

ASCETICISM AS A WAY TO INTEGRITY OF CREATION AND RESTORATION TO LIFE

A. S. OYALANA

INTRODUCTION

The Holy Scripture unfolds the story of humanity's long and hard struggle to manifest truth and goodness in the world. Good and evil are distinguished here in the light of divine truth; the supreme expression of which is a revelation of the Word of God in this world. In spite of God's help, the sinful tendency to misuse freedom remains in people so that sin keeps disturbing the world. The Holy Scripture goes through the sins that lead to death. The most widespread sins of our time are egoism, individualism, militarism, imperialism and racism.

If we look at humankind's attitude to nature through the course of history, we can conclude that it was and remains not that of a good steward, but that of a predator. Humankind wastes and spoils nature every time through wars, in the pursuit of glory and wealth, in the vanity of carnal lust. We damage the woodlands and destroy the creatures and the riches of nature. We are witnesses of the destruction of ocean plankton by radio-active waste deposited in the sea, we see the pollution of rivers and lakes by oil and poisonous chemicals. We are appalled at the heartless destruction and damage of the atmosphere. We are witnesses of the dumping of toxic wastes at the coastlines of developing countries by industrialized countries.¹ And all these are happening in the pursuit of armed race, personal or national greed or simply from thoughtlessness and inaction.

Looking at the problem theologically and applying to it the notion of sin, we are in no way denying the objective reasons why the balance in relationship between humankind and nature has been violated – the natural population growth and the destruction of the world's population, technical progress, the inadequate and unequal cultural status and consciousness of people, etc. It is simply considered that the objective reasons do not excuse the carelessness and thoughtlessness, the inactivity and irresponsibility of the

10. *Ibid.*, p. 72
11. K. C. Anyanwu, The Nigeria philosopher, turned Senghor's African mode of knowing into African epistemology. he was responsible for most of the mistakes committed by this theory. It was in his work that we saw the impression being created that the "Negro-African mode of knowing" is being presented as the African answer to the various epistemological theories of the West.
12. K.C. Anyanwu, op. cit. p. 36
13. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
16. See Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (New York: Dover Publication, 1957), p. 17
17. O. Oladipo, "Towards A Philosophical Study Of African Culture" in *Quest*, Vol. III, No. 2, Dec. 1989, p. 32
18. This type of distinction can also be made in metaphysics and also in philosophy generally speaking. We can talk of holistic metaphysics of the community and the strict and technical metaphysics of the philosophers.
19. L. S. Senghor, op. cit., p. 72
20. Quoted by Maurice Natanson, *Literature Philosophy and the Social Sciences Essays in Existentialism and Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nynhoff, 1962), p. 161.
21. For further details of Bergson's intuitionism, See H. Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics* trans by F. L. Pogson (New York, 1910).
22. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* Translated by H. Barnes (New York, 1955), p. 172.

DR. KOLAWOLE OWOLABI is a lecturer in the Dept. of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.

humankind; they do not excuse her sins towards nature.

The Christian places all his hope in Christ the Saviour. Life with Christ liberates us from all sins; but as we put our trust in Christ's guidance towards salvation and with the help of the power of the Holy Spirit, we have to exercise virtue through our own free will. Humankind, who is called to cultivate the earth, must first of all cultivate himself. And in today's "consumerist"² attitude to nature, he must take the path of asceticism and fasting, since asceticism in general and fasting in particular, are the opposite poles of "consumerism"³. The aim of this paper is to show how constructive asceticism⁴ can serve as a useful way to restore the integrity of creation⁴ and to serve as a way of life of humankind.

The Way of Christ

The Way of Christ in asceticism may help us determine the legitimacy or otherwise of our approach on the topic, since we are bound to follow the supreme example of the Master.

The incarnation is the event in which God took on material, human flesh, making it His own. The Son became incarnate because He wanted to unify humanity with God. By the incarnation, the first separation between man and woman and God was broken and after that the next two obstacles, sin and death, were removed. The Son corrected where Adam had gone wrong. The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:45-49). So Christ is the new Adam, the new man from heaven, the second and last man. He is real God but he is real man, too. The Fathers of the Church taught that "what is not taken on (by God) is not saved".

