

Asceticism: An Appraisal

[We are very glad to have this characteristically thoughtful, lucid, and direct essay from our old and esteemed friend Dr. Alexander F. Skutch. Dr. Skutch's areas of studies have been wide, e.g., education, natural science, and biography, and they have all led him to a philosophy which is idealistic in conclusions but has its roots very firmly in a vivid appreciation of the processes of actual life, both natural and social.

In this article he puts forward a very clear and cogent analysis of the place and nature of true asceticism in all real human progress.—ED.]

RELIGION is, historically, man's attempt to attain prosperity, harmony, and enduring happiness by enlisting the support of supernatural powers. From another point of view, it is a revolt against the harshness and strife of the natural world, with all its violence and bloodshed, disease and death, with all the privations and suffering that it frequently imposes upon man and other living things.

Some of the ills that afflict us are wholly beyond our control. Against earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, drought, floods, excessive heat and cold, primitive man is powerless and even modern technology avails little. We must either accept them as inevitable or supplicate some higher power to shield us from them. Magic, prayer, and sacrifices to the gods have ever been man's pathetic shifts to avert the destructive power of nature. But there are other natural evils in which we are more intimately involved, and which we can take more effective measures to diminish, at least in so far as they touch our lives. The greatest and most widespread of these evils is predation, the slaughter and devouring of one animal by another, which is, directly or indirectly, the cause of most of the terror, violence, and carnage that afflict the world of animals, as well as some of the ugliest passions that oppress mankind.

The second of these evils is sexuality as developed in man. Admirably integrated into the whole pattern of life of many a non-human animal, sexuality in man has grown like a rank and noxious weed. When one considers all the struggles, too often ineffectual, that responsible people undergo to control it in themselves; all the shame and agony it causes when it escapes from moral control and results in disrupted marriages, unwanted pregnancies, and illegitimate births; all the social and economic ills, all the wars and famines, all the destruction of natural beauty, caused by overpopulation, which in turn springs from man's too-strong sexual impulses; all the crudities of its physiological manifestations; all the ugliness, lewdness, and obscenity that it prompts — when one con-

siders these manifold ills for which sexuality is responsible, one must concede that its over-development is one of mankind's greatest afflictions.

Human sexuality is a standing insult to human rationality. To be denied full rational and voluntary control of one of the most important things he does—the begetting of offspring—is one of the most distressing of man's limitations. Contemplating this violent opposition between human rationality and human sexuality, one finds it difficult to believe that man was conceived or created by a deity at once omnipotent and benevolent.

It was inevitable that these two outstanding evils—predation throughout the animal kingdom and sexuality as overdeveloped in man—should be prime targets of the religious revolt against nature. It was also logical that the methods taken to combat them should differ from those employed against natural catastrophes such as drought and famine, flood and earthquake. To avert the latter, men could do nothing more effective than to sacrifice, pray, or resort to magic. But one can refuse to live as a predatory animal; one can resist his sexual impulses, perhaps subdue or sublimate them. If thereby he does not purge the world of its abominations, he at least takes a firm stand, makes a stout protest, and does all that lies in his power to mitigate them.

This steadfast refusal to participate in the horror of predation and to be swayed by irrational sexual impulses constitutes the core of asceticism as practised in most religions, especially in the East. To this is usually added stern repression of the acquisitiveness, the desire for worldly possessions, that engenders so much envy, strife, contention, and bitterness in human societies. The typical ascetic eats only vegetable foods, and those in moderation; he abstains from sex or uses it sparingly for procreation; he has few possessions, and those the most indispensable.

When we view religion as a protest or revolt against the evils of nature, which undeniably it is, then it becomes apparent that asceticism is the most effective part of religion—one might almost say, the only effective part. There is no sound evidence that sacrifices or supplications have ever coaxed a drop of rain from the sky, or throttled a volcanic eruption, or abated the hurricane's fury, or made the flood recede, or halted a plague, or stopped a war, or cured any bodily malady that did not have its root in psychic disturbances. There is no evidence, able to withstand scientific scrutiny, that any religion has ever conquered that universal affliction of the living world, death, and brought a blessed immortality to its faithful. But it is undeniable that the ascetic, by firm adherence to his vows, diminishes some of nature's evils: no animal is killed to supply his meals, no wild creature is terrorized to provide him

sport; no maiden is seduced, no bastard born to ignominy, no marriage disrupted, because of his incontinence. Moreover, no ugly disputes over property arise from his acquisitiveness, nobody has too little because he has too much. Since the fraction of the world's ills that can be attributed to any one man is infinitesimal, the most steadfast ascetic can correct only an infinitesimal fraction of those ills; yet by providing a standing example of a controlled life and constantly holding aloft the standard of revolt against some of the worst of nature's evils, his influence may extend far beyond his personal activities.

Since the ascetic's practices constitute the most demonstrably effective revolt against nature's evils, the religion that fails to encourage a measure of asceticism is an incomplete or defective religion. Something essential to religion has been omitted from it. It has neglected that most important element in nearly all early religions, man's relation to the natural world of which he is a part, to concentrate on man's relation to man, and, above all, the winning of heaven. But it does not even improve human relations as well as it might do by means of a wider vision and a more inclusive revolt against the crudities of man's nature. By neglecting to repress man's predatory impulses, as exhibited in the slaughterhouse and such bloody "sports" as hunting and bull-fighting, by doing little or nothing to restrain sexuality and acquisitiveness, such a religion leaves human nature in a crude state, and human relations suffer from this crudity. In so far as the winning of a blessed immortality depends upon character and conduct, these non-ascetic religions do less than they should to prepare their adherents for heaven. Too often the members of those faiths cherish the hope that after a life of scarcely restrained indulgence in the flesh-pots of this earth they may enter a paradise that is hardly less grossly sensual.

