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*Christian Rejection of the Body: A Historical Perspective*

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Mortification of the flesh and asceticism, its sister activity, have long played a role in Christian worship and life. Both activities focus on the body, along with its emotions and attitudes, aiming to deny its influence on behavior and thought in order to reach through one's spirit toward the divine. The body is viewed with a decidedly jaundiced eye, never being seen as good, often being understood as evil, but occasionally, at best, being treated neutrally. According to this theology, the Christian's goal is to determine how to strive toward good and spiritually uplifting behavior and attitudes by getting around the dead weight, and even sinful counter-drag, of the body.

It is not surprising that Christian monasticism first arose in Egypt, during the third century. In the previous century, Egypt had provided fertile ground for the Gnostic Christianity. Gnosticism had strong beliefs against the body. In their theology, each human soul was actually part of God's divine essence, called a "spark." The body's physical matter entrapped this spark and kept it in exile from God. As a result, the goal of the Gnostic was to release the spark by denying the body's desires and needs.

St. Anthony is credited with being the first ascetic hermit to retreat from the village and city life of Egyptian Christianity to live a solitary life of prayer and contemplation. Anthony was tempted by bodily needs and appetites, by Satan, and, even after decades of ascetic living, by worldly cares (mostly concerning the welfare of his younger sister). His example inspired others, who after becoming his disciples, went on to live solitary hermit lives themselves. Their rejection of society was also a rejection of the body while embracing a quest to live a life seeking God through spiritual means. Although thoroughly Orthodox, the hermits shared the Gnostic view that the body acted to separate humans from God.

In the fourth century, Pachomius drew groups of these Egyptian monks into organized communities. Pachomius' largest monastery is said to have held 1,400 monks. Later, Basil composed a work detailing the expected behavior, worship and governance of monastic groups. This was called the Rule of St. Basil. The monasteries enabled the practice of ascetic behavior

within an ordered life shared with other ascetics. The monks assisted each other in their practice of self-denial rather than requiring everyone to accomplish this on their own, as the hermits did.

Both hermits and monks practiced mortification of the flesh. They tried many different things to free themselves from the tyranny of the body, its emotions, and its needs. Among other activities, some fasted; some took vows of silence; some flagellated themselves; some restricted their living areas to a small space -- Simon Stylitus in Syria even sat on a pillar for many years.

Although they practiced the same kinds of self-denial, hermits and monks differed in an important way. The hermits lived a free-form life. Living by themselves, they alone chose their acts of mortification and they alone imposed those acts upon themselves. Each hermit "fought his own devils."

The monks, by contrast, practiced mortification guided by the instructions found in St. Basil's rule. Fasting, for example, was guided in part by the liturgical calendar. Physical punishment, such as flagellation, took place according to strict guidelines. In this way, some acts of mortification could be practiced by individuals alone, but many became activities undertaken by an entire monastery. They were thus "public" acts of the monastic community.

Over the centuries, monasticism spread throughout the Mediterranean world and into Christian Europe. As the popularity of monasticism grew, the practice of individuals becoming hermits waned, and was often discouraged. It was difficult to ensure that such individuals were performing only accepted practices and not straying into some type of error. In the modern period, asceticism is still practiced by a few, but physical mortification of the flesh has become frowned upon and is often seen as a sign of fanaticism rather than true faith.