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The Naked Intent: On Connecting Asceticism and Activism

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Abstract: This article explores the connections between political activism and Christian asceticism. It does so through a discussion with recent political theologies and historical research into (early) Christian asceticism. Two present-day cases, the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Buy Nothing Year, are used to demonstrate similarities and potential for fruitful engagement between the two traditions. It is suggested that asceticism needs to be understood in a fuller range, incorporating introspective, imaginative and institutional aspects in order to make visible the potential for a dialogue between the Christian ascetic tradition and present-day political activism. The article thus contributes to the discussion concerning asceticism in the Christian tradition, developing public theology as a bodily practice and to a theological understanding of political activism.

Keywords: asceticism, activism, monasticism, Occupy Wall Street, Buy Nothing Year, prayer.

In face of rampant climate change, polarizing societies, societies divided by issues of gender and sexuality, more and more people seek to find ways to combine political activism with Christian faith. One trend is to look to the monastic tradition and ascetic practices for inspiration. Evangelicals like Shane Claiborne have made use of ascetic traditions in their Christian political activism.¹ For a few years now the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland church has proposed ‘eco-fasting’ during Lent.² More examples are easy to find.

On an immediate level, there seems to be a clear connection between traditional ascetic practices such as fasting and activist tactics like boycotts – both are instances where someone refrains from something in order to achieve something else. Eco-fasting – that is, the practice of giving up meat to reduce one’s carbon footprint – thus seems like an obviously good idea. On the other hand, such actions could be said to be little more than a rather superficial understanding of traditional ascetic techniques. No desert father fasted for what might now be called environmental reasons.³

Our intention is to develop a framework for a dialogue between the Christian ascetic tradition and political activism as a distinct contribution to a public theology⁴ that seeks to understand religious and political practices.⁵ Public theology, as does academic theology in

¹ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Harper Collins, 2006).

² Ekopaasto. <http://www.ekopaasto.fi/>, accessed 6 February, 2016).

³ For potential connections, see Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 463; Catherine Keller, ‘Chosen Persons and the Green Ecumenacy: A Possible Christian Response to the Population Apocalypse’, in David G. Hallman, ed, *Eco-Theology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 284-299.

⁴ Breitenberg has listed three types of public theology literature. 1. Discussion about public theologians, 2 Discussion about public theology and 3. Constructive public theology. The present article fits into the third category. E. Harold Breitenberg, ‘To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?’ *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23:22 (2003), 55–96 at 62–63.

⁵ There are few full treatments of this subject matter. Luke Bretherton writes, in a way that is not uncommon in current theology, ‘For Alinsky, community organization involves a form of political *ascesis* or disciplined formation: it educates and apprentices people into the practices necessary for sustaining public or civic friendships

general, has a tendency to focus too narrowly on discourse. Asceticism has historically been both public and theological to a degree that, especially in Protestant tradition, is seldom acknowledged.

The academic interest in asceticism has been steadily growing for the past decades.⁶ It has done so because it connects a number of central concerns of modern academia – primarily the body and sexuality – to religious praxis, and draws upon an interesting modern tradition of thinking – from Nietzsche to Foucault.⁷ Yet, as Sarah Coakley points out, there have been few attempts at actually rehabilitating asceticism as a useful concept in today’s world: ‘Asceticism has become voyeuristic, something to study but not actually do.’⁸ This habit of mind makes the connection between asceticism and activism particularly interesting, since activism is by definition something you do.⁹

The key requirement for such a fruitful discussion is to develop a fuller understanding of the Christian ascetic tradition. We will thus proceed in several steps. Firstly, we will survey the academic discussion regarding Christian asceticism and political activism,¹⁰ and by shifting that debate using a fuller account of asceticism in the Christian tradition than what is usually the case (based on historical research), argue that there is more conceptual overlap between the two

and, through these friendships, forging a common world with those who are different or with whom they disagree.’ This seems to us to be a very fruitful notion of asceticism, but it is not at all developed further by Bretherton in his book. Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 77.

⁶ Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); David W. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013.); Richard D. Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche discusses ascetic ideals in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Michel Foucault treats the concept of *askēsis* in his *History of Sexuality* as well as his lectures at the Collège de France from 1982 to 1984. See Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

⁸ Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism. Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 18.

⁹ There is no consensus on a definition of activism. For the present purpose, activism is understood as a politically motivated attempt to change a situation using creative tactics. For a discussion see Shiv Ganesh and Heather M. Zoller, ‘Dialogue, Activism, and Democratic Social Change,’ *Communication Theory* 22:1 (2012): 66–91.

¹⁰ The primary modern example of the ascetic activist is Mohandas Gandhi. See, Veena R. Howard, *Gandhi’s Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action*, (Albany: University of New York Press, 2013). For further political relevance of asceticism outside the Christian tradition is Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 233.

phenomena than what has generally been thought. Secondly, using concrete cases of activism, we will show that the Christian ascetic tradition can shed light on various aspects of activism at a much deeper level than merely as similar practices, such as the way activism is related to community-building and the way conflicting motives among activists can be handled. Activism can also bring important insights to the way Christian asceticism is perceived, however, by providing a present-day framework for a focused intentional way of life. We will thus show that connecting asceticism and activism in a more serious way makes sense both analytically and practically.

