

Soma and Sauton: Teilhard, Foucault and the New Asceticism of Margaret Miles

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ABSTRACT

Modern Christian theology has been largely silent about the body as a visceral entity. This “conspiracy of silence” must be overcome if we are to come to a more complete understanding of the body *vis-à-vis* Christian tradition and Christian practice in our own time. Margaret Miles, in *Fullness of Life*, seeks to end this silence with a roar—via a call for a “new asceticism,” one that challenges both the old asceticism of Christian tradition and the modern secular underground, unacknowledged and unconscious asceticism that “dulls and damages both our souls and bodies” (16). To construct, or reconstruct, this new asceticism, however, Miles must confront not only a powerful discourse of bodily renunciation that still exists within Christianity at both the popular and institutional levels, but also, and perhaps more crucially, the (Platonic-Cartesian) secular discourse that conceives of the body and the soul/mind in a dualistic fashion, and relies heavily upon the *a priori* existence of a Kantian transcendental ego. In this paper I analyze Miles’s argument, in particular ways in which her “new asceticism” may be bolstered by a) the last writings of Michel Foucault regarding an “aesthetics of selfhood” based upon the *ars erotica* (as opposed to the *scientia sexualis*), where “caring for the self” replaces “knowing the self”; and b) those of Teilhard de Chardin, who sought a Christian *askesis* where *soma* is the fullest completion and realization of *sarx* and *pneuma*, and thus brings about the full “spiritualization of matter.”

Modern Christian theology has been largely silent about the body as a visceral entity. This “conspiracy of silence” must be overcome if we are to come to a more complete understanding of the body *vis-à-vis* Christian tradition and Christian practice in our own time. Margaret Miles, in *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism*, seeks to end this silence with a roar—via a call for a “new asceticism,” one that challenges both the “old asceticism” of Christian tradition and the modern secular underground, unacknowledged and unconscious asceticism(s) that “dulls and damages both our souls and bodies” (Miles, *Fullness*, 16). To construct, or reconstruct, this new asceticism, however, Miles must confront not only a powerful discourse of bodily renunciation that still exists within Christianity at both the popular and institutional levels, but also, and perhaps more crucially, the (Platonic-Cartesian) secular discourse that conceives of the body and the soul/mind in a dualistic fashion, and relies heavily upon the *a priori* existence of a Kantian transcendental ego. In this paper I will analyze Miles’s argument, in particular ways in which her “new asceticism” may be bolstered by a) the last writings of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) regarding an “aesthetics of selfhood” based upon the *ars erotica* (as opposed to the *scientia sexualis*), where “caring for the self” replaces “knowing the self”; and b) those of Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), who sought a Christian *askesis* where *soma* is the fullest completion and realization of *sarx* and *pneuma*, and thus brings about the full “spiritualization of matter.”

Miles does not seek to invent an ascetic program *ex nihilo*, but rather to develop one based upon traditional Christian asceticism, which that at the same time overcomes the popular (mis-?) conceptions of this tradition as it has come down to us today. Early Christian writers *did* write about the body, she argues, but have been largely ignored (by scholars), misunderstood (in popular imagination); or distorted (by contemporary authors, often for their own ends). (Miles, *Fullness*, 9-10) While admitting the many inconsistencies regarding the body in the work of early Christian writers, Miles suggests that it is precisely these ambiguities that open up the space for critical reappraisal of these writings and

accompanying hermeneutics; a space for what Foucault would call “counter-memory” as well as the possibility of “re-visionary” praxis.

The origins of Christian asceticism may be traced to Clement of Alexandria (c. 155-215), the first Christian writer to elevate the ascetic ideal to that of martyrdom. Clement invoked an ongoing, “daily martyrdom” at a time when systematic persecutions of Christians were becoming a memory. Interestingly, while this early and influential Christian apologist emphasized avoidance of “bondage to pleasure” (Miles, *Fullness*, 40), he allowed that Christians should by all means use and enjoy the created world with gratitude and exaltation, indeed with an almost Whitmanesque awe at the sacred quality of everyday living. The enemy of Christian life on earth is thus not *death* but *deadness* (the slavish subjection to physical pleasures). The human body can be either temple or tomb; it can be invested either in passions or can become *the connection of the whole person to the source of life*. Asceticism is “integrating the body into the program of the soul”; yet the conditions for this process are God-given. For Clement, and, it would seem, for Miles: “Asceticism is the choice to stop temporarily the outflow of the soul’s attention and affection to the objects of the physical world, and to focus this attention and affection to one’s connection with ‘divine power and grace’” (45). This is a point worth stressing: asceticism must be more than simply self-creative morality; the ascetic dwells in relationships with others, as well as with a source of authority, in the Christian case God, who allows for the conditions in which we develop ascetic techniques and practices.