The life of Christ, his teaching and his ethics bring into the world a new thinking and a new understanding of creation and its relationship with God. Christ's message can be found in his two great laws, love of God and of fellow people. The character of the good man is explained by Christ, by his many instructions which are particularly

expressed in the nine Beatitudes.⁵ In these Beatitudes Christ teaches the people who decide to follow him that the new man must be humble in his desires, requests and behaviour and must be peaceful. He must have right value in life and weep with penitence for weakness and sins. The new creature must try to know truth and justice and must be ready to suffer for people even to the point of sacrificing himself. He or she must be merciful to people and must have pure heart which is not darkened by sin.

The greatest example for our life as Christians is the life of Christ, who went by the way of the cross. That means, Christ followed the will of God in all things.⁶ He was baptised, prayed, fasted, denied himself of personal home and any other property. He helped people in the pains of their body and of spirit. He loved good and bad people alike. He was persecuted, beaten and suffered unjustly. Yet in all these he did not retaliate. He was in the end crucified and he died. But he rose again. He was indeed victorious over death and is now in heaven. In one word, Christ followed the way of asceticism throughout his life.⁷

That is the holy way for those who want to follow God from baptism to paradise. It was the way the early Apostle, Paul went through. He punished his body, denied the body of pleasures of life and suffered for Christ's sake, even unto death.⁸ It was the way the Early Church Fathers went and became very successful in their ministry.⁹ Asceticism is the way of renouncing one's own self. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me, for whoever would save his life would lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25).

We must lose our way of thinking so that we may have within us the mind of God. There are many ways to have the mind of God, such as studying the Bible, praying, engaging in acts of charity, mercy, confession, fellowship, asceticism, monasticism, celibacy etc. For our purpose in this paper we like to concentrate on two of them, asceticism and fasting. In asceticism we are renouncing those things which hinder us from living the life of Christ and to be in unity with God. Asceticism enhances the realisation and fulfilment of the purpose of the incarnation in our lives, that is, restoration of our fellowship with God and with fellow human beings. Fasting is the most obvious form of asceticism, to which the Church calls its

members to embark upon whenever possible since it enhances the way to life.

Asceticism

In every religion there is the desire to overcome the "world" in the sense of inferior existence. Asceticism is a way toward this victory. Without asceticism, without overcoming inferior nature for the sake of superior nature, without victory over "this world" for the sake of the other world, the life of religion is unthinkable. Asceticism is the method of experience of the life of all religion although the spiritual content underlying this method can be different.

Asceticism is one way of religious experience. The value and truth of this way are indubitable. The "World" must be overcome, so a struggle with things which pull man towards this world is necessary. Asceticism is only a technique of religious experience, only formal method. None of the ascetics sees in asceticism the full content or aim of religious life because its content and aim is the "other world". From a distance we see only asceticism technique, and formal method. But behind those things there is love of God, going into the new life.

The technique of asceticism is renunciation but its content is a return to God.

Humankind must accept and follow the law of the gospel – not to love the "world" and the things of "this world" – if we want to go back to God. The ascetic is not a person of "this world". By asceticism, man is literally going out from "this world" towards the "other world". Asceticism is not adjustment to this world, it is a transition beyond the limits of this world. The law of the Gospel, not to love this world, has value because one who does not love the world is free and he is a son. But one who loves the world is a slave of the world. Asceticism is always an escape from enslavement to the world. Asceticism overcomes the burden of this world, destroys sin and illuminates our higher nature.

