

Asceticism: a Missing Dimension in Climate Change Responses

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[A]ll of us are deeply frustrated with the stubborn resistance and reluctant advancement of earth-friendly politics and practices. Permit us to propose that the reason for this hesitation and hindrance may lie in the fact that we are unwilling to accept personal responsibility and demonstrate personal sacrifice. In the Orthodox Christian tradition we refer to this “missing dimension” as asceticism, which could be translated as abstinence and moderation, or – better still – simplicity and frugality.... This may be a fundamental religious and spiritual value. Yet it is also a fundamental ethical and existential principle.

-- Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I¹

In the face of an ever-worsening climate change crisis, one significant concern is the need for lifestyle changes that reduce human impact on the natural world.² Environmentalists have been advocating for these changes to become more substantial in several ways – for more people to embrace change, for the changes to be more significant, and for change to happen more rapidly. However, distractions, temptations, competing values, discouragement, and denial combine to minimize change just when maximization is needed. As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si'*, “Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity.”³

¹ John Chryssavgis and Michele L. Goldsmith, eds., *Sacred Commerce : A Conversation on Environment, Ethics, and Innovation* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2014).

² Lifestyles are only one area of concern in regards to climate change. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda identifies the need for transformation in “five areas of social life – the arenas of individual or household, civil society organizations, corporate or other business, government or public policy, and worldview or consciousness.” This paper focuses only on the first arena, without denying the importance of the others. I agree with Moe-Lobeda that there is significant “interplay” between these arenas. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, “Climate Change as Climate Debt: Forging a Just Future,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 36, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 37.

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (The Holy See: Papal Archive, 2015), §14.

Religions have distinctive resources to add the efforts being put forth by a variety of actors. As Larry Rasmussen points out, “There are other transforming agents, not least education, the arts, and healthy families. But religion bears remarkable powers that are ignored or dismissed to the peril of those riding the same small ark on the same rising seas. It is foolish not to tap millennia of fluency in the arts of life instruction and renewal, just as it is foolish to overlook the religious loyalties of some ten thousand religions and 85 percent of the planet’s peoples.”⁴ As Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew declares in the above quote, the element of *ascesis* (or asceticism) has been missing in the discussions about climate change, and yet is a fundamental and essential aspect of Christianity.

The Christian church has a long-standing and very rich tradition of asceticism.⁵ From the very beginning of Christianity, there was a great interest in establishing a way of life that reflected the distinctive faith commitments held by the followers of Christ.⁶ Over time, this interest came to fall under the label of 'asceticism', a term coming from the Greek ἄσκησις (*ascesis* or *askesis*) meaning exercise, training, practice, but also the practice of something, or a mode of life.⁷ Early Christian use of the term asceticism borrowed a metaphor from athletics which likened living a Christian life to running a race; Christian athletes must take on difficult training, putting aside distractions to focus

⁴ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

⁵ My focus on Christian asceticism should not be seen as a claim that asceticism is uniquely or even distinctly a Christian practice. It is clear that asceticism existed before Christianity in both Hellenic philosophy and Jewish practice, probably drawing heavily on both. Non-Christian asceticism also exists in a number of other faiths – Islam and Buddhism, for example., While these other forms of asceticism are potential resources for creating meaningful responses to climate change around globe, the scope of this paper will necessarily be limited to Christian asceticism.

⁶ The earliest examples may be found in the letters of Paul and the Gospels, as well as non-canonical texts such as the *Didache*. Clearly, this interest in a Christian way of life predates the development of monasticism, yet asceticism is often conflated with monasticism in a way that is not helpful; for my purposes the terms will have distinct meanings. While asceticism is a set of practices or disciplines, monasticism refers to one type of institution within which asceticism is practiced. Asceticism is also practiced outside of monasticism, and indeed for our purposes non-monastic asceticism is of greater interest than the monastic varieties.

⁷ Henry George Liddell, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, Founded upon the 7th Ed. of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 124.

on the goal.⁸ Asceticism includes both positive and negative aspects; there is both giving up old habits and taking up new ones; in the process, the ascetics – pulling on an even earlier meaning of the term, to fashion or craft – refashion themselves and their lives.⁹ Asceticism has the potential to shape not only their habits and daily choices, but their mindset, their relationships, and the very core of their being. I argue that climate change calls for a Christian response that includes the historical tradition of asceticism in order to seek a better future for all of God’s creation. Christian asceticism has the potential to provide movement on the environmental agenda because it brings 2000 years of experience to the task of creating and sustaining faithful ways of living in the world, especially in the face of significant challenges and resistance. At the same time, in order for this tradition to provide an adequate response, Christian asceticism must grow – both in practice and in theory – to include a concern for sustainability and a place for social action.