While it is clear that asceticism and the concept of mysticism are closely related, for the present purpose, we will largely bracket the discussion about the way mysticism relates to the political as well as the way asceticism and mysticism is related.¹¹ It is clear that by limiting the perspective on asceticism to its political relevance, other important perspectives will be neglected, but we argue that it is the political perspective that is underdeveloped in the scholarly discussion and thus hope to contribute to the wider discussion this way.¹²

More academic attempts at connecting asceticism and activism usually begin (and often end!) with applying Max Weber's notion of inner-worldly asceticism to political groups. The significance of Weber's contribution was that he saw asceticism as a response to a tension between political and economic realities and a religious ethos (the unashamed use of such broad categories notwithstanding).¹³ His extremely blunt instrument of inner-worldly vs. world-

¹¹ The relationship between mysticism and the political has been studied quite extensively by writers such as Dorothee Sölle, Eduard Schillebeeckx, and Gustavo Gutierrez. See Matthew T. Eggemeier, 'A Mysticism of Open Eyes: Compassion for a Suffering World and the Askesis of Contemplative Prayer', in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12:1 (2012), 43-62.

¹² For an overview on political activism, see R Pointer et al., 'Civil Society, Political Activism and Communications in Democratisation Conflicts. A Literature Review' (MeCoDEM Working Paper, 2016), <<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/117310/>> [accessed 29 July 2019].

¹³ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 331-340. Weber also discusses the tension between religion and the aesthetic, the erotic and the intellectual. Weber also discusses asceticism in his works *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1985).

The notion of asceticism as a response to perceived tension with political and social forces was picked up in the early work by the so called 'asceticism group' in the United States in 1990s, but subsequently dropped. Vincent

rejecting asceticism,¹⁴ however, as well as his contrasting of asceticism and mysticism as polar opposites should give pause for thought.¹⁵ His view of asceticism is certainly very different from the picture described by more recent (and more source-focused) research, yet it remains oddly influential.¹⁶

For Weber, asceticism, especially when it is ‘inner-worldly’, is indeed about activism. Since it is distinguished from both world-rejecting asceticism and mysticism in its various forms, though, it is hard to tell what distinguishes asceticism from any other type of political activity. Asceticism in the Christian tradition seldom seems to exist in any of these ideal forms, however. As the corpus of texts studied in early Christian studies grows and is compared with a wider range of contemporary texts, and is further complemented by archaeological evidence, a picture emerges of an ascetic movement that is closely related to ‘the world’ in complex ways.¹⁷

Another commonly held opinion about asceticism is that it is fueled by a dualistic rejection of the body. This notion, strongly held by older mostly Protestant research may still be found in handbooks, but has little support among scholars today. Rather, the ascetic tradition developed a very dynamic understanding of the way the body interacted with social,

L. Wimbush, ed, *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Mineapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p.2. For further discussion of definitions of asceticism, see Patrik Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 3-17.

¹⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, pp. 541-544.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 544-551.

¹⁶ Nicole Shepherd, ‘Anarcho-Environmentalists. Ascetics of Late Modernity’. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31:2 (2002), 135-157. Shepherd’s article is based on solid fieldwork; it suffers from its narrow understanding of asceticism. While referring also to Harpham and Foucault, she bases her concept of asceticism mostly on Weber.

¹⁷ It should be noted in Weber’s defence that he does not seem to be particularly interested in early Christian asceticism. What drives his discussion is the ‘inner-worldly asceticism’ of the Puritans as a crucial part of his narrative about the development of capitalism. He has a discussion regarding the difference between “world-fleeing mysticism” and “world-rejecting asceticism”, but while he maintains this distinction to be very important, it is unclear if it has any historical foundation. Weber, *Economy and Society; an Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 544-545. For a historical perspective, see Mark R. Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

psychological and cultural aspects of the human person.¹⁸ This way of conceptualizing asceticism is one important reason why it should now be reexamined as a valid political concept.

The discussion will proceed as follows. Based on an overview of various theological approaches to connecting asceticism to the political, we will propose a model for a more multifaceted – and therefore more politically compelling understanding of asceticism. Using this model with three aspects of asceticism, and a separate division of the ascetic life into three areas created by David Fagerberg, we will analyze two examples of present day activism that we maintain show ascetic traits: the Occupy Wall Street movement and the concept of a Buy Nothing Year. Based on this analysis we will finally address how the connection between asceticism and activism can be relevant.

Theological approaches to asceticism as political

Asceticism as a political activity can be treated in very different ways.¹⁹ One such approach is explored by theologian Marion Grau in her 2004 study *Of Divine Economy. Refinancing Redemption*. Drawing on postcolonial thought, feminism and the philosophy of Jacques Derrida she describes the ascetic as a trickster figure, who ‘shuns convention and customs of society, as its nonconformity can turn into ideological (and theological) iconoclasm, social anarchy, literary satire’.²⁰ Focusing on characters like Symeon the Stylite and the ‘holy fool’-tradition,

¹⁸ For overviews of this research see Samuel Rubenson, ‘“As Already Translated to the Kingdom while Still in the Body”: The Transformation of the Ascetic in Early Egyptian Monasticism’, in Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Økland, eds, *Metamorphoses Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity*, (New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 274-291.

¹⁹ The most explicit attempt at connecting asceticism with the political is Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political. Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*, (Indiana: Notre Dame, 2012). Its concept of the political is mostly limited to the question of participation in liberal democratic institutions, and uses a concept of the ascetic that is limited to a personal struggle for ethical improvement. See Hagman, ‘Asceticism as Political Theology: The Ascetic as Sacrament in St Isaac of Nineveh’, in Hilarion Alfeyev, ed, *St Isaac the Syrian and his Spiritual Legacy*, Yonkers N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015), pp259-269.

²⁰ Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy: Refinancing Redemption* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), p. 195.

