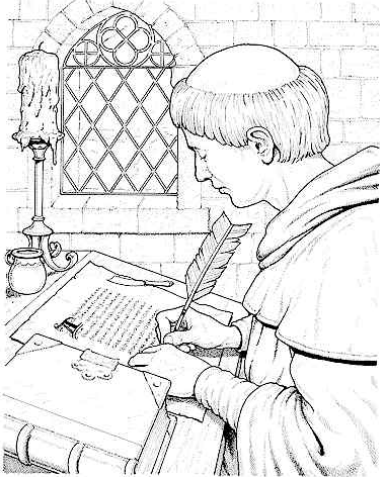


**RS 280A Fall 2004**

**RELIGIOUS STUDIES SEMINAR : THE ASCETIC IMPULSE**



**Thursdays 2:00 – 4:50 Butte 219**

**Instructor: Daniel Veidlinger**

**Office: Trinity 246**

**Phone: 898-4637**

**Mail: [dveidlinger@csuchico.edu](mailto:dveidlinger@csuchico.edu)**

**Office Hours: T / Th 10:00-12:00**

Throughout the religious history of the world, men and women have felt called to serve what they believe to be a higher ideal in radical ways. They have chosen to leave the comforts of the world and, alone or in groups, to enter into a special and relationship with a greater power. This impulse has been called “asceticism” and is generally associated with poverty, celibacy and discipline, although it can take many forms. Ascetics have often chosen to live alone as hermits on the boundaries of society, while others have regular congress with society, and yet others live in communities of like-minded individuals that agree to follow certain rules. Loved and venerated by some, feared and disdained by others, there is little doubt that ascetics have left an indelible mark on some of the most important religious movements throughout the ages, and have been responsible for the preservation of religious traditions during difficult times.

This course will explore the phenomenon of religious asceticism in Hinduism, Buddhism and the Orthodox and Catholic traditions of Christianity. We will approach the subject from a variety of perspectives in an attempt to understand the motivations, philosophy, and psychology underlying it. After looking at the historical development of asceticism, we will ask questions such as: Why would people wish to leave the “regular” world and live according to an ascetic ideal? What is the relationship between these religious “virtuosos,” as they are sometimes called, and society at large? How do they relate to established religion and how does the establishment see them? How is the ascetic impulse expressed in the modern world? How have the ideals of celibacy and poverty been upheld and betrayed over the years?

**REQUIRED TEXTS**

There are three required books for this course as well as a course packet. The books are available at the AS Bookstore in BMU and are as follows:

France, Peter. *Hermits : The Insights of Solitude*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996  
Lawrence, C.H. *Medieval Monasticism* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Harlow: Longman, 2001.  
Olivelle, Patrick. *Samnyasa Upanisads*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

The course packet is available at: [www.universityreaders.com](http://www.universityreaders.com). Click on "Students" then "Buy now" and you will be guided through the process.

## **GRADING**

- 24% 8 two-page assessments of the readings for that week (worth 3% each). You may write these reports on any week that you wish, but there must be a total of eight by the last week of the course. They are to be handed in at the beginning of the class the week following the discussion of those readings.
- 6% 12 lists of at least five points or issues brought up in the readings that you would like to discuss further (each list worth 0.5%). These will form the basis of the class discussions and are to be handed in at the end of the class. Note: this list is not required for the first or last class, and you may fail to hand it in once without penalty.
- 10% An annotated bibliography that will be used to support your research paper due at the end of the course. You should list the books, articles, websites and other sources that you plan to use for your paper and explain what they are, what they cover and why they will be helpful **DUE Nov 11**.
- 10% A mid-term take home exam that will consist of two 500-word answers to a choice of questions handed out beforehand. **DUE Oct. 14**
- 25% A 10-12 page research paper on a topic of your choice that you have discussed with the professor **DUE Dec 9**.
- 15% Class Participation. This includes attending class regularly, paying attention, making comments (I would rather you say something that is not quite correct than say nothing at all). It is also expected that you will come to class having done the readings and thought about them. Please don't feel shy about asking any questions that you have – that's what the instructor is there for. Since this is a seminar course, it is imperative that you come to all classes. If you miss even one, be sure to come to my office to catch up.
- 10% Class Presentation. Each student will be required to present on the readings and lead the first hour of a class. This schedule will be worked out at the beginning of the course.

## **Students with Disabilities**

Any student who has a learning or other disability that affects classroom performance should make this known to the instructor in order to allow him to marshal resources to assist you. All disclosure will remain confidential but may require medical documentation.

## **SCHEDULE**

### **Aug 26 Introduction**

*We will be introduced to the idea of the ascetic and be made aware of the wide range of influence that this ideal and the individuals pursuing it have had on the development of religion and society in general.*

#### **Readings:**

France: Chapter 1: *The Emergence of the Individual*

Packet: H. Chadwick "The Ascetic Ideal in the History of the Church"

William James "Saintliness"

### **Sept 2 Early Christian Monasticism**

*The ascetic ideal was felt early on in the history of Christianity, influenced by the life of Jesus as well as Greek and Jewish ideas about the relationship between God and humanity, and humans and the world. St Antony and St Pachomius, both Coptic Christians in Egypt, became the founders of eremetical and coenobitic monasticism respectively around 300 CE.*

#### **Readings:**

France: Chapter 2 *The Desert Fathers* and Chapter 3 *The Russian Startsy*

Lawrence: Chapter 1 *The Call of the Desert*

Packet: Susanna Elm Introduction to "Virgins of God"