Defining and Describing Christian Asceticism

Over the course of two millenia, the vine of Christian asceticism has grown a variety of branches with different understandings or approaches to asceticism. The language used to discuss Christian asceticism has evolved since the ancient period to include terms such as discipleship, growth in holiness, and sacramental living. While, this variety of terms complicates the task of definition. I offer the following definition of Christian asceticism: Christian asceticism is a set of intentional practices or disciplines that are chosen and followed by practitioners to pursue a Christian way of life in response to the world around them.

In the opening quote the Ecumenical Patriarch gives a contextual definition of asceticism: “abstinence and moderation, or – better still – simplicity and frugality.” This is not a dictionary

⁸ See Heb. 12:1-3, 1 Cor 9:24, 2 Tim 4:7

⁹ Liddell, *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 124.

definition based on the Greek term, but rather a definition that speaks to what the term means in the contemporary world. In this he reminds us that asceticism is a practice, not a universal ideal. Therefore, it cannot be separated from the people and places where it is practiced; asceticism represents “a range of responses to the social, political, and physical worlds.”¹⁰ (These responses are often critical of these worlds, and may seek to change them.) Thus, this context is always relevant, and shapes the asceticism in that time and place. To deepen our view of asceticism, I will give some brief examples of actual (contextualized) ascetical practices, one ancient and a few modern, followed by a fuller exploration of the key characteristics of Christian asceticism.

The first example is that of Basil of Caesarea, who both preached and lived a life of asceticism. Key for him were the practices of almsgiving and moderation or simplicity in way of life. Basil regularly exhorted his congregation to care for the poor,¹¹ viewing those with wealth as stewards of God’s blessings who are charged to share that wealth with the poor.¹² Basil advocated cultivating the virtue of detachment as a means of supporting almsgiving.¹³ Detachment from material goods had both a spiritual and a physical aspect; giving up one’s emotional attachment to wealth and luxuries leads to giving up possession of that wealth, through almsgiving.¹⁴ The result of this sense of detachment and the accompanying almsgiving was a true Christian life of moderation and simplicity. An important aspect of this life of moderation was the practice of fasting,¹⁵ which

¹⁰ Walter Kaelber quoted in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1995), 119.

¹¹ For example, Basil of Caesarea, “Homily 21: On Detachment from Worldly Goods and Concerning the Conflagration Which Occurred in the Environs of the Church,” in *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, trans. Sister Monica M. Wagner (Washington, D. C: Catholic University Press of America, 1962), 497. See also Homilies 6, 7, and 8, among others.

¹² For example, Basil of Caesarea, “I Will Tear Down My Barns (Homily 6),” in *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder, Popular Patristics Series 38 (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2009), 2, 7.

¹³ See especially, Basil of Caesarea, “Homily 21: On Detachment.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 495–6.

¹⁵ Basil dedicates two homilies to fasting. Basil of Caesarea, “First Homily on Fasting,” and “Second Homily on Fasting,” in *On Fasting and Feasts*, trans. Susan R. Holman and Mark DelCogliano, vol. 50, Popular Patristics Series (St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2013).

for Basil goes beyond abstinence from food – he exhorts his congregation to loose every bond of iniquity¹⁶, giving up a variety of vices.¹⁷ It is a universal discipline for all Christians, whether wealthy or poor, men or women, children or seniors, settled or travelers.¹⁸ Fasting, almsgiving, and simplicity of life are ascetical disciplines that work together to fashion a Christian way of life.

This way of life was accompanied by prayer, both private and communal. Basil advocates regular and extensive prayer for his congregants. While Basil is known for having written quite a number of prayers still in use today, prayer is more than a text for him. “Limit prayer not to syllables, but to the intentions of the soul, and a lifelong practice of virtue.”¹⁹ Prayer should be, along with self-control, a constant companion and friend.²⁰ Its content should be that of gratitude and thanksgiving, with the Christian urged to “give thanks in all circumstances.”²¹ Alongside gratitude, repentance is also an important attitude for the Christian to cultivate in prayer. Repentance should include confession, prostrations, groaning, weeping, and humility as well as the end of injustice and debt.²²

For Basil, asceticism is supported by community, with the family household as the basic unit of community for the majority of his audience; those within the household pursue ascetical practices together. He rejects an argument that married people should be exempt from asceticism due to the raising of children.²³ The local church also serves as support of ascetical practices²⁴ through

¹⁶ Basil of Caesarea, “First Homily on Fasting,” §1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, §10.

¹⁸ Basil of Caesarea, “Second Homily on Fasting,” § 2.

¹⁹ Basil of Caesarea, “On the Martyr Julitta (and On Giving Thanks, Concluded),” in *On Fasting and Feasts*, trans. Susan R. Holman and Mark DelCogliano, vol. 50, Popular Patristics Series (St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2013), §3.

