

Konstantinos Z. Delikostantis



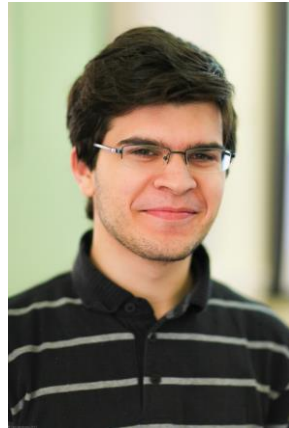
Athens: Ennoia Press, 2011,  
pp. 160.

Reviewed by  
Dimitrios Pallis

In the work in question, Konstantinos Delikostantis, Professor of Philosophy and Systematic Theology at the University of Athens, focuses on the importance and role of asceticism, as experienced in the Orthodox Church from centuries ago to the present and bequeathed to human civilization as a whole.

Review

*Η γοητεία του  
ασκητισμού  
(Allure of  
Asceticism)*



Dimitrios Pallis has studied Theology at the Universities of Athens and Winchester (UK). He is currently pursuing a DPhil at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom

Contributions such as that of Professor Delikostantis, especially from a theological perspective, are deemed essential in our time as anthropological and cultural proposals in order to evaluate and confront the impasses of postmodern society and its established structures.

The current study is not Professor Delikostantis' first attempt to provide an anthropological and sociological critique of modern society and its difficulties with a philosophical underpinning. From his MA thesis on the thought of Hannah Arendt (1974) and his first doctoral dissertation (1980), which critically examined modern humanitarianism from a philosophical perspective, as well as his subsequent studies up to and including the current work, he outlines the increasing anthropological and social impasses of our time and proposes solutions.

In this book on asceticism the author contrasts modern civilization and its obsession with possessions and pleasure, which has as its ultimate goal the satisfaction of the individual and his desires, with the ascetic cultural proposal of Orthodoxy, as experienced in the past and present (in its healthy forms) within the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Asceticism, as the core of the reality defined by the author in his recent works as "personhood culture",<sup>1</sup> constitutes a central concept of Christianity and, moreover, functions as the touchstone of its Christian character, and, therefore, its ethos of freedom. The life of a Christian is fundamentally bound to the ascetic ethos. But what does asceticism mean? Is it a "flight" from the world, a denial of human civilization or perhaps the

---

<sup>1</sup> See Konstantinos Z. Delikostantis, *Η παιδεία ως πολιτισμός του προσώπου* [*Education as Personhood Culture*], (Athens: Ennoia Press, 2009) and my comments on this study in the book review published in *Θεολογία* 82:2 (2011), pp. 349-54. In short, I would say that the author argues in favour of the application of the Christian person-centred cultural legacy and the relational dynamics of life and freedom it includes at a broader social level, as the consequence of an open proposal to the world and some of its aspects, which are nowadays troubling many.

exclusive privilege of a select group? The author attempts to provide answers to questions like these and other stereotypes regarding asceticism, engaging in a critical dialogue which is, however, entirely free of any apologetic tendencies.

The basic line of argument followed in the book is that the problems relating to the uncertainty of contemporary man and the human societies he lives in originate in the individualistic structures of society and their consequences, which appear to have brought about disorientation on the personal and collective level, since the ontologically relational character of true freedom has been forgotten (Prologue). In response to this confusion, the author suggests the need, or rather desirability, of an ascetic “revolution” (14; 43) in view of the challenges of the modern “post-ascetic” age (30). As he aptly remarks, “asceticism, as understood and experienced in the tradition of Orthodoxy, can constitute an *answer* to the contemporary “disorder of the heart” [désordre du coeur] and the crisis of values” (14; 78: my modifications). It is this dimension of the Orthodox legacy which, born out of and nurtured by the mystery and sacraments of the Church (52), can guarantee liberation of the “ego” from “needs” and “values” (96). At another point, he describes ascetic Christian freedom, stating that “freedom in Christ means self-transcendence, ministry and the renunciation of individual claims for the sake of love (...) it is the interpretation of truth as communion, the precedence of love over “rights” and freedom over happiness, the identification of freedom and love within a culture which contrasts freedom with love and love with freedom” (25). Indeed, according to the author, theology, which, in its genuine form, is always a theology of freedom (26; 101), gives a special place to asceticism as synonymous with the freedom arising in the Church so that every theology of freedom is *de facto* also ascetic (7; 21). Thus, “a non-ascetic Christianity”, both as a way of life and theology, would be a “parody of Christianity” (62). As regards the structure of the content, it must be noted in advance that it is based on the above viewpoints. Taking as his

starting point the principle dear to the followers of the theology of Fr. Michael Kardamakis that “asceticism is Christianity in its entirety”, a principle which the author frequently formulates in different ways (12; 40; 42; 62; 85; 104), the author attempts to analyze the different socio-cultural manifestations of asceticism in Christian life. Thus, apart from the critical appraisal and philosophical and theological comparison with other forms of asceticism and the dialectical defence against its, at times, wrongful devaluation, he devotes two chapters to monastic and married life as ascetic expressions of ecclesial life respectively. Except for the brief *Prologue* (7-9) and the *Introduction* (13-26), which summarises the content, the book is composed of four chapters, and a pioneering addendum regarding the Pauline theology of freedom, which highlights an aspect of the theology of Paul which has been overlooked to some extent in academic research.