### **Sept 9 Early Ascetic Monasticism in Buddhism and Jainism**

*Buddhism and Jainism, two Indian religions, were founded in the sixth century BCE by men who had renounced the world to live an ascetic life. Both believed that attachment to the world caused suffering, which could be conquered by leaving the world to live as an ascetic.*

#### **Readings:**

Packet: P.S. Jaini "The Mendicant Path and the Attainment of the Goal"

S.J. Tambiah "The Buddhist conception of the Arahant"

M. Carrithers "The Path of Purification"

### **Sept 16 Asceticism and Renunciation in Hinduism**

*Hinduism had an ascetic path that became popular also in the sixth century BCE. Ascetics, those who had renounced the world, became important figures in the religion but had a complicated relationship with institutionalized religion, as we shall see.*

**Readings:**

Olivelle: Bhiksuka Upanishad (p.236-7)  
Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Maitreya Upanishad (p.158-169)

**Sept 23        The Process of Renunciation and the Hindu Ascetic Life**

*How does one actually go about becoming an ascetic according to classical Hindu doctrine? What does it involve and what is it supposed to lead to?*

**Readings:**

Olivelle: Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Turiyatitavadhuta Upanishad (p.238-240)  
Paramahansa Upanishad (p. 137-140)  
France: Chapter Five *Light From the East*

**Sept 30        Theoretical Evaluations**

*Social theorists have tried to make sense of renunciation in a variety of ways. We will look at some theorists who see renunciation as a vital component of Hindu society that helps paradoxically to give meaning to the elements that remain within society as well as providing a much needed outlet for others. The meaning of meaning will be explored in the article by Culler in order to provide a basis for evaluating asceticism.*

**Readings:**

Packet: John Culler "The Linguistic Foundation"  
Louis Dumont "World Renunciation in Indian Religions"  
J.C. Heesterman "Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer"

**Oct 7        Mid term exam questions distributed  
Coenobitic (communal) Developments**

*While most ascetic movements were founded by wandering mendicants, they eventually became settled and institutionalized themselves, with monks living in communities.*

**Readings:**

Lawrence: Chapter 2 *The Rule of St. Benedict*  
Packet: Mohan Wijayaratna "The Origin of the Community"  
Sukumar Dutt "The Growth of the Buddhist Coenobium"

**Oct 14        MID TERM EXAM DUE**  
**Monks and Society**

*While the ascetic life is generally opposed to “normal” life in the world, in fact monks and ascetics have often had dealings with society at large and in many cases have actually been major players in worldly affairs, gaining both wealth and power.*

**Readings:**

Lawrence: Chapter 7 *The Cloister and the World*  
Packet: Jane Bunnag “The Way of the Monk”

**Oct 21        Renewal and Reform**

*Some monks reacted against the growing wealth and involvement in worldly affairs on the part of many monks and monasteries. We will look at some “back to basics” movements that emerged in order to address these concerns.*

**Readings:**

Lawrence: Chapter 9 *The Cistercian Model*  
Chapter 10 *The New Monasticism Versus the Old*  
Packet: S.J. Tambiah “Monastic Networks”

**Oct 28        Mendicancy and the Simple Life**

*We will continue our look at monastic reform movements that were aimed at getting back to a simpler lifestyle in harmony with nature.*

**Readings:**

Lawrence: Chapter 13 *The Friars*  
Packet: Thanissaro Bhikkhu “The Home Culture of the Dharma”  
Electronic Reserve: Carrithers “Introduction”

**Nov 4        Nuns and Female Renunciants**

*Women have played an important role in the development and success of ascetic movements in a variety of places, eras and religions. While sometimes facing strong opposition, they have made great philosophical and practical contributions to their traditions, a few of which will be explored in this course.*

**Readings:**

Lawrence: Chapter 12 *Sisters or Handmaids*  
Packet: Susan Murcott “Mahapajapati Gotami and Her Disciples”  
Philip Koch “Women and Solitude”  
Sara Davidson “What they did for Bliss”

**Nov 11            ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE**  
**Psychological Perspectives**

*We will look at some of the psychological problems and motivations peculiar to those who have taken ascetic vows. Remember that donning the robes does not remove one's basic human drives.*

**Readings:**

- Packet: Robert McAllister "Conflicts Regarding Chastity"
- Robert McAllister "Conflicts Relating to Poverty"
- Online: *The Psychology of the Ascetic* by J.M. Masson found at:  
<http://www.american-buddha.com/psychol.ascetic.htm>

**Nov 18            Comparative Reflections on Monasticism**

*We are now in a position to examine some of the similarities and differences between monasticism as it is found in Buddhism and Christianity.*

**Readings:**

- Packet: Karmen MacKendrick "asceticism: seducing the divine"
- Ilana Silber "Opting Out in Buddhism and Christianity"
- Steven Collins "Monasticism, Utopias and Social Theory"

**THANKSGIVING BREAK**

**Dec 2             The Ascetic Impulse Today**

*The ascetic lifestyle still has a lot to say to us in the modern world – perhaps more than ever. We will look at some overtly religious as well as more secular examples of asceticism and ask if they are the true inheritors of the ancient traditions we have been looking at.*

**Readings:**

- France: Chapter 4 *By Walden Pond: Thoreau*
- Chapter 7 *The Waters of Contradiction: Merton*
- Online: *Death of an Innocent* found at:  
[outside.away.com/outside/magazine/0193/9301fdea.html](http://outside.away.com/outside/magazine/0193/9301fdea.html)

**Dec 9             FINAL PAPER DUE**

Wrap Up Discussion