Grau suggests that asceticism can open up a third space where elements of society can be questioned and exposed as unjust or absurd. It becomes easy for her to find modern examples of activists working according to a similar logic, such as eco-activist Julia Butterfly Hill who stylite-like lived in the top of a redwood tree for seven hundred and thirty-eight days in order to stop the clear-cutting of a redwood forest; or various performance artists who use street theater and clown-like artistry to get their message across.²¹

The important point Grau makes is that some of these ascetics and activists combine a kind of power of the powerless – when taken to its extreme, the willingness to give up one’s life – with a bridging and blurring of categories which makes their protest particularly compelling. This is true of Simon on his pillar, half-way between heaven and earth, but even more striking regarding the female ascetics that very clearly transcended the gender distinctions of their day.²² Grau uses the influential definition of asceticism by Richard Valantasis:

Asceticism may be defined as performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.²³

Grau here stresses the notion of performance and takes it in the direction of actual play-acting. This dimension of asceticism is also very strong in the female asceticism of the medieval

²¹ Ibid., pp. 196-210.

²² It is a cliché of the stories about female saints in the early church that they “became like men” or even posed as male ascetics. See Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

²³ Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2008), p. 38.

period, although the entirely different social situation compared with late antiquity means that it takes different forms.²⁴

Grau's rather individualistic interpretation of asceticism does not do ancient asceticism full justice, however. Nor does it of itself suffice as a political strategy. Striking individuals like Symeon the Stylite and Anthony the Great clearly played a great role in the emergence of the ascetic tradition, but their impact on society was based on being part of a mass movement of thousands of ordinary ascetics mostly living together in monasteries. Any account of Christian asceticism and its political impact that does not take this into account is unbalanced.

In a very different approach to the same theme as Grau – that is, economics and theology – Daniel M Bell Jr. deals with this other side of monastic life. Bell is concerned with capitalism as an 'Economy of desire' and interprets monasticism as an environment for practices that reshape desires. Bell's example is Bernhard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians and yet his argument is equally, if not more pertinent, for the early church. According to Bell, the problem with capitalism is not that it feeds our desires, but that it deforms them and directs them to the wrong things. The monastery thus functions as a 'school of charity, where desire was redeemed and love redirected'.²⁵ The Cistercians actively recruited their members among the aristocracy. Much of the monastic life was then devoted to redirecting the desires so that rather than striving for power and worldly glory they would learn humility and longing for divine love. The various rituals and ascetic techniques employed in the ascetic life, including the office, served this purpose. Compared with Grau, the aspects of ascetic life here emphasized are much less spectacular, even mundane.

A similar approach is taken by Sarah Coakley in her *The New Asceticism. Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (2015). For her asceticism, properly understood, 'involves a

²⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 219-244.

²⁵ Daniel M. Bell, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), p.132.

demanding integration of intellectual, spiritual and bodily practice over a life-time, sustained by a complete vision of the Christian life and its “ends”²⁶. This definition, on initial observation, seems to suggest that asceticism would only be relevant in an explicitly religious context. Coakley notes, however, that ‘there are already plenty of indications in the so-called “secular” world that “asceticism” of some sort is not only needed but actively to be pursued’,²⁷ citing addiction treatments, anger management and dieting as examples. This question of how to relate secular practices to a theological tradition like asceticism, is a crucial, and very complex, question.

Like Gray, Bell and Coakley envision the political aspect of the ascetic life to take place primarily within the individual; they do so in spite of the pronounced intention to connect asceticism to the political.²⁸ It would be a mistake, nevertheless, to see monasticism as an individualistic self-improvement project. Cistercian life, for instance, is intensely communal. What needs to be modified is not merely something inside the monk or nun, but rather their patterns of relationships as such. To get at asceticism in its full political sense this aspect has to be developed further: the focus here, again to use Valantasis’s terms, is more on ‘shaping new social relations’, and the ‘new identity’ follows from that.

Athanasius claimed that the monks had made the desert into a city. Recent research suggests that this was not meant figuratively, the ascetic movement produced monasteries that had many of the functions of actual civic centres. The ascetic movement created an alternative society with alternative rules, institutions and practices. Archaeological evidence suggests that

²⁶ Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, p.18

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁸ Coakley uses the mystical triad of purgative, illuminative and unitive practices to develop an ascetical renewal as a ‘lengthy project of erotic purification’ where the focus is clearly on the individual, though her larger theological project has a strong ecclesial orientation. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

the monasteries of the Egyptian desert were, indeed, well built, had excellent communications, a clear division of labour and well-defined social structures.²⁹

By way of illustration, the monastic movement organized schools very similar to those of the cities. These were schools that employed a similar pedagogy to that of pagan schools, replacing pagan texts with Christian texts in similar genres.³⁰ The fact that the actual ethical teaching of the Desert Fathers follows comparable patterns to those of some pagan philosophical schools,³¹ indicates that the meaning of the phrase ‘rejecting the world’ did not have the isolationist connotations Weber and many subsequent writers would give it.³²

The romantic image of the ascetic isolated in his cave, powerful as it may be symbolically, is thus inadequate as a depiction of what early Christian asceticism actually was. It is the more historically anchored image of asceticism as primarily carried out in a particular institutional setting that has more political potential than the romantic lone heroes of hagiography.

There is, then, a need for a fuller understanding of asceticism in the Christian tradition than the aspect described by Grau: her rendering can be identified as the imaginative aspect; What Bell and Coakley describe is the introspective to which can now be added a third – the institutional. Its focus falls upon the alternative institutional processes and frameworks created by asceticism itself.

The imaginative challenges the societal frameworks we use to understand our world. It goes beyond a merely intellectual challenge with the characteristic ascetic use of the body. Questions of gender and sexuality are particularly relevant in asceticism, but so are matters to

²⁹ Samuel Rubenson, 'Monasticism and the Philosophical Heritage', in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 489.