Asceticism is one, but there are two parts to it – renouncing and receiving. They look like contradictions but in fact they complement each other. By renouncing we reject the devil, evil, sin and death. And by receiving we obtain power, good, grace, love and God. These are two parts of the way of asceticism which come out of Christology

and anthropology and from bodily knowledge, too. In the Church, bodily asceticism has always been the road to theological knowledge.¹⁰ It is not possible for man to come to know the truth of life, of God and of his own existence purely through the conventional concepts which can be expressed in language, relative as they are. When man follows the way of relative analogies and conventional expressions, all he can gain is a relative and conventional knowledge. The universal truth of God's revelation, the truth about the fullness and fulfilment of life, is a universal knowledge gained through personal experience – in the biblical sense of knowledge which identifies it with sexual relations and intercourse. And as the true sexual relationship and intercourse is a complete participation in body and in soul, and an offering of oneself, so also the eros of God, the true relationship and or communion with him, the knowledge of his person presupposes bodily participation by man, the bodily asceticism of self-offering.¹¹

Asceticism generally refers to the deliberate and persevering endeavour of the Christian to attain full human development which is Christian perfection. In fact we cannot know what human development is outside Christ, because human development is perfect in only Christ. Practically, there are great obstacles in the conflict between flesh and spirit – our weaknesses, our strong egoism and the outside influences of sin. It necessarily means a problem between body and spirit. Hence asceticism starts as some kind of exercise, abstinence and struggle, which have two sides – negative and positive. The negative side is turning away from evil, from sinful inclinations, from our individual desires. The positive side is turning toward God and other people, acting according to moral principles and exercising nature, the restoration of our nature which was damaged by sin, the practice of love. The entire process involves purifying the heart and finally union with God – theodosis (deification), that is a gift of God too. But God, who gave us this gift and who gave us knowledge of himself in his revelation, is waiting for our answer which is to accept his gift and to cooperate with him – every time, every day. And asceticism is our daily acceptance of his gift of faith, of his grace, our "yes" to God, our cooperation. By faith we receive the mystery of God which is for us incomprehensible by reason and by faith, we are giving ourselves to God with trust

and without seeing what he promised us. Thus we are attempting to find meaning of the world, and its history, of the cosmos, of being, of our own existence. And guided by our faith in God, who promised us eternal life, we are still dying to transform ourselves through God's grace. This is the main basis for asceticism.

Asceticism is thus a struggle between body and spirit but it is not enmity between body and spirit. The material body partakes in the perfection of man, in his sanctification. Perfection and sanctification signify man's restoration to the fulness of existential possibilities, to what he is called to be, the image and glory of God. This "end" for human life involves man's being as a whole, both what we call body and what we call soul; it relates to the totality of the human person. This is a fundamental truth of orthodox anthropology, which both interprets the meaning of Christian asceticism and draws a fundamental distinction between this and the legal understanding of individual virtue. Asceticism is not an individual work of merit, an act of constancy in observing some objective code of behaviour, or obedience to commandments laid down by some impersonal law or conventional authority. Nor does bodily asceticism confine itself to "suppression" of the body, turning this into an end in itself so that the disdained matter becomes obedient to the superior "spirit".¹²

Unfortunately there is a tendency towards a wrong understanding of asceticism in the modern mind. Asceticism in the mind of most people, who are not exactly familiar with its meaning, is some practice of "self-identification" by people, monks and nuns – who are living in monastic areas and who are separated from the world. This judgement is unhealthy because it has dissuaded many people from asceticism, which is in fact essential for everyone who wants to follow the gospel. To live in a monastery is not the only way to be an ascetic. Christian asceticism must avoid this limited understanding which projects only one side and only one method of its practice.

Asceticism must go back to the traditional understanding and to the right attitude toward the body, sex, marriage and worldly matters in general. It must approach the human person as a unity of body and spirit living in the world. And it refers to all human beings in the whole world; not only to monks and nuns in monasteries but to all people in every place and in every time. As

God created all people and as Christ died and rose again for all people, thus, asceticism is for all people, too. If we are looking at this, we can see the diversity and the necessity of different approaches to asceticism depending on the position of every person. We have to take into consideration the vocation, age, environment, status, state of maturity etc. Although approaches are different, there are in asceticism the same practices but only one aim – the following of Christ, and unity with God. Looking at this aim guarantees right understanding of asceticism – not as an end in itself but as a means of simplifying our life, so as to be more open to the grace of God. We must know this because there is still a problem and a danger of using asceticism for pious achievement and individual virtue for its own sake, and of making ourselves and own personal perfection the centre of religious effort.

