Gender and Sexuality in Early Ascetic Christianity With Peter Brown

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how early Christian asceticism shaped theological understandings of gender, sexuality, and the body. It examines the ways ascetic practices influenced views on masculinity and femininity, as well as the significance of sexual renunciation. By analyzing early Christian texts, the study highlights the construction of purity ideals, the role of celibacy, and the pursuit of spiritual transformation.

Keywords: Asceticism, early christianity, gender, sexuality, celibacy, purity, body

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INTRODUCTION

Peter Brown – A Foundational Historian of Late Antiquity

This study investigates how early ascetic Christianity conceptualized gender and sexuality. It examines how renunciation of the body and sexual desire influenced theological discourse, monastic practices, and the construction of male and female identities, while also offering a critical engagement with Peter Brown's work on asceticism.

Peter Brown, born in 1935 in Dublin, Ireland, into a Scots-Irish Protestant family, is widely regarded as one of the most influential historians of late antiquity. He is the Rollins Professor Emeritus at Princeton University and has significantly shaped the study of early Christianity, particularly through his seminal works on Augustine of Hippo and Christian asceticism. His early scholarship on Augustine established his prominence, while The Body and Society marked a transition in his historical methodology, shifting toward a more nuanced analysis of gender, sexuality, and the body in early Christian thought. More recently, his research has focused on wealth and poverty in the late antique world.

In the preface to The Body and Society, Brown cautions readers about the nature of his sources, emphasizing that the evidence available is "overwhelmingly prescriptive and theoretical in nature, written exclusively by male authors" (Brown, 1988, p. vi). He further argues that the Christianity of late antiquity is fundamentally distinct from that of the High and Later Middle Ages, as well as from contemporary Christianity, separated by a "chasm almost as vast as that which appears to separate us from the moral horizon of a Mediterranean Islamic country" (Brown, 1988, p. xvii). Despite the rigidities of ancient sources, Brown acknowledges that historical accounts reveal the harsh realities faced by both men and women, who endured physical deprivation, emotional suffering, and the constraints of social expectations (Brown, 1988, p. xviii).

The Roman world was characterized by a starkly hierarchical family structure, with the pater familias at its head, reinforcing the primacy of the family unit over the individual (Brown, 1988, p. xxi). Marriage was not merely a private arrangement but a *school for orderly behavior*, where the balance between severity and tolerance was crucial to maintaining social stability. Women, while often subordinated in public life, exerted influence within the household, sometimes being among the few who could speak candidly to their husbands.

Brown highlights the Roman conceptualization of gender and sexuality, noting that women were often regarded as *failed males*, a perspective deeply ingrained in the medical and philosophical discourses of the time (Brown, 1988, p. 25). Masculinity, on the other hand, was perceived as fragile – men risked losing their virility through excessive emotional expression or sexual activity, particularly through frequent or uncontrolled orgasms. Conversely, adolescent boys were thought to possess an excess of virility that needed to be expended through controlled outlets (Brown, 1988, p. 17). These perspectives shaped early Christian ascetic practices, where self-denial and sexual renunciation became essential components of spiritual discipline.

Research Question: How did early Christian asceticism shape gender and sexuality in ways that both subverted and reinforced Greco-Roman social norms?

Thesis: This paper argues that early Christian asceticism constructed a spiritually transformative model of gender and sexuality that transcended prevailing Roman norms while also reproducing certain patriarchal structures, ultimately reframing embodiment within a theological and eschatological horizon.

Asceticism and the Rejection of Sexuality

This study examines how early ascetic Christianity conceptualized gender and sexuality, particularly through the renunciation of the body and sexual desire. Brown argues that asceticism was not merely a set of practices but a comprehensive worldview that required the simultaneous observance of multiple disciplines (Brown, 1988, p. 8). In The Body and Society, he explores the struggles of early ascetic figures, such as Anthony the Great, who is depicted as engaging in intense spiritual warfare against bodily temptation. At the age of twenty, Anthony reportedly faced severe trials as the devil sought to awaken his sexual impulses. His response was radical: he renounced all possessions, provided for his virgin sister, and withdrew into the desert to lead a life of strict asceticism (Brown, 1988, pp. 213-14). Brown interprets Anthony's retreat not merely as a rejection of material wealth but as a profound repudiation of sexuality itself, reinforcing the ascetic ideal as a radical departure from worldly existence (Brown, 1988, p. 215).

