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## The Ascetic Impulse in Early Christianity: Some Methodological Challenges

Vincent L. WIMBUSH, New York

### I

#### Recent Gains and Current Challenges in the Study of Asceticism

As a student of New Testament and Christian Origins, thus, of the earliest period in the history of early Christianity, I come to the study of asceticism very much in the middle, forced from the beginning to address methodological issues. Very little attention has been paid to asceticism by those scholars who deal with the earliest texts and periods; it is as though the phenomenon did not exist in the first three centuries of the common era. The bulk of the literature on asceticism comes from those scholars whose expertise is in the fourth centuries and beyond. Such literature rarely problematizes or reflects the complexity of the phenomenon that is asceticism. Far too often asceticism is broached as though its meaning and function were static, clear and simple.

Yet, in the last fifteen years across the artificial boundaries of academic disciplines and departments much scholarly attention has been devoted to asceticism, especially those expressions found in the ancient societies and groups around the Mediterranean that are considered wellsprings of western culture. And this attention has wrought some important changes. It is safe to say that the most important difference between writings on asceticism of decades past and most of those of the last fifteen years is that the latter reflect much more consciousness of the *diversity* of expressions and motives that were ascetic, and thus have consistently attempted to understand asceticism as complex, multi-form, multi-motivated phenomenon. No longer (even in the West) is asceticism thought to have originated in, thus, to be defined by, one tradition (Christianity), or one period in history (i.e., late antiquity, or Greek and Latin Christianity). Conversely, no longer are some traditions (e.g., Judaism) defined over against asceticism, as though either asceticism or any religious tradition could be thus simply explained.

Further, and perhaps, even more important, it is clear that asceticism, understood as complex phenomenon, can no longer be argued to be the simple expression of the negative, the shrill response, of world-rejecting, anti-social individuals and groups. It is even arguable that ascetic behaviors are historically and necessarily a part of every culture, helping to define, structure

and constantly reform them<sup>1</sup>, and that the revival of western academic interest is due in no small measure to popular cultural shifts<sup>2</sup>.

### II

#### Ancient Christianity as Ascetic Movement: A Proposal for Further Study

In an effort to take up part of the challenge involved in the study of the complexity that is asceticism and ancient Christianity, a thesis about ascetic behavior that has general heuristic and methodological implications can be hazarded. It is advanced with a heightened awareness of methodological minefields. But it is not offered as an all-encompassing thesis that can explain ancient Christianity as simple and single phenomenon; it is offered as an *interpretive* key that can provide a methodological framework that can help account for, not gloss over, the diversity and development, the conflicts and shifts and complexity that was Christianity at least up to the fifth century. Beyond this aim, such a thesis may have implications for the modern or post-modern critical interpretation and reception of aspects of ancient Christianity. This essay, however, aims to do no more than point to or problematize the matter of the interpretation of ancient Christianity by advancing a proposal that will need to be pursued in comprehensive studies.

The proposal does not begin with, but finds a touchstone in, the more encompassing argument of Gilbert Murray, among others (e.g., E.R. Dodds, Martin Nilsson, A-J. Festugière, A.D. Nock), that a certain pessimism or 'loss-of-world' ethos was pervasive in Greco-Roman antiquity, including Christian antiquity. Because he made the point with such poignancy, I still find it difficult to resist quoting from Murray's chapter entitled 'The Failure of Nerve', found in his famous lectures published as *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (1925):

<sup>1</sup> See Steven D. Fraade, 'Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism', *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages* (ed. Arthur Green; vol. 13 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* [New York, 1986], 253-288, for discussion of complexity of asceticism as phenomenon, with special attention to ascetic behaviors in ancient Judaism. Also, see Geoffrey Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago, 1987), civ, for discussion about the 'subideological', transactional nature of asceticism.

<sup>2</sup> It is tempting to argue that the modern revival of western academic interest is influenced by the shift — evidenced in the United States, but very likely also in western Europe and other places — from the widespread, unquestioned valuation of consumption and desire, to at least a more widespread questioning of such, and a turn toward the valuation of moderation, self control and discipline. The shift is not radical and universal, but that it is beyond the circle of the 'religious' has been noted recently by the *New York Times*. See most recently 'A New Gateway: Bed, Breakfast, Spirituality', Wednesday, July 17, 1991.

Any one who turns from the great writers of classical Athens, say Sophocles or Aristotle, to those of the Christian era must be conscious of a great difference in tone. There is a change in the whole relation of the writer to the world about him. The new quality is not specifically Christian: it is just as marked in the Gnostics and Mithras-worshippers as in the Gospels and the Apocalypse, in Julian and Plotinus as in Gregory and Jerome. It is hard to describe. It is a rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in the normal human effort; a despair of patient inquiry, a cry for infallible revelation; an indifference to the welfare of the state, a conversion of the soul to God... an intensifying of certain emotions; an increase of sensitiveness, a failure of nerve<sup>3</sup>.