Despite the pioneering work of Clement, it was Augustine of Hippo (354-430) who, in his *Confessions*, was the first Christian author to fully explore the human condition from a deeply personal perspective, and it was he who developed the concept of *concupiscence*, defined as the anxious grasping in fear that emerges from of a feeling of lack (from the Latin verb *concupiscere*, “to begin to desire,” though the modern connotation is, significantly, restricted to imply only *sexual* desire). Concupiscence is for Augustine a wound, a sickness, which is a result of the Fall and which

develops out of anxiety over Original Sin. Yet the body is not to be thereby disdained; for it is the soul's first duty is to *care* for its body. Moreover, the body is not itself responsible for concupiscence; it is rather "sinned against by the concupiscence of the soul" (Miles, *Fullness*, 72). Thus, for Augustine, the problem is not the existence of actual pleasures or senses but rather *the condition of being addicted and thereby enslaved to these pleasures*—a note that makes this ex-Manichaean sounds strikingly Buddhist. It is not the body but the *corruptible* body that is the burden to the soul. The Bishop of Hippo's main concern was keeping body and soul together as much as possible until resurrection. Without jettisoning the hierarchical anthropology of his forebears, Augustine worked with doctrinal understandings that required a more explicit description of the integration of the body in the full range of human—including present embodied experience.

Miles sums up her historical analysis by offering four types of Christian asceticism as it developed in various forms throughout history: 1) the pursuit of self-understanding via exploration of the outer edges of the psyche, as seen in the anchoritic tradition of the Egyptian desert; 2) the control of the addictive and deadening agenda of sex, power, and possession, as seen in early cenobitism, where "the hermit's quest for self-knowledge and self-mastery is not rejected but critiqued and incorporated in a context of service within and without the community" (Miles, *Fullness*, 142); 3) the gathering and focusing of energy, as described by St. Augustine, where the body is a primary *condition* of the soul's learning; and 4) the intensification and concentration of consciousness, enabling one to connect oneself to freedom for love and work, as described in Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. She concludes by stating, "we must reject rationales for ascetic practice that are inconsistent with the Christian affirmation of the human body by the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection" (156). Yet each of the four ways outlined above has something to offer us today, though it would appear to this writer that it is the second, the priority of interdependence and community, and the third, emphasizing the body as "condition" and the problem of concupiscence, that are of most relevance to the present historical situation (where self-knowledge has, if anything, been *over-emphasized* as a guiding rubric for what Foucault has derisively called the "Californian cult of the self").

In short, Miles claims that we must reject the "old asceticism" that often has as its rationale the presumptuous "taking control of one's own judgement and punishment" (Miles, *Fullness*, 156)—a presumption that presupposes and supports the subjectivism of Cartesian and Kantian epistemology, and dates back to the Greek oracular maxim "Know Thyself!" Such a form of asceticism must be rejected, "whether we find it in historical rationales or disguised as self-indulgence in contemporary culture" (157). For Miles, the most significant early Christian authors (e.g., Tertullian, Origen, Augustine), present another model for asceticism, a New Asceticism that involves a "dialectic, not of mind (or soul) and body, but of those aspects of the human being distinguished as 'spirit' and 'flesh'." Thus we are given a choice of either establishing connection to the source of life and being, or "the disorientation caused by clutching at objects of immediate pleasure and enjoyment"—i.e., Augustine's concupiscence and the Buddha's *dukkha* (perhaps even Marx's "alienation"). The objects of our desire objects may be good in themselves, but they enslave their us; they become addictive. Addiction, a problem of unquestionable relevance in our own time, is "the constant frustration felt by the inability

of *objects* to give greater life" (158). Therefore ascetic practice must be directed to the "flesh" and not to the "body"—as "a method to break the hegemony of the flesh over the body so that the spirit, hitherto uncultivated, unexercised, and unstrengthened, can begin to possess it... [thereby] *freeing* the Body to share in the life and energy of the Spirit."

What do these conclusions presage? In *Beyond Good and Evil* (I.14) Nietzsche gives a sardonic motto for the modern world: "Where man has nothing more to see or grasp he has nothing more to do"—this being, as he says, the right imperative for "an uncouth industrious race of machinists and bridge-builders." In our own day of late global capitalism, when all the bridges have been built, Nietzsche's epithet applies more aptly to Western consumers, those great many of us addicted to accumulation and in a constant search for satiety. It is by no means my contention that Miles's New Ascetic will be a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, but Nietzsche's break with rationalistic and positivistic discourse, and his insistence on overcoming the self may be seen as an atheist precursor to Miles's vision, and one which set the impetus for a trend in philosophy focusing on "techniques of subjectivity," a theme taken up, as we shall see, by Nietzsche's disciple Michel Foucault in his last writings.

