

Norm and Exercise

Christian asceticism between
late antiquity and early middle ages

Edited by Roberto Alciati

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Roberto Alciati
Norm and Exercise

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Für Veit Rosenberger (1963–2016)

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This book contains papers presented at an international conference held in Turin in June 2015. However, not all the speeches given and discussed in those two days have been published here; nevertheless the material collected here seems to reflect the variety of topics, above all resulting in a sufficiently coherent collection.

The staging of a conference of course involves a substantial amount of effort on the part of organizers and participants alike, but nothing could have been possible without the financial support of an Italian research project coordinated by Luca Arcari (Federico II University of Naples) during the academic years 2013–2016. As a member of that research team, and with the supportive and active collaboration of the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Turin, I was able to give substance to this idea.

Though enough delays postponed the publication of these proceedings longer than I had initially hoped, the constructive dialogue that occurred between some of the conference participants at various points during the last three years, lead me to consider, retrospectively, the whole process an instructive experience. I offer therefore my heartfelt thanks to all the authors for their patience, and above all to Conrad Leyser, who has never stopped encouraging and advising me. But my deep gratitude is for Jörg Rüpke, one of the editor of this series, for having accepted the book.

This collection of essays is dedicated to the memory of Veit Rosenberger, who was professor at the University of Erfurt until his tragically early death in September 2016.

ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations of ancient Greek authors and texts follow the practice of the *Greek-English Lexicon* compiled by Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford 1940) and those of the *Patristic Greek Lexikon* edited by G.W.H. Lampe (Oxford 1961). For Latin authors the model is the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. However, many have been expanded for greater clarity; the first letter of the abbreviated form has been always capitalized. The spelling of names has been harmonised (generally: Latinized) throughout the volume, including in quotations and credited translations; authors and titles can also be found in full in the Index Locorum. The abbreviations for the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and New Testament are according to the *The SBL Handbook of Style* edited by Patrick H. Alexander et al. (Peabody, Mass. 1999) (contributions in English) and to the *Liste des titres et abréviations bibliques* (<http://www.sourceschretiennes.mom.fr/type-outils-recherche/titres-et-abreviations-bibliques>, accessed May 2018) (contributions in French). Abbreviations specific to individual chapters are explained in relative footnotes.

NORM AND EXERCISE: A USEFUL PAIR OF LENSES – AN INTRODUCTION

Roberto Alciati

1. ASCETICISM OR MONASTICISM?

In his famous study *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Robert A. Markus writes about an ‘explosion of asceticism’;¹ nine years later, in 1999, Andrea Giardina entitled one of his articles ‘Esplosione di tardoantico’.² These two explosions are decidedly different, though still linked, as the explosion of studies on late antiquity analyzed by Giardina is exactly the same historic period in which Markus holds that the greatest manifestation of forms of ascetic life are recorded. In 2005, when a collection of studies in honour of Elizabeth A. Clark was published, it was asceticism, along with gender studies and historiography, which indicated the historiographic period under consideration.³ Indeed, the editors believed that the skill of this eminent American scholar stood out for having offered a new reading of late antiquity, focusing attention on these three aspects and then passing them through the filter of the ‘cultural turn’.⁴ If we then look closely at the series of the fifteen published essays, despite the fact that the work is divided into three sections, each of which is dedicated to one of the three thematic areas of Clark’s research (asceticism, gender and historiography), at least half contain direct references to asceticism in their titles, and thus not only those that are gathered in that specific section. It is as if asceticism is not easily contained and indelibly colours a great many aspects of the history of late antiquity. This undisputed trend, which continues well beyond the *Festschrift* in honour of Elizabeth A. Clark, carries with it an element that is too often neglected, but which has important consequences for the study of ascetic ways of life in the late antiquity of the Mediterranean (and not only). Reading the titles of the essays in the aforementioned collection or, for example, those in a more recent volume on the reception of the New Testament in antique ascetic literature,⁵ we clearly see how

1 MARKUS 1990, 81.

2 GIARDINA 1999. In truth, this argument was already anticipated and analyzed by Reinhart Herzog in a conference in 1986, wherein, well before others and quite acutely, the growing interest in late antiquity was focused upon. According to Herzog this phenomenon was due both to the individual and collective perception of late twentieth century modernity as a period of crisis not unlike that which was seen following the end of the Mediterranean Roman Empire, and to the desire on the part of cultural and political institutions to find answers for today in the past (HERZOG 1987). On the interweaving of scientific and political issues in the study of late antiquity, see also CAMERON 2004, 73–4.