Although I am aware of (and am in basic agreement with) some of the criticism levelled against Murray's and others' argument — especially the overstatements — I am convinced that its basic thrust merits critical reconsideration. There is little doubt about the popularity in some ancient societies and circles in the Mediterranean and Near East of critical, even contemptuous views of, and responses to, the world (viz., the social-economic-political orders). What Murray argued can be nuanced by suggesting that Christianity, certainly up to the fifth century in many circles, and beyond the fifth century in some other circles, can with profit be understood and interpreted as *counter-cultural*, or at least *culture-critical*, as a complex of movements in opposition to the 'world'. 'World' in ancient Christianity was referenced with ambivalence: sometimes it referenced the reign of Satan in opposition to God's reign; at other times it referred positively to humanity and the natural, physical order. Confusion and challenge ensued over the two understandings and about the appropriate response to culture and society, as well as to the natural order. But the resistance impulse obtained most consistently; the rhetorics and historical orientations reflect as much. Ancient Christian 'resistance', or 'critique' must, then, be viewed alongside many other contemporary Hellenistic-Roman reflections of what J. Delumeau has referred to as *contemptus mundi*. The different expressions of ancient Christian *contemptus mundi* were signalled most dramatically and consistently in different forms and degrees of ascetic behavior and in correspondence with different motives and discursive strategies<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> See his *Five Stages of Greek Religion: Studies Based on a Course of Lectures Delivered in April 12 at Columbia University* (Oxford, 1925), 155.

<sup>4</sup> On *contemptus mundi*, its long historical reflection, beyond antiquity, and the ambivalence of 'world' in ancient Christian thinking, see Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture: 13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (tr. Eric Nicholas; New York, 1990), 12f. I find the emphasis here on the *longue duree* in terms of religious-cultural thinking and sensibilities to be an improvement over many earlier engagements of the issues.

For sketchy, but provocative discussion of the notion of asceticism as 'resistance', see Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, xv-xvii, 61-62.

For discussion about groups that can be counted among the alienated in the Empire see Ramsey MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire*. (Cambridge MA, 1966).

For discussion of religion — especially including ancient Christianity — as 'critique', see Robert John Ackermann, *Religion as Critique* (Amherst MA, 1985).

To view ancient Christianity as a complex of ascetic behaviors is to see its situations in and expressions about the worlds in which it originated and developed in ways quite different from some still reigning interpretations and assumptions. Acceptance of this view would, for example, challenge the assumption that ancient Christianity developed simply and inexorably from 'otherworldly' sect to 'worldly' institution. It would, instead, open up a view of ancient Christianity as a series of battles for self-definitions in light of degrees of opposition to the world, the dominant cultural orders, including religious, values and expectations. Such degrees of resistance can be argued to have been something of the *original impulse* of the movement. But this thesis will have to be established at another time and in another forum<sup>5</sup>. It is enough for the present essay to point to some of the *methodological*<sup>6</sup> implications of the shift in assumptions that the argument represents, as well as the significance<sup>7</sup> of ascetic piety among the different 'arts' of early Christian resistance.

A comparative-sociological-historical perspective and discussion of a concrete case-study text and isolable historical situation from an early period can serve as useful beginning of an effort to address some of the challenges pointed to above, especially the need to establish ascetic behaviors as pervasive response among the early Christians, as reflective of different forms of critique of the world, and as heuristic thread by which an interpretive history of ancient Christianity can be woven. What is needed first is a perspective that will accommodate both the *generalizability* and *comparative* study of asceticism in order, on the one hand, to respect *diversity* and, on the other, to explain *commonalities*. Given the limitations of space, only broad summary hints of what requires much careful elaboration can be discussed below.

In comparative-sociological-historical perspective Christianity is not viewed as unique phenomenon. With respect to the ascetic impulse, it can be viewed as one of many movements having their origins in a period in which 'loss of world', some degree of alienation from and critique of world, was not uncommon across many different cultural divisions. The whole of the period from the first millennium B.C.E. through late antiquity is especially significant for such an interest. This period was first designated the 'Axial Age' by Karl Jaspers; it has since been taken up by others and further discussed and

<sup>5</sup> The thrust of my forthcoming book *Worldly Asceticism: The Origins of a Cultural and Religious Orientation*.

<sup>6</sup> Such implications for both scholars and religious devotees. A discussion of some of these will be reserved for the summary discussion below.

<sup>7</sup> I have in mind here the function of ascetic behaviors as signifier, as reflection of a certain 'mentality', or 'vision of the world'. See Michel Vovelle, *Ideologies and Mentalities* (tr. E. O'Flaherty; Chicago, 1990) for provocative discussion.

explained. It is a period characterized by the critique and eventual rupture of the traditional, static 'holistic' societies and aristocratic empires of antiquity. The critique was inspired by the 'transcendental visions' of groups of elites. Such visions reflected the conceptual and existential *tension* that obtained between the traditional order and the Other that was imagined, and eventually led to such a critical evaluation of traditions that they inspired a devaluation and renunciation of the world<sup>8</sup>. Benjamin Schwartz, in a paper presented at a conference devoted to discussion of the character and implications of the age, has, perhaps, best summarized scholarly sentiment about the period:

If there is some common underlying impulse in all these 'axial' movements, it might be called the strain towards transcendence... a kind of standing back and looking beyond — a kind of critical, reflective questioning of the actual and a new vision of what lies beyond...<sup>9</sup>

Such perspective can help explain early Christianity as *social formation*, even social experimentation, inspired by certain types of visions that can be compared to visions among other groups in world history. The 'axial age' thesis does now *explain* all of early Christianity as phenomenon in history; it only provides a general *perspective* that assumes that transcendental visions in the period proliferated across cultural divides, that differences among such visions beg — they do not themselves function as — explanations. And such explanations require *comparative* analysis so as to inspire questions in ways that do not begin with the often unacknowledged assumption that Christianity was a unique phenomenon, or with unproblematized discussion about Christian 'asceticism', orientations and self-definitions. Such a perspective requires that more serious attention be given to the dynamic between early Christian cell groups and the world outside. Transcendental visions of and orientations to the world can function as a most useful category of comparison — both within early Christianities and between early Christianities and realities and movements apart from their trajectories (viz., Buddhism, Hinduism).

The ancient worlds around the Mediterranean Sea included many groups (philosophical movements, sages, prophets, oriental cults and renewal religious groups of many types) that can be viewed as the ancient wellsprings of the development of the great transcendentalist religions in the West. Such groups, under inspiration of the new (visionary) elites of the so-called Axial Age, came to view the world in its social-cultural, political-economic manifestations as (somewhat) alien, oppressive, as a stumblingblock in the pursuit of

<sup>8</sup> See S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies; Albany, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, I. Schwartz, "'The Age of Transcendence". *Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt*, *Daedalus* (Spring, 1975), 3-4.

new goals or ideals — of salvation<sup>10</sup>. These groups did not constitute one united block of opposition; they did not confer with one another. They did not always use the same languages or discourses of opposition. They did not even stand opposed to the world — all the extra-group realities, but especially the core and sum of respectable and powerful society — from the same position or perspective, nor to the same degree. What they had in common were rhetorics of resistance, their lack of acceptance of, their low level of comfort in, their critique and (various forms of) renunciation of, (different aspects of) their worlds. This discomfort, this resistance, was often influenced by, or at least felt in association with, some positive *ideal*, whether the salvation that represented existence according to a transcendent order, or self-knowledge in association with the ordered *kosmos* — all understood as different from the world as had been previously experienced. There was a realization that there was now a fundamental tension between the world and the new ideals that inspired asceticism as types of behavior signifying a new critical attitude of resistance, a refusal to orient the body, language, indeed, the self in the world in traditional or socially acceptable ways<sup>11</sup>.

Early Christianities generally shared the cultural critical or resistance impulse. It is very difficult to account for their origins as other than critique and resistance — to different circles of establishment power and tradition, whether religious/cultic, political-economic, social-cultural, whether Jewish, Roman, Greco-Roman<sup>12</sup>. The object of the resistance, of necessity, was differently articulated among different groups, and changed in different times and situations. The character and intensity and language of the opposition also changed in different times and situations. Internal debates often reflected differences in the articulation of motives, in the degree and style of opposition as response to the world. In those debates that became shrill — viz., where one group attempted to define another out of the movement — it was very often the sharpness in disagreement over motives, style or practice, degree of intensity of practice, and, of course, depending on which camp is arguing, the concern about either the lack of moderation (thus, control) that 'radical' renunciation represented, or the compromise with the world that other types of renunciation represented that were at stake.

But it is most important that these differences be understood not simply as the divide between 'worldly' and 'ascetic' (or 'otherworldly') groups and orientations. Too much of the character of the discussion about early

<sup>10</sup> See Louis Bouyer, *Cosmos: The World and the Glory of God* (tr. Pierre de Fontnouvelle; Petersham MA, 1988), chaps. 1, 10.

<sup>11</sup> See Eisenstadt, 'The Axial Age Breakthroughs — Their Characteristics and Origins', *Origins*, 1-25. Also see the recently published and well received cultural critical work of Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge MA, 1990) with focus on attitudes to the body (especially chapter 6, 'Sex Socialized') in the West.

<sup>12</sup> See Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity*; and Ackermann, *Religion as Critique*, for provocative discussion.

Christian self-definition in connection with asceticism is simplified when such a divide is advanced or assumed. A fuller accounting of the wide range of the different ascetic practices and motives and corresponding discourses of the early Christians is imperative. Given such an imperative, the methodological advantage of the ascetic impulse as a key for interpreting early Christianity can be seen in its potential to provide both comprehensiveness or generalizability and specificity as explanation. That is, asceticism can not only help account for the diverse pattern of behavior and self-definitions, it can also help account for the larger phenomenon and common assumptions that was the early Christian movements<sup>13</sup>.