In the *first chapter*, entitled “The philosophy and theology of ascesis” (29-62), the author initially undertakes a presentation of the anti-ascetic spirit of our age, which is based on the principles of consumerism, capitalism and technocracy, resulting in a model of daily life which is eudaimonistic, money-oriented and anti-ascetic, respectively (29-30). Freedom, as synonymous with happiness, has led to a new type of human, “homo habens”, a human being entirely dependent on a measureless desire for possessions, and, at the same time, “homo computer”, as a result of the continual organization of his egopathic happiness through the constant “discovery” of new demands and satisfactions (31-2). Within this commotion of devaluation and disparagement of the ethos of sacrifice and the cross, despite the recent emergence of a new strain of asceticism as a form of protest, the author shows himself to be particularly cautious since, as he detects, this reaction is nothing more than neo-bourgeois rationalism, which, instead of limiting individualism, arms the individual with the pursuit of rights (35). Delikostantis’ remarks on the anthropological grounding of asceticism are also extremely interesting (36-9).

He subsequently proceeds to recount the history of the concept of asceticism as a cultural stance within the Orthodox tradition, and touches on its Eucharistic-ecological and eschatological dimension (39-46). The chapter closes with a comparison between Christian and philosophical asceticism (46-52) and the author's response to Nietzsche's critique of Christianity (52-9). Philosophical and Christian asceticism are compared with special reference to the cynics Antisthenes and Diogenes, as well as Immanuel Kant (46-8), focusing on the character of Christian asceticism, which revolves around the cross and resurrection, as the fundamental difference (48-52). Summarizing his critique of philosophical asceticism, the author aptly remarks that "the cross without resurrection and hope becomes masochism", while "the resurrection without the cross is utopianism" (50). The author engages in a critical dialogue with the Nietzschean view of (dualistic) Christianity, while, at the same time, drawing attention to the theological ability of the philosopher of the Superman ("Übermensch").

The *second chapter*, called "Monasticism and civilization" (65-86), deals with the embodiment of the ascetic ideal in conjunction with its space-time and beyond time dimensions. Monasticism, as an "explosive mixture", which combines a radical eschatological witness with life and freedom, presence and witness, offers a stable witness and a direction of life full of dynamism (66; cf. 79-86). It preserves the ascetically eschatological spirit of primordial asceticism within the Church (68). At this point, the author outlines four parameters, which are critical as regards the meeting of monasticism and modern civilization: the historical existence of the Church, with specific cultural connections (cf. the lurking deviations of unhistorical monophysitism and overemphasizing history nestorianism); the anthropological presupposition that man, "the deficient being", is protected by institutions (cf. Gehlen); Christianity's adoption of a cultural character so that it might be "churchified", without being changed from it; and the links between monasticism and various cultures, without losing its

truth in Christ (68-77). The contribution of monasticism to the culture of Orthodox peoples is underlined enthusiastically, whereas, at the same time, the risk of secularization is noted (73-7). He continues: "when the essence of monasticism is relativized in the name of any worldly activity, then its ascetic and eschatological character is altered and then we are faced with alienation rather than a witness" (76-7). The monasteries themselves convey an ecumenical spirit when they express that spirit of openness to what is different (78-80). It is the monasteries which, in times of difficulty, "hold the gates of heaven open", as the author eloquently states (74).

In the *third chapter*, named "Marriage and the family between postmodern and ascetic freedom" (89-111), the author discusses the same ideal through the married path of Christian life. Specifically, following a brief reference to the "postmodern" face of marriage (89-90), he attempts to examine and identify the source of the problem within the institution. The author carefully recounts the observations of the famous sociologist Anthony Giddens as regards divorce and the new parameters, which lead to it (90-3). A particularly interesting perspective in Giddens' approach is that the model of the traditional family, as an antidote to the marital crisis of our times, is not a solution and, moreover, that an insistence on some dimensions of the traditional family constitutes a more worrying phenomenon than its decline (90-2). Instead, the solution lies in the *transformation* of the family (93). To illustrate this point, there follow two anecdotes which demonstrate the root of evil, drawing the reader's attention to the invasion of individualistic principles and a confusion in the understanding of human freedom within the institution of marriage (93-5). Self-centricity has replaced duties in the life of modern man with extreme individual claims and has made him pursue "self-fulfilment" of an individualistic kind (96-100). I would like to add that self-fulfilment *per se* is not anthropologically mistaken, as, in my view, as a reaction to heteronomy, it appears to have powerful support and justification. Dysfunction arises from its

connection with autonomism and its preservation of a utopian individual self-sufficiency (cf. 98-100). Attention is subsequently drawn to the model of married life proposed by the Orthodox Church, with emphasis on the liberating nature of the ethos of sacrifice, inextricably bound, as it is, to the perspective of the resurrection, which gives meaning to the cross in a reality laden with eschatological anticipation and reference (101-2). Another aspect is the character of marriage, which is born out of and nurtured by the sacraments. A modern tendency to “desacramentalize” marriage strips married life of the metaphysical basis of its ascetic hue (see especially the comments of Chr. Yannaras, Fr. J. Meyendorff and Fr. M. Kardamakis, 103-4). Eutychism, as the opposite of asceticism in a couple’s relationship, inevitably leads the family to alienation in various forms (105-6; cf. 89-100). The self-sacrificing love of the spouses within a marriage justifies the title “the mystery of love” (104-11).