The ascetic element is notably deficient in some of the widespread forms of the three major religions whose sources may be traced to the Old Testament: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions are not without their fasts, partial or complete, their abstentions and mild austerities, but these are practised principally to commemorate certain events peculiar to each religion, such as the flight from Egypt or Christ's Passion, or else for ritual ends: they are not directed against primary natural evils; they do nothing to heighten awareness of them or to mitigate them, as do the ascetic practices of such Eastern religions as Jainism and Buddhism. For Judaism, especially, a revolt against the evil of predation would have been appropriate. Among the most inspiring and influential passages in the Old Testament are those in Isaiah foretelling the advent of the Messiah, when the strife of nature will cease, animal

cease to kill and devour animal, and peace and love prevail over all the earth. Since Judaism has, apparently, never ceased to cherish this hope, one might suppose that, to prepare for the arrival of this blessed day, the Jews would have become vegetarians as strict as the Jains. But they do nothing of the sort, while they passively await the establishment of universal peace through supernatural agency unseconded by human effort.

Only an ascetic religion can satisfy one who feels the full horror of nature's crudities and is determined to take a firm stand against them and do what little he can to mitigate them. Yet asceticism is too often overdone. The good citizen who struggles against some of the evils or injustices of his country does not wish to abandon or destroy it, but only to improve it. Similarly, one who revolts against the evil in nature should not repudiate nature wholly, or refuse to recognize and enjoy all the good it contains. For nature is neither wholly evil nor wholly good, but a mixture of the two; just as human nature, which is part of the universal nature, is a mixture of good and evil. And the good in nature, as I have long contended,¹ is primary, whereas the evil is secondary, the result of the clashes that arise in consequence of the excessive intensity of the movement to build the crude stuff of the Universe into coherent, harmonious patterns, that is, to increase goodness. So intense is this striving for organization that it initiates more patterns than can find the space and materials that they need to complete themselves; becoming overcrowded, organized beings collide and often destroy each other. Universal evolution is directed toward the increase of beauty, joy, and love; ugliness, suffering, and hatred are its tragic by-products.

Asceticism is an expression of the religious revolt against the evils of nature. If it avoids fanatic extremes, it will confine its rebellion to what is truly evil and not reject the whole of nature. The rational ascetic, who keeps clearly in mind the reasons for his practices, should not hesitate to enjoy and participate in all that is good, beautiful, and innocent in the natural world, as well as in human society. By studying nature, contemplating and perhaps even creating beauty, cultivating friendships, and similar wholesome activities, he will expand his mind and elevate his spirit, thereby making it worthy of the blessed immortality to which he aspires, if that be the goal of his religious practices rather than just to live decently and blamelessly on this earth. Asceticism, a protest against the world's agonies, should not increase sorrow but joy. The most admirable ascetic is he who, avoiding all narrowness, can show us how to live fully and joyously without harming any creature.

Although ascetic doctrines and practices are fully developed only in

¹ Especially in *The Quest of the Divine* (Boston, 1956).

the so-called higher religions, the germs of asceticism can be found in primitive races. Widespread in early societies was the belief that for success in the hunt, on a raiding expedition, or some other important enterprise, the participants, and sometimes even members of their clans who remained at home, must fast, or abstain from certain foods, and practise continence. Likewise there was the quest for visions by means of fasts, austerities, sometimes even mutilations. Although the objectives of some of the enterprises for which these primitive people practised austerities — such as success in the chase or in a foray — may to us appear to be of a low order, to the tribesman they were often all-important, for survival depends upon them. Might we not say that already, at an early stage of human culture, there was a vague feeling that for the highest accomplishments some denial of natural appetite, some rebellion against nature, was necessary? As, with advancing culture, our objectives have become higher and more spiritual, we have developed and formalized what was true in this early insight, thereby giving rise to asceticism as an essential part of religion.

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He is confirmed in spiritual knowledge when he forsaketh every desire which entereth into his heart, and of himself is happy and content in the Self through the Self. His mind is undisturbed in adversity; he is a stranger to anxiety, fear, and anger. Such a man is called a Muni. When in every condition he receives each event, whether favourable or unfavourable, with an equal mind which neither likes nor dislikes, his wisdom is established, and, having met good or evil, neither rejoiceth at the one nor is cast down by the other. He is confirmed in spiritual knowledge, when, like the tortoise, he can draw in all his senses and restrain them from their wonted purposes. The hungry man loseth sight of every other object but the gratification of his appetite, and when he is become acquainted with the Supreme, he loseth all taste for objects of whatever kind. The tumultuous senses and organs hurry away by force the heart even of the wise man who striveth after perfection. Let a man, restraining all these, remain in devotion at rest in me, his true self; for he who hath his senses and organs in control possesses spiritual knowledge.

He who attendeth to the inclinations of the senses, in them hath a concern; from this concern is created passion, from passion anger, from anger is produced delusion, from delusion a loss of the memory, from the loss of memory loss of discrimination, and from loss of discrimination loss of all! But he who, free from attachment or repulsion for objects, experienceth them through the senses and organs, with his heart obedient to his will, attains to tranquillity of thought.

—*The Bhagavad-Gita*