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Book Review: Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*

Vincent L. Wimbush
Claremont Graduate University

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Book reviews

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. [First published 1987.] xviii + 326 pp. ISBN 0-226-31692-0. \$17.95.

The study of asceticism in the West, still focused primarily upon Christian traditions, has come a rather long way in the last two decades. From focus upon texts, upon the history of ideas and practices (mainly of the early church desert "fathers"), and upon the general arts of the spiritual life, a shift of emphasis and scope is evident: Not only has the circle of students and conversation partners in the field been widened beyond church historians and theologians to include philosophers, cultural critics, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary critics, the scholarly agenda itself has also been broadened. It is no longer enough for asceticism to be defined by the rhetorics and behaviours of the Christian desert fathers; an understanding of the universality and complexity of the ascetic impulse has more recently led many scholars of a particular tradition to seek conversation with, and to learn from, scholars of other traditions. Even where there is focus primarily upon Christianity, it can no longer be assumed that the earliest or most representative model of ancient Christian asceticism is the desert figure; an understanding of the diversity and complexity of early Christianity, on the one hand, and asceticism, on the other, simply will not sustain such narrow representation. Christian asceticism did not begin or end in the desert. One can now find support and company in the attempt to understand ascetic impulses and behaviours as universal phenomena, even as one focuses mainly upon one particular historical and cultural tradition. The shift in scholarly agenda and in types of conversation partners has not lessened but increased interest in the particular representation of the ascetic. The significant change now lies in the change of attitude, especially in recognizing the importance of lack of closure regarding the ascetic in any one tradition or period of history. The quest on the part of many students of asceticism has changed from trying to offer the definitive statement about an historical ascetic figure or tradition – as though such a statement or figure or tradition could exhaust

asceticism – to the attempt to use such study as springboard into the study of the complexities of the ascetic life and of cultures themselves. Respect for the many different, even conflicting, cultural and historical representations and cultural and socio-political ramifications is maintained.

The fascinating and brilliant book entitled *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (1987), written by Geoffrey Halt Harpham, professor of English at Tulane University, stands at the apex of this development in the study of the asceticism. Harpham has blown some fresh and – given the state of studies in some sectors – some uncomfortable breezes into the world of academic (primarily religious and theological) studies on asceticism. To be sure, Harpham focused upon only one historical tradition – western Christian – in his book. But since he does not claim to define or historically reconstruct either that one tradition – “Christian asceticism” – or the phenomenon in general – “asceticism” – it does not matter a great deal.

Although the book seems to assume, mistakenly, that its beginning point – Antony and what is thought to be the beginning of the solitary ascetic tradition in the fourth century Egyptian desert – is also the true beginning of the history of ascetic traditions within Christianity, the power of the book nonetheless remains because it does not rest in the details of the history of particular traditions or moments within a tradition. What Harpham actually does is to use what are arguably important points in one historical trajectory of asceticism and a set of provocative and influential representations of asceticism as a starting point for a wide-ranging historical and cultural critical analysis of different western representations of the ascetic. As such, the book goes far beyond the originary moments and situations of early Christianity. Harpham takes the reader on a fascinating journey through the interplay of historical moments, some of their rhetorical and literary representations and dynamics, and the numerous cultural meanings and ramifications they reflect or create. The tour begins with Antony of Egypt, the beginnings of ascetic linguistics, and the subjects of “language, the self, desire and narrative” (Part One). It continues with Augustine of Hippo in North Africa and an analysis of asceticism and “self-representation, conversion, textuality, and interpretation” (Part Two). Then onward to the Isenheim Altar (attributed to Matthias Grunewald), of early sixteenth-century Germany, and ideas about “‘conceptual narrative’, the ethics of pictorial representation, the ‘passion’ of representation, and the relation between asceticism and the sublime” (Part Three). Nietzsche and Foucault are then discussed as examples of a cast of modern philosophers, with their efforts “to escape the binding force of traditions or structures they call ascetic by positing counterconcepts of power or the body” (Part Four). Finally, a turn is given to modern interpretation theory, interpreted as an “ascetic undertaking”, given its oscillation between types of formalism and subjectivism (Part Five).

Governing the fascinating tour summarized above is Harpham’s understanding of asceticism as the “cultural” element in culture. That is, he understands asceticism to be “sub-ideological”, a common feature of all cultures, and a way of making cultures comparable, permitting communication between cultures and providing a provocative explanation of cultures. The argument about asceticism’s “cultural” features alone could have been the subject of a book of considerable power and scholarly merit. The argument merits considerable serious and respectful attention from scholars, especially students of early Christianity, because it offers one of the few possibilities for the breaking out of the study of asceticism beyond the narrow confines of (traditional) philological/history-of-ideas/theological work. Harpham’s arguments provide a model of the study of asceticism as a type of cultural criticism that promises to be of interest to a wider and more diverse reading audience, including those for whom most, if any at all, of the discourses and orientations of early Christianity are no longer resonant. The “cultural” feature of asceticism discovered by Harpham allows such an audience to focus upon asceticism as self-criticism, self-limitation and the like, as a part of all cultures, the early Christian tradition being only an important historical instance of such.