When analyzing early Christian customs, it is crucial to consider both Roman legal structures and Christian perspectives on social norms. The moral and theological principles guiding early Christians were shaped not only by the Gospel but also by ecclesiastical writings, including the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (Van de Weyer, 1997, pp. 5-25), Polycarp of Smyrna (Hartog, 2013, pp. 35-100), and Hippolytus of Rome (Cerrato, 2002, pp. 20-50). These texts reveal the formation of a distinct Christian ethos, one that increasingly distanced itself from Greco-Roman conceptions of family, sexuality, and social hierarchy.

Brown's scholarship provides a crucial lens for understanding how early Christian asceticism functioned as both a theological stance and a form of resistance against prevailing societal norms. His work underscores the complexities of gender, sexuality, and power in late antiquity, offering valuable insights into how early Christians navigated their relationship with the body and the material world.

METHODS

This study combines historical and theological analyses to explore early ascetic Christianity's conceptualization of gender and sexuality. The primary focus is on analyzing the writings of key early Christian figures, such as Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, and Hippolytus of Rome, and on examining their perspectives in light of the socio-political and religious context of the Roman Empire. This method draws on both primary sources and

secondary scholarly literature, facilitating an understanding of how early Christian ascetics shaped their religious practices and theological views regarding the body and sexuality.

A critical component of this analysis is the examination of Peter Brown's The Body and Society, a foundational text for understanding the relationship among asceticism, sexuality, and gender. Brown's historical perspective will be compared and contrasted with other scholarly interpretations of early Christian asceticism. In doing so, this study evaluates both the theological motivations behind ascetic practices and their social implications in the Roman context.

This research also employs a comparative method, linking early Christian ascetic practices to related traditions, such as the Therapeutae of Alexandria and the Essenes of the Qumran community. By analyzing the commonalities and distinctions between these groups, this study aims to highlight the shared theological and sociocultural factors that influenced early Christian ascetic thought and its treatment of gender and sexuality.

Additionally, the methodology includes a textual analysis of New Testament writings, particularly 1 Corinthians 7 and other Pauline epistles, to assess the relationship between early Christian views on sexuality and broader Roman societal norms. This text-based analysis is complemented by a critique of modern scholarship on asceticism, drawing on secondary sources that engage with the philosophical, theological, and historical dimensions of ascetic practice.

RESULTS

This study reveals how early ascetic Christianity profoundly reshaped gender and sexuality within the context of spiritual purity and self-denial. Women were often idealized for their virginity, while men sought transcendence over gender distinctions through ascetic practices.

An illustrative case is that of Saint Ignatius of Antioch (Gabidzashvili, 2010, p. 293), who, with intense passion, sought martyrdom, asking his fellow Christians not to show excessive affection towards him as he approached his grim fate at the hands of beasts. Ignatius' martyrdom exemplifies the deeply spiritual longing for communion with Christ through suffering. This desire for martyrdom wasn't unique to Ignatius, as demonstrated in the martyrdom of Saint Shushanik ("I will go to a sincere death") and Origen's passionate pursuit of martyrdom. Even amid physical suffering, this fervent longing for union with Christ typifies early Christian spirituality.

As Christianity evolved and external persecution faded, the longing for spiritual unity with Christ endured. Christians began to wage an internal war against their "sinful" nature, leading to the rise of asceticism as a form of spiritual martyrdom. This self-discipline, chosen willingly, was a form of inward martyrdom – embodied through practices such as *hesychia* (silent prayer) (Nikodimos, 1979, Vol. 1, p.107). This internal ascetic struggle became the dominant means by which Christians achieved spiritual union with Christ. Asceticism flourished through the influence of figures like Saint Anthony the Great and became synonymous with the quest for holiness.

A significant shift occurred as asceticism began to be institutionalized, mainly by establishing monastic communities. The notion of monasticism as a form of spiritual discipline vividly illustrates Anthony the Great's role in this transformation (Chryssavgis, 2004). Despite criticisms from figures like Brown, who critique asceticism as a withdrawal from civic duties, this research suggests that early Christians who chose the ascetic life were not escaping from society but were engaged in a more profound spiritual commitment. Though different in lifestyle from lay Christians, monks shared the same ethical and doctrinal standards, reflecting the broader Christian quest for holiness.