³⁰ Lilian I. Larsen, 'On Learning a New Alphabet: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and the Monastics of Menander', *Studia Patristica* 55:3 (2013), 59-77.

³¹ Henrik Rydell Johnsén, 'Renunciation, Reorientation and Guidance: Patterns in Early Monasticism and Ancient Philosophy', *Studia Patristica* 55:3 (2013), 79-94.

³² Rubenson, 'Monasticism and the Philosophical Heritage', 489.

do with food, possessions and money, and how we perceive and order time. The introspective aspect is concerned with understanding and changing a person's passions and motivations (in their social context) and thus connects moral and psychological factors. The institutional, finally, structures a common life (even in the community of one person, in the case of the hermit) in order to give more concreteness and resilience to the ascetic vision, and thus give it stronger societal impact. Such structuring does not have to take the form of a strict hierarchical organization, for example: it should reflect the aims and goals of the ascetic life (whatever they may be). The full political potential of asceticism emerges when these three aspects are combined.

Examples of ascetic activism

Such a fuller understanding of asceticism suggests that asceticism should not be reduced to ascetic techniques. In his excellent exposition of classical ascetic theology, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, David W. Fagerberg provides a simple model where ascetic thinking is divided into three parts: his description of the malady, the cure and the joy can also be expressed in terms of the problem, the method and the goal. Only the second part deals with techniques. Fagerberg's model can be used to examine the fuller range of ascetic activism – the imaginative, the introspective and the institutional – with reference to two particular examples of political activism.

Both the Occupy Wall Street movement and the concept of a Buy Nothing Year demonstrate ascetic traits.³³ They are somewhat similar in focus insofar as they evince a critical

³³ Obviously, it would not be difficult to come up with examples of ascetic activism done in a clearly Christian setting, from Catholic Worker Movement to the local parish flea market. We chose to focus on two secular examples in order to make the political potential of ascetic practices stand out. The distinction is of course problematical, since both examples are taken from cultures with a strong Christian influence.

posture towards the way in which capitalism and consumption functions in the contemporary world. They differ in size, level of ideological thinking, and in radicalism.

Occupy Wall Street refers to protest movement that started on September 11th 2011 in Zucotti Park, New York. It quickly spread across the United States and beyond. The protesters would meet up in parks, which quickly transformed into camps with food kitchens, first aid, libraries and various other activities. The protest centered on issues to do with growing income inequalities (the famous slogan “We are the 99%”), student debt and corruption in the finance sector.

One of the best accounts of the protest is David Graeber’s *The Democracy Project. A History, A Crisis, A Movement*. He took issue with the familiar criticism that the Occupy movement was not making concrete political demands and was unwilling to take part in the regular political process. Graeber preferred to describe the political significance of the movement in completely different terms.

What [these critics] don’t understand is that once people’s political horizons have been broadened the change is permanent. Hundreds of thousands of Americans (and not only Americans, of course, but Greeks, Spaniards, and Tunisians) now have the direct experience of self-organization, collective action, and human solidarity. This makes it almost impossible to go back to one’s previous life and see things the same way.³⁴

For Graeber, (who calls himself a ‘small-a anarchist’),³⁵ politics is not so much about the means to gain power. It is more a case of seeking to create a different kind of political life as such. This intention is reflected in the range of practices utilized by Occupy Wall Street: the General

³⁴ David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, 1st ed. (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013), p. xix.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Assembly, the main decision-making body of the movement, for instance, made use of a modified consensus process where anyone could participate in order to come to some agreement on more important questions of the protest, ranging from practical issues such as food distribution, to strategic questions, such as how to deal with the media. This protest prefigures a society without hierarchical structures of power; it does so in a way that is consistent with traditional anarchist thinking. Graeber further suggests that such a political change at a societal level also involves changes on a personal level where there is a broadening of one's political horizons and one's way of seeing the world. The introspective and imaginative perspectives of an ascetical typology are, in effect, aligned with institutional changes.

The comparison can be made with the theory and practice of having a Buy Nothing Year, created in 2013 by two Canadian roommates Julie Phillips and Geoffrey Szuszkiewicz. They decided to spend a whole year without buying anything except necessities, such as food and some hygiene products, that they could not make themselves. The rest of what they needed they acquired through bartering, made themselves or simply decided to live without.³⁶ For Phillips and Szuszkiewicz this commitment entailed some major lifestyle changes. They quit driving and stopped taking the bus; instead, they walked or biked, even while in the throes of Calgary's winter. They no longer went out for drinks or dinner with friends and colleagues; instead, they learned how to cook at home and began hosting lots of dinner parties. They lost contact with some friends who insisted on 'hanging out' in consumerist ways; now they made connections with other people in the arts and downshifting community and those involved with food security

³⁶ Phillips and Szuszkiewicz refer to how the project started out in a video called 'Calgary Pechakucha Talk on Buy Nothing Year' that can be found at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1IT9lAbuk0&spfreload=10>>, [accessed 2 May 2015].

and urban farming.³⁷ Their project gained much publicity – not least through their blog and the many interviews they gave.

The Buy Nothing Year programme is clearly ascetic in the more everyday usage of the term. In terms of its motivational aspect, and with regards to the consequences it had in the personal lives of Phillips and Szuszkiewicz lives, it resonates well with a fuller understanding of asceticism. While initially what could be termed an isolated ascetic practice – that is, not buying things – the project quickly evolved to embrace the introspective and imaginative aspects.

These two examples differ in two ways. Whereas the Occupy Wall Street movement was social and ideological (in a rather general sense), the Buy Nothing Year programme centered on two individuals: at the beginning they had little of an ideological framework for their actions. These differences highlight some interesting aspects of how asceticism as a concept and a tradition can be applied to current political activism.