In the *fourth chapter*, “The practice of charity in Orthodoxy” (115-32), which could be considered the most practical of the chapters in light of the recession in Greece and beyond, the author outlines the multi-dimensional social contribution of the Church in the current financial crisis. This is a crisis which does not hesitate to sacrifice the person at the altar of profit and the tyranny of “needs”, which are a new infliction on our freedom (115-6). Through the ages, as in our own times, we see the ministry of the church in its many forms, often organized and on a large scale, which resulted in charitable works as an expression of a person-centred sense of solidarity and a heightened social sensibility (117-32). As the author correctly points out, the eschatological orientation of the Church did not at any time function as a brake on the social activity of the Church but, conversely, appeared to heighten the Church’s social instinct, from the very first monastic communities (119-21; 125-6). It is inconceivable that it should act as a substitute for politics, since this would bring about new difficulties. However, every critical support of positive political initiatives

would be above all a benefit and offer a valuable opportunity to embody the witness given to the world by the ecclesial “culture of solidarity” (131-2). He subsequently proceeds to a comparison of eastern and western Christianity as regards the concept of freedom (122-3), while he discusses the western “open society” (cf. Popper) and the ensuing “homo clausus” (cf. Elias) [123-4]. In the same vein, he focuses on the matter of the recognition of the importance of the affirmation of human rights as a socio-anthropological “achievement” by Orthodoxy, and the immobility of the latter on this issue (127-8). This is, of course, not the first time that the author has dealt with this topic: in other works he considers it to be of critical importance to the general discussion regarding the relationship between Orthodoxy and modernism. The truth concerning human rights is revealed only when we grasp the interrelation and complementarity of the notions of liberty, equality and fraternity contained in human rights (see, for more, Delikostantis, K. *Τα δικαιώματα του ανθρώπου: Δυτικό ιδεολόγημα ή οικουμενικό ήθος; [Human Rights: Western Ideology or Universal Ethos?]*, Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Press, 1995). The chapter ends with an allusion to the fact that in the Orthodox tradition systems of values and rules were not developed, as in the West, regardless of the fact that this did not stand in the way of the ministry of love through the ages, and with a reference to the opportunity to enrich Orthodox social teaching through an encounter with the relevant teaching of the Roman Catholic Church (129-31).

The study closes with an original *addendum* regarding the Pauline theology of ascetic freedom, an aspect of Pauline theology which has not been fully researched (135-45). The author deftly links the Pauline view of freedom with the eastern ascetic tradition of freedom, which he substantiates theologically (135-42), while, at the same time, he argues strongly against the well-known views of the previous generation of biblical scholars, who posited a link between the Pauline and stoic view of freedom, as set out in Epictetus (142-5; See also, K. Delikostantis, *Το ήθος της ελευθερίας: Φιλοσοφικές απορίες και*



θεολογικές αποκρίσεις [*Ethos of Freedom: Philosophical Queries and Theological Responses*], Athens: Domos Press, 1990, 32-9, 53-61 [also available in Italian, translated by Ant. Ranzolin]). This is followed by a useful index of names (147-9) for easy reference and further study.

Proceeding to the final evaluation and closer examination of this attempt by Delikostantis to outline the way of life and freedom proposed by the Orthodox Church in relation to the challenges of our times, I should first like to note that both in terms of its timing, given the current circumstances, and in terms of its scholarship, as a result of the quality of its research and academic experience, this brief, but valuable, study could be seen as the fruit of an earlier investigation and a mature revisitation of the root of the problem with youthful enthusiasm. For practical reasons, I note that, as perhaps has become apparent, the book does not have an *epilogue*, since the author's conclusions are included at the end of nearly every chapter in the form of a brief epilogue. Personally, I consider that this book adopts a clear stance, which is evident in almost all of the author's theological and religio-philosophical works; the current study is, however, marked by more extensive references and more systematic argumentation. It is, indeed, of particular importance that an Orthodox theologian with a background in philosophy has evaluated and drawn fresh attention to the ascetic foundations of Christian freedom in an age embued with a consciously "anti-ascetic" (if not "post-ascetic") spirit. This work by Professor Delikostantis brings to the fore a theological aspect of Christianity which appears to be undervalued, not only in the Protestant world, but also among several Orthodox theologians. Although it may appear strange, studies on asceticism in the form of a dialogue between theology and philosophy are a rarity in Orthodox theological publications and, in this sense, we should also acknowledge the originality of the author as regards his choice of subject matter.