Book Reviews


The book under review focuses on criticism of asceticism, studied in different historical contexts. In his introduction, Oliver Freiberger gives the following working definition of asceticism: “the enduring performance of practices that affect bodily needs for religious purposes” (6). That definition can encompass a whole range of cultural phenomena, and the book is conceived as a comparative investigation. Even if the contributors addressed historically and geographically specific topics, they were asked to take into account common questions such as: What are the arguments against asceticism? What kinds of arguments are they? Why was such a criticism articulated? Who were the critics, and whom did they criticize? This framework allows a much more subtle and pertinent approach than a mere juxtaposition of essays dealing with each “religion” (“criticism of asceticism in Christianity,” “in Judaism” and the like).

As Freiberger says, “[u]nlke the phenomena of the ‘classical’ phenomenological school of religious studies, it is rather a discourse or a debate we are examining here” (14).

The book is organized into three sections, according to the agents of criticism: Freiberger distinguishes “extra-ascetic criticism” (critics stemming from outside of the ascetic context) from “inter-ascetic criticism” (critics stemming from other types of ascetics), and from “intra-ascetic criticism” (critics stemming from the ascetic context itself). Typically, contends Freiberger, agents of extra-ascetic criticism criticize the foundations of the ascetic worldview and practice, while agents of inter-criticism condemn other ascetics for “lacking certain doctrinal convictions, and [practicing] a false asceticism […] because their particular practices are based on wrong suppositions.” (15) Agents of intra-asceticism “tend to advocate a rather moderate ascetic lifestyle; thus, the common feature of their intra-ascetic criticism is the focus on the degree of intensity of ascetic practice.” (16).

This paper first distinguishes between “Root Asceticism” (the “MS-DOS” of culture), “Cultural Asceticism” (cultural manifestations of root asceticism) and “Elite Asceticism” (extraordinary ascetic forms). It then emphasizes the ambiguity of asceticism in the Brahmanical tradition: while the tradition quite exclusively recommends a “domestic” lifestyle and harshly criticizes extreme asceticism, it also acknowledges the legitimacy of certain strands of asceticism (under, among others, the names of śrama and tapas). For Olivelle, it implies that “it is not asceticism per se that the later Brahmanical theologians are opposing” (32), but rather specific ideologies reflected in ascetic practices, like those of the Jainas and the Buddhists.

Ulrich Berner’s paper, “Epicurus’ Role in Controversies on Asceticism in European Religious’ History,” shows how the figure of Epicurus was used in Christian debates about asceticism. Jerome was criticized by Jovinian for promoting a counter-natural ascetic way of life, centred on celibacy and fasting, and dangerously close to heretical Manichaeism. In turn, Jerome criticized Jovinian for promoting an epicurean, i.e. materialist and atheistic way of life. Those arguments were still used in the 15th century: the figure of Jerome was praised for having been an ascetic in the desert, whereas other writers (Cosma Raimondi, Lorenzo Valla) reinterpreted the figure of Epicurus, considering him to be a role model. The essay successfully traces the complex history of the reinterpretation of a figure among both promoters and critics of asceticism.

The first part of the book closes with the paper of Max Deeg, “Aryan National Religion(s) and the criticism of Asceticism and Quietism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.” As is well known, Aryan ideology divided world’s cultures into two families: Aryan and Semites. The former is associated with a more activist, conquering and “in the world” behaviour, whereas the latter is considered to have a passive, quietist, “out of the world” attitude. Thus, according to authors such as Oldenberg, the Indian Aryans lost their Aryan character, as witness the ascetic statements of the Upaniṣad. The Aryan spirit is, however, not altogether dead, and it can be reanimated by European activism — ironically, that of the British. For von Schroeder, this kind of Aryan activism was especially fertilized in Christianity. Buddhism, on the contrary, was a form of ultimate ascetic life-view. As shown convincingly by Deeg, it can be seen that “extra-ascetic” Aryan criticism targets both Indian and Catholic asceticism in order to promote Aryan values of honour, courage and activism. These ideas survived in certain neo-pagan religious groups in Germany (e.g. Artgemeinschaft).

The second part of the book, “Inter-ascetic criticism,” begins with the contribution of Martha G. Newmann, “Disciplining the Body, Disciplining the