The problem

For the activist, the problem needing to be addressed is usually described in structural terms. Those issues usually involve power and economy, as well as injustices based on race, gender and/or class. What sets activism apart from more mainstream political activities is precisely the way the activist gets involved at a personal level, investing one's self in the political struggle. A group of activists is usually more than a set of people united by a cause – they will quickly become a group of friends, or else they will simply dissolve.

³⁷ Laura Shin, 'The Buy Nothing Year: How Two Roommates Saved More Than \$ 55 000', *Forbes*, 20 August 2014), <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/laurashin/2014/08/20/the-buy-nothing-year-how-two-roommates-saved-more-than-55000/>>, [accessed 2 January 2016]

In ascetic thinking – following Fagerberg’s outline – the problem to be addressed is most often described in terms of the passions. This descriptive term is, of course, primarily one that describes something that happens within a person. It is also one of those words in Christian theology that describe what is wrong with the world, related to sin, evil, the demons and the devil. Now, in late antiquity, there was some variation in the use of this term. Besides the well-known stoic view according to which the ideal is to be completely free from passions, others use the term without moral connotations, and some (e.g. Isaac the Nineveh) see them as good, evil or neutral.³⁸ Passions name those parts of the human personality that border on the involuntary; they are movements and affections that are only partly, or only under specific circumstances, under a person’s control. Put differently, they are those parts of the human psyche that outside forces can influence and exploit. Fear is a good example of such: unless we manage to keep fear under control we are easily manipulated by the powers that be.

The passions thus connect us to the world. The seventh century Syriac mystic Isaac of Nineveh went so far as to define ‘the world’ as the sum of the negative passions.³⁹ It is this connectivity to the external world that renders passions full of political interest. By identifying which passions assail the monk, and which outside forces entice them, the early Christian ascetics produced an analysis of the society they lived in. So while the traditional vices, such as gluttony, fornication or greed, sound like parts of the individual’s psychology, to the ascetics they were an instrumental part of the world, of society. As an illustration of this understanding are Evagrius of Pontos (345–399) comments on avarice .

³⁸ Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, p. 29; Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh*, pp. 74-93.

³⁹ Isaac of Nineveh, *The Ascetic Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, II, (Boston, MA: translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984).

Avarice suggests a lengthy old age, inability to perform manual labour, famines that will come along, diseases that will arise, the bitter realities of poverty, and the shame there is in accepting goods from others to meet one's need.⁴⁰

For Evagrius avarice is not simply desire for riches; it is a passion that connects a number of thoughts that, according to him, comes to the monk from the outside.⁴¹ These thoughts, also called demons, have a purpose – they are present to tempt the monk to give up the ascetic struggle and to return to the normal, socially acceptable life. The demons speak with the voice of common sense against the project of living an alternative kind of life.

Evagrius' political thinking thus places itself half-way between the stereotypical left political analysis, emphasizing society as structures and institutions, and a stereotypical right way of thinking, emphasizing the moral character of the individual. It is his conviction that outside forces have a strong influence on the way the individual acts, and that these forces can be analyzed and understood. These outside forces do not determine the individual – there are factors inside the particular person that also must be taken into account. Evagrius' position is a way of thinking about the political that emphasizes relations and a very wide range of factors affecting them. These thoughts, or *logismoi*, are part of the fabric of society and thus of every individual. In contemporary language they are social constructs and, as such, very complicated to handle. The first step is to become aware of them, and much ascetic teaching is concerned with enumerating the passions and linking them together.

Describing the world in terms of passions can easily be done today – it is not based on a specific scientific understanding of the human being. This way of description is more about a

⁴⁰ Evagrius of Pontos, *Praktikos* 9, in: Evagrius of Pontos and Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 98 .

⁴¹ Columba Stewart, 'Evagrius Ponticus and the Eastern Monastic Tradition on the Intellect and the Passions', in Sarah Coakley, ed, *Faith, Rationality, and the Passions*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 67-79.

perspective on how people and relationships function.⁴² By way of example, it is not difficult to see what kinds of thoughts entice greed today: they may not be too different to those Evagrius describes, though they may come to us through different media. Our greed is fueled by commercials, product placement, social marketing; it is also informed and shaped by the way we talk with our co-workers over coffee and the way we dress. Of course, it is also possible to name specifically modern thoughts, like ambition. It is now used by those in positions of power to exercise some control over young people, as well as being an excuse to justify various problematic patterns of behaviour, like over-working or neglecting one's close relationships.

The ascetic teaching on passions can thus be used to formulate a critique of the way the world functions which would have perspectives that other similar critiques lack. As an example of such Phillips came close to using language not that far removed from the ascetic talk about passions while describing her experience of the Buy Nothing Year.

It felt like a fast or an addiction program where you're slowly changing your behaviors and patterns from something you're addicted to or that's habitual for you. This project, which started out as a challenge between Geoff and I and fun between roommates, ended up having a lifetime effect. The frugality I've learned is going to stick with me. It only takes 30 days to get into a new habit, so after a year it feels pretty engrained.⁴³

Like Evagrius, Phillips and Szuszkiewicz were able easily to identify connections between their own passions – or in their own language, behaviours and patterns, and problems at the societal

⁴² For two recent examples of descriptions of the human being focused on desires and passions, see Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009).