There is one more reason, why we must restore right understanding and practice of Christian asceticism. In recent years, some people picked up new teachers of asceticism and spirituality from the East – Gurus or Divine Masters. Some of them were Christians before. Why are the people, who before listened to the leaders of Church now turning to Gurus and Divine Masters? Probably because they were never in touch with the Divine Master of Christianity. So it is time to look again at ascetical practices, which were observed in earlier years of Christianity and which were swept away.

There are more of asceticism in the Church – fasting, sexual continence, participation of the body in prayer, humbling act of service, act of submission and rejection of the individual will, acts of charity and participation in the mysteries (sacraments). All these are practical forms of resistance of the egocentric individuality identified with the flesh, aspects of man's dynamic struggle to overcome the impersonal elements in his biological nature, his struggle to be fulfilled, through relationship with God and with his fellow-men, in his personal distinctiveness which can be realized only through love. These are not forms of individual resistance or individual struggle, but of submission by the individual to the universal experience and life of the Church. Individual effort is transformed into a common effort. The struggle becomes an act of communion, taking its place in the life of the whole body of the

Church.

Since this is its content, asceticism is not deprivation and a niggardly attitude towards life, nor enmity towards the body and scorn for matter. Within the tradition of the Church, asceticism is *philokalia*, love for the beauty of that "uncompleted perfection" which is personal fulfilment, the restoration of God's darkened image into its original beauty.¹³

FASTING

In the tradition of the Church there are two ways of fasting. The first one can be termed "total" fasting for it consists of total abstinence from food and drink. One can define the second one as "ascetical" fasting for it consists mainly in abstinence from foods and a substantial reduction of the dietary regime.¹⁴ Total fasting may be used before the Eucharist and it is called liturgical fasting. It is very important for our preparation for communion. Doubtless, the Holy Communion as personal meeting with God is the greatest event in our life in this world and we need to be fully prepared for it.

It does not mean we are fasting for the benefit of this event or of God that we are going to meet. God does not need fasting but we need it – so we are fasting for ourselves, to be able to meet him in a fitting way.¹⁵ And we fast so strictly because it is the last and ultimate preparation before the greatest event for which we must prepare ourselves, longer than only the few hours before communion. "The total fast is the main expression of that rhythm of preparation and fulfilment by which the Church lives, for she is both the expectation of Christ in this world and the coming of this world into the world to come".¹⁶

The ascetical fast is different. It is preparation for the great feast but it is not the last and ultimate preparation for it. This preparation is longer and slower and needs much patience from man. That is the kind of fasting which can, together with prayer, overcome the demonic powers.

That is the way by which man struggles with sin and death, by which he overcomes the break in relationship between himself and God, between himself and creation – he changes his egoistic relationship with creation, in which he only gets what he can from it, into

cooperation with creation.

Both of these ways of fasting have not only a personal character but a social character. They are not fast of man's body only, but they are fast of the body of the Church. The Church fasts as a bride who follows her bridegroom Jesus Christ who fasted. "Christian asceticism is above all an ecclesial and not an individual matter." It is changing of our nature's individual mode of existence into a personal communion and relationship, a dynamic entry into the community of the life of the body of the Church. The aim of asceticism is to transfigure our impersonal natural desires and needs into manifestation of the free personal will which brings into being the true life of love. Thus the instinctive need for food, the greed for the individual's independent self-preservation is transfigured in the context of the Church's fasting: submission to the common practice of the Church becomes paramount, turning it into an act of relationship and communion. The Christian does not fast in order to subjugate matter to the spirit, nor because he accepts a division of foods into "clean" and "unclean". He fasts because in this way he ceases to make the intake of food an autonomous act; he turns it into obedience to the common will and common practice of the Church, and subjugates his individual preferences to the Church rules of fasting which determine his choice of food. And obedience freely given always presupposes love: it is always an act of communion.¹⁷

The most important fasting period in the established Churches is the period of Great Lent. As it exists today, it is the result of a long historical development (Great Lent is the oldest fast). First two days (four successive Sundays) of preparation. Then the six weeks of forty days of the Great Fast of Lent and finally "Holy Week" which ends with "Easter Sunday." Easter is the most important feast in the Church as the day when Christ rose from the dead, and by overcoming death destroyed the last obstacle which separated the nature of humanity from the nature of God.