On the other side of the coin, but speaking a very similar language, is Teilhard de Chardin, who, like John A. T. Robinson and Miles, seeks in his writings a reintegration of *soma* out of the Manichaean-Cartesian dichotomy of flesh and spirit. Any new prescriptive asceticism must also involve a new conceptualization of what it means to be a self and a subject in the world, and it is this lacuna in Miles that can be addressed by looking to the writings of Teilhard and Foucault. One of Teilhard's most significant contributions to the discourse of a theology of the body can be found in his notion of "sur-animation": "The true Christian supernatural... neither leaves the creature where he is, on his own plane, nor suppresses him: it 'sur-animates' him." (Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, 110). "It is astonishing," Teilhard goes on to say, how

so few minds should succeed... in grasping [this] notion of transformation...[s]ometimes the thing transformed seems to them to be the old thing unchanged (*sarx*); at other times they see in it only the entirely new. In the first case it is the *spirit* that eludes them; in the second case, it is *matter*.

Thus Teilhard, like Miles, dismisses both the old asceticism of the Christian tradition (which says "Flee!" before the body), as well as the hedonistic "Americanism" typified by Augustinian concupiscence and addiction. John A. T. Robinson concurs: in a 1952 essay on St. Paul, he argues that Paul's concept of the body allows for an analysis of our situation under sin as *enslavement*—as the nexus of vast, refined solidarities of the power pressures of the world. True Christian freedom is neither *escape* from the body or from sociality; the freedom and promise of Christianity lies in the *transfiguration of solidarity* through the Body of Christ. Robinson draws much of the blame of the misunderstanding of Paul's concept of transformation to a confusion of lexicons and translation, as the author himself was using Hebrew concepts and Greek terminology to express his thoughts, without deigning to clarify these in anything like a systematic fashion. Where the Greeks opposed body (*matter*) and soul (beginning a long genealogy extending from Plato, the Gnostics, and eventually Descartes), the ancient Jews rejected this dualism. Also, where Greeks see the body as delimiting

human solitude, the Jews saw body as *joining* humans to creation. *Sarx*—understood not as a part of body but an aspect of the whole person (or perhaps even as a stance or attitude; i.e., a particular way of relating to God and to others)—stands for the whole person alienated from God/the Spirit. Spirit or *pneuma* in Paul stands in contrast for the whole person directed towards God/Love. Humanity under the auspices of *sarx* is infirm, transitory, and corruptible. To be in flesh is to be in the world as a “fallen creature,” subject to powers that oppose God, or, in Foucaultian terms, subject to the diffuse powers that control our everyday existence. Flesh is force by which powers of the world get their grip on us. Under *pneuma* the whole person (body and soul) is directed towards God. Thus matter is not evil, contra the Gnostics and Manichaeans, nor is there any conflict between Reason and Passion (as in the Stoics). In sum, *sarx* is that force by which humans come to live *for* rather than *of* the world (for God); and *soma* may be seen as the conceptual bridge between the fallen figure and the redeemed figure resurrected, a bridge sought by the integrative precept of the New Asceticism.

A number of questions may be raised here. If this interpretation, which supports the conclusions of both Miles and Teilhard, is indeed correct, then we are bound to ask: *What happened?* What is to account for nearly two millennia of misinterpretation, almost from the very origins of Christian discourse on the body? As Teilhard laments, it appears that the Gnostics won against Augustine and Paul, but why? Because of the familiarity of (native) Greek concepts over (foreign) Hebrew ideas in newly Christian world? Was it a matter of naïve or perhaps purposive misunderstanding to better serve interests of apologists, or those in power whom they may have been wishing to assuage? In short, we can ask here the question Miles leaves to the reader: Why are our ideas about Christian history (and Christian asceticism in particular) steeped in such profound un-historicity?

