



ASCETICISM IN WESTERN SCHOLARLY THOUGHT: HISTORICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract. This article examines the formation and development of scholarly approaches to asceticism within Western academic thought from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. Drawing on the works of prominent anthropologists, theologians, philosophers, and sociologists such as Theodor Waitz, Adolf von Harnack, Otto Zöckler, Friedrich Nietzsche, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber, the study analyzes diverse interpretations of asceticism as a religious, moral, social, and cultural phenomenon. Particular attention is given to the role of asceticism in early Christianity, its relationship to monasticism, and its reassessment in modern theological and sociological research. The article also highlights contemporary methodological shifts toward comparative and interdisciplinary studies of ascetic traditions, while pointing out the persistent lack of systematic comparative analysis in both popular and academic literature. By synthesizing classical and modern perspectives, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of asceticism as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.

Keywords: asceticism, monasticism, early Christianity, religious practices, Western theology, sociology of religion, comparative religion, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim.

INTRODUCTION

Asceticism is a complex religious and socio-cultural phenomenon that has attracted sustained scholarly attention within anthropology, theology, philosophy, and sociology. Since the late nineteenth century, Western scholars have offered diverse interpretations of ascetic practices, viewing them alternately as expressions of early religious beliefs, moral discipline, social regulation, or spiritual transformation. The works of such



thinkers as Theodor Waitz, Adolf von Harnack, Friedrich Nietzsche, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber laid the foundations for understanding asceticism from interdisciplinary perspectives. In contemporary research, particular emphasis is placed on the role of asceticism in early Christianity and its connections with monasticism, as well as on the need for comparative and methodological approaches. This article reviews key Western scholarly interpretations of asceticism and outlines their contribution to the study of religious and ascetic traditions.

MAIN PART

The German anthropologist and psychologist Theodor Weitz (1822-1864) wrote about scientific research on the history of asceticism conducted at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries in his work “Anthropology of primitive peoples (Anthropology der naturvolker)” (6 volumes, 1864) different regions: Africa, America. He evaluates the ascetic views of the Alari population as a manifestation (phenomenon) of early religious beliefs and ascetic practices as an element of rituals based on primitive ideas.

The famous Protestant historian and German theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) published the work “Monasticism (Das Monchtum)” in 1881, dedicated to illuminating the life of Christian monks and monasteries. In his work entitled “The Essence of Christianity,” he emphasizes the absence of ascetic elements in the Bible and gives a negative assessment of asceticism. A similar approach is observed in the book “Christian Theology” by the American theologian Millard Erickson (1932).

Asceticism and Monasticism (Askese und Monchtum) (2nd ed.; 1897) by the German theologian Otto Zockler (1833-1906) provides information on the history of asceticism, or rather monasticism, in Christianity. John Mason Neale (1818-1866) “History of the Holy Eastern Church” (5 volumes, 1850-1873), J. Mayer “Christian Asceticism: Its Nature and Historical Development” (Die christliche Askese: Ihre Wesen und ihre historische Entfaltung) (1894) scientific research comments on the manifestations of Christian asceticism in modern times.

The German philosopher and writer Friedrich Nische (1844-1900) in his book “Genealogy of Morality” (1887) gives asceticism both negative and positive assessments. He defines asceticism as willpower and places special emphasis on the fight against



asceticism, which he considers artificial and corrupt. In the third part of this book, Niche writes: “What is the essence of the ascetic ideal?” tries to find the answer to the question from the point of view of artists, philosophers, priests and, finally, from a scientific point of view. According to his conclusion, asceticism has no meaning for artists; he accuses philosophers of failing to clearly define the ascetic ideal and believes that the founders of the ascetic ideal are priests, for whom asceticism acts as a governing force.

French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) addressed the topic of asceticism in his study Elementary Forms of Religious Life (Elementary Forms of Religious Life) (1912). Describing asceticism as a “negative phenomenon” based on religious prohibitions, he also admits that it “has a very important positive influence on the religious and moral nature of man.” When a person gets rid of all the impurities he has and moves away from worldly life, he will be able to overcome the barrier separating the pure from the unclean and enter into communion with the holy things. Only in this way does he achieve a positive cult, he can see divinity in everything, and is now considered different from the ordinary person. That is, it is completely different from its previous state. Durkheim names fasting, night vigils and meditation as practices for achieving this level. Also, according to Durkheim’s definition, it is unacceptable to observe any religious prohibition that forces a person to give up useful things or an ordinary way of life. Somewhat ascetic in nature. Since every religion, to one degree or another, has a system of prohibitions, all representatives of the faith are to one degree or another ascetics (hermits), they differ only in the degree of development of this approach.