⁴³ Shin, 'The Buy Nothing Year'.

level. Phillips described what she had learnt in terms of the virtue of frugality, a type of language very much at home in the ascetic tradition. They created an effective critique of the consumption oriented society with clearly ascetic qualities. Szuszkiewicz concluded that

People are always saying, well how is the economy going to function if everyone stops buying things? Well, maybe it's not supposed to just function upon people buying things, maybe it is supposed to serve other purposes too.⁴⁴

At the beginning of the Buy Nothing Year there seemed to be no clear vision. Phillips and Szuszkiewicz realized that something is wrong in the consumer society; they had no clear counter-vision to strive towards. It was only as their experiment with this way of living unfolded that they picked up emerging insights; they realized how pleasant it is to walk to their jobs and how reasonable it is to repair clothes instead of buying new ones. Through these concrete everyday insights they gained a deeper awareness of the benefits of a slower pace in life and observing more sustainable values. Some of their initial ideas can be traced back to downshifting and mindfulness but they had no clear vision or overarching framework in which to situate themselves.

The ascetic approach to activism looks for connections between the political problem and aspects of one's own personality. It thus emphasizes the effect activism has on the actual activists – a well know phenomenon that nevertheless seldom is explicitly emphasized.⁴⁵ Whereas this aspect of activism can be seen either as a more or less irrelevant side-effect or as a problem (an exhausting demand for ethical purity), the ascetic tradition actively engages with

⁴⁴ Kristin Wong, "'Buy Nothing Year': A Chat with Geoff Szuszkiewicz & Julie Phillips", <<https://youtu.be/bNxXOf3e9Cs>>, [accessed 13 May 2015].

⁴⁵ Phillips underlines the importance of the relationships she has fostered. 'The journey for me has been about meaning and finding the people and relationships and things that are enriching my life, and not just happening. I see how if I'm mindless, I end up back in these old habits.' Shin, 'The Buy Nothing Year'.

the notion of modifying one's passions and habits, both on an individual level and on the level of the community.

When Phillips and Szuszkiewicz faced – mostly motivational – struggles during the year, they used Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to cope with them. They made a point of listing the positive effects of their changed lifestyle, as they realized the value of positive reinforcements for their motivation. Via the project, Phillips and Szuszkiewicz got more exercise, felt better about themselves as their cooking skills improved with the added bonus of saving a considerable amount of money. Here we have a contemporary rendering of the kind of introspective work done in the ascetic tradition and how such introspection includes, rather than excludes, the social dimension of life.

The Method

The next step is the devising of methods to secure some control over the passions. That is the purpose of the ascetic struggle. The first movement in the ascetic life is 'leaving the world'. The ascetic leaves the city, leaves ordinary life looking for an alternative, in the wilderness. Rather than trying to change the world by confronting it, or by striving for power, the ascetic looks for a different kind of life outside the world. This withdrawal is not merely a symbolic act: it bears witness to a different kind of society that was developed in the monasteries in late antiquity, that later would transform the entire western world. Today this act of 'leaving the world' is often more subtle. Phillips and Szuszkiewicz did not leave the city; they removed themselves from all commercial activities as they sought to create a space outside the world as defined by the capitalist society. The people who were engaged in Occupy Wall Street attempted to create a new order right in the heart of the cities; they found a space for their alternative visions in parks and city squares.

The Occupy Wall Street movement likewise did not have a set ideology that holds it together, though it consists in part of people – like Graeber – with a high level of political reflection. As a movement, it was a case of making things up as you go. It seems as if this protest movement did not want to adopt a clear ideology or even formulate demands or goals. This hesitation resonates with an ascetic approach that is inclined to focus more on formulating a set of practices (along the lines of a monastic rule) rather than a list of demands or some utopian vision.

Here the example of Evagrius can be of assistance. For him and traditional monasticism the ascetic practice that most readily corresponds to the demon of avarice is poverty – understood as the voluntary giving up of all possessions. Evagrius emphasized the freedom that this practice gave the monk: that freedom amounted to freedom from worries, duties, work. It is a method that is closely connected to time and how it is spent.⁴⁶ It is also clear, though not that so explicitly expressed in Evagrius, that living without possessions means confronting the fears that the demon of avarice depends upon.

Here it is helpful to remember the context in which Evagrius was writing. There are many stories about how God miraculously brought food to ascetics in need, but for the majority this turn from avarice is bound to putting one's life into the hands of the community and then trusting that it will provide for one's basic needs. Avarice is thus one of several forces that threaten the ascetic life as a whole, not just the life of the individual. The real temptation, then, is to give up the will to live a different kind of life. Evagrius' demons whisper 'go back to ordinary life'.⁴⁷ By way of correspondence similar demons assail the contemporary political activists. The introspective dimension to the ascetic approach seeks to understand and change those parts of one's self that feel attracted to a normal life; the imaginative seeks to create new alternative structures that support the vision of a different kind of life.

⁴⁶ Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 3, in: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, pp. 78-79.

⁴⁷ E.g. Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 12, in: Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, p. 99.

Concerning the practice of the Buy Nothing Year there is a surface resemblance between voluntary poverty and the experiment pursued by Phillips and Szuszkiewicz. The similarities go deeper than the voluntary giving up of (some) possessions. Towards the end of the project, Phillips secured new job and moved out of Szuszkiewicz's home in order to live closer to her office. She had learned through the project that it was important for her to have a short commute without car.⁴⁸

I'm really involved in my day and my surroundings because I'm not in my car all the time. I'm riding my bike and walking, and it's caused me to think about the bigger picture in our society — here's the flows of money, here's the temptations. Calgary is a wealthy city. There's an expectation that you go out for drinks after work and you have this certain lifestyle if you're working at a corporation. What does it mean to resist that and think about where your products are coming from and to see the global flow of objects?⁴⁹

The giving up of the car was more than merely getting some exercise; she became more intimately involved with her surroundings. It led her to question the presuppositions of the society in which she lives. Her ascetic practice had thus come to constitute an exercise in imagining a different type of society – or, according to Valantasis a different set of social relations.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Annalise Klingbeil, 'Frugal Friends Loosen Purse Strings After Year of No Spending, *Calgary Herald*, 29 July, 2014, <<http://www.calgaryherald.com/Frugal+friends+loosen+purse+strings+after+year+spending/10077040/story.html>>, [accessed, 13 May, 2015].