DISCUSSION

Contextualizing Asceticism in Early Christianity

The analysis reveals that early Christian asceticism both challenged and reinforced traditional gender roles. While celibacy and renunciation offered women spiritual authority, they also subjected them to restrictive ideals of purity. The study highlights how early Christian views on sexuality shaped later theological traditions, influencing monasticism, clerical celibacy, and gendered conceptions of holiness.

Brown's critique of Greco-Roman social norms and their historical context is well-founded (Brown, 1988, p. 8). However, his theological analysis tends to approach mystical experience in a fragmented manner. Isolating biblical references to sex or interpreting a single artistic depiction fails to capture the broader theological and cultural picture. His discussion of the Roman system is accurate, particularly in highlighting how individuals were primarily valued for their reproductive role (Brown, 1988, pp. 6, 20). His assertion that citizens were expected to have five children and that those unable to contribute to the city's population were seen as inadequate citizens aligns with evidence from other historical sources.[1] Marriage and procreation were seen as essential duties for all elite Romans, with children valued both personally and as contributions to societal expectations. In the words of Keith Bradley, "marriage and procreation were culturally induced social obligations, not the result of individualistic choices" (1991, p. 171). Marriage and procreation were viewed as natural law, with Lucretius linking the union of man and woman to the birth of children in the rise of civilization (Hug, 2014, p. 18). Marriage was seen as a legal act, and having children with a lover was not permissible. Children were more than just an expected outcome of elite Roman marriages; their presence validated the marriage itself and distinguished it from other unions (Hug, 2014, pp. 19-20). Elite men could form lasting, monogamous relationships with women of lower social status (Brown, 1998, p. 13), but these women were considered concubines rather than wives. They were not expected to bear children for their

1 See Bruce W. Frier, *Roman Life Expectancy: Ulpian's Evidence, Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 86 (1982): 213–251, https://doi.org/10.2307/311195; See E. A. Wrigley, *People, Cities, and Wealth: The Transformation of Traditional Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) for further reading on this topic.

See also: Hopkins, M. K. (1965). The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage. *Population Studies*, 18(3), 309–327. https://doi.org/10.2307/2173291

lovers and had no legal claim to their property (Hug, 2014, pp. 19-21). Similarly, the moral stance of Christian ascetics reflected the scriptural teaching that the family was the only legitimate path for having children (1 Timothy 2:15, NIV, 2011). Christian asceticism was a voluntary practice, not driven by pressure, coercion, or necessity. By contrast, the chastity of many virgin priestesses was not a matter of personal choice; the city recruited its virgins by dedicating them to the service of the gods (Brown, 1988, p. 8).

Childbirth and Familial Continuity

Christians did not oppose the social structure; Jesus adhered to the laws of the state and upheld moral principles, and Christians followed his example (Matthew 22:21). They were not opposed to sex, but rather to disorder and chaos. This does not mean that they agreed with everything the state imposed; in fact, their protests often led to imprisonment. Christians were explicitly persecuted for their ascetic practices (Kidder, 2003, pp. 96-97).

In examining the formation of the New Testament, we must also consider the context of the Roman Empire, where women's rights were severely diminished. This reality is reflected in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul adopts elements from the state's social structure and explicitly states that his guidance is personal opinion rather than divine command (v. 25). Paul's writing is particularly significant given the profound social inequality of the time, where women were regarded as servants and even seen as "failed males" (Brown, 1988, pp. 10, 22). They had no legal rights, and mature men often married young girls: "In the Latin world, men appear to have married even later: they could treat their young wives almost as daughters" (Brown, 1988, p. 13). Views on marriage and sexuality were similarly peculiar; as Brown describes, "The genital regions were mere points of passage… the outlets of a human espresso machine" (Brown, 1988, p. 17). Slaves endured even harsher conditions, stripped of all rights and regarded as mere property of their masters, including control over their bodies: "Every master is held to have it in his power to use his slave as he wishes" (Brown, 1988, p. 23). Paul does not challenge the institution of slavery; instead, he leaves it intact, a stance that raises the question of why he did not explicitly condemn it as unacceptable (1 Cor. 7:21).

The significance of childbirth for the city is evident in the celebration of a boy's first ejaculation, which his family honored during the Liberalia festival on March 17 (Brown, 1988, p. 28). With this emphasis on familial and societal continuity established, he then shifts his focus to critiquing asceticism, beginning with Antony the Great and asserting that its origins trace back to him (Brown, 1988, p. 216).

