EDUCATION AS ASCETIC PRACTICE: TEACHING THEOLOGY IN A POST-9/11 CONTEXT

Maureen R. O'Brien
Duquesne University

ABSTRACT

This essay presents an argument for the inherently ascetic nature of education in theology when considered in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. Using a specific undergraduate theology course on Christian and Muslim responses to war and violence as a test case, the essay describes ascetic education as creating an epistemological "space" in which the capacity to engage complexity is intentionally enlarged and transformed. This enlargement, in the course under discussion, occurred principally through the students' encounter with diverse historical Christian responses to the question of participation in war, along with the comparison of Western and Muslim notions of "just war" as differentiated by historical, political and cultural factors. After presenting some highlights of how course themes and methods engaged the central ascetic tensions in the post-9/11 situation, three dimensions of asceticism vis-à-vis education are presented: ascetic disposition, conversation and action.

I. Introduction

[W]hen [people] are hungry, they stretch out toward something; while they are stretching, they are enlarged; while they are enlarged, they become capacious, and, when they have become capacious enough, they will be filled in due time.[1]

In the spring semester of 2002, I was scheduled to teach an undergraduate honors section on "Classical and Contemporary Theology." Instructors for this course receive wide latitude in choice of topics and readings. For my focus, I decided to draw upon the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as impetus for examination of "issues of war and

[1]Augustine, "The Usefulness of Fasting," in *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Various Subjects,* trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1952), 404 (chap. 1).

Maureen R. O'Brien, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Theology and Director of Pastoral Ministry at Duquesne Univesity (Pittsburgh, PA 15282). She has published a number of articles that explore themes related to education for peace and justice, as well as pedagogical models for theological reflection and ministry education.

HORIZONS 31/2 (2004): 355-74

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

peace, justifications for violence, and the clash of religious, cultural and political worldviews between the West and the Muslim world."[2]

I viewed the course as an important and mutual opportunity for learning. The events of 9/11 had left me with a deep sense of intellectual, moral and physical vulnerability. Concerned with the reflexive patriotism that seemed to prevail in the wake of the attacks, I hoped to create an educational setting in which the students and I, as a community of learners, could critically interpret the current "war on terror" in light of Christian and Muslim traditions on the ethics of war and peace. Accordingly, I structured the course to include an opening unit on Christian responses to important questions of war and peace in varied historical and cultural contexts, followed by a unit on Muslim responses to these questions. (At the students' request, I provided additional readings and discussion time for further background on Islam.) A final, brief unit was intended to situate the Catholic sources on war and peace within the larger framework of Catholic social teaching.

The results were, as in most such endeavors, mixed. Some students seemed to find the course an occasion to reconfirm their anti-Muslim prejudices. Some professed themselves to be uninterested in the subject matter throughout the semester. Others worked through initial perplexity to new insight, and valued the experience. And, for me, the course engendered further reflection on the material we discussed as well as the continuing "war on terror" that unfolded through subsequent attacks by the United States on Afghanistan and Iraq.

Fueled by this pedagogical experience and reflection, I hope to show in this essay how teaching and learning in the post-9/11 context have become an opportunity to claim and develop the ascetic nature of education. Drawing on Augustine's expression of the usefulness of fasting in its ability to enlarge "capaciousness," education as ascetic practice can be the cultivation of a space for epistemological "hunger," or desire, in which our capacity to entertain complexity is intentionally enlarged and deepened, in order to be "filled" with transformed perspectives and responses to a complex world. As a religious "classic," in David Tracy's sense, asceticism helps to disclose, for Christians and others, a "wholeness of reality," and thus illumines the nature and purpose of education amid the particular challenges of our times.[3]

Furthermore, teaching on the subject of war and peace in this context provides a helpful test case for education as ascetic practice, especially when Christian and Muslim perspectives are considered within an American climate of heightened apprehension and urgency.

[2]Course Syllabus, Spring Semester 2002.