Fasting is not only formal abstinence from food, true fasting is more, rejection of evil, rejection of our own desires, rejection of anger, rejection of lies. "Nevertheless, the Church's fasting rules do not express a fortuitous or arbitrary division of foods, but summarize a long experience of human nature on the part of the saint who laid down these canons. The experience knows well the rebel

liousness of our nature, and understands how to distinguish what use of food invigorates the impulse for self-preservation and what weakens it. In this sense, we can accept the connection between fasting and the subjugation of matter to the demands of the spirit, as an image or a figure of interpretation. All that need be made clear is that asceticism in the Church is not in conflict with matter itself, but with the rebellion of material individuality, the rebellious drive for self-subsistence.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Fasting comes from God by the first law in paradise. It is a great spiritual effort – one of the most important kinds of Christian asceticism. Fasting originated in the Old Testament and continues in the New Testament. Jesus Christ fasted for forty days and forty nights before he began His teaching. Christ's fasting is an example for all believers. The Church speaks every time about the importance of fasting for spiritual life and the salvation of man. She says it follows Christ's example and the understanding of the Apostles and Fathers of the Church. "Be careful that nobody can take you away from this way of teaching. If you can carry all the burden of our Lord, you will be perfect, if you cannot, do what you are to be able to do. About food – what you are able to do about it, do it" (Didache 6:1–3).

Fasting's abstinence from material things does not mean a rejection of God's creation. "All that God has made is very good" (Genesis 1:31). Evil resides not in created things as such but in our attitude towards them, that is, in our will. The purpose of fasting, then, and for asceticism is not to repudiate divine creation but to cleanse our will. During the fast we deny our bodily impulses – for example, our spontaneous appetite for food and drink – not because those impulses are in themselves evil but because they have been disordered by sin and require to be purified through self-discipline. In this way, asceticism is a fight not against but for the body; the aim of fasting and asceticism is to purge the body from alien defilement and to render it spiritual. By rejecting what is sinful in our will, we do not destroy the God-created body but restore it to its true balance and freedom.

The liturgical texts during the fast speak very often about the

inherent goodness of all creation including the material:

The hosts of heaven give Him glory;
Before Him tremble Cherubim and Seraphim;
Let everything that has breath and all creation;
praise Him, bless Him, and exalt Him above all for ever;
O thou who coverest Thy high places with the waters;
Who settest the sand as a bound to the sea and upholdest all things;
The sun sings Thy praises; the moon gives
Thee glory,
Every creature offers a hymn to Thee;
His Author and Creator, for ever;
Let all the trees of the forest dance and sing;
Let the mountains and all the hills;
Break forth into great rejoicing at the mercy of God;
And let the tree of the forest clap their hands.¹⁹

This attitude towards the material world gives us a right understanding about God's creation as very good and about man as a part of this creation, who was created good, too. Unfortunately sin has spoiled this beauty and brought chaos into creation. But man, who was created in the image and likeness of God, loves beauty and is trying to find the way back to integrity.