Brown criticizes the monks for devoting excessive time to thoughts of sex and struggling against sexual desire, which he finds unacceptable. He explains:

"Among the monks of Egypt, the problems of sexual temptation were most often seen in terms of the massive antithesis of 'desert' and 'world.' Sexual temptation was frequently treated in a somewhat offhand manner, presented as if it were no more than a drive toward women, toward matrimony, and hence toward fateful conscription, through marriage, into the structures of the settled land." (Brown, 1988, p. 217)

Critique of Asceticism

Asceticism, derived from the Greek term *askesis*, originally signified physical training or exercise aimed at excellence. In modern contexts, it refers to the practice of self-denial and abstinence from pleasures, often leading to suffering, as a means to achieve spiritual perfection, self-control, or honor God through sacrifice. Scholarly views on asceticism, including those of Weber (1963, pp. 164-184). Yinger (1957, pp. 417-420), Urbach (2002, pp. 35-56), and Baer (1955, p.15) have varied, with some scholars interpreting it as a significant element of rabbinic ideology. For instance, Fraade argues that the Pharisees advocated ascetic practices. Still, many scholars have contested this interpretation, emphasizing that the rabbis preferred a milder form of self-denial rather than rigorous abstinence (Fraade, 1986, pp. 259-276). Asceticism is also examined in the context of monasticism, where it is viewed not as an expression of superiority but as a self-sacrificial service to God, aiming for divine communion through liturgical practices. While scholars like Peter Brown highlight monastic asceticism as a rejection of sensuality for spiritual focus (Brown, 1988, pp. 229-230), it is crucial to recognize that asceticism, as a broader concept, predates the institutionalization of monasticism in the fourth century, encompassing a variety of spiritual disciplines beyond hermitage (Brown, 1988, p. 236), such as the communal dimension of liturgical service in Eastern Christian thought.

Asceticism in Theological Context

Peter Brown's assertion that monks perceived sexuality as a threat to spiritual life is not a misrepresentation; rather, it reflects an authentic monastic perspective. However, their rejection of sexual activity was not rooted in hatred but in a profound desire for communion with God, subordinating all else to this pursuit. Brown observes: "The abiding presence of sexual desire, and of sexual feeling in the mind of the monk, took on a new meaning. Sexuality became, as it were, a privileged ideogram" (Brown, 1988, pp. 229-230). To understand the dichotomy between "pure spirit and the sensual body" (Brown, 1988, p. 236), Brown highlights instances of monks breaking their vows. However, while individual failures are inevitable, using such cases to critique monastic asceticism as a whole is neither just nor objective (Brown, 1988, p. 230).

Spiritual Practice and Service

Asceticism, both as a spiritual practice and as a literary tradition, is an intrinsic element of Eastern Christian thought. Contrary to Brown's assertion that asceticism emerged in the fourth century, ascetic practice predates this period. While the fourth century witnessed the institutionalization of monasticism, as mentioned above, and the proliferation of eremitic lifestyles, asceticism is a broader concept. The Greek term "μοναχός" (monachos) implies solitude, but ascetic life (referred to in Old Georgian as მოღვაწეობა) encompasses a wide spectrum of spiritual disciplines beyond hermitage.

The monastic vocation was not about superiority but about self-sacrificial service. Monks sought divine encounter through an intentional, liturgical commitment. The Greek term "λειτουργία" (liturgy) embodies the communal dimension of this service. Etymologically,

it derives from "λαός" (people) and "ἔργον" (work), originally denoting public service (Liddell, 1940, p. 472). The verb "λειτουργεῖν" signifies service performed for the community's benefit (Vintilescu, 1972, p. 140). In biblical texts, "λειτουργία" denotes acts of devotion and collective worship, later acquiring a Eucharistic connotation, particularly during times of persecution (2 Cor. 35:3).

Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BCE–40 CE), Pliny the Elder, and Josephus (Fraade, 1986, pp. 253-288) describe the Therapeutae, a Jewish ascetic group, in *De Vita Contemplativa* (Steyn, 2009, pp. 424-448). Their practices parallel those of the Qumran community (likely the Essenes) and early Christians (Saria, 2012, pp. 20-30). Nineteenth-century historians dismissed Philo's account as literary embellishment, but the Dead Sea Scrolls affirmed the historical reality of such ascetic communities. Philo describes the Therapeutae as healers of both body and soul, emphasizing their devotion to contemplation. They abstained from food until evening, prohibited meat and wine, and engaged in rigorous meditation. On the Sabbath, they gathered for communal worship, maintaining distinct spaces for men and women. Their simplicity was reflected in their diet, limited to bread, salt, and water. Philo notes that they revered the numbers seven and fifty as sacred (Saria, 2012, pp. 20-35).