²⁰ Basil of Caesarea, “In Time of Famine and Drought (Homily 8),” in *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder, Popular Patristics Series 38 (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2009), §4.

²¹ See 1 Thess 5:16-18 and Basil of Caesarea, “On Giving Thanks,” in *On Fasting and Feasts*, trans. Susan R. Holman and Mark DelCogliano, vol. 50, Popular Patristics Series (St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2013), §1.

²² Basil of Caesarea, “In Time of Famine and Drought,” §3–§5.

²³ See Basil of Caesarea, “To the Rich (Homily 7),” in *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder, Popular Patristics Series 38 (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2009), §7.

²⁴ Basil of Caesarea, “In Time of Famine and Drought,” §8.

instruction, exhortation, example, shared practice, and prayer. The local churches were also a major foundation for the veneration of saints; as we see in several of Basil's sermons, these saints served as important role models for the community, especially pertaining to ascetical practices.²⁵

In 368 a drought struck Basil's region of Cappadocia, resulting in a seemingly complete crop failure. A very severe famine ensued, fed by the drought and the hoarding of grain by those few who possessed a surplus. The destitute gathered in the capital city of Caesarea, hoping for help as they starved to death. Basil rose to the occasion, organizing a relief effort that transformed the city of Caesarea, outlasted the famine, and stood as an enduring legacy of Basil's love of the poor. Basil's homilies from this time period showed the ascetic aspect of his response as he encouraged his congregations to engage in intensified ascetical disciplines, especially almsgiving and repentance, as a special means to help alleviate the suffering of the poor during the crisis.²⁶ (He identified sin as a cause of the crisis, especially the wealthy not sharing with the poor.) The end result was the creation of the famous *Basiliad*, a group of social services agencies located on the outskirts of Caesarea (and named after Basil.) Basil, as bishop, moved his residence there (along with his monastery), living alongside and serving the poor. The *Basiliad* outlasted both Basil and the famine that inspired it. Although not a unique institution in the ancient world, the *Basiliad* was particularly well known, and became inspiration for others.²⁷

There are a number of ways in which Basil is particularly helpful for this study, the greatest of which is our ability to see how he views ascetic disciplines as an important part of his

²⁵ For example, Basil of Caesarea, "On the Martyr Julitta (and On Giving Thanks, Concluded).", "On the Holy Martyr Mamas," and "On the Martyr Barlaam," in *On Fasting and Feasts*, trans. Susan R. Holman and Mark DelCogliano, vol. 50, Popular Patristics Series (St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2013).

²⁶ Basil of Caesarea, "In Time of Famine and Drought," §1–2.

²⁷ For more on the *Basiliad* see: C. Paul Schroeder, ed., "Introduction and Commentary," in *On Social Justice*, Popular Patristics Series 38 (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2009), 32–37. Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, Oxford studies in historical theology (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 74–76. Brian E. Daley, "Building a New City : The Cappadocian Fathers and the Rhetoric of Philanthropy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (September 1, 1999): 431–461.

community's response to a crisis – in his case, a drought and famine. Regular practices are intensified but also new practices (and even institutions) are created that remain in the community after the immediate crisis is over. “Storms at sea test the mettle of the ship’s captain...,”²⁸ and a crisis shows if one truly has a Christian love of neighbor. He hopes his congregation will not merely weather this storm, but will also see it as an opportunity to deepen their faith and to more fully live out their faith through helping those in need.

Christian asceticism is not limited to the ancient period, but is also alive and well in the contemporary period. It has taken on some different practices and forms, but has also retained many historical aspects of the tradition. Examples of these practices include, but are in no way limited to: prayer, fasting, charitable giving and service to the poor, corporate worship, simplicity of lifestyle and choosing to be less consumeristic, taking responsibility for the consequences for spending choices, and forming intentional communities. This list is woefully inadequate as it would be nearly impossible to include all the different approaches to contemporary asceticism. Below, I offer a few brief examples of contemporary ascetical practices.

Christians have long pursued special ascetical practices during liturgical seasons. Lent is most often associated with asceticism, especially the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. However, the pre-Christmas season²⁹ now provides an interesting example through an organization called the Advent Conspiracy, which seeks to counter the growing materialism of Christmas. “In 2006 five pastors imagined a better Christmas practice for their own communities. Today, Advent Conspiracy is a global movement of people and churches resisting the cultural Christmas narrative of consumption by choosing a revolutionary Christmas through [the four tenets of] Worshipping Fully, Spending Less, Giving More and Loving All.”³⁰ The organization provides resources for

²⁸ Basil of Caesarea, “In Time of Famine and Drought,” §5.

²⁹ This is called Advent in the western church and the Nativity fast period in the eastern church.