The significance of human asceticism and fasting for the whole creation is well expressed in this comment on Lent;

By means of our Lenten abstinence, we seek with God's help to exercise this calling as priests of the creation, restoring all things to their primal splendor. Ascetic self-discipline, then, signifies a rejection of the world, only in so far as it is corrupted by the fall; of the body, only in so far as it is dominated by sinful passions. Lust excludes love: so long as we lust after other persons or other things, we cannot truly love them. By delivering us from lust, the fast renders us capable of genuine love. No longer ruled by the selfish desire to grasp and to exploit, we begin to see the world with the eyes of Adam in Paradise. Our ascetic life

62

63

1. In 1987, some Italian Companies dumped toxic wastes on parts of coastline of Nigeria which caused some deaths among the nearby Koko town inhabitants. Out of poverty Benin Republic was ready to receive money reward in exchange for dumping of toxic waste on their coastlines. This attitude, was attacked by many African countries including Nigeria, and in fact Nigeria returned the toxic wastes back to Italy. e.g. *Daily Times of Nigeria* October 12, 1987, p.4
2. Consumerist attitude to nature is the propensity of humankind to consume what ever nature has in store for us, without the corresponding attitude of replenishing what has been consumed.
3. Asceticism and fasting will be fully discussed below.
4. In Vancouver, in 1983, the delegates of the VI Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) issued a call to the member Churches to engage themselves in "a conciliar process of mutual commitment (Covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation". See *Gathered for Life*, Official Report, VI Assembly of the WCC, Vancouver, Canada, 24 July – 10 August, 1983. Edited by David Gill, WCC, Geneva, 1983, p. 255.
5. See Matt. 5:3–11.
6. In John 4:34 Christ says "My food is to do the will of my Father".
7. Christ never married, never owned a house or any property except the clothing he had on. He slept wherever the night met him as an itinerant preacher (Matt. 8:29). He was often hungry and without money (Matt. 17:27). He was even buried in a borrowed grave by a philanthropist. (Luke 23:53). These are all signs of his ascetic life.
8. See 1 Cor. 9:27.

9. For details about the ascetic life of some of the Early Church Fathers, see W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), pp. 200-209.
10. Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1969), p. 16.
11. Christos Yamaras, *The Freedom of Morality* (New York, 1984), p. 116.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 109
13. *Ibid.*, p. 111
14. Alexander Schemann: *Great Lent* (New York, 1989), p. 49
15. See Emma Ekpumbi, *Joy of Fasting* (Ibadan: S.U. Press Ltd., 1989), pp. 11-17.
16. Alexander Schmemmann, *Op. Cit.*, p. 50
17. Yamaras, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 109-110.
18. Yamaras, *Op. cit.*, p. 10.
19. *The Lenten Triodon (Service Book)* translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite (London: Kallistos ware Ltd., 1987, p. 24.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

Rev. Dr. A.S. Oyalana is a lecturer in the Dept. of Religions, University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

“HUMAN FREEDOM: ITS ONTOLOGICAL BASIS” – A RESPONSE

I. J. EKPO

In “Human Freedom: Its Ontological Basis”,¹ Rev. Sister Nkechi Ezeanyino maintains that as human beings “We are aware of our deliberate choices and actions; of our being ourselves whenever our self-determination is achieved”.² According to her, the purpose of her paper is to “demonstrate as far as possible that freedom is nothing extraneous to man but rather part of his essence as man”.³ She further states that the paper “does not pretend to offer the final solution to the controversy but to provoke thoughts for further reflections”.⁴ It is on this ground that I have decided to express my views on the problems of human freedom.

The problem of human freedom could rightly be said to be one of the most important issues in philosophy which has received the attention of many philosophers and theologians, yet no solution seems to stand out superior or satisfactory. What appears a plausible solution at one age many seem riddled with hideous difficulties at another age. What makes the problem paramount in philosophical inquiries lies in the fact that it involves the question of moral responsibility to which neither ethics, theology nor metaphysics can remain indifferent. Before further discussion let us briefly review the article.

A Brief Review of “Human Freedom: Its Ontological Basis”

According to Ezeanyino, the problem that is uppermost in her mind is to “excavate into the fundamental or ontological basis of human freedom... to demonstrate that freedom is nothing extraneous to man but rather part of his essence as man”.⁵ This according to her, is premised on the fact that “man is a being who is aware of his deliberate choices, actions, of being himself whenever self-determination is achieved”.⁶ She maintains that human freedom is in consonance with our experience, knowledge and understanding of human nature, and that man, through his acts of