The Essenes, also known as Esevites, established isolated communities in the Judean desert, distancing themselves from mainstream society. Their communal structure was marked by shared property, strict discipline, and ritual purity, including ablutions and sacred meals. Rejecting temple sacrifices, they opposed the corruption of the Jerusalem priesthood but refrained from active rebellion. The community was divided into hierarchical groups under strict regulations (Saria, 2012, pp. 24-40). They envisioned cosmic dualism, anticipating an eschatological battle between the "Sons of Light" and the "Sons of Darkness," culminating in the triumph of righteousness. However, the Essene movement faded because it failed to realize this apocalyptic vision (Saria, 2012, pp. 26-28).

The Qumran excavations have yielded extensive material evidence of Essene life, including manuscripts documenting their beliefs and practices. Among these texts is a reference to a "Truth-Telling Messiah" who was rejected and crucified. Some scholars have speculated on connections to New Testament narratives, but caution is necessary in drawing direct parallels. Burrows (1955, as cited in Saria, 2012, pp. 26–42) argues that the Dead Sea Scrolls do not fundamentally alter our understanding of early Christianity, emphasizing the need for rigorous historical analysis rather than speculative associations (Saria, 2012, pp. 26–42).

Ultimately, monastic asceticism must be understood within its theological framework rather than through isolated examples of failure or external critiques. Its essence lies in the pursuit of divine communion through disciplined practice, deeply embedded in the spiritual traditions of Christianity.

Biblical Foundations of Asceticism

Asceticism is not a new social phenomenon but has deep biblical roots. Figures such as Samson, who took Nazarite vows, and John the Baptist embody the ascetic tradition. The Old Testament also includes schools of the prophets, which cultivated spiritual lives

through discipline and ritual. These schools and practices laid the foundation for ascetic movements in the New Testament (Matthew 5:48). For example, the "schools of the prophets" in 1 Samuel 10:5, 19:18, and 2 Kings 2:3 influenced the spiritual atmosphere of the time. Nazarite vows, as seen in Samson's story (Judges 13:5, 16:17) and Acts 18:18 and Matthew 2:23, further demonstrate the longstanding role of asceticism. These practices, grounded in theological commitments to holiness, purity, and divine service, have been integral to the Old and New Testaments.

The asceticism of the Old Testament shares the same fundamental principles as that practiced by Christians in the 1st, 4th, and 5th centuries, as well as in other eras. However, the specific forms and expressions of ascetic activity have varied across time.

Early Christian Martyrdom

Asceticism gradually diversified over time, with its most distinct form emerging at the end of the 3rd century and the dawn of the 4th century. This form, known as eremitism or monasticism, represents a withdrawal from worldly affairs. Although eremitism, too, is multifaceted in nature, it is vital first to understand why this specific manifestation of asceticism gained prominence in the late 4th century and why it was not as evident earlier (Matthew 19:21). Before the 4th century, the first three centuries of Christianity in the Roman Empire were marked by intense persecution, where Christianity was primarily defined by martyrdom (Bigg, 1909, pp. 1-518). Christians faced extreme forms of repression, including physical violence, leading to countless deaths under various emperors (Bigg, 1909, pp. 24-162). Even more perilous were the verbal persecutions, where Christians were subject to severe calumnies. As documented by 2nd-century apologists, Christians were accused of atheism for refusing to worship the Roman gods, with figures such as Athenagoras countering these accusations (Barnard, 1972, pp. 20 – 150). Similarly, accusations of cannibalism arose from misunderstandings of Christian liturgy, particularly the Eucharist, with opponents distorting Christ's words about the bread and wine (Groton, 1914, pp. 3-67). Another damaging accusation involved incest and sexual immorality, rooted in misinterpretations of Paul's writings about unity in Christ. In this context of both physical and verbal persecution, many Christians sought refuge in remote areas, particularly during the Decian persecutions of the 3rd century (Esquivel, 2021, pp. 341-50). As persecution subsided, some of these Christians, accustomed to solitary life, chose to continue in isolation, leading to the rise of eremitical forms of asceticism. While this retreat from persecution contributed to the development of monasticism, it cannot be considered its sole origin; other factors were undoubtedly involved in the emergence of this profound spiritual practice (Gabidzashvili, 2010, p. 279).