### III

#### Ascetic Behaviors in Ancient Christianity:

##### First Century Corinth and 1 Corinthians 7 as Case Study

Discussion, even if summary and sketchy, of a case-study text and historical situation is needed in order to demonstrate the implications of the arguments above for the study of ancient Christianity. The mid-first century Corinthian Pauline church is the historical setting. 1 Corinthians 7 is chosen as focal text. It is an appropriate and useful choice for a number of reasons: 1) it is the *earliest* extant written text in which there is actual debate about ascetic practices and what they suggest about 'Christian' self-definition (early texts at any rate, very much need to be re-examined in terms of evidence for 'Christian' 'asceticism'; the latter has too often been defined from texts and ascetic pieties of *later* periods, to the point that ascetic behavior among Christians before the desert fathers is barely recognized, certainly rarely — except recently beyond a small part of a chapter in P. Brown's monumental *Body and Society* — problematized in comprehensive historical interpretive works); 2) in the context of one of Paul's letters to the Corinthian believers, it provides a window onto the socio-religious world of a community of religious *virtuosi*, allowing the interpreter to understand more clearly how the issue of ascetic practices *functioned* in context<sup>14</sup>; and 3) it is a text that, perhaps, for reasons already cited above among others, has had tremendous influence on

<sup>13</sup> The contrast with the still typical scholarly understanding of 'apocalypticism' and 'gnosticism' as radical, sectarian offshoots is instructive. See no less than Robert Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World* (pb San Francisco, 1990), for example of such argument.

<sup>14</sup> See W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, 1983); Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (ed. and with introduction by J. Schuetz; Philadelphia, 1982); and now Margaret MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge, 1988), for general discussion useful for perspective on 1 Cor. 7.

subsequent Christian and western cultural discussions and debates about marriage, ascetic practices, attitudes about the body and self-definition<sup>15</sup>.

It is important from the beginning to clarify the general occasion for, and function of, the chapter. It seems to be the beginning of Paul's response to an 'official' letter sent from the church at Corinth (cf. 7.1; 8.1; 12.1; 11.2f.) containing several questions or issues that were at the heart of group self-definition, communal rituals and worship and ethics. The questions or issues broached in the letter to Paul were framed from the perspective of that wing of the church represented by the somewhat official delegation led by Stephanas and Fortunatus (cf. 16.15). Paul's response to this letter, reflected in chapters 7-15, has the character of qualified agreement ('yes... but...', as reflected in Καλὸν... δὲ...: cf. 7.1,2,8,9,26,28). This qualification reflects not only his own orientation, but his awareness of another set of opinions and orientations among believers in Corinth.

Paul takes up the issues of marriage and celibacy, probably following the order of questions and issues in the letter addressed to him. (But note also the otherwise fortuitous juxtaposition of the issue of πορνεία in chapters 5-6, and then the issues of marriage and celibacy in chapter 7!) Recent interpreters (G. Theissen; W. Meeks; J. Neyrey; D. Balch; Margaret MacDonald, among others) have seen the function of the topic of celibacy as communal marker over against the world. But some of these same interpreters seem to argue — or to have assumed — that the sexual asceticism under discussion in the chapter was a *simple* phenomenon, e.g., of one type, from one source, influenced by outsiders and/or a radicalized (and anti-Pauline) interpretation of the teachings and example of Paul himself. Such interpretation, therefore, has tended to attempt to account (in a history of religions perspective) for the *origins of*, and *influence(s) upon*, the 'radical' ascetics in Corinth, and to explain (in social-historical, social-scientific perspective) the *social consequences* of their behavior. (And, of course, it seems to be assumed in the scholarly literature that this was/is the *only* way to be ascetic.) The general thrust of scholarship, then, reflects little notice of the evidence in the chapter (and throughout 1 Corinthians) for *different types* of ascetic piety among the Corinthians and Paul, and that these types were reflective of different understandings of the ideals and challenges of Christian existence.

I find in 1 Corinthians 7 (and throughout 1 Corinthians) evidence for *three* types of 'responses to the world', which, given their character, should be understood as ascetic. To an accounting of these types I now turn.

<sup>15</sup> See Vincent L. Wimbush, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and Self-Understanding According to 1 Corinthians 7* (Macon, 1987); and O.L. Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles* (Atlanta, 1987).

## A. 'All Things are Permitted...'

The first type of response is associated with the fairly easily identified so-called radical pneumatic elites, understood to have embraced and advanced in the pre-1 Corinthians letter to Paul the 'All things are permitted' slogan. These are the pneumatic elites whose understanding of Christian existence as σοφία (cf. 1 chaps. 1-4) or γνῶσις (cf. chap. 8) inspired a boldness in response to the world, a radical indifference to the world, its standards and expectations. In the history of interpretation this response has sometimes been perceived as renunciation, but much more often as its opposite — profligacy and immorality. 'Gnostic' piety, until very recently in scholarship, was generally associated with profligacy. More recently, access to the writings and perspectives of the 'Gnostics' has given pause and re-thinking<sup>16</sup>. From their own writings we now know that these 'gnostic' believers seem to have been convinced that the world was already irrelevant, was of no consequence for them, given their status as enlightened ones. In principle this conviction meant that any response to the world was legitimate. In actual practice, however, the evidence suggests that such believers were more consistently 'radical' in their renunciation than in their embrace or exploitation of the world.