3 MARTIN AND MILLER 2005.

4 MARTIN AND MILLER 2005, 7–9; CHANEY 1994.

5 WEIDEMANN 2013.

the proliferation of asceticism has always been understood as the proliferation of both asceticism and monasticism, almost as if this terminological pair is always and uncritically to be considered a hendiadys. As if to say: monasticism and asceticism are the same thing. This observation could also be applied to the present work that I have edited, as the title only uses the word ‘asceticism’, but looking at the titles of the single essays we see that many are dedicated to people and texts that are clearly monastic. We will return to this point below. First, however, it would be helpful to explain how asceticism and monasticism can also not be exactly the same thing.

A good starting point is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who picked up the idea from Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) that it is human nature to represent one’s actions based on intentions, and therefore to identify thought in general with conscious thought. Yet this habit of human beings is neither arbitrary nor accidental, but rather ‘the tragic inability to forbear the fiction of an intended happening, to which the precarious animal man must turn in order to preserve himself’.⁶ This principle, however, is considered valid, and thus natural, only within daily life and the many actions that distinguish it. But human beings can (and must) aspire too to a superior form of knowledge, a conscious knowledge that is, according to Spinoza, qualitatively opposed to affections, in that it is equipped with ‘the imperturbable causal necessity, free from all one-sidedness, the source of fear and trembling’.⁷ The superior or conscious knowledge, which is distinguished from the common one, falsely considered intentioned, is that which makes human beings different from other animals and which gives a sense to our existence.

This condition, which potentially gives strength to a ‘free’ choice, is that which Nietzsche calls the ascetic ideal: ‘except for the ascetic ideal: man, the animal man, had no meaning up to now. His existence on earth had no purpose’.⁸ Going without, self depravation, fleeing from the world, according to Nietzsche, are not an indication of poverty, but rather of the self-sufficiency of life, as the ascetic takes himself out of the lien of the ‘condemning sin’, placing himself beyond good and bad, disintegrating the moral, self-styled Christian from the world. The ascetic way of life is therefore ‘beyond man’, that is to say that it is for the man who is able to ‘accept the finitude not as a sign of defectiveness that leads to subjection to another principle, but as a condition of his own power’.⁹ In other words, the ascetic way of life implies a metaphysical idea of the world which has as its fulcrum the end of the world, as a complete vision of the world is always obtained ‘in the point in time that closes all time’ and ‘only with the apocalyptic halt of becoming is the “unconditioned condition” manifested, to which regression vainly tends without end’.¹⁰ In this futility of continual regression lies the sense of the ascetic way of life. The ‘rule of the world’, on the other hand, imposes this continual regression to the prime condition, when an ethic improvement seems to be requested.

6 DI MARCO 1984, 73.

7 DI MARCO 1984, 72.

8 NIETZSCHE 1994, 127.

9 DI MARCO 1984, 38.

10 VIRNO 2015, 40.

But if this is asceticism, that is, a condition that goes beyond that of a human being immersed in the illusion of the world, then what is monasticism? One could say that the monastic way of life is found between these two conditions described so far (worldly humanity and ascetic beyond-humanity): a monk aims to reject the illusion of the world, but at the same time it seems that he cannot do without the tools of the world, such as regressing to the prime condition or the necessity of a series of *auctoritates* from the (more or less recent) past who act as the number zero on the monk's timepiece. This is because, like all things in the world, even a monk needs to be measured and thus put into a space (both ideal and physical) that can perfectly and precisely contain him according to the measures that have already been previously established. A striking example is found in the genealogies of varying degrees of holiness wherein, for example, the apostolic community described in the *Acts of the Apostles*, Antony, and the heroes Martin and Benedict all become the supposed unconditioned conditions, the origin.¹¹ Just as Nietzsche writes regarding the genealogy of morality, in these cases as well the construction of a sequence, presented as an attempt at identifying the essence of the phenomenon, in the sense of a final justification as well as an origin that can be considered perfect, is rather the tool that calls out the arbitrary nature of every origin, according to which the adherents appreciate and denigrate certain types of conduct and, consequently, elevate the presumed rules that govern them to Principles.¹²

