwork is what he, following Clement of Alexandria and Origen, describes as the 'practical', or ascetical, life. This attention to the ascetical disciplines of prayer, fasting, keeping vigil, reading the scriptures, is the indispensable preparation for the contemplation of created things. This contemplation surpasses mere enjoyment of surface beauty, seeking the 'dearest freshness deep down things' of which Gerard Manley Hopkins writes in 'God's

Grandeur'. Any sort of contemplation requires preparation in order to quiet distractions, to break the hold of obsessive thoughts, to restore our ability to see things in their proper proportions. The desert monks knew this preparation to be a lifelong process rather than a fifteen-minute technique used as a run-up to prayer. They knew contemplation to be not a task or an intermittent activity, but a stance towards human and divine reality that characterizes one's entire life. Therefore one's whole life has to change to dispose one towards contemplation. This change involves every aspect of the self, of body and of spirit. The gradual reorientation of the human person towards the reality of God and the deep reality of the universe is what asceticism is all about.

This kind of asceticism is not the responsibility of just the solitary monk in the desert. It is a mindfulness that enables all Christians to cultivate attentiveness to truth. The 'reality therapy' of asceticism is equally achieved in the relentless demands of parenthood and the giving of self in religious life or priesthood. It is not a matter of self-induced starvation or flagellation, but is more accurately understood as awareness: awareness of one's needs, appreciation of things and persons other than oneself, the ability to relate to things and persons other than oneself without consuming them. This is a patient sort of learning, occurring only through experience and the willingness to deal directly with the issues which cloud our ability to see as we must.

The early ascetical literature often employs metaphors of clearing, planting and cultivation to describe this labour. It is never-ending, it is often tedious: there is nothing more boring and insipid than our foolishness and sins. Even after the work of clearing away the brambles and dead wood of major and obvious sins there remains the mundane crop of daily selfishness, each act minor in itself but the totality capable of choking any fruitful growth. It is only through the daily 'working of the earth of the heart' that we can ever expect love to grow. As John Cassian, the great communicator of Egyptian monastic tradition to the West, rather vividly describes: 'At every hour and instant turning up the earth of our heart with the plough of the Gospel, that is with the constant recollection of the Lord's Cross, we will be able to eliminate from ourselves the lairs of foul beasts and the hiding places of poisonous serpents' (*Conferences* 1.22).

Asceticism enables contemplation by leading one to the integration of emotions which Evagrius and other Christian writers describe as *apatheia*. We might say 'getting it together' or 'growing up'; the point is the same. To return to the agricultural metaphor, the heart in the

state of *apatheia* is the well-tended and well-planted field. Weeds still threaten but are in check; the air is calm and temperate; the tender plantings of virtues are able to gather strength and sturdiness. The result is the growth of love, and it is this love which then leads one into the knowledge of created things. The significance of field, vineyard and garden metaphors in biblical and post-biblical texts surely lies beyond their relevance to the agricultural economy of ancient peoples. These images describe the process of human cultivation which is the ascetical task.

The encounter with God's work in creation is the way towards knowledge of God as God is. Augustine notes that 'we catch sight of the Truth as he is known through his creation' (*Confessions* 7.10), but adds that this creation is real only in so far as it has being from God. Our proper use of creation is to marvel at its mediation of God's salvific plan and will, and to seek further for the One who shaped the creation we encounter as our eyes are opened. This suggests that as we damage and destroy the creation around us, we obscure and then obliterate the traces of God's loving will given us as hints of the divine. To damage the earth is to damage the book of nature where we read about God, it is to silence the earthly song which echoes the glorious music of the Kingdom of God.

But there is another side to the revelatory nature of creation. We learn not only harmony and beauty from nature, we learn also death and struggle and starvation and war. The same flaw which runs through the human psyche, causing us to grasp illusory securities and to defend them at all costs, disrupts the divine plan for the whole of creation: 'For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope' (Rom 8,20). Even without human destructiveness the natural world is subject to catastrophe on an epic scale, and the food chain of creaturely survival is hardly a paradise of mutually respectful insects, animals and other creatures going about their God-given purpose in gentle harmony. In nature we contemplate God's creating grandeur but also a creation at times seemingly severed from a beneficent providence. If we see the will of God mediated to us in creation we also see our own sinfulness and destructiveness mirrored on microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. The interplay of the human person recovering from the trauma of original sin and the cosmos cycling through disaster and recovery is an intriguing and profoundly mysterious one. Paul continues the passage from Romans, 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the

children of God' (Rom 8,21). Our human hope is shared by all of creation; we are interdependent within the mystery of salvation. Today debate intensifies over the relation between human life and the life of the planet, centring often on the question of stewardship. Are we the stewards and guardians of a planet given to us for our support and prosperity? Or are we just one species among many others, with no special claim to the earth? Are we inevitably despoilers of whatever we touch? These questions force us to consider how we are to relate to the creation around us.