This appears to be the case in 1 Cor. 7. Although it is certainly not necessary to label them 'gnostics', the 'radicals' addressed in the chapter seem to share some second and third century gnostic sensibilities and visions of the world in the sense that they defined Christian existence as a bold and radical way of life, as existence without acceptance of the customs and traditions of the world. This included the renunciation of sexual relations and the assumed accompanying traditional ties and responsibilities of marriage and family life. Among some, Christian existence was thought to require existence without sex even *within* the marriage or engaged relationship (7.1f.; 25f.). That this response represented rejection of the world is clear enough: family life and sexual relations and the laws and traditions governing them were perhaps the most important socializing institutions and agents in Greek and Roman antiquity<sup>17</sup>. No one, no group through whatever impulse, having considered resistance to the social and political orders a necessity, would have failed to see the importance of renunciation of marriage and family and sexual relations as resistance, as declaration of independence from the world. In

<sup>16</sup> See the recently published books by Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (tr. Anthony Alcock; Oxford, 1990), and Simone Petrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnostics* (tr. Carol Harrison; New York, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*. (New York, 1988); and his 'Bodies and Minds: Sexuality and Renunciation in Early Christianity', *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient World* (ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin; Princeton, 1990) 479-493.

chapter 7, then, the radical, aggressive sexual renunciation of some of the Christians at Corinth clearly represented, through whatever influence<sup>18</sup>, only *one* view of Christian existence in the world, understood as rejection of world, signified in a form of ascetic behavior<sup>19</sup>.

So what can be developed from 1 Corinthians, especially chapter 7, is a picture of a loosely knit group within the mid-first century church at Corinth that defined itself as group over against the world. This struggle for self-definition took the form of renunciation of aspects of the dominant society's values and traditions, its primary socializing forces. The rejection of marriage as one of the strongest of such forces reflected a need to maintain the strongest boundaries between church and world. The fullest picture that can be developed from the evidence, however, reflects not just the negative, but the struggle to realize the ideal of enlightenment (γνῶσις) *in* the world. The latter, it was thought, had to be overcome, to be ignored, made sport of, or renounced as deemed necessary. What seemed most important was gaining the insight to understand one's identity, whence one comes, what was one's destiny. Such insight was expressed most dramatically with what was done *in* the world, *with* the body. For the pneumatic in Corinth what was done with the body was reflective of radical opposition to the prevailing views and mores of urban Greco-Roman society. But this response must be understood as only one of the multiple responses among the urban Christians in the first century intended to aid the realization of the ideal.

## B. 'Eat Not...'

Teasing out responses from the letter a response different from that of the elites is a serious interpretive challenge, especially since the letter is for the most part a response to the views and practices of the pneumatic elites. Chapters 7-15 for the most part are Paul's response to the questions raised *by* the pneumatic elites; chapters 1-6 for the most part seem to be his response to the perspectives given *about* the pneumatic elites. Nevertheless, the perspectives providing the basis for chapters 1-6, and the responses to the letter from Corinth in chapters 7-15, do provide some information about what might be

<sup>18</sup> See David Balch, 'Backgrounds of 1 Cor. 7', *NTS* 17 (1971), 351-364; and '1 Cor. 7:32-35, Marriage, Anxiety and Distraction', *JBL* 102, 3 (1983), 429-439, for Greco-Roman popular moral philosophy as background; and James Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit* (Lanham MD, 1984), for revival of Hellenistic Jewish speculative wisdom tradition, following works of B. Pearson and R. Horsley.

<sup>19</sup> The other parts of the letter support this view of the Corinthian pneumatics. Paul's descriptions of them, his reaction to different sources of information notwithstanding, paints a fairly coherent and consistent picture. Those who filled his ear about what they thought was going on in Corinth (1.11; 11.18) — obviously brought a critical perspective. But what they thought negative squares with what Paul suggests in chapters 7-15 might be problematic about the pneumatics' own positively stated views about their preferred practices.

considered another orientation, if not a clearly definable group in Corinth. This other orientation was no less 'ascetic' than that associated with the pneumatic elites.

Evidence for an orientation different from that identified with pneumatic elites is strongest in the section of the letter (chapters 7-16) that is a response to the questions raised by the pneumatic elites. As was pointed out above, as Paul makes attempts to respond to the questions raised, he finds himself in a quandary: he most often agrees in principle with the assumptions behind the questions raised by the elites, knowing such assumptions as influential in his own lifestyle. But he just as often finds himself attempting to relativize the significance of the views and practices of the pneumatic elites. This is done primarily out of his concern to maintain unity in the church (cf. especially chaps. 8-10). He saw the need to balance the differences in backgrounds, perspectives and capacities in the church so that those who were considered less influential, less eloquent, who seemed less bold in their response to the world could be heard and be deemed legitimate.