³⁰ “Home - Advent Conspiracy,” *Advent Conspiracy*, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.adventconspiracy.org/>.

churches to encourage their members to pursue a different way to celebrate Christmas, focused on the four tenets listed above. A disciplined approach to gift giving and celebrations encourages the participants to both spend less and more thoughtfully – for example, making gifts or decorations instead of buying them – while also dedicating themselves (and the money they are not spending on gifts) to helping others in need. Advent Conspiracy particularly encourages donations in support of world-wide clean water initiatives, although families and congregations may choose their own causes to support.³¹

Another growing trend in contemporary ascetical disciplines is to take responsibility for the consequences of one's spending choices. This may be choosing to support a particular product or business, or choosing to avoid a product or business, in either case based on the compatibility of the product and one's own ethical values. For example, many churches have moved to purchasing the coffee for their Sunday morning fellowship from Free Trade organizations which market their coffee as being economically better for the growers and more sustainable for the environment;³² similar organizations connect consumers to a number of other products.³³ Other ethical purchasing campaigns include those to buy local goods³⁴ as well as the various longstanding campaigns to buy American goods.³⁵ The day after American Thanksgiving, Black Friday, is the target of the Buy Nothing Day campaign³⁶ as well as the Blackout Friday campaign,³⁷ pointing to the vigor and adaptability of this modern practice. The logic of ethical shopping also extends to ethical or socially

³¹ The Heifer Project is another example of specialized holiday traditions; their Christmas gift catalog allows people to 'purchase' animals to be given to poor families in the name of the gift 'recipient', who receives a card announcing the donation in their name. See www.heifer.org/gift-catalog/index.html

³² Examples include Grounds for Change (www.groundsforchange.com), and Equal Exchange (equalexchange.coop).

³³ For example, Fair Trade USA (www.fairtradeusa.org), SERRV International (<http://www.serrv.org/>) and Ten Thousand Villages (<http://www.tenthousandvillages.com/>).

³⁴ for example, <https://sustainableconnections.org/thinklocal/why>; Also,

³⁵ For example, <http://madeintheusa.com/>

³⁶ For more information, see <https://www.adbusters.org/bnd/>

³⁷ For more information, see <https://blackoutfriday.org/>

responsible investments, divestment campaigns, and boycotts. Although some of these practices can be part of larger political action campaigns, they are not linked to any one part of the political spectrum but rather are becoming a common way for consumers to both take responsibility for their financial interactions, and to affect change in the world around them.

For one final, brief example Society members might remember the excellent presentation by Mark Scandrette at the November 2013 PCTS meeting where we spoke about his work through Reimagine: A Center for Integral Christian Practice. At the center, Scandrette leads groups through retreats called ‘learning labs’ and encourages the group members to develop new practices through which they may more deeply and meaningfully live out their faith. Practices vary by group, but his examples included efforts to down size and live more simply, while also helping the poor.³⁸ His group practices reflect a larger social movement towards simplicity and simple living.³⁹

Having examined a few examples of asceticism, we are now able understanding its nature more deeply. Christian asceticism, as it has developed from the ancient period into the modern, has certain important characteristics which describe ascetic practices throughout the tradition, while also allowing for variation within the tradition.

- 1. Christian asceticism is teleological and transformative.**

Asceticism ‘trains’ us to run the ultimate race, toward our Christian *telos*; however we may choose to describe this *telos*, it is understood as pertaining to both God and our true selves.⁴⁰ The *telos* provides the point of reference for establishing ascetical practices that move the practitioner forward to a perfected and fulfilled self. This is a process of growth, transformation, and conversion. The Christian *telos* has an eschatological aspect, but is never only eschatological; the ultimate *telos* may be accompanied by a number of penultimate goals.

- 2. Christian asceticism is contextual.**

³⁸ Give pcts website, center fb page, and book citation

³⁹ For examples, see: <http://www.simpleliving.org/>; <http://lovingsimpleliving.com/>; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carl-phillips/living-simple-simple-not- b_11071700.html .

⁴⁰ I am aware that there are different ways of speaking of the Christian *telos*. Orthodox Christians, for example, use the language of theosis (deification). How a Christian thinks of their *telos* may affect their approach to asceticism, but not the importance of asceticism for reaching that *telos*.

Asceticism is a response to the world, and as such, is specific to a particular place, time, and person. Different travelers seeking to converge on a single point may need to move in different directions – some going north, others west or east, and still others south – in order to arrive at the designated end point. So, too, with asceticism, practices will vary depending on the location and character of the practitioner. Practitioners have the freedom to pursue the path of their choice, discerning the best steps in order to take to reach their *telos* from their particular starting points. As Weber notes, asceticism will always exist in tension with any particular context;⁴¹ Christian asceticism has often been openly counter cultural, especially in regards to economic practices.