Those who practice an ascetic way of life, on the other hand, place their own origins, as it were, beyond the measurable world and thus before the zero. That which counts is not the series of models to retrospectively retrace, as this way of life comes directly (and mysteriously) from God. Though even the ascetics are forced to live on this world, more than everyone else they understand the limit and the anguish of this temporary collocation, and they direct everything towards the union with the divinity, which will happen in full only in the restoration of the last day. To continue using the time metaphor, those who practice the ascetic way of life do not turn back to bring order to the gallery of the 'fathers', but instead always look forward, forcing themselves to go beyond the confines of any and all units of measure. We might say that: as the art of measuring is to the monastic way of life, so is the art of knowing to that of the ascetic.¹³

A large part of this theoretical approach is found in a condensed form, more or less explicitly, in a book published by Geoffrey G. Harpham in 1987 titled *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. Despite the book's being chronologically placed in the period characterized by the 'explosion of asceticism', by

11 On the monastic genealogies, see ALCIATI 2011 and 2018, 41–61. Regarding the degree to which the concept of 'primitive' or 'original model' is artificial, though still a necessary fiction for giving sense to the order of things in which human beings are immersed, see KUPER 1988. For the persistence of this process, especially within the Christian religious system, see MICCOLI 1960.

12 GIACOMINI 2015.

13 This perspective not only implies an irreversible fracture between asceticism and monasticism, but it also assigns the first with a universal value that is not exclusively religious, in accordance with an interpretative approach that goes from William James (1842–1910) to Peter Sloterdijk (1947).

choosing the story of Antony and the solitary life of Egypt in the fourth century as his starting point, Harpham forces himself to go beyond the temporal limits of late antiquity, omitting the details (and presumed extraordinary nature) of the history of Christianity and addressing himself to a wider audience, with the aim of showing the trans-cultural dimension, which is thus universal, of the ascetic way of life.

This book, in spite of some limitations it registers regarding 'the facts' that specialist period historians should be fussy about, actually broadens the scope and relevance of asceticism far beyond anything accomplished in published scholarship – especially historical and philological work – on the subject to date.¹⁴

This quote is from the review of the paperback edition written by Vincent L. Wimbush, probably the most famous scholar on asceticism who, in exactly the same period, formed an interdisciplinary research group on the topic. A comparison between the two scholars is interesting in order to better understand the possible boundaries between asceticism and monasticism.¹⁵

In 1985, within the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity of Clermont, Wimbush founded a research group called 'Ascetic Group': at first the group was joined by leading scholars on early Christianity and, more generally, on late antiquity. The first results of this group are represented in an anthology of Christian texts that are translated with commentary, but the choice of texts and the skilful combination thereof aimed to show the impossibility of understanding the enormity of this phenomenon while limiting the study to the antique Mediterranean.¹⁶ As if it were an upward spiral, this urgency became ever more pressing and the group's second publication,¹⁷ despite the fact that the focus is still on antique Christian literature, included a response from none other than Harpham, who gave new life to the research starting from the title of his piece, which was particularly well received: 'Old Water in New Bottles'.¹⁸ The conclusions reached by Harpham, that asceticism is not only monasticism and that its study must break through both the disciplinary boundaries (early Christianity vs. comparative history of religions) and the hermeneutic boundaries (ethics, linguistics, political theory, gender formation, racial categories, etc.), find confirmation in the group's third publication, where comparative readings confront Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism.¹⁹ Yet the project reached its peak in the organization of an international conference at the Union Theological Seminary of New York in 1993, where numerous specialists of different historical periods and religious systems came together under the guidance of Wimbush and Richard Valantasis. The publication of the proceedings, 'under the deceptively

14 WIMBUSH 1996, 387.

15 The appreciation for these two scholars by the late antiquity community – and in particular by scholars of early Christianity – is quite different. While Wimbush now seems to be an indispensable author and very nearly a benchmark, references to Harpham are much rarer. The fleeting 'evocation' in ROUSSEAU 2004 is emblematic, and remains to date the most detailed study on the current state of research into ancient Mediterranean asceticism.