[3]David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Participants, whether religious believers or not, find themselves working through the relationship of those two religious perspectives to each other, and considering the types of public engagement that each perspective encourages. As my honors course illustrates, dealing with the inherent tension between the obligations of religious faithfulness–for Christians, the practice of Christian discipleship–and state citizenship, a task historically fraught with difficulty, confronts us today with new layers of ambiguity and complexity. The further effort to bring this unwieldy heritage into dialogue with comparable dilemmas within Islam, furthermore, can force participants to consider the particularity of their own traditions, and the problematic nature of all universal claims regarding moral human behavior.

Thus, the honors course serves to illustrate how the metaphor of asceticism in an educational setting illumines the pedagogical attempt to create and enlarge epistemological hunger in order to create and sustain new capacities for public engagement. Working from Augustine's expression, then, the hunger fostered through wrestling with the course's tensions may create enlarged capacity for critical engagement with complex questions. Such enlarged capacity can foster a new desire to be "filled" that will shape new ascetic possibilities, inside and outside the classroom.

In this essay I will begin with a rationale for the use of asceticism as an educational metaphor, drawing on broadly religious dimensions of the ascetic tradition as well as specifically Christian aspects. A necessarily brief overview of the honors course readings and themes, and the central tensions they raise will then serve to highlight how course content along with pedagogical strategies offered the potential for ascetic education. This will lead to an identification of three key dimensions of ascetic education for a post-9/11 context: ascetic disposition, conversation, and action–with further elaboration in light of the honors course.

II. Asceticism as Metaphor for Education

While in its narrowest sense "asceticism" has often connoted severe forms of bodily discipline or mortification for the sake of altered consciousness, a virtuous life, or religious faithfulness, there is ample justification in contemporary scholarship for viewing it in more multifaceted ways. In a widely cited treatment, Richard Valantasis defines asceticism as "performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and an alternative symbolic universe."[4] In this expression, and Valantasis's extended treatment, the following highlights can be discerned:

- Asceticism is a *practice:* a patterned "performance" (i.e., enacted for an audience, whether other members of the ascetic community, God, or oneself),[5]
- requiring specific types of *training*–with the root sense of *askesis* evoking an athletic stretching of one's capacity,
- which symbolically and materially engage practitioners in *renunciation* of one way of life and *embrace* of another way,
- thus involving both the exercise and the creation of *power,*
- and precipitating *transformation:* of self and society.[6]

He argues for the importance of such ascetic practice for identity formation within fluctuating environments, whether ancient or contemporary:

> The disciplined activity of learning to communicate, of constructing a personal and social identity, of living in the complex social and political worlds, of creating theologies, philosophies, and cosmologies to validate these social roles, and of the training to become competent communicators within a society, point toward a role for asceticism far more significant than previously imagined.[7]

Christian asceticism places the aims of such practice within an ultimate vision rooted in the Gospel. Reading early Christian sources, Margaret Miles uncovers a usable tradition of asceticism for today that, as for the ancients, relies on specific ascetic practices as methods, not goals:

> The immediate goals of asceticism, once again, include self-understanding, overcoming of habituation and addiction, gathering and focusing of energy, ability to change our cultural conditioning, and intensification or expansion of consciousness. . . . We, like the historical people who developed methods of asceticism to actualize these immediate goals, should not forget that the ultimate goal of Christian asceticism is "the kingdom of heaven."[8]

[4]Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63/4 (Winter 1995): 797.
[5]Ibid., 797-98.
[6]Ibid., 799.
[7]Ibid., 795.
[8]Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 162.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Such "immediate" goals show how methods of fasting–from excessive consumption of food as well as from modern media and other aspects of consumerism–are intended to foster the generation and release of power emphasized by Valantasis, for the sake of the "ultimate" goal.

Karl Rahner discusses how contemporary asceticism for the Christian includes renunciation of prevailing thoughts and convictions, done for the sake of love and grounded in radical openness to God. Rather than a monastic withdrawal from the world, he focuses on the value of an ascetic perspective in daily life: "freely fulfilling one's responsibilities in the performance of one's duties" in a wholehearted assent to God and to one's ultimate future.[9] Like Miles and others, he points to the renunciation of consumerism as a mode of Christian asceticism in thought and practice in modern times.[10]