3. Christian asceticism is positive self-discipline.

Asceticism is an exercise of free will in regards to one's own character, identity, and behavior, aligning them to one's *telos*.⁴² Each Christian must determine their own rule or set of ascetical practices, based on their own understanding of their situation and of the circumstances of the world around them. (Thus, asceticism cannot be imposed upon someone.) This process of discernment benefits from the solitude and silence associated, in the tradition, with the desert; the process also involves ongoing repentance. Christian asceticism is a life of liberation, fulfillment, love, beauty, and holiness for the practitioner, even when engaged in practices of renunciation.⁴³

4. Christian asceticism is a communal activity.

Christian asceticism is not done alone, but rather within a community, or set of communities which provide inspiration, motivation, education, support, and accountability to the individual practitioner. Though we strive individually for our *telos*, we achieve it together as a whole.

5. Christian asceticism is relational.

Ascetical practices are directed at our relationships; like virtue, asceticism is essentially philanthropic in nature. Through our practices, we grow in our ability to act with love and justice toward those around us – our friends and family, our neighbors and community members, and our non-human neighbors. While ascetical practices often focus on moderating our consumption of material goods, this is done for benefit others as well as ourselves, to restore rightly ordered relationships.. Ultimately, our asceticism helps us grow closer to God as well.

6. Christian asceticism is both spiritual and ethical.

Each Christian is called to holiness, and our ascetical practices are part of our response to that call. As we grow in holiness – in faith, hope, and love –we grow both spiritually and morally. Although asceticism is often studied within the field of spirituality, historically it

⁴¹ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright 1916-1962 Mills (Nabu Press, 2011), 323–359.

⁴² Significantly, this includes the cultivation of virtues.

⁴³ See Kallistos Ware for an excellent examination of the more stringent and body-negative practices within the history of Christian asceticism. Along with him, I prioritize the more natural and positive ascetical practices as more central to the tradition. Kallistos T Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?," in *Asceticism*, by Vincent L. Wimbrush and Richard Valantasis (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3–15.

has had a strong ethical element. The regularity, frequency, and mindfulness of ascetical practices makes them interesting for ethics because of the potential for these practices to create habits, form identity, motivate moral choices, shape relationships, influence the moral imagination, and move the practitioner toward a goal or goals. Any dichotomy between inwardly focused (spiritual) aspects and outward focused (ethical) aspects is a false dichotomy. Christians have one *telos*, not two.

7. Christian asceticism consists of integrated praxis.

Ascetical practices work together to move the practitioner towards the *telos*. Practices build upon each other, and support each other. Strengths and virtues cultivated by one set of practices may pave the way for engaging in more difficult practices in the future. There is an ongoing process of discernment as to the practices needed. The more robust practices will grow with the practitioner, continuing to offer opportunities for growth and transformation, while other practices may see an end to their usefulness. While asceticism is essentially an active process, some practices take on a life of their own, affecting the practitioners in unexpected ways, as the Spirit wills, such as preparing the practitioner for unforeseen future challenges.

These characteristics, combined with the previously given definition and with the description of some actual ascetical practices help us to understand the nature of this historical, diverse, and dynamic tradition with Christianity. In the next section, I will offer an argument in favor of revitalizing this tradition as part of a Christian response to climate change.

Why Christian Asceticism as a response to climate change?

How does asceticism as found in the Christian tradition help the church respond to the crisis of climate change? How might we see asceticism helping to bring about change that is deeper, quicker, and affecting more people? It does so in a number of ways, some practical, some pertaining to our relationships, and some theological.

The first practical reason to turn to Christian asceticism as a response to climate change is that it makes the response seem more manageable. When dealing with a large and overwhelming task, any number of productivity experts will offer the advice of breaking the large task down into

smaller component parts.⁴⁴ Asceticism does just this by allowing the practitioners to start small. Initially, their goal will be to start a new discipline, any new discipline; perfection is the long term goal, not the immediate one. In time, as the initial discipline becomes easier, the practitioners can reevaluate their rule of disciplines and choose new practices, or intensify their current practices. Climate change can seem like an overwhelming issue, but by proposing a lifelong process of ever deepening ascetical practices, the initial steps taken to address the issue need not also be overwhelmingly large.