⁴⁹Shin, 'The Buy Nothing Year'.

⁵⁰Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, p. 38

Fagerberg further argues that asceticism in the Christian tradition should be understood within a liturgical framework.⁵¹ Like liturgy, asceticism cannot be reduced to the practising of skills. It is, in part, the call to develop the virtues necessary of living what the Syriac churches described as ‘the life of the angels’.⁵² It *is*, at the same time that other life. Something of that life of the angels is realized already. From a political perspective a resemblance with Graeber’s anarchism now becomes apparent: The practices of the Occupy Wall Street movement were not only designed to inculcate a different politics where participants might think horizontally rather than in terms of vertical structures of power; they created that expression of politics in the margins of the older, established model.

The ascetical tradition is thus able to furnish examples for an alternative lifestyle and politics. One other, seemingly unlikely example, arises of how monasteries organized their day around prayers at fixed hours.⁵³ This rite effectively brought into being a particular society where time itself was arranged to a different pulse from that of the Roman Empire. Other formal practices that occurred during a General Assembly – like the use of hand signals to show agreement, or the ‘people’s mic’ used in big meetings – likewise possessed an ascetic resonance:

The trick is very simple. One speaks loudly, pausing every ten or twenty words or so. When they pause, everyone within earshot repeats what they said, and their words carry twice as far as they would have otherwise. It’s not only practical, but, we found, it has a curious, and profoundly democratic, effect. First of all, it strongly discourages speechifying. Almost anyone will know better than to ramble on unnecessarily if they know that a thousand people are waiting to repeat

⁵¹ Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, p. 246.

⁵² Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh*, p. 155.

⁵³ On the development of time in the monastic context, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 18-24.

every word. Second, since anyone can speak, and everyone must repeat, it forces participants to genuinely listen to everybody else.⁵⁴

This semi-spontaneous liturgy, then, not only solved a practical problem; it fostered a democratic expectation among those taking part while, at the same time, being a powerful image of the kind of society the movement saw itself as trying to create. The double-sided logic of liturgy as described by Fagerberg is present: the ‘people’s mic’ became a way to practise those virtues necessary for a true democratic society in Graeber’s sense – those virtues being the ability to listen to others and keep matters practical. All the while the General Assembly itself is a small democratic society that is actually functioning.

The institutional aspect – the third aspect of asceticism – comes into view. It is admittedly the aspect least developed in these two examples – and especially in the Buy Nothing Year experiment. In a rather similar vein, it is this aspect of asceticism that has received the least attention by the theologians. There seems to be a shared tendency to downplay the institutional aspects of asceticism and political life – the same is true of mainstream politics, where party organizations are little more than professional campaigning bureaus.

Graeber examines the uneasy relationship between the Occupy Wall Street movement and various more institutional organizations at length. He does mainly from the perspective of how they created problems for the movement, trying to co-opt it for their own purposes.⁵⁵ In other contexts, Graeber is very clear about the usefulness of functioning structures, so long as these structures are decentralized and horizontal in trajectory. As an anthropologist, he is well

⁵⁴ Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, pp. 51, 190.

⁵⁵ In Graeber’s version of the story, the Occupy Wall Street was threatened to be co-opted by various organizations, from fairly marginal groups to the Democratic Party, even before it started. See *Ibid.*, 23-33.

aware that a society always has structures and institutions of some sort. For Graeber anarchism clearly is not about lack of structures.⁵⁶

It is arguably the case that both these examples could have had more impact if they had been able to set up more enduring institutional frameworks. In the case of the Buy Nothing Year, the closest thing to an institution was a blog. It was evident that many commentators found the blog inspiring, but few picked up on the challenge. The experiment had little impact beyond the lives of Phillips and Szuszkiewicz.

The Christian ascetic life has taken on countless institutional forms through history. The key institutional principle in Christian monasticism is not the monastery itself or the monastic order: it is the monastic rule. Giorgio Agamben has recently demonstrated how a rule is very different from a law: a rule is the attempt to formulate a form of life rather than to regulate it. Agamben observes that we can easily think of an unworthy priest – that is, a priest who does not live like a priest should but who is nevertheless still a priest. The comparison can be made with an unworthy monk, which is deemed something of a contradiction in terms – you live the monastic life or you do not.⁵⁷ While there is no sense that an activist has to make the kind of lifelong commitment associated with monasticism, the same thing still seems to apply. It is not possible to be an activist unless the activist life is practised at least to some degree. Is it not feasible that the kind of thinking found in a monastic rule – and the variety of Christian monastic rules is great – be of use for activists?

The benefit of a rule is the way in which it focuses on shared practices rather than theology and ideology. It defines the daily monastic life. The rule also covers situations where

⁵⁶ Graeber elsewhere mentions an institutional network of which he approves: ‘From early 2000 to late 2002, I was working with the New York Direct Action Network – the principal group responsible for organizing mass actions as part of the global justice movement in New York City at the time. I call it a “group”, but technically DAN was not a group at all but a decentralized network, operating on principles of direct democracy according to an elaborate, but quite effective, form of consensus process. It played a central role in ongoing efforts to create new organizational forms. DAN existed in a purely political space. It had no concrete resources – not even a significant treasury – to administer.’ David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2015), p. 261.