Asceticism in the full sense of the word develops in such a way that observance of restrictions and renunciations becomes the basis of real life discipline. The system of prohibitions can even expand, covering the entire existence over time. The cult of positivity comes first. Durkheim describes this as “systematic asceticism.”

The famous German philosopher, sociologist and historian Max Weber (1864-1920) paid special attention to the issue of asceticism in many of his works. He looked at it from both a religious and economic-social point of view. In “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Die Protestant Ethic und der “Geist” des Kapitalismus)” he develops his point of view. In this work, Weber cites the term “internal asceticism”, widely used in Protestantism, as a factor influencing economic history. By this he means the worldview and way of life that emerged in the 16th century, initially based on



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religious foundations, and later going beyond the original religious context. According to Weber's teachings, this type of asceticism is determined by the connection between the "inner world" of the social system and the ascetic ideal of life. The end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries were marked by a reassessment of the role of early Christianity in the development of ascetic theology in Western theology and a significant increase in interest in the study of asceticism of the first three centuries. This situation is mainly associated with a new approach to defining the essence of asceticism and a change in research methodology in the 1980s, as a result of which a number of collections and monographs were published devoted to the study of Christian asceticism. Active study of the ascetic traditions of Christianity was observed in the first three centuries as a merit of modern researchers. Among researchers there are those who defend the idea that the history of asceticism in Christianity began in the 4th century, that is, during the period of the emergence of monasticism and its rapid development was observed, as well as those who interpret the previous three centuries. as a period of preparation for Christian ascetic theology. In modern theology, the topic of asceticism is comprehensively studied. Some researchers suggest that the development of ascetic views in early Christianity was influenced by the sources of Judaism, Greek, Roman and even monistic teachings. There are very few works demonstrating a consistent comparative approach to the study of asceticism. The lack of consistent comparative attention to historical-interpretive studies of asceticism in the modern period in popular and scientific works is clearly visible.

Monastic Life in the Christian and Hindu Traditions: A Comparative Study (1990) by the renowned Indian theologian Narayanan is a book of comparative focus, but the title suggests it. shows that this work is also limited to comparing two traditions and then to discussing one form or type of ascetic behavior within the two traditions.

As part of modern research, a number of encyclopedic works on the topic of asceticism have been created. For example, James Hastings's (1852-1922) fourteen-part encyclopedia Religion and Ethics (1908) covered this topic under the title "Asceticism." You can also cite the works of O. Chadwick (1916-2015) "Western Asceticism" (1958; 1979), L. Vincent, Wimbush's book "Asceticism and the New Testament" (1990).

Russian philosopher and theologian-researcher S. Khorudzhi (1941-2020) conducts extensive research on asceticism. His book "On the Phenomenology of Asceticism (Towards the Phenomenology of Asceticism)" is devoted to elucidating the essence of



Orthodox asceticism, which existed from the 4th century AD to the present day and is the basis of the religion and culture of the Russian people. The book provides a solution to the philosophical problems that arise in understanding ascetic practice, and explains the ascetic experience in two directions - hesychiastic understanding (based on religious texts) and modern conscious understanding (without denying religious texts). The topic of hesychiasm is new to many humanities and is described as a broad area of knowledge that generates perspectives.

CONCLUSION

The article provides a comprehensive analysis of asceticism from historical, religious, philosophical, and sociological perspectives. Early studies by scholars such as Weitz and Harnack focused on anthropological and Christian contexts, while Nietzsche, Durkheim, and Weber examined asceticism in relation to human willpower, moral-religious influence, and socio-economic development. By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, research emphasized the study of early Christian asceticism, its connection to monasticism, and influences from various religious and philosophical sources. Contemporary scholars, including S. Khorudzhi, explore Orthodox asceticism both through hesychastic practice and modern conscious understanding. Overall, asceticism is viewed as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon whose interpretation varies according to historical, cultural, and religious contexts.

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