

# Asceticism

*Asceticism* comes from the Greek word *askesis*, meaning “exercise”, “training”, “practice”, “denial”, “mortification”, “detachment” etc. Both great mystics of Carmelite Order speak in great lengths on this subject. St. John of the Cross, gives insistence on this topic in his treatise the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and St. Teresa of Avila speaks of it in *The Way of Perfection* and in the *Interior Castle*. Ascetics renounce worldly pleasures that distract them from spiritual growth and enlightenment and live a life of abstinence, austerity and extreme self-denial. The practice of asceticism is abundantly present in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. Asceticism is not to be confused with Stoicism. Stoics believe that holiness can reside only in the spiritual realm, and all physical matter is evil. Ascetics do not necessarily believe that the flesh is evil, but they do go to great lengths to deny the flesh in order to transform the mind or “free” the spirit. Historically, asceticism is associated with fasting, exposing oneself to heat or cold, sleep deprivation, flagellation, and even self-mutilation is proved. Asceticism is usually associated with monks, priests and yogis.

The voluntary Nazarite vow could be seen as a mild form of asceticism. People of the Old Testament who took the vow consecrated themselves to God and refrained from drinking wine and cutting their hair (Numbers 6.1-21). Modern Christian ascetics use passages such as I Peter 2.11; I Cor 9.27 to support their lifestyle, and they exhibit their austerity in different ways. Some choose to

be celibate. Others practice religious disciplines such as meditation, keeping vigil, and fasting.

Monasticism is closely linked with asceticism but with a slightly different focus. When ascetics practice extreme self-denial, monks seclude themselves from all earthly influences in an attempt to live a godly life and to keep their personal religious vows. Christian monasticism is based on an extreme interpretation of Jesus' teachings on perfection Matthew 5.48; celibacy (Matthew 19.10-12) and poverty (Matthew 19.16-22). Monks and nuns attempt to control their environment and surround themselves with like-minded devotees. Many followers of Eastern religions also practice monasticism, the Buddhist monk perhaps being the most recognisable.

When we look at the traditional progress of Christian monasticism we clearly note that there is a heavy influence of Judaic tradition from the Essenes, a Jewish mystical sect, that is similar to the spirit of monks. They were as devout as the Pharisees but lived in isolation, often in caves in the wilderness. Biblical scholars prove that John the Baptist was an Essene, and many scholars believe the Dead Sea Scrolls were written by Essenes. Monasticism in Christianity became popular during the time of Constantine. With the government's endorsement of Christianity, many believers found it more difficult to live a godly lifestyle. Some of them turned their backs on society and fled to the desert, where they believed that quietude and self-induced hardship would make following Jesus easier. Today, most Western monks and nuns are Catholic, although there is a movement among Protestants for individuals and families to live communally.

Followers of Christ are told to deny self (Luke 9.23), but asceticism takes this command to an extreme. The Bible never suggests that a Christian should purposely seek out discomfort or pain. On the contrary, God has richly blessed us “with everything for our good” (I Timothy 6.17). The Bible warns of those who “forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods” (I Timothy 4.3) thus, it is erroneous to believe that celibates who abstain from certain foods are “more holy” than other people. We are under grace, not under the law (Romans 6.14) therefore, a Christian does not live by a set of rules but by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ has set us free (John 8.36). In many cases, the ascetic practices self-denial in order to earn God’s favour or somehow purge himself from sin. This shows a misunderstanding of grace; no amount of austerity can earn salvation or merit God’s love (Ephesians 2.8-9)

Asceticism is a great means of attaining to holiness and union with God but a total focus on asceticism without trust in God’s grace is not a healthy way to holiness. Grace and effort both are needed to attain to sanctity.

**Dr. Rudolf V. D’Souza OCD**  
**Guardian Angels Parish**  
**Vancouver -**