Of course, Harpham was not content to leave matters with arguments about “cultural” asceticism. He is most provocative when he argues that the asceticisms along the tour he provides the reader can ultimately be explained by reference to the concept of “resistance”. Here too some generalization proves to be not merely provocative, but of some heuristic value. Drawing upon the meaning of the concept in ethical theory, Harpham first works the notion of resistance (to temptation) as tension – between the “fixed . . . analogs” of “soul” and the “mobile . . . analogs” of “body” (xvi). Then he identifies resistance as the tension that actually structures and limits desire. This tension is extended throughout the tour of different cultural situations of cultural asceticism, including modern interpretation theories. The latter matter much to Harpham not only because they represent his most intimate scholarly home and provide him an opportunity to continue “in-house” debate. They also facilitate the widening of the discussion of asceticism beyond early Christian categories to a very wide range of culture-critical issues – “desire, power, time, ethics, the body, representation, imitation, precedence, the constitution of the self, and the relation between human practices and aesthetic form” (xv).

In my opinion 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 technical historical and philological work – on the subject to date. Few of the grand and comprehensive histories of Christian and western asceticism, few of the philological studies

focused on particular texts, individuals or traditions with their exacting detail, even few of the more recent studies that represent the beginnings of openness to interdisciplinary conversation and experimentation, have provided as much provocation and heuristic power as has Harpham's book. It is the book's consistent but careful generalizability, the very thing that generally causes traditional scholarship in every field and discipline to groan and pout, that distinguishes the book. It is in making asceticism generalizable that is the book's lasting impact. Great and lasting impact will be felt especially upon those who, like the reviewer, have lived with the details in the trees for a time. Some among such types now welcome a light that provides a different view – a fuller, more expansive view of the forest and of more complex relations between many of the trees. In other words, Harpham has helped many so-called specialists in religious and theological studies see more sharply some of the complexities of the phenomenon of asceticism in general and the rhetorical and political relations between asceticisms. In persuasively and artfully subjecting asceticism to cultural criticism Harpham has provided a heightened window onto a complex phenomenon that now has the potential for aiding cross-cultural explorations about rhetorical and political formations and orientations. The limitations and vulnerabilities and criticisms that attend such explorations do not outweigh the possibilities for the expanded view and sharper understanding of a phenomenon that has endured in so much of the history of human consciousness and orientation. For challenging us with the possibilities all readers are in Harpham's debt.

The book should be read by all students of history of religion, theology, philosophy, cultural criticism, and interpretation theory.

New York City, Union Theological Seminary

VINCENT L. WIMBUSH

Joshua Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone: Religion, History, and Identity in Early Modern Political Thought*. Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. xi + 252 pp. ISBN 0-226-53221-6. \$34.95.

This book effectively challenges the reign of secularization theory in the interpretation of early modern political thought and, on a deeper level, contests the adequacy of secular and universalist rationalism in political theory itself.

Fundamental modern notions of political authority and legitimacy are typically grounded in the work of authors such as those treated here. Mitchell seeks to demonstrate that they constructed their theories not from universal reason alone, but from inferences about the particular import of biblical history. Such are the "threads that hold together the fabric of early modern

political thought" (18), as represented here by Luther, Hobbes, Locke and (at one remove) Rousseau. To ignore – or be ignorant of – the theological framework of early modern thought is to misrepresent these authors (for example, by identifying ahistorical social contract theory as their fundamental contribution), and perhaps thus inadvertently to deprive cherished principles of democracy and equality of their authoritative grounds.

As the title indicates, Mitchell's authors, and Mitchell himself, hold that "the authorization for a politics of justice cannot stand on the faculty of reason alone", but requires "another horizon of history which reason alone cannot grasp" (4). He points out that the lack of scholarly interest in the historical-mythic frameworks of explanation and interpretation in the thought of his authors is vastly disproportionate to its importance in their own work.

A major source of Mitchell's orientation is Nietzsche, whom he quotes at the end: "Only a horizon ringed by myths can unify a culture. . . . Over against this, let us consider abstract man stripped of myth, abstract education, abstract mores, abstract law, abstract government; . . . a culture without any fixed and consecrated place of origin, condemned to exhaust all possibilities . . ." (152)

In an era when God's hiddenness or absence was increasingly felt, the authors studied here searched out new grounds for a "politically authoritative history" – history that "discloses the constitutive ground and situation in which human beings find themselves", and "implores that *this* action be taken and not *that*, in order that the truth of the partially revealed and concealed God/nature not be violated" (133).

What Mitchell uncovers, then, is the irreducible mythic structure which authorizes early modern political thought, and by extension our own. The theories examined here shelter under master narratives that provide (borrowing from Clifford Geertz) both a "model of" the totality of things and a "model for" appropriate action in it. Thus, "the self must act in accordance with, and within the parameters set by, the truth of its authoritative history" (136).

Mitchell convincingly reads the work of the first three authors as political theologies (73). He sees as the "genius of Hobbes and Locke" – but Luther must be given equal credit here – "that they locate God close enough to authorize a form of political life, yet distant enough to assure that political conflicts are never ultimate conflicts" (131).

All urgently seek to articulate what is normative about a particular political order even though God is hidden or absent: "That which is binding on all four authors is disclosed to the soul either *beneath* reason in faith (Luther), *to* reason from Revelation (Hobbes and Locke), or *before* reason through the heart (Rousseau)." (3) In each case, the soul is situated in a history (or rather a myth) that is "confirmable" through faith, revelation, or the heart – but "most emphatically . . . not by reason alone!" (18)