16 WIMBUSH 1990. On the history of this group see VAAGE AND WIMBUSH 1999.

17 WIMBUSH 1992.

18 HARPHAM 1992.

19 WIMBUSH 1994.

simple title *Asceticism*',²⁰ as Martin writes, 'constitute[s] a remarkable testament to the growth of interest in asceticism and to the value of comparative approaches'.²¹

The path of research undertaken by Wimbush will have important consequences: it is as if, from that moment on, that which specialists from different disciplines knew were all brought together, with repercussions that had been neglected to that point. *Asceticism* does not begin with a definition, even just a working definition that would thus be open to criticism, of the concept; rather, the editors hope that the confrontation between different specialist areas might blow up all of the widespread notions of asceticism that always try to anchor it to a particular intellectual system and highlight the peculiarity, or the 'coloration', that it takes on within the diverse contexts examined.²² We see once again the return of the explosion metaphor, used here however not as a proliferation of something, but as a dissolution and anti-essentialist fragmentation.

The editors' decision not to define asceticism (and thus not to propose any distinction, for example, between asceticism and monasticism) is better understood when considering the noteworthy presence of Harpham within the volume. Many of the authors feel obliged to confront their work with their colleague's book (always defined as 'provocative' or in similar terms), but nearly all of them tend to show the limits, or the precarious applicability, of his idea of asceticism to the various, and highly specialized, historical contexts. That which Wimbush exalted in his review of the book is not found much within the pages of *Asceticism*, which include an essay by Harpham himself, perhaps even more 'provocative' than his book from 1987. He writes:

I am beginning with two premises. The first is that aesthetics is not merely a modern name for an aspect of asceticism, but constitutes asceticism's specifically modern form – its modernity. The second is that asceticism brings pressure to bear upon the very concept of art precisely insofar as art is modern.²³

It is important to note that Harpham, insisting on modernity, makes no reference to contemporary monasticism: for him, quite simply, the ascetic culture of modernity is to be found elsewhere. Whether it be art or other expressions of human culture, it certainly is not the monastic way of life (which obviously, genealogically, claims its derivation from Antony, Pachomius, Benedict, etc.) that best shows the persistence of asceticism; in other words, monasticism is not necessarily asceticism.

In light of these theoretical premises, the essays gathered in this book aim to contribute further to showing how much the Wimbush-Harpham line of thinking is still extremely fertile and useful in overcoming the opposite excesses (phenomenological essentialism and historical specificity) and to aim for a minimal and shared definition of asceticism (and thus also of monasticism). In the two paragraphs that follow I will show how the choice of two sufficiently generic and universally recognizable signifiers, 'norm' and 'exercise', can be useful in this sense, especially

20 WIMBUSH AND VALANTASIS 1998.

21 MARTIN 2005, 14.

22 WIMBUSH AND VALANTASIS 1998, xxvi.

23 HARPHAM 1998, 357.

when related to the concept of 'ascetology' proposed by Emiliano R. Urciuoli and that of the 'bodymap' described by Gian Antonio Gilli.

If we look once again at the volume *Asceticism*, the terms 'norm' and 'exercise' are not given significant importance. 'Norm', for example, is found only once in an important way, in contrast to 'neurosis' and with the following explanation: 'perhaps neurosis is just a modern term for heresy, since ascetic behaviour, either of the world-affirming or world-denying sort, appears to be a significant departure from the modern term for orthodoxy: "the norm"'.²⁴ 'Exercise', on the other hand, is much more present, being quite simply the modern equivalent of the Greek *askesis*, though still in this case as well it is not used very significantly. Two uses of this word bear mention. The first is a quote from the *History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault, where we read that 'no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; neither can one learn the art of living, the *Techne tou biou*, without an *askesis* which must be taken as a training of oneself by oneself'.²⁵ The second refers to the research of Alayne Yates on eating disorders, which shows that

when eating-disordered women and obligatory runners combine diet and exercise in an effort to become healthy, thin, or even younger, the patten of diminished intake and heightened output seems to regenerate and reinforce itself and the system becomes remarkably resistant to change.²⁶

These two affirmations, when used as a filter through which to examine the ascetic ways of life allow us to see two recurrent traits that are present in the ascetic way of life, especially when understood *à la* Harpham.