Those believers 'weak in conscience', as Paul referred to them (8.7,9,11,12) — probably both for the sake of argument and as a reflection of his own sensitivities to what he thinks are the dynamics in Corinth — apparently also felt estranged from the world, especially in light of heightened eschatological consciousness. The eschatological language that Paul uses throughout 1 Corinthians points not only to some of the already traditional assumptions and assertions he made about Christian experience as understood in his mission (cf. 1.7f.; 6.2f.; 10.11; 11.26,32), but also to the important specific function of restraining the radicalism of the elites (cf. especially 2.7f.; 6.13f.; 7.26-31; 15.51f.)<sup>20</sup>. In both cases such language reflects what were probably many of the *basic* themes and emphases struck by Paul during his first visit. Paul makes use of it in an attempt to influence behavior because he assumes it to be basic and authoritative. Thus, the behavior he ultimately commends, modifies or excoriates seems to be often directly linked to — even accommodative of — the position of the 'weak'. And here the language of the end time figures prominently: Those who are labelled the 'weak' were also likely — many of them — those who probably as Jews had observed cultic taboos in the conviction that such observance reflected a pious life. As followers of Jesus these same individuals found warrant for such observance in the conviction that Jesus was Messiah and that they were the ones upon whom the 'end of the ages has come' (10.11).

By establishing and consistently maintaining simple and strong boundaries vis-à-vis the world through cultic taboos, those labelled 'weak' in Corinth registered their critique of the world. They renounced table fellowship and, we are led to believe, almost all other social contact, with outsiders. It is

<sup>20</sup> See Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 178-179.

important to understand, however, that the difference between the 'weak', (the non-elites) and the elites in Corinth should not be understood as that between a world-rejecting ethic (the 'weak' group) and a world-embracing ethic (the pneumatic elites). Clearly, *both* groups shared a sense of the imperative of critique and rejection of the world; membership in the new social group that was the Jesus movement at Corinth probably was understood as such. Both responses reflected the imperative of renunciation of the world, but they reflected differences in *understandings* of what such relationship to the world should entail, perhaps, even on what basis such renunciation should be justified. For the 'weak' the critique of the world was to be registered consistently and simply in physical and social separation. This response, as some interpreters have suggested, may very well have been influenced by a type of Jewish background of some in the community. The imperative of temporary renunciation of social and physical contact for the sake of cultic purity and observances is evident<sup>21</sup>. The pneumatic elites did not think it less important to establish distance from or mastery over the world. But they apparently wanted the distancing to be a part of a more sophisticated and comprehensive and rather bold and daring response to the world. More important than renouncing any aspect of the world at any moment was the 'true' insight into the world, recognition of truth about the world and everything in it, the power to overcome the world, to be at any time indifferent to it, to indulge it, to exploit it, to renounce it. The point was not to have to take it seriously. Simplicity of view and consistency in behavior were not premium values for such individuals.

The 'weak' group/orientation in Corinth was, then, not *more* ascetic than others; it was, as ascetic behavior, simply different. It defined Christian existence in a way — even as critique — that differed from that of the pneumatic elites. This 'group' thought it imperative to be separate from the surrounding communities, especially as such communities expressed *themselves as communities* with cultic ritual as signifier. This meant that this group's critique of the world, as reflected in the proscriptions in the text, was less radical because it was more simple and transparent and locally, even if consistently, focused. 'Eat not... touch not..., abstain from', etc., suggests an understanding of self and community that was straightforward, based on certain observances and rituals, perhaps, even, ethnic identification and boundaries safeguarded by sets of proscriptions. All of this suggests, at any rate, that the 'Jewish' identity of the 'weak' group needs to be problematized and further explained<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> See Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 97, 105; and Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, 1; Leiden, 1973), for helpful discussions about cultic purity.

<sup>22</sup> As is the case regarding the influence behind the pneumatic elites' orientation, so with the 'weak' group orientation, 'Jewish' influence can be posited. But this means that 'Jewish' must here mean different things. In the case of the pneumatic elites the argument might be — I do not need



## C. 'As If Not'

Of course, Paul's writings serve not only as (problematic) sources for the sentiments and practices of others, they also reflect his own. His responses to the two different sources of information about what was going on in Corinth, reflecting at least two different understandings of Christian existence among believers in Corinth, challenged him to clarify and articulate his own thinking, as well as help the community to find a consensus position. He may have been forced to do it, but he nevertheless offered in such responses the articulation of another (third) view of Christian existence the character of which is best understood as a type of ascetic piety.

In his response to the questions put to him by letter (cf. 7.1), Paul reflected his personal orientation and his sensitivity to the diversity of church membership in Corinth and the different capacities and orientations that was the index of diversity. Again and again throughout chapters 7-15 Paul indicates his personal affinity with the views and practices of the pneumatic elites in the Corinth. But also throughout those chapters he indicates his unwillingness to make his (and the Corinthian elites') views and practices the rule for all. He even challenges himself, and the elites with whom he is in basic (principled, logical, theological) agreement, to defer to those whose backgrounds and capacities and consciences are different (viz., 'the weak', cf. especially chaps. 8-10; lesser gifts, chaps. 12-14).