Seen within this tradition, education can be construed as inherently ascetical. Anthony Saldarini posits asceticism as a specification of "discipline"–encompassing "attitudes and activities oriented toward virtue, knowledge, achievement, social standing, survival, religion, and productive activity, among others."[11] Discipline, in turn, is a specification of "education," the latter seen as efforts at human formation that will result in a "higher or better" mode of existence than a natural state.[12] Parker Palmer draws upon the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers to formulate a definition of teaching that resonates with the metaphor of asceticism: "*to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced*."[13] In such space, epistemological rigidity and formlessness alike are renounced to create an open, bounded and hospitable locus in which "truth," as mutual and personal, is sought communally. While grounded, for Palmer, in relationship with Jesus, such truth is "ultimately capacious" and speaks to the potential for all to find truth in relationships with other humans and the entire

[9]Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 242. Note the similar expression in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality:* "Asceticism is a disciplined regime that Christians freely take on in order to fulfill their task. . . . In daily existence it is the willingness to make whatever efforts are necessary to fulfill God's will, no matter what the cost, so that at the end of life the Christian may join St. Paul [sic] in saying, 'I have competed well, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith' (2 Tim 4:7)" (Kenneth C. Russell, "Asceticism," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality,* ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 65.

[10]Rahner, 242.

[11]Anthony J. Saldarini, "Asceticism and the Gospel of Matthew," in Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, eds., *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 14.

[12]Ibid., 15.

[13]Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 68. Emphasis in original. See 47-105 for an extended development of the definition.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cosmos.[14] Both these treatments reinforce the connection between education and Valantasis's focus on the transformative drive of asceticism, as new subjectivities, relationships and symbolic structures are incorporated in place of the old.

In contemporary adult education researchers and teachers also advocate a pedagogical imperative to enlarge the capacity of adults to engage complexity effectively in their social worlds. Many of these authors' approaches resonate with the key dimensions of asceticism as summarized above. Jack Mezirow, for example, espouses teaching adults for "transformative learning," referring to "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action."[15] Positing that adults *should* be taught in this way assumes that values such as those listed in Mezirow's statement are desirable in contemporary society. Thus a viable adult teaching-learning style will aim for productive engagement with personal and social dilemmas, so as to shape new "frames of reference" more adequate for flourishing in contemporary society.

Laurent A. Daloz and associates echo these convictions in their investigation of American adults in a variety of professions who exemplify a commitment to the common good through their work. Analyzing the ways in which these adults make meaning of their lives and actions, the researchers postulate five "habits of mind" that they deem essential to public commitment within a complex world: dialogue; interpersonal perspective-taking; critical, systemic thought; dialectical thought; and holistic thought. Educators committed to the common good, then, are urged to foster such "habits" through their pedagogies.

> The deep purpose of higher education is to steward . . . transformation so that students and faculty together continually move from naivete through skepticism to commitment rather than becoming trapped in mere relativism and cynicism. This movement toward a mature capacity to hold firm convictions in a world which is both legitimately tentative and irreducibly interdependent is vitally important to the formation of citizens . . . .[16]

[14]Ibid., 50.

[15]Jack Mezirow, "Learning to Think Like an Adult," in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress,* ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 7-8.

[16]Laurent A. Daloz et al., *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 223.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Such treatments support a pedagogy that will sponsor participants' development of new cognitive capacities that will change their meaning-making in empowering ways, suitable to a world characterized by ambiguity and complexity.

Education, therefore, like asceticism is a *practice,* involving *training* in specific *renunciations* and *affirmations,* leading to new *desire and capacity,* and generating *power* for the sake of *change.* Asceticism offers to education the assumption that certain types of disciplined practices will aid our negotiation of ambiguous and complex realities, both within our faith tradition and in public conversation. The goal of such practices will be the commitment to full human flourishing within transformed social structures oriented toward life, not death.[17] For Christians, such commitment will incorporate a vision directing this transformation toward the kingdom of God.

How might the metaphor of asceticism illumine undergraduate theological education in the era of the war on terror? In the next section, I will briefly describe how major themes in the 2002 honors course in the context of the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath contributed to epistemological tensions that I could engage pedagogically for ascetic "enlargement."