### *Asceticism and communication*

When Antony had gathered a hoe, an axe and a little grain, he inspected the land around the mountain, and finding a small, suitable place he plowed it; and having abundant water from the spring, he planted it. And by doing this every year, he had bread from then on, rejoicing because he would be annoying no one because of this, and because he kept himself from being a burden in all things. But after this, again seeing certain people coming, he also planted a few vegetables in order that the visitor might have a little relief from the rigor of that hard trip. At first, however, when the beasts in the wilderness came for water, they often would damage his crop and his planting. But gently capturing one of the beasts, he said to all of them, 'Why do you hurt me, when I do you no injury? Leave, and in the name of the Lord do not come near here any longer.' From then on, as if being afraid of the command, they did not come near the place. (*Life of Antony* 50)<sup>1</sup>

Antony's experience suggests both the ambivalence and the possibility of the human place in the cosmos. All is not well with the human effort to make a life on this planet: the sentencing of Adam and Eve in chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis is fulfilled in our daily experience of struggle against unpredictable natural forces, forces with which we cannot communicate and over which we have little power. Nonetheless, the creation of earth, animal life and human beings by one God suggests that there is a unity to be sought somewhere, however elusive it may be.

The detection of this unity returns us to the ascetical goal of seeing clearly and truly. The struggle for survival despite natural disaster and competition for food and other resources is obvious. Seeing the traces of harmony and cooperation is a far more difficult task. As Christians, however, we are committed to the principle of such an original unity between God and creation, and within that creation.

The present state of that unity will naturally be as skewed and marred as the state of the image and likeness of God within us. Both unity and image are perhaps more often experienced as promise than as present experience, but they are nonetheless real. As we live in this time of salvation, the time between creation and the final harvest to God, we must seek signs of original goodness as we long for restoration and transformation.

Antony's difficulty with the local wildlife is echoed in every farmer's and gardener's encounter with hungry or curious birds and fauna. His solution, however, strikes us as quaint and utterly irrelevant to the gardener enraged by a rabbit's consumption of what is to its eyes a conveniently-planted salad. However, Antony's biographer is not interested in quaint vignettes. A point is being made in this story about connection and communication across the gulf which separates human from non-human creatures, human beings from their planet. If we can learn to see and to listen in contemplation, perhaps we can also learn how to speak of and to nature rather than silence and destroy it. The contemplative ascetic who works the earth of the heart can learn to work the earth of the planet with open eyes and ears. This challenge requires the use of every human faculty and kind of knowledge as we learn the workings of the cosmos and understand our relationship to it. Antony's encounter with local fauna is a hint for our human encounter with the universe.

#### *Asceticism and consumption*

Amma Syncletica also said, 'There is an asceticism which is determined by the enemy and his disciples practise it. So how are we to distinguish between the divine and royal asceticism and the demonic tyranny? Clearly through its quality of balance. Always use a single rule of fasting. Do not fast four or five days and break it the following day with any amount of food. In truth lack of proportion always corrupts.'<sup>2</sup>

The ascetical goal of true insight into the nature of creation and the creation of nature has immediate and practical consequences. The attention to self-awareness brings one to a truer sense of physical needs, and the growing insight into the theological resonances of creation induces a more profound respect for the earth and its fruits. It is always a movement towards balance and integration, as Syncletica notes. The original paradigm of natural harmony between

God and humankind, and between humankind and the rest of creation, was disrupted and we now work towards its restoration. The ascetical starting point is the discovery of balance within our own lives as we learn what our bodies need for food, drink, sleep and what they can or cannot tolerate in the way of excess or deprivation. The ascetical challenge is not narcissistic physical culture—body-building is about as far from this balance as one can get—but is a listening to the body and the emotions, noting their interplay and seeking their reconciliation. The way to do this is to seek a regular diet and other patterns of consumption that abuse neither body nor conscience nor earth.

One of the tensions inherent in any discussion of asceticism can be expressed in the questions, 'Is asceticism conceived as something against nature practised to tame disordered human nature? Or is asceticism a natural approach which develops full human potential?' One can find each view in the Christian tradition, and of course each speaks to a part of human experience. We are confused in much of what we want and do, but we aren't hopelessly deprived. The body needs both discipline and nurture. Syncletica gets it just right when she distinguishes between the 'tyranny' of a false asceticism and the 'divine and royal' qualities of true asceticism. The key distinction is balance: does one seek to punish and to abuse the body, or to find its natural rhythms?