Bultmann's Influence on Christian Thought

Christians began offering the highest form of bodily sacrifice for the love of Christ, mirroring Christ's own self-sacrifice through his crucifixion for humanity. In his study of prim-

itive Christianity, Rudolf Bultmann traces the influence of Old Testament, Jewish, Hellenistic, and Gnostic ideas on early Christian thought. He admits that the practical behavior of the church and its members resembled that of Gnosticism in that it rested upon a sense of superiority over the world (Bultmann, 1956, pp. 206-209). Bultmann critically analyzes this aspect, noting how Brown sarcastically references Augustine's frequent sermons on the rich and the poor (Brown, 2012, pp. 72-90). While Augustine emphasized social issues, it is essential to recognize that Christians were not engaged in society for social work; their primary aim was the acquisition of spiritual virtues. Just as Christ dedicated Himself to humanity through His death on the cross, so too did Christians aim to bear witness to His love with their own lives, spiritually uniting themselves with Christ in the process. If this were a decisive factor, then asceticism must have truly begun in the 1st and 2nd centuries, as the persecutions of that time were no less intense. It is clear that certain Christian groups, facing extreme repression, chose to retreat from the sword of their persecutors. However, the definitive reason for this movement is found in spiritual reality, which is clearly evident. It is crucial to remember that the first three centuries of Christianity were marked by martyrdom, not merely because Christians were persecuted and therefore became involuntary victims, but because many Christians actively sought martyrdom. The crown of martyrdom was seen as more exalted than any other, and those who received it were considered faithful witnesses to Christ, spiritually crucified, buried, and resurrected with Him in His glory. For this reason, many Christians yearned for martyrdom.

The Pursuit of Spiritual Virtue

This study reveals how early ascetic Christianity profoundly reshaped gender and sexuality within the context of spiritual purity and self-denial. Women were often idealized for their virginity, while men sought transcendence over gender distinctions through ascetic practices.

An illustrative example of this desire is the case of Saint Ignatius of Antioch (Gabidzashvili, 2010, p. 293), who sought martyrdom with such passion that he asked fellow Christians not to express excessive love for him, as he was about to face a dreadful fate at the hands of beasts. Despite the inevitability of his impending death, Ignatius, already spiritually a martyr, did not look back towards earthly attachments, nor did he desire any diversion from his path towards martyrdom. His unwavering focus on the crown of martyrdom shows the depth of his desire for unity with Christ through his suffering. This desire for martyrdom was not unique to Ignatius but was shared by many early Christians. For example, the martyrdom of Saint Shushanik exemplifies the same sentiment: "I will go to a sincere death. "(C'urtaveli, 2021, pp. 207-218) Origen's example further confirms this, as he encouraged his father, who was imprisoned, to embrace martyrdom. Origen himself, inflamed with the desire for martyrdom, would have surely fallen victim to the persecutions but for his mother's intervention. These examples conclusively demonstrate that there was an overwhelming divine desire among Christians for communion with Christ through martyrdom – the path of true sacrifice, which embodies the confirmation of the Savior's truth through suffering.

Martyrdom as Union with Christ

The era of martyrdom came to an end in Rome, as Christianity was first tolerated, then accepted, and ultimately recognized as the official faith. Persecutions ceased, and no one was pursued for the sake of Christianity. However, the divine longing for communion with Christ remained alive in the hearts of Christians. As external persecution faded, Christians turned inward, choosing to wage war against their "sinful" nature, seeking to overcome sin on their own terms (Gabidzashvili, 2010, p. 279). In doing so, many withdrew from the world, desiring to become worthy of union with Christ through spiritual struggle during times of great adversity. Asceticism, in this sense, became a form of spiritual martyrdom – an inward, voluntary self-discipline carried out without external force and embodied in an ever-new way of life called hesychia (Nikodimos, 1979, pp. 107–138) or silence in prayer. Hesychia means, however, far more than merely refraining from outward speech (Ware, 2000, p. 89). This spiritual state was a continuation of the early martyrdoms of the 1st to 3rd centuries, where Christians demonstrated their commitment to truth through physical sacrifice. Thus, after the example of Anthony the Great became widely known, particularly through the writings of Athanasius of Alexandria, countless Christians followed in his footsteps. A fiery passion for ascetic life took root, and by the 4th century, asceticism had become a prominent form of spiritual martyrdom. Historically, Christians did not live in peace, even in the fourth century, as the Persian king persecuted and tortured monks (Alfeyev, 2000, p. 16). The proper foundation of asceticism lay in its ability to fulfill the Christian desire for martyrdom, making it the most actual path to spiritual communion with Christ. The devout individual chose this path through seclusion in monastic life. Initially, seclusion manifested in various early forms (hermits, wanderers, barefoot ascetics, and recluses, among others). Later, it evolved into organized monastic communities established along their boundaries, collectively known as asceticism (Gabidzashvili, 2010, p. 279).