In his response to the perspectives of those other than or in disagreement with the elites (cf. 1.11; otherwise chaps. 1-6), Paul also shows his identification with the anxieties and concerns of those outside the circle of the elites. In his self-references in chapter 4 (ἡμεῖς ἄσθενεῖς... ἅτιμα... πεινῶμεν; vv. 10-12), precisely because they are found in the context of highly rhetorical speech, is also his identification with the non-elites in Corinth. His almost strident response to the information and perspective relayed by those from Chloe's house should be understood as part of his effort to encourage and legitimize the views and practices of the non-elites and thereby preserve church unity. The non-elites in Corinth (as is usually the case, by definition) were not dominant. (It is otherwise difficult to understand why the differences in Corinth had become such problems, or why Paul's biting sarcasm at points in the letter<sup>23</sup>). Paul sought to downplay, even ridicule, the views and practices of the elites, as part of a strategy to embrace and elevate the non-elites.

or want to argue the origins or influence question here, since my general thesis does not hang on it — that Hellenistic Jewish wisdom traditions were of direct influence; in the case of the 'weak' group the argument might be that more traditional cultic sensibilities were of direct influence. The divide between 'Jewish' and 'Greek', 'Jewish' and 'Greco-Roman', will not stand because it does not respect the dynamic and fluid character of different cultural traditions or their interrelationships. One orientation might arguably be considered more or less Hellenistic or Greco-Roman in influence, but not all or nothing.

<sup>23</sup> Contra Wendell L. Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10*. (SBL Dissertation Series 68; Chico CA, 1985).

Since Paul's rhetoric in this part of the letter is aimed primarily at the elites — but in support of non-elites — little direct attention is given to the explication of his own views and practices or those of the non-elites. The radical and well-developed, well-articulated views and behaviors of the elites seemed to force or inspire reactions. If 1 Corinthians, then, is thought of primarily as Paul's response to the behavior of the elites in Corinth, one can see more clearly his arguments functioning partly to justify aspects of the ascetic piety of the non-elites, and to relativize and substitute another type of ascetic piety to be embraced by all. At any rate, 1 Corinthians does not reflect Paul as either the non-ascetic in reaction to radical ascetics ('opponents'), or Paul the ascetic attempting to convince the believers in Corinth to renounce the world, thereby setting a fateful (world-renouncing) course for western Christendom. The snapshot is rather one of a movement in which Christian self-understanding and mission in the world were commonly understood from the perspective of loss of world, from the experience of a radical rupture with the world. Everything — every ideal, every assumption, every strategy — had to be questioned and reconsidered. All worldly ventures and activities had to be reprioritized. 1 Corinthians reflects differences in points of view about how to understand the rupture, about what might or should be the consequences for the new orientation to the world.

The closest Paul comes to advancing a broad proposal or argument in response to the teachings and behavior of the elites is found in 1 Cor. 7.29-35. The passage has long been seen as a *locus classicus* for Paul's views on marriage and celibacy<sup>24</sup>. It is Paul's attempt to counter the views and practices of some (perhaps, a minority) of the Corinthians by advancing an ethic of response to the world that could be embraced by the majority. This ethic, which can be put under the greatly abbreviated, but haunting rubric 'as if not' (ὥς μὴ), points to the praxis and motive that Paul thinks should govern the believer's relationship to the world and identity. 'As if Not' — in the context of 1 Corinthians 7<sup>25</sup> — suggests the rejection or recasting of both the *radical* indifference to the world of the pneumatic elites and the absolute but simple rejection of basic worldly (social and physical) contact some other members of the Corinthian church wanted to practice. The world as the *sphere* of Christian existence was affirmed by Paul, given the acceptance, even if grudging, of marriage and other forms of social contact; as a source of value and identity the world was rejected. The believer, according to Paul, must accept the reality of bodily, historical existence in the world, including contact with outsiders (5.11).

But this must also mean existence in *tension* with the world, insofar as the

<sup>24</sup> See Wimbush, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic*, 7-9.

<sup>25</sup> I have argued that the passage (vv. 29b-31a) is pre-Pauline, part of eschatological prophecy. See Wimbush, 44f.

world is understood not to have been built and oriented around the expressed goal of undistracted devotion to the Lord (cf. 7.32-35). What remains, then, is discernment — about how to re-conceptualize and re-prioritize existence in the world as believer. What at every point seems to be at stake in the argument in the chapter is the appropriate 'use' (χράσθαι) of, or response to, the world on the part of the believer (cf. 7.31). The questions Paul was asked to respond to, and the charges levelled against the elites throughout the letter, suggest this interpretation. The questioning of existence in the world, of orientation in the world sanctioned by tradition and custom, reflects the critique that ascetic behavior signifies most dramatically.