2. NORM

Despite the distinction that has just been made between asceticism and monasticism, using the word 'norm' in this context immediately brings to mind the word 'rule', as there is no model, in common terms, for a model of regulated life that is comparable to that of the monks who, obviously, live according to a rule. Nonetheless, just like asceticism and monasticism, the word 'norm' also requires some preliminary clarification, especially in relation to its presumptive synonym 'rule'. In general terms, we can say that, among all of the religious ways of life, the ascetic appears to be the most obdurate to being regulated. The simple fact of defining oneself *fuga mundi*, cannot help but induce the observer to understand it as the space of anomy. The self-perception of the ascetic as he who lives in the space of anomy par excellence, the desert – be it real or symbolic – produces in the observer, especially when looking over centuries and through literary mediation, an optical illusion: the ascetic is that which he claims to be.

This is not the space to provide useful material on the scholarly philosophical debate – which has been on-going since at least the times of Plato's *Euthyphro* – on

²⁴ CORRINGTON-STREETE 1998, 123.

²⁵ VALANTASIS 1998, 546.

²⁶ YATES 1991, 87 in BUSHILL 1998, 555.

the forms and value of the norm;²⁷ the intention is, more modestly, to reflect upon how establishing a norm always means to prepare a series of precepts and dispositions that consent the governing of one or more human beings. The underlying idea is that there can be no governing if those who govern do not relate their actions to a set of real understandings that do not depend on the will and whim of he who makes the norm, but rather on a rational and relational structure recognized by those who abide by the norm.²⁸ But these calls to rationality and to the truth hide the naturalization of an act of arbitrariness, that is, the necessary differentiation operations through which an attempt has been made to establish proportions and hierarchical relationships since time immemorial: there is always *the* norm among the many norms. And above all, there is always some authority who, through such operations, aims to impose a specific point of view, manipulating the logical and argumentative resources provided by the *doxa* that is shared by the group of social agents, in this way attempting to construct and teach (Pierre Bourdieu would say ‘to incorporate’) a personal set of truths and structures of significance.

But every form of coercion that reaches its goals always implies a certain amount of violence – and it is irrelevant, in light of the objective, whether it be physical or symbolic – under the guise of the consent that the dominated cannot help but show to the dominant, and thus to the act of dominance exerted through the imposition of a norm.²⁹ ‘To follow a norm’ therefore implies a problem of persuasion: the stated impositions appear to be more convincing the more they are understood as being necessary to the adaptation to particular principles of a vision and division of the world (and thus necessary for their being perceived as adequate).³⁰

An example of this phenomenon is found in Cassian’s *Institutiones*. Describing the Christian community of Alexandria, Cassian affirms that some of them were already called *monachi*, and that Mark himself, the evangelist who is traditionally considered the first bishop of the city, had given them a specific *norma vivendi*. As we have already seen, here is the appearance of a genealogy, which, from Mark, comes into the hands of the monks met by Cassian at the end of the fourth century. This norm, however, proves to be precarious because, for example, it does not deal adequately with the way in which one must pray. Each monk thus considered it his

27 For a good introduction to the problem, see LUNDGREEN 2017; MÖLLERS 2015; SQUARCINI 2012.

28 According to the model proposed by FOUCAULT 2012, 23–24.

29 The result is that the dominated consider their condition of exclusion by the group of dominators as legitimate, that is that they consider themselves unworthy of such a position because they are unable to conform to the practices laid out by the norm, always understood as ‘the inevitable natural order of things’, ‘when the schemes they implement in order to perceive and evaluate themselves or to perceive and evaluate the dominators (high/low, male/female, white/black, etc.) are the product of the incorporation of the (thus naturalized) classifications of which their social being is the product’ (BOURDIEU 2000, 170).

30 The relationship between perception and persuasion is fundamental for a prescriptive imposition to be successful. For a different perspective, which has the concept of expectations as its starting point (but which reaches similar conclusions), see BICCHIERI AND MULDOON 2014. For how persuasion is not obtained by supposing a moral and rational value to just any norm, but rather on the relatedness on the possibility of a different understanding of the world (*Weltbeschaffenheit*) see MÖLLERS 2015, 13–4.