Today this distinction is more crucial than ever because of the enormous social pressures in western countries to conform to cultural ideals of physical attractiveness. This pressure is particularly intense for women. The insanity of such pressure is evident in the range of eating disorders which afflict modern people desperate to conform to spurious ideals and profoundly convinced that they are failures if they do not do so. The irony of anorexia on the one hand and compulsive body-building on the other hand in a world where billions have less food than they need signals yet again the profound disharmonies within creation. We generate illusory ambitions and allow ourselves to be driven by them. The only way forward is, again, the nurturing of an ability to see oneself and one's place in the world as accurately as possible. Some of us are naturally thin and may need to eat more, others are naturally obese and will need to eat less. In each case the goal is balance and health, not the pursuit of an impossible and destructive goal. As one grows into oneself one can gather strength and courage to challenge the social pressures which try to force the body to become what it cannot be, to eat and to consume in ways that

are at odds with respectful attention to our earth. Abba Daniel used to tell how when Abba Arsenius learned that all the varieties of fruit were ripe he would say, 'Bring me some'. He would taste a very little of each, just once, giving thanks to God.<sup>3</sup>

The insight asceticism develops into the nature of all creation challenges the way in which we regard the food we grow, purchase and consume. The dignity and reverence we show to the food of the Eucharist is mocked by the carelessness with which we handle the food which sustains us in our daily lives and labour. An increasing reliance on fast foods, failure to take time over a meal or to eat with other people, seeing food as a threat to one's longed-for physique: all of these practices and attitudes reduce food to a purely functional role. Food becomes simply a commodity, and an ambivalent one at that. Most modern people are quite removed from the actual cultivation and production of food. This distance contributes to the attitude that because food appears on the shelves like any manufactured product it is to be handled as such.

Compare with this the reverence shown by Abba Daniel in the story above. He was a man of severe discipline and carefully moderated diet, but he venerated and enjoyed the fruits of the earth. Other stories from the desert depict monks passing around bunches of grapes without eating from them, or deliberately choosing bad rather than good fruit, but not so Abba Daniel. He looked forward to the annual joy of joining the natural rhythm of nature by tasting each fruit as it came to ripeness. He didn't gorge himself, he didn't hoard, he didn't use the fruit as an ornament not intended to be eaten. He simply used it according to its purpose.

*Asceticism, contemplation and human community*

Abba Hyperechios said, 'It is better to eat meat and drink wine than to eat the flesh of one's neighbours through slander'.<sup>4</sup> The ascetical challenge, then, is on both individual and social levels. What is my own natural balance? How do I resist and try to reshape society's use of false and potentially dangerous stereotypes? How do I give my body what it needs in a way that respects what the earth gives me? These questions are basic and controversial. Dogmatism lurks in the vicinity of each one, and Abba Hyperechios' caution is valuable to us in discussion of these matters. There are no absolutely certain answers to questions about the merits of vegetarianism or the eating of meat, about the virtues of vegan or other diets: 'Food will not commend us to God' (1 Cor 8,8). There is ample opportunity in

debate, however, for people to assert that there are absolutes and then to engage the machinery of judgement and condemnation. Fanaticism in the service of contemplation of the natural world is a grotesque contradiction of the fundamental value of seeing clearly and wholly. One who is able to see may challenge, and do so passionately, but will never condemn.

There was an anchorite who was grazing with the antelopes and who prayed to God, saying, 'Lord, teach me something more.' And a voice came to him, saying, 'Go into this monastery and do whatever they command you.' He went there and remained in the cenobium but did not know the work of the brothers. The young monks began to teach him the work of the brothers and would say to him, 'Do this you idiot,' and, 'Do that, you old fool.' And suffering he prayed to God, saying, 'Lord, I do not know the work of human beings, send me back to the antelopes.' And having been freed by God, he went back into the country to graze with the antelopes.<sup>5</sup>

There are times when all of us may be tempted to graze with the antelopes rather than deal with the struggles of human society. The suspicion always lurks that contemplation is impossible within the ambiguities and tensions of ordinary life. Here we must be vigilant to avoid a fatal error in our greening of asceticism: the notion that our contemplation of natural creation is purer or more direct if we separate ourselves as far as possible from all influences and traces of human life. The human role in the life of this planet and universe is fraught with problems of enormous proportions, but they are solved neither by ignoring them nor by wishing for the virtual elimination of that human role. Asceticism prepares us finally for relationship. Remember that the result of the ascetical life is love, and it is this love which enables us to see and to understand. Sight and understanding enable us to relate to one another, to all of creation, and finally and primarily to God. This is a lifetime's work and more. It is a deliberate effort, but best done without the burden of acute self-consciousness. Let us learn from Abba Sisoës:

A brother asked Abba Sisoës, 'Why did you leave Scetis, where you lived with Abba Or, and come to live here?' The old man said, 'At the time when Scetis became crowded, I heard that Antony was dead and I got up and came here to his mountain. Finding the place peaceful I have settled here for a little while.' The brother said to him, 'How long have you been here?' The old man said to him, 'Seventy-two years'.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Trans. R. C. Gregg, Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York, 1980), p 69.
- <sup>2</sup> *Apophthegmata patrum*, Alphabetical Series, Syncretica 15, trans. B. Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London, 1975), p 196.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Arsenius 19, p 10.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Hyperechios 4, p 200.
- <sup>5</sup> *Apophthegmata patrum*, Anonymous Series, Nau 62, trans. C. Stewart, *World of the Desert Fathers* (Fairacres, 1986), p 20.