A second practical reason is that Christian asceticism is necessarily linked to community and a connection to community is well known to help empower personal behavior change. For example, group membership (social support) can help people achieve weight loss goals;⁴⁵ it is also true for achieving other types of goals,⁴⁶ such as addiction recovery.⁴⁷ The group may provide information, education, physical resources, emotional support, or accountability.⁴⁸ Given the

⁴⁴ Some examples include: Ilya Pozin, "7 Things Highly Productive People Do," *Inc.com*, last modified December 13, 2011, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.inc.com/ilya-pozin/7-things-highly-productive-people-do.html>; Eric Ravenscraft, "Break Big Tasks Into Smaller Pieces to Avoid Distractions," *Lifehacker*, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://lifehacker.com/break-big-tasks-into-smaller-pieces-to-avoid-distractio-1498674433>; Emily VanBuren, "Taking It One Step at a Time: Breaking Apart Big Tasks," *GradHacker*, April 2, 2014, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.gradhacker.org/2014/04/02/taking-it-one-step-at-a-time-breaking-apart-big-tasks/>; "MIT Center for Academic Excellence: Tooling and Studying - Effective Breaks," accessed October 21, 2016, <http://web.mit.edu/uaap/learning/study/breaks.html>.

⁴⁵ See, for example: "Social Support and Lasting Weight Loss," accessed October 21, 2016, http://www.weightwatchers.com/util/art/index_art.aspx?art_id=20911&tabnum=1#footnotes; "How Social Support Can Help You Lose Weight," *Http://www.apa.org*, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.apa.org/topics/obesity/support.aspx>; "Weight Loss Accountability," accessed October 21, 2016, http://www.peertrainer.com/diet/importance_of_accountability_in_weight_loss.html.

⁴⁶ Glass Heel, "6 Ways To Achieve Any Goal," *Forbes*, accessed October 22, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/glassheel/2013/03/14/6-ways-to-achieve-any-goal/>; "Sharing Your Health & Fitness Goals Makes 'Em Gettable – Fitbit Blog," accessed October 22, 2016, <https://blog.fitbit.com/sharing-your-goals-makes-em-gettable/>.

⁴⁷ "Self-Help Groups for Alcohol Addiction: AA and Other Alcohol Addiction Support Groups," accessed October 22, 2016, <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/addiction/self-help-groups-for-alcohol-addiction.htm>; "Recovery from Addiction: Social Support," n.d., accessed October 22, 2016, <https://www.mentalhelp.net/articles/recovery-from-addiction-social-support/>; "Positive Social Support," accessed October 22, 2016, <http://alcoholrehab.com/alcohol-rehab/positive-social-support/>.

⁴⁸ For an overview of the benefits of social support see the aforementioned webpages "Recovery from Addiction" and "Positive Social Support."

difficulties faced with climate change, having the social support provided by a church could make a big difference in the practitioners' ability to develop and sustain meaningful ascetical practices.

The connections between starting new environmentally oriented ascetical practices and the practitioner's already existing faith represents another practical benefit of pursuing asceticism as a response to climate change. As we have seen above, Christian asceticism has existed for centuries, and is still a vibrant tradition today. New ascetical practices build upon both the practitioners' already existing faith commitments and practices as well as the historical resources of two thousand years of Christianity. Even very basic practices, such as saying grace before a meal, can be a point of connection to the climate crisis, encouraging practitioners to reflect on their relationship to farmers, and the way climate change may affect food production and farm workers, potentially leading the practitioner to choose a deeper ascetical practice.

Another practical reason for looking to Christian asceticism in the face of climate change is the importance of repentance within the tradition. Christianity's language of sin, repentance, and metanoia (change of mind) brings a resource to the table that is scarce in the modern world. Repentance calls us to change – something sorely needed in our day and age marked by climate injustice. This part of the tradition has already primed Christians for change; this language prompts Christians to identify and change the behaviors that contributed to the crisis. The fact that it is a regular part of the tradition, especially during Lent, means that it is familiar language for Christians. The brokenness of the world always calls the faithful to repentance and to ever deepening asceticism. It is a call Christians have already heard; now it calls them to face a new problem. Now a new response is demanded because climate change highlights our shortcomings in a new way. Christians are 'missing the mark' in regards to right relations with creation, and alongside this they are repeating an older habit of neglecting the poor and marginalized. The world has always offered

challenges to Christians to deepen their faith through how they live and respond to the needs of the world; the climate change crisis is a new chapter of this old book.

The final practical reason I want to offer in support of asceticism as a response to climate change pertains to environmental virtue ethics. This ethical theory suggests expanding virtue ethics to include new virtues that are directed at a right relationship with the environment (or to reevaluate traditional virtues in light of environmental concerns.⁴⁹) Some examples of new environmental virtues are: awe, creativity, critical reflection, humility, participation, and sensitivity.⁵⁰ Ascetical practices can be an important method for cultivating and acquiring virtues. For example, St. John Climacus teaches that physical labor, obedience, honesty of heart, and fasting, are the practices that lead to important virtue of humility.⁵¹ John of Damascus has a long list of ascetical practices that cultivate humility, including: fasting, all night vigils, sleeping on the ground, shedding of possessions, solitude, silence, working with your hands, et al.⁵² Asceticism can be the practical aspect of virtue ethics, providing the means by which virtue is cultivated or acquired by the practitioner. Contemporary environmental virtue ethics needs ascetical disciplines to cultivate virtues required to respond to the climate change crisis.