Anthony the Great, Monasticism and Ascetic Literature (Paterikon)

Brown asserts that Anthony the Great is foundational to the development of ascetic life (Brown, 1988, p. 215), despite the presence of ascetics before him, such as Paul of Thebes, whom Anthony himself buried at the age of 113. While these early figures were significant, it was Anthony's influence that truly brought asceticism to prominence, attracting a vast following of disciples. However, in Syria and elsewhere, as Chryssavgis notes, there is no single figure comparable to Antony, at least not in the way Athanasius presents him (2004, p. 79). Antony may not be the founder, but he is clearly the father of monasticism (Chryssavgis, 2004, p. 79). His prominence as a spiritual figure is further confirmed by Gregory of Nazianzus, who regarded him as a spiritual father. This marks a critical turning point in the 4th century, in which ascetic literature began to solidify as a distinct genre within Christian writings. Anthony's epistles, along with the writings of his spiritual successors such as Ammonas and the monastic rules of Pachomius (*cenobitic*) (Chryssavgis, 2004, p. 79), played a crucial role in the formation of ascetic thought. These texts, alongside the contributions of other key ascetics such as Macarius of Egypt, helped establish a robust tradition of spiritual and ascetic literature. Even Evagrius Ponticus, despite his theological

controversies, made substantial contributions to this literary tradition, influencing both the content and form of subsequent ascetic writings (Bingaman and Nassif, 2012, pp. 50-130). This period of prolific writing gave rise to the foundational Patristic and monastic works that define Christian asceticism today, including influential collections such as the "Paterikon," which continues to hold a central place in the ascetic tradition (Moschus, 1992, pp. 5–25). Notably, these texts are characterized by their succinct and profound style, and Georgian translations have further enriched their legacy (Shoemaker, 2021, pp. 73–79). The *Patericon* (or *Paterikon*, Greek: πατερικόν), derived from πατερικόν βιβλίον ("father's book"), often translated into English as *Lives of the Fathers*, and sometimes referred to as *gerontikon* (Greek: γεροντικόν), is a genre of Byzantine religious literature. It consists of collections of sayings of saints, martyrs, and hierarchs, as well as narratives about their lives (Moschus, 1992, pp. 1-20). These texts have their origins in early monasticism. One of the earliest works in this genre is *Leim*ōn pneumatikos in Greek, known in Latin as Pratum spirituale ("Spiritual Meadow"), sometimes abbreviated "Prat. Spirit.", and also referred to as the *Leimonarion* or the "New Paradise." (Moschus, 1992, pp. 1-287) Written in the 610s, it recounts the author's personal experiences with prominent ascetics he encountered during his travels through Palestine, Sinai, Egypt, Cilicia, and Syria, sharing the edifying stories these ascetics imparted to him.

The ascetic life did not develop without literature; instead, monastic writings evolved along two main trajectories. In many cases, Brown critiques monks for indulging in fantasies, particularly regarding sexuality, portraying them almost as psychiatric patients like Antony (Brown, 1988, pp. 214-31). However, in reality, monks shared their spiritual thoughts and visions with one another, like Barsanuphius & John. (2003, pp. 57-199) or John Climacus (1982, pp. 1-291).[1] Often, these exchanges took the form of anecdotes or parables, serving as illustrative examples for deeper understanding (Gabidzashvili, 2010, p. 281).