III. Major Course Themes and Tensions Relevant to Ascetic Education

For the first unit of the honors course, our focus was a survey of important historical Christian responses to war and violence as analyzed by Lisa Sowle Cahill in *Love Your Enemies*.[18] Beginning with this material gave students, all of whom were at least nominally Christian, an initial experience of familiarity at the surface level. Yet the complex and dialectical nature of the enterprise quickly became apparent as we studied the variety of attempts by Christians to practice discipleship in relation to their participation in political structures.

Cahill's book succinctly poses a central tension: "What is the primary context in which the Christian works out concrete moral action–the kingdom of God as disclosed and brought near by the Sermon on the Mount, or the networks of natural human relationships whose ambiguities and conflicts are mediated by moral rules and political institutions?"[19] She maintains that pacifist approaches are rooted in a way of life: a radical community of disciples rather than a system of ethical thought. As a central feature of this communal fidelity to the call of the

[17]See Miles' discussion of "lifefulness," 33.

[18]Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

[19]Ibid., ix.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Gospel, Christian pacifists have attempted to adhere closely to the nonviolent imperative of the Sermon on the Mount, and thus to God's reign. Just-war approaches such as those of Augustine and Aquinas, on the other hand, allow a larger eschatological "distance" or "space" between the horizon of the kingdom of God and prevailing sociopolitical structures, authorizing Christian participation in war according to the prerogatives of the state.[20]

Cahill's discussion of eschatological "space" lends itself to our present discussion of uncomfortable ascetic stretching as occurred through our study of her book in the honors course. To take the differing demands of discipleship and citizenship seriously, as she does, requires the ascetic renunciation of an easy use of language of complementarity[21] and provokes reflection on the distinctive post-9/11 context. It enlarges our capacity for analysis of our context beyond both the uncritical patriotism promoted by the U.S. administration 1991-95 in which the roles of disciple and citizen may have collapsed into one another,[22] and an apolitical withdrawal from public engagement as inappropriate for lives of Christian holiness.

In the first unit of the course, then, we studied selections from primary sources discussed by Cahill, chosen to highlight key aspects of the discipleship-citizenship tension as regards the use of violence. The "ascetic performance" expected of students was to engage critically and interrelate the voice of the primary source with Cahill's close analysis of that source and their own analyses, particularly in light of the 2001 terrorist attacks. For example, in our treatment of Augustine's stance on war and violence, assigned readings included excerpts from *City of God* and the Cahill chapter on Augustine. The weekly handout sheet provided brief historical background and directed students as follows:

[20]Cahill develops the metaphors of nearness, distance and space as part of her eschatological focus: "The issue is essentially that of eschatology: What impact does the nearness of God's reign as proclaimed by Jesus (Mark 1:15) have on our lives now? And, in the matter of ethics, how does the way we behave toward others, both inside and outside our religious community, manifest that proclamation?" (ibid., 16).

[21]For example, Cahill finds tenuous the U.S. bishops' characterization of just-war theory and pacifism as complementary in their pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace:* "Gospel-based nonviolence and the notion that nations have a right to self-defense seem to have very different, if not opposite, implications for practical moral and political behavior" (ibid., 4). See United States Catholic Conference, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1983), nos. 120-21.

[22]One example of language that might promote uncritical patriotism is the characterization of the American armed struggle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban has been characterized as the war between "freedom and fear," to use the central phrase of George W. Bush's pivotal speech before Congress on September 21, 2001 ("President Bush's Address on Terrorism Before a Joint Meeting of Congress," *The New York Times* [21 September 2001, accessed 10 October 2001]; available from http://www.nytimes.com).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For class discussion, take particular note of:

- How Augustine (and Ambrose, who greatly influenced him) shaped his position on Christian responsibility regarding war and violence in relation to the political circumstances of his times
- Augustine's understanding of peace and the kingdom of God in relation to his argument regarding the "two cities" in The City of God, summarized by Cahill
- How Augustine drew upon Scripture in formulating his approach to the question of justifiable use of violence, including his view of the authority or canonicity of Scripture and his treatment of the "hard sayings" (i.e., the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, especially the directive to "Love your enemies")
- How Augustine understood love in relation to the use of force; how he incorporated this into his recommendations regarding heretics such as the Donatists

And think about:

- How *Cahill* evaluates Augustine's treatment of the question of Christian participation in violence?
- How *you* evaluate Augustine on these questions?
- If Augustine came to our class to discuss appropriate Christian responses to the events of September 11, what might he say, and why?[23]

Discussion of these points required that the class wrestle with what Cahill sees as the "space" that is opened by the distinction Augustine creates "between preparedness to act on the Lord's commands and the actual embodiment of their literal meaning," as, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount's injunction to turn the other cheek.[24] For Augustine, war pursued with just cause and rightful authority may be necessary within the guiding rubric of Christian love. Such a perspective led to class discussion of how American Christians today might regard terrorists and opponents in war, and what approaches might be faithful to the call of discipleship as well as responsible to the obligations of citizenship.

Such activity is crucial for Christians in the post-9/11 context. Furthermore, the terrorist attacks and subsequent American initiation of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq also raise difficult questions, for reli-

[23]Class handout for 22 and 24 January 2002.
[24]Cahill, 71.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gious believers and non-believers alike, about moral action in a religiously and ethically plural world. Thus, besides the tension between discipleship and citizenship for Christians, another tension relevant to the post-9/11 context and to ascetic education is that of particularity vis-à-vis universality. In the honors course, our second unit provoked engagement with this dialectic, especially in regard to just-war theory. As Cahill shows, this system of thought, predicated on the assumptions of universal principles encoded in natural law, allowed Western thinkers to evaluate historical situations of violence with recourse to *jus ad bellum* (criteria for determining whether to go to war) and *jus in bello* (criteria for the conduct of war) categories.[25] However, our use in class of John Kelsay's *Islam and War* as a major text in the second unit powerfully provoked ascetic renunciation of any "universal" rendering of just-war theory across differing historical circumstances and with diverse guiding assumptions.[26]

Kelsay's analysis, written in the wake of the Persian Gulf War (1991), calls into question any supposed agreement between Western and Muslim adherents on appropriate bases for moral action by the state. Muslim writings, like those of the (Christian-influenced) West, have articulated principles regarding the waging of war. Yet the role accorded to religion within the structures of the state, shaped by historical circumstances, profoundly affects how the principles are expressed and applied. In the honors course, facing such discrepancies in competing visions of the "universal," couched differently within differing particularities, required from our class a painful stretching of our epistemological and moral capacities. I intended our reading of Kelsay and other commentators to show the students that Islamic understandings of religion vis-à-vis the state are complex and have developed amid significantly different conditions from the Christian history we had just read. Thus, we would need to renounce a naïve equating of terms such as "justice" and "just war" across Western and Muslim traditions, as well as the assumption that Muslim tradition is itself univocal.[27]

What we read and discussed was refracted through the space cre-

[25]See ibid., 179-230, in which Cahill analyzes leading Catholic and Protestant perspectives on just-war theory and pacifism in the twentieth century.

[26]John Kelsay, *Islam and War: A Study in Comparative Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

[27]For example, Kelsay presents the widely accepted viewpoint of Roland Bainton that Western just-war theory developed, in the wake of these experiences, as "a kind of antidote" to religion's tendency to precipitate war. Secularizing *jus ad bellum* discussion, according to this thinking, allows for more humane conduct of war (43-44). However, in Kelsay's analysis, Islam's development can be viewed as a sustained and countervailing reflection on the corrective role that religion, as integral to the identity of the state, can play precisely in limiting violence (e.g., 48).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ated by our nascent and often anguished efforts, as Americans, to understand ourselves in relation to the unknown and seemingly hostile "other" of Islam in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Thus, the following assigned questions for class discussion are an example of the attempt to foster ascetic "stretching" in our context:

> Kelsay [discusses] the role of religion in relation to war with a focus on Islam, both in its "classical" period and in the [1980s] war of Iran vs. Iraq.
>
> a. In your reading, what do you find to be the major ways in which Islam as a religion might be seen to promote war? What are the major ways in which it might limit war?
>
> b. How does your understanding from part (a) affect your opinion on the role of Islam in the 9/11 attacks?[28]