Asceticism, as noted above, is at its essence, relational; it is focused on building right relationship with others, relationships shaped by love and justice. As in the example of Basil's response to the famine of his day, a Christian response to climate change needs to be significantly focused on ameliorating the effects of the crisis on the poor and marginalized. Asceticism helps us

⁴⁹ For an example such a reevaluation of traditional virtues (prudence, courage, temperance, justice, faith, hope, and love) see Kathryn D'Arcy Blanchard and Kevin J. O'Brien, *An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism: Ecology, Virtue, and Ethics* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014).

⁵⁰ From Louke van Wensveen's analysis of Thomas Berry's writings in Louke Van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics* (Amherst, N.Y: Humanity Books, 1999), 73–74.

⁵¹ John Climacus, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (New York: Paulist Pr, 1982), 227, 168.

⁵² John of Damascus, "On Virtues and Vices," in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, vol. 2 (London ; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979), 334–5.

do this by reordering our priorities away from our selves (through self-discipline) towards others. Repentance of our contributions to climate change must include efforts to undo the injustices perpetuated on those who contribute little but will suffer greatly. These efforts can be included in Christians' ascetical practices. The fact that Christian asceticism is also communal in nature provides additional opportunities to practice relational disciplines and virtues. A local church itself may foster relationships with other institutions, relationships which further the philanthropic practices of the church members, helping those suffering the most from climate change.

Contemporary ascetical practices, such as ethical shopping, point at the very deep ways in which our lives are connected to others. This connectedness is the essence of globalization, but also the central truth behind climate change; the consequences of our actions have the potential to affect people far away from us, including future generations. Too often these relationships are characterized by a lack of justice. Ascetical practices can begin to reorder these sometimes obscure and often long distance relationships. The crisis of climate change calls us to this task. As the earth becomes, at least in places, less hospitable to supporting human life, there will be a choice between helping each other by sharing limited resources or fighting each other over those same scarce resources.⁵³ Christian asceticism is the choice of philanthropy, the choice to help those in need.

Thinking of asceticism as a response to climate change also helps to articulate theological aspects of that response. Christian ascetic practices move the practitioners toward their *telos*, and thus closer to God and a life of holiness (with greater faith, hope, love.) This movement opens the practitioners to seeing God's action in and through their lives. All ascetical practices are an invitation to cooperate with God's will for the practitioners' lives and world. It is only through this cooperation – human efforts and God's will acting together – that any progress happens in

⁵³ Some researchers claim that this scenario is already playing out in the conflict in Syria. See Colin P. Kelley et al., "Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and Implications of the Recent Syrian Drought," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 11 (March 17, 2015): 3241–3246.

asceticism. “Unless the Lord build the house of virtues, in vain do the laborers labor.”⁵⁴ Thus, environmental asceticism is useful as a response to climate change because it brings God into our thinking on this issue. Integrating ‘spiritual’ practices, like prayer, alongside ‘ethical’ practices, like simplicity, urges the practitioners to rely on God alongside their own efforts. Christians need not think they are alone in their response to climate change. God is always present – immanent and Emmanuel. This realization should help drive away the doubt and hopelessness that can often accompany efforts to fight climate change. There is a path from this point in time to a point in the future where climate is protected; even when this route is obscured or seems unpassable, there is hope. Indeed, Christians have always strived toward a seemingly impossible *telos*, where the exact route is unknown. Feeling that the crisis is too big to handle can itself be a positive sign of moving closer to the reliance on God that is needed. The Holy Spirit regularly guides Christians through their ascetical practices; they can also rely on the Spirit’s guidance in the struggle against climate change.

Additionally, asceticism helps establish a theological understanding of the material world, including nature or creation. Ancient Christian approaches to asceticism included a moderation of the consumption of material goods for a number of reasons; it was unhealthy for the Christian, but also it was unjust to the poor. The wealth accumulated by some was not actually theirs – all goods belonged to God, and they only came into the hands of the wealthy in order for the rich to help the poor. The underlying principle is that creation belongs to God, not humans. Creation was made by God – was declared good by God; it always retains this initial intrinsic value, just as it always remains the possession of God. Humans may hold and use creation, but its value is not merely instrumental.⁵⁵ Asceticism can help us keep these theological truths in mind through practices such

⁵⁴ Psalm 126:1 (127).