As regards the particular issues — marriage and celibacy — that provoked the correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul avoids as much as possible any direct unequivocal answer. He refuses to lay down rules for all to follow. Although he personally felt some affinity with the elites and agreed with them on principle, he counselled against any blind imitation of his lifestyle. He thought it better that each individual follow the path that reflects the gift (χάρισμα) from God, as well as the worldly situation in which one finds oneself. So neither elitist indifference nor cultically — or eschatologically — influenced separatism gained Paul's uncritical favor. In the end he supported a relationship to the world that reflected a rational critique of the ethos of the structures and dominant order of the day. Such critique was to be felt in the form of differently (psychologically) ordered individual and group priorities, challenges, and social formations, all in pursuit of the ideal of devotion to the Lord — in the context of the city. Such devotion was to represent concrete world-orientation and self-definition in the world. This is made clear above all by the emphasis placed on mission: the believers were to be worldly enough in order to gain converts, but they were to be enough detached from the world so as not to be distracted and frustrated by its challenges (cf. 7.16).

#### IV

##### Summary Conclusions

To view 1 Corinthians as a source of more than Paul's views and practices, as reflective of at least *three* types of ascetic piety that represented understandings and models of Christian existence, is to accept a number of interpretive views and assumptions about early Christianity.

First, the movement will be seen as a complex social and political movement defining itself more or less from the margins of Greco-Roman society in ways not dissimilar from other marginal groups in Greco-Roman society and beyond. Second, the 'more or less', that is, the diversity, the development, the different types of discourses and social formations and understandings of marginality within the movement, will be accounted for with the ethos of resistance, as opposed to the 'catholic', or world-embracing perspective, assumed as base-line or fundamental perspective. No longer can it be

assumed that the major conflict between early Christian can be understood simply as that between 'worldly' and 'otherworldly' orientations, with the former representing the essence of the movement, or its inevitable outcome, the latter a corruption or marginal offshot of it, or even vice versa. Third, it would mean that western culture of modernist or post-modernist disposition would be challenged not to seek to find in ancient Christianity any simple historical precedent for, and ideological legitimation of, its own practices and image. This is especially critical for those traditions that have become dominant and status quo, notwithstanding their continued embracing of the ancient Christian rhetorics of critique. For such traditions an ascetic Christianity simply would not fit the bill: it is far too complex: it is *both* too radical *and* not progressive or worldly enough. Another serious look at it from the perspective of its loss-of-world ethos will encourage new and exciting and disturbing questions, and will differently inform contemporary western discourses about self-definition, especially in connection with Christian origins.

At any rate, asceticism as heuristic category and as reflection of social and cultural opposition and the embracing of the positive ideal (salvation) in the manipulation of the body as self, allows students of ancient Christian history and literature to frame questions and to sift through evidence for ancient Christian self-definitions in a way that has not yet been fully explored. This most certainly does not mean that ancient Christian asceticism has not been much researched and written about. What the study of 1 Corinthians suggests is the complexity and wide ranging presence of asceticism in the earliest period of Christianity. So what is called for in this essay is not merely the study of asceticism *in* early Christianity — as though asceticism were an isolable minority movement or odd, quirky, even interesting and fascinating phenomenon within a sector or region or period within early Christianity. Ascetic mentalities and ascetic behaviors — with their full range of diversity of practice and function — must be seen, at least experimentally, as nothing less than *self-defining* of the ancient Christian movement. The most dramatic part of the story of this movement as ascetic movement may very well be the struggles *against* certain ascetic mentalities and expressions. But for this very reason it is important that the implications of understanding it as ascetic movement be fully explored. The rhetorics and orientations of ancient (pre-Constantinian) Christianity make much more sense the degree to which they are plotted on a trajectory of ascetic behaviors, or placed on a grid of responses alongside other 'enemies' of the empire. Here the debates can not only be more clearly explained, they also have the potential of reflecting a greater degree of clarity of world views, the differences within the movement notwithstanding, than attention to any set of doctrines can provide<sup>26</sup>. This

<sup>26</sup> See R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, chaps. 3-5, 13; also, E.A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (New York and Toronto, 1986), for provocative discussions about debates about ascetic pieties in later periods. Little attention has been given to such debates in earlier periods.

argument for asceticisms in early Christianity is also an argument for a broadening and greater sophistication of the conceptualization of ascetic behavior.

The importance of (re)consideration of the *earliest* periods and their literatures lies in the perspective and methodological focus that their agenda-setting for Christian world orientations and their evocation of certain rhetorics and discursive strategies of *contemptus mundi* provide. And the fact that the ascetic impulse, if not the rhetorics and discursive strategies and theologies, are perduring, only adds to the methodological imperative. The understandings of *contemptus mundi* in Paul and among his contemporaries in the middle of the first century are important not just because such understandings shaped the literary and rhetorical and theological nature of debates that followed in late antiquity and the middle ages and beyond, but because they suggest that asceticism, functioning as bodily articulated critique and resistance, may be a most important heuristic key to understanding ancient Christianity and much of what developed into dominant western cultural values and orientations<sup>27</sup>.

This essay, then, is a challenge to change some assumptions about, and approaches to, the study of ancient Christianity. Alongside such a change regarding the assumptions and orientations of the earliest Christians might also be the accompanying change in modern day scholarly assumptions and orientations in some circles about the engagement of preindustrial, premodern, world-critical texts and sensibilities.

<sup>27</sup> This is part of the very provocative thesis of G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, in his *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca, 1981), 409-452.

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