⁵⁷ Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, p.84.

potential conflicts tend to arise, and here it becomes obvious that it is a tool for building and upholding a community over a long time. By indicating how to introduce new members to the community, how to deal with financial issues and, of course, how power is distributed within the community, the rule seeks to create stability in the very areas where any community is at its most vulnerable.

The institutional dimension to the ascetic does not have to involve buildings with walls and enclosure (though it may do so). The General Assembly of the Occupy Wall Street movement is an institution, and there are other more stable alternatives in the anarchistic tradition Graeber belongs to as well. It can be a webpage, or a well thought-out use of social media. From an ascetics' perspective more concrete bodily types of community building is of great importance. Consider the importance attached to the monks clothing, often interpreted in symbolical ways,⁵⁸ or the equally deep significance of common meals.

It is not the case that activists should adopt monastic rules; rather, this line of thinking, coming out of the ascetic tradition, may be a useful approach to working out policies for common problems like getting people to adopt responsibility, or how to deal with disappointments and conflicts. Through the passage of time the ascetic tradition has developed ways to negotiate a quite fundamental dilemma in larger movements: all struggles need goals to strive forwards, yet any strictly formulated goal will hamper the development of the struggle. The ascetic life as a whole can be understood as the development of patience as a method for political change. Since the desired goal is elusive and the 'revolutionary moment' may not be forced, the best thing to do while waiting is to cultivate those virtues needed for a different kind of life and type of society.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 16-18.

The Goal

The third part of Fagerberg's model does not so easily seem translatable into contemporary political and public practice. Unlike the secular activist, who longs for a different society, the goal of the Christian ascetic is contemplative prayer.⁵⁹ Does this mean that the political aspects of the ascetic life cease here? So much now depends upon how prayer is understood.

The claim has been made that asceticism involves three aspects – the introspective, the imaginative and the institutional. The purpose of prayer can be understood as a practice that holds these three together. The underlying assumption here is of these several aspects being held together, though the exact end of the prayer is of an evanescent nature. The anonymous fourteenth century writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* envisages the goal of contemplation being 'a naked intent',⁶⁰ – that is, a moment where all other thoughts, motives and concerns fall away and the soul is directed completely towards God. It is indeed a well-attested feature of prayer in the monastic tradition that no matter how focused it is, that focus is not anchored in a clear image of what one is praying to. On the contrary, the deeper one dwells in prayer, the more one's image of what is being reaching for fades away into darkness – or that cloud of unknowing.

Is there an analogy that can be made with an authentic activism? The origins of such are likely to lie in a deep sense of frustration with the way things are in a given situation; there may be some sense of an alternative society. Both of these predispositions were evident in the two examples selected. What then transpired was a gradual lessening in importance of a specific objective as distinct from the acting out of a different way of being together. Once the Occupy Wall Street gained publicity the combination of a clear criticism of Wall Street with a novel

⁵⁹ Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, p. 113.

⁶⁰ Ira Progoff, *The Cloud of Unknowing: A New Translation of a Classic Guide to Spiritual Experience Revealing the Dynamics of the Inner Life from a Particular Historical and Religious Point of View* (New York: Julian Press, 1957), p. 76.

and attractive practice – camps in cities with general assemblies – became what attracted people. Asceticism – and activism – is thus not about only striving for a political goal, or developing a critique of society, or coming up with effective tactics and practices. It is more about finding ways in which to combine these into a seamless whole.

Prayer is always introspective, imaginative and institutional; it is so even in forms that strive for a minimum of formality. Praying is a practice aimed at giving life an inner coherence and focus. Whatever unites the introspective, imaginative and institutional aspects of asceticism/activism is prayer. Even without going into the possible functional benefits of prayer, it seems that especially contemplative prayer in the ascetic tradition can be understood as the pinnacle and most concentrated form of that struggle to transform one's person, to imagine different social relations and create new institutions. Seen from this perspective, prayer is not an optional addition to other aspects of asceticism/activism. It is that which makes it possible.

Conclusion

Elaine Graham has argued that a public theology understands itself to be a discipline committed to dialogue.⁶¹ One of the many instances of that prospect is the potential conversation between the Christian ascetic tradition and present day political activism. For that dialogue to be meaningful there is a need to delve more deeply down to a more substantial level than the mere similarity of (some) practices. This weaving together of the introspective, the imaginative and the institutional aspects of asceticism are worth exploring. They hold out an option that is rather different from the increasing default to the fifth estate of social media. It is evident that

⁶¹ Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (London: SCM Press, 2013), pp. xxii-xxiii.

asceticism offers ways to think about how activism changes the activist, how it allows activism to imagine other ways to function as a community and society, and the way ascetic actions need to create structure in order to ensure endurance and impact.

The bilingual nature of a public theology raises a contrary proviso as well. The very nature of activism serves as a prophetic and liberative argument against the commonly held opinion that the ascetic life and the practice of prayer is about retreating into the self. It mounts a protest against prayer and contemplative practice being an incentive to retreat from critical discussion and political realities. It can also serve as a spur to rethink asceticism in a contemporary setting as an actual practice rather than merely an intellectual possibility.

The important, but difficult, work that needs to be done is to revisit those traditional ascetic techniques, like fasting, vigils, and voluntary poverty. What might they signify and represent in a world so very different from that in which they became a part of the Christian tradition (though these practices were done by people who had bodies that functioned more or less the same as ours)? Some of these methods are still relevant in the struggle against the principalities and powers of the contemporary world; others need to be reinterpreted, and new ones invented. For a public theology, asceticism can provide a framework for reflection on the way the Christian faith interacts with the public domain and does so in a time that emphasizes the importance of practices, the body, and the interaction of the self with the community and God.