The work of Foucault may help to answer some of the questions. Foucault has often been criticized for two related problems in his work: the first being the difficulty of praxis, if conceived solely as “counter-discursivity” and the transgression of codes; the second the rather disembodied account of power he projects, which has questionable implications for practical empowerment of the oppressed, and has been criticized for such by Charles Taylor and Lois McNay. Whether in direct response to such criticism or following a gradual but pervasive change in his self-appointed task, Foucault turned, in his last writings, to the theme of the embodied subject and to the creation of subjectivity more particularly. In “Technologies of the Self,” Foucault provides space for the promotion of “new forms of subjectivity... through the refusal of [the] kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries” (Foucault, “Technologies,” 17). This involves the development of “techniques of subjectivity,” set within a Nietzschean model of (self)-creative overcoming, but relying upon certain disciplines and practices oriented away from “Know Thyself!” (*gnothi sauton*) to another Greek imperative “to care for oneself” (*epimelesthai sautou*). Foucault suggests a contrast between Weber’s question: “To what kind of asceticism should one submit?” and his own query: “How have certain kinds of interdictions required the price of certain kinds of knowledge about oneself?”—or in other words, “What must one know about oneself in order to be willing to renounce everything?”

With these questions in mind, Foucault undertakes an analysis of the hermeneutics and technologies of the self in

pagan and early Christian practice. For Foucault, an ascetic practice is an exercise upon self by which one tries to transform one’s self and to obtain a certain mode of being. Thus, the self-care ethos of Greco-Roman times, as an ascetic practice, was the manner in which individual (and civic) liberty considered itself ethical. *Askesis*, the testing of one’s preparation, asks: “Is the truth assimilated enough to become ethics so that we can behave as we must when an event presents itself?” (Foucault, “Technologies,” 36) Ethics, as understood by Foucault in his later work, is nothing less than the elaboration of “a form of relation to self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct” (Bernauer, “Ecstatic Thinking,” 54). Here we see a convergence between the Greek concept of *askesis*, or ascetic practice, the *ethos* of care of self, and the priority of ethical conduct as an indistinguishable part of this self-formation. Schematically, we have a conflation of three important Greek concepts: *askesis*, *aesthetikos*, and *ethos*.

Foucault’s ascetics of selfhood thus has strong roots in classical Greek thought, and hearkens back to the original meaning of *askesis*: “Care for self is of course knowledge of self in Socrates/Plato but it is also the knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct/principles... to care for one’s self is to fit one’s self out with these truths” (Foucault, “Ethic of Care,” 5). Care of self is not narcissistic, as the Greek *ethos* of freedom is also a way of *caring for others*. Self-care renders one competent to involve oneself within community relationships, and implies a relationship to the other to the extent that, “in order to really care for self, one must listen to the teachings of a master” (6). Thus, Foucault’s project fulfills both the integral and communal aspects of Miles’s asceticism as well as the Clementine notion that the practice of asceticism is not simply self-creative.

Margaret Miles’s project in *Fullness of Life* is both ambitious and explicit: to reconstruct a New Asceticism that challenges both conventional forms of Christian asceticism (Nietzsche: “[T]he entire morality of self-renunciation must be taken mercilessly to task and brought to court”), including its rigid dualism and glorification of spirit/soul at the expense of matter/body; as well as the “unconscious asceticism(s)” and concupiscence of the modern world, which “dulls our souls and our bodies.” In both building upon and overcoming historical Christian asceticism, a new subjectivity must be fashioned, perhaps, as I have suggested, along the lines of the late Foucaultian development of various “techniques of the self,” where selfhood is re-conceptualized as a transformative and creative process, yet one developing in a relational context both to others and to a source of authority. This theory of Foucault’s borrows much from Nietzsche, but is also echoed in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin and supported by John T. Robinson’s essay on Paul’s use of the triad terms *sarx*, *pneuma*, and *soma*. Part of this process involves a change from *gnothi sauton* to *epimelesthai sauton*, from knowing to caring for oneself. As Foucault explains, the reasons why *gnothi sauton* has obscured *epimelesthai sauton* are the following: first, a transformation in western moral principles, where self-care came to clash with a more rigorous morality and principles of austerity; second, in theoretical philosophy from Descartes (down, one could say, to Husserl), knowledge of the self (as a thinking subject) takes on an *a priori* position in the quest for a theory of knowledge. This subtle inversion precipitated by these factors, Foucault concludes, lead to very different concepts of selfhood and self-fashioning in ancient and modern eras, and it is not difficult to see on which side Foucault’s sympathies lie—towards a reconstruction of an

askesis based on the ethic *epimelesthai sautou* and grounded in a re-conceptualization of selfhood as a creative process of overcoming. Margaret Miles's *Fullness of Life* can thus be seen as an exegetical support for this reconstruction of *sauton*, and the clearest and most explicit preliminary vision offered thus far towards a truly New Asceticism of the Christian body.

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