Monastic Life and Commitment

Monastic and mystical spiritual literature can be categorized into two interrelated aspects: (1) the didactic and spiritual teachings of monks, which include reflections on their struggles, ethical guidance, and theological insights found in ecclesiastical writings and epistles; and (2) the shorter, often aphoristic narratives known as paterika – brief sayings or stories aimed at conveying specific moral or ascetic lessons. The former represents a mystical dimension, seeking to articulate divine experiences and spiritual purification, while the latter is pragmatic, offering concise wisdom rooted in lived ascetic practice (Gabidzashvili, 2010, pp. 279-80). These writings collectively function as formative tools for the spiritual and intellectual growth of monastic communities, reinforcing the ideals of monastic superiority and devotion. Through paterika, details of monastic lives that might be absent from official vitae are preserved, shaping not only the legacy of early Christian asceticism but also the broader theological discourse on monastic piety.

1 See also Chryssavgis, J. (2004). *John Climacus: From the Egyptian desert to the Sinaite mountain.* Ashgate.

This broader literary tradition shaped monastic self-understanding and influenced external perceptions of ascetic life. However, interpretations of monasticism have varied significantly among scholars. One such perspective is offered by Brown, who presents a critical view of early Christian asceticism, arguing that it represented a withdrawal from civic responsibilities rather than a legitimate mode of engagement with society.

Brown interprets the works of Christian writers such as Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, and others – as well as Christian life in late antiquity – as acts of defiance against civic duty (Brown, 1995, p. 25) and an attempt to escape worldly responsibilities (Brown, 1998, p. 44). He even goes so far as to suggest that asceticism contributed to social impoverishment. However, this perspective overlooks the reality that early Christians did not evade their social obligations or burden others (Brown, 1998, pp. 44-47, 54). Many sustained themselves through manual labor, embodying a self-sufficient way of life. Even the apostles, while preaching the message of Christ, actively traveled and worked rather than leading idle lives. Brown's analysis lacks a spiritual dimension and presents an overly one-sided view of ascetic existence, failing to acknowledge its deeper theological and ethical foundations (Brown, 1982, pp. 166-95). For Brown, the monk is portrayed as a self-centered egoist, with the prestige of monastic life stemming from his status as the "lonely one" (1998, p. 52). The Church does not often consider it necessary to speak about material things; instead, it focuses on spiritual poverty and on how the human person may be enriched in God. It is not material poverty or wealth that affects a person, according to the teachings of the Church, but a poor soul that blinds his vision of God (Behr-Sigel, 1995, p. 30).

Monks differ from laypeople only in their way of life; their adherence to Christian teachings and doctrine remains the same in principle. Both monks and lay Christians are equally bound by the understanding of sin articulated in patristic writings (Gabidzashvili, 2010, p. 281). What is forbidden for a monk is equally forbidden for any Christian – pride, unlawful sexual relationships, and other moral transgressions. The key distinction lies in their commitments: a monk takes a vow of celibacy, while a married Christian, through the sacrament of marriage, vows to remain faithful to their spouse. The principle of making a sacred commitment remains constant; only the form and lifestyle differ.

CONCLUSION

Early ascetic Christianity's approach to gender and sexuality was intricately linked to its conception of spiritual perfection. While it offered alternative models of identity transcending prevailing social norms, it simultaneously reinforced specific hierarchical structures. This study advocates for a more nuanced interpretation of ascetic ideals, particularly in their influence on Christian thought regarding the body and sexuality.

When examining the lives, teachings, and practices of specific monks, avoiding anachronistic interpretations stemming from a 21st-century lens is crucial, especially when scrutinizing the fourth century's legal and cultural context. The ascetic life and its spiritual ideals must be understood within the parameters of that era, which were significantly shaped by a worldview rooted in the eschatological expectation of the kingdom, which did not dismiss

the relevance of worldly life and marriage.

While these spiritual teachings, especially in paterika and hagiographies, were written for future generations of monks and Christians, they must also be understood as presenting a demanding path intended primarily to guide and instruct rather than to be replicated uncritically. For instance, the process for a woman to become a nun involved various stages of communal life, rigorous testing, and spiritual formation throughout 10 to 15 years, often under the supervision of a mentor. Thus, it is misleading to interpret the rejection of marriage and sexual relations as the sole motivation of these ascetics. Instead, their primary aim was to draw nearer to God, and for many, the monastic life represented the most effective means of daily, dedicated spiritual training.

This investigation suggests that early Christian asceticism should be viewed not merely as an institutional framework, as Brown has suggested, but rather as a profound, spiritually motivated endeavor to transform the individual's relationship with both the divine and the material world.

Ethics Approval and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or publication of this work.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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