⁵⁵ Of course, while creation must be valued as intrinsically good – God’s good creation – it cannot be a substitute for God.

as simple living, prayers of gratitude, and environmental practices.⁵⁶ This may also help shift our (global) worldview about creation away from the instrumental mindset that has been at the foundation of the climate change crisis.

Conclusion

As the world faces the crisis of climate change, humanity will need to muster all its resources to rise to the challenge. Religion is one important source of the needed wisdom. A renewed emphasis on ascetic practices with Christianity could make a big difference, especially if these practices were adopted by a significant portion of the over two billion Christians in the world.⁵⁷ Key areas of focus for an environmentally oriented Christian asceticism would be food, transportation, and housing as these areas make up significant portions of an individual's carbon consumption; these areas are also significant sources of overall carbon emissions. As an example, the City of Berkeley estimates that residential energy use is 20% of the carbon emission within the city; transportation, all forms combined, makes up 55% of the city's emissions.⁵⁸ Ascetical practices that focus on reducing this carbon footprint can make enough of a difference to be part of the overall solution. The ancient tradition of Christian asceticism continues to be an important way for Christians to respond to the world and shape their lives and their selves according to their faith.

⁵⁶ For example, acts of hospitality as habitat restoration such as suggested by Marilyn Matevia at the Spring 2016 PCTS meeting.

⁵⁷ According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2011 there were 2.18 billion Christians in the world, approximately one third of the world's population. Pew Research Center, "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, December 19, 2011, accessed October 12, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

⁵⁸ "CAP Work Session_2014_current.pdf," n.d., accessed October 20, 2016, http://www.cityofberkeley.info/uploadedFiles/Planning_and_Development/Level_3_-_Energy_and_Sustainable_Development/CAP%20Work%20Session_2014_current.pdf.

This impulse to asceticism can be harnessed to build a stronger and quicker response to climate change.

At the same time, asceticism as a method can be subject to some shortcomings. Practitioners need to be open to the ongoing challenge to deepen their practice, otherwise there is a risk of developing an unhealthy and unholy sense of self-righteousness. Asceticism demands a sense of repentance that focuses reform on the being and actions of the practitioner. Finding fault in others and finger pointing is not part of an authentic ascetical way of life. The standard of judgement for the ascetic practitioners is perfection in Jesus Christ, not whether the practitioners see themselves as better than others.

The second potential danger of asceticism is that efforts to make changes in the personal arena will distract people from the very real change needed in the other arenas – business, public policy, institutions, and worldview. We cannot use asceticism to ‘flee from the world’ in a way that neglects our duties to others and our relationships. Asceticism is philanthropic – the world we flee from is the world of unjust social structures and economic practices. ‘Green’ ascetical disciplines cannot become ‘greenwashing’ – making superficial changes that appear to support sustainable practices while remaining the same old practices. To borrow language from Bonhoeffer, shallow asceticism is a kind of cheap grace.

Changes in the other arenas mentioned -- -- business, public policy, institutions, and worldview – can build off of ascetical disciplines aimed at the individual or household arena. Ethical shopping, which was already discussed, is a great example of how asceticism can affect other arenas. As Christian consumers seek more sustainable and just purchasing options, businesses should (by law of supply and demand) seek to provide those products and services. (Or perhaps ascetic practitioners will develop these businesses themselves.) Pursuing asceticism within communities might easily provide opportunities for change within community institutions, especially for our

examples, the church. The arena most often in the spotlight is that of public policy. Here, again, there is potential for asceticism to affect change. First, as people engage in ascetic disciplines, they may begin to support new policy measures. Secondly, practitioners may choose to engage in social action as part of their ascetical practice. The greatest potential for change may lie with the worldview arena. Worldview is both held by individuals and constructed by societies. Ascetical practice is dependent on self awareness. Practitioners must assess their situation from their current point of view to set a rule of practices for themselves. However, as they move along the path to their *telos*, as they grow in holiness, their point of view will change. The practices will affect how they view the world, and from this new vantage point they must again engage in self reflection and assessment to update their chosen practices. Asceticism builds upon one's values, but can also introduce new values, even replacing old values. Thus, ascetical practices can change the practitioners in unexpected ways, such as changing how they view the world, and how they respond to that world. This altered worldview within one practitioner may be shared with another, with the group, and in time, even spread to society.

I have argued in favor of employing asceticism as part of the Christian response to climate change. The long-standing historical tradition, as well as its contemporary developments provide a rich array of resources to help the practitioners reshape their lives along environmentally sustainable lines. This will not be easy, but the tradition provides resources to overcome difficulty and to convert practitioners to a new and better life. The greatest treasure within the tradition of Christian asceticism is the gift of hope – hope of moving forward in the face of overwhelming odds, hope of redeeming relationships and structures marred by injustice, and hope of a better future for humanity and for the earth.