The space created within these tensions can easily be filled by frustration and hopelessness. The drive to reduce epistemological dissonance through simplified arguments and solutions can be intense. I believe that framing education in this context as an ascetic practice, however, opens up other possibilities. If asceticism is a religious "classic," in Tracy's expression—publicly accessible while rooted in religious particularity—it is "grounded in some realized experience of a claim to attention, unfolding as cognitively disclosive of both meaning and truth and ethically transformative of personal, social and historical life."[29] Unlike other types of classics, it "will involve a claim to truth as the event of a disclosure-concealment of the whole of reality *by the power of the whole*—as, in some sense, a radical and finally gracious mystery."[30] Its power to disclose will, then, depend on a prior willingness to enter the type of conversation open to considering important religious questions from varied perspectives. In turn, the glimpse of "radical mystery" gained through ascetic education will shape new possibilities for common understanding and action in a diverse world.

In my effort to probe asceticism as such a classic for our times, three dimensions have emerged for ascetic education: ascetic *disposition, conversation,* and *action*. These are not sequential but mutually influence one another. I will explore these dimensions in the next section, drawing further on the honors course as catalyst and illustration.

[28]Class handout for 26 March 2002.
[29]Tracy, 132.
[30]Ibid., 163.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

IV. Three Dimensions of Education as Asceticism

Ascetic Disposition

Authors disagree on whether a changed worldview necessarily leads to, or follows from, changed practices. In an appreciative assessment of Valantasis's construction, for example, Garrett maintains that the new "symbolic universe" Valantasis proposes must precede the drive to engage in ascetic performance; acceptance of a new worldview allows and generates the desire for more firm establishment of new ways of living, new subjectivity and new relationships.[31] On the other hand, some readers of the Christian ascetic tradition argue that, in the understanding of classical authors, "insight comes only after change, from *doing* differently."[32]

If we understand asceticism in terms of performance for and with an audience, however, the fluid and nonlinear nature of this relationship between one's worldview, or disposition, and intentional practice becomes evident. No worldview is constructed in isolation, and so experiences of transformation typically launch humans from reliance on one dominant understanding into another. The "audiences" for ascetic performances can include those already disposed toward the new way, and those "undisposed" whose witness of the performance may spark a perspectival change. (Theology professors can readily envisage such diversity within their student audiences.) At the same time, those who appropriate a new understanding within a community are likely to find themselves engaged in communal practices intended continually to deepen that changed appropriation.

The epistemological stretching of ascetic education will necessarily involve a nascent awareness of, and attraction to, a new subjectivity, set of relations and worldview. Consequently, attempts at such education require that a sufficient gap–a new capaciousness–must be opened intentionally between what we presently *are* and what we *desire to be*. Asceticism that draws upon Christian "classics" will find that, once again, the reign of God becomes the horizon toward which one must be oriented–the hoped-for new reality–and direct one's ascetic striving to keep open the gap. This disposition is keenly felt by Christians as eschatological in-betweenness: in Augustine's terms, the faithful "hold a kind of middle place" between carnal unbelievers and inhabitants of heaven. Like Paul, they are on the way, eagerly anticipating the end in

[31]Susan R. Garrett, "Beloved Physician of the Soul: Luke as Advocate for Ascetic Practice," in Vaage and Wimbush, 72-73.

[32]Miles, 163.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

life in Christ.[33] Fasting, for Augustine, usefully sharpens their desire for ultimate fulfillment in the Risen One.

As expressed by Elizabeth Dreyer, the ascetic disposition includes a "necessary stripping" of illusions, whether personal, political or global, so as to open the way for appropriation of a transformed perspective and practices.[34] Such illusions, in our present post-9/11 discussion, may include an uncritical confidence in the goodness of one's own nation, or of other nations and peoples; an easy faith in natural law-based universals and the ability of reason, exercised in civil dialogue, to solve differences; assumptions about the use of central symbols of faith and national identity as wholly benign and readily intelligible to others; and so on. An important "dis-education," a fasting from prevailing understandings, is required.[35] A perspective "in between," while capable of distortion as well as insight, sharpens consciousness that all constructions in the earthly city are insufficient and fosters capacity to sustain an orientation toward the ultimate. Longing for the new way that is glimpsed in the eschatological vision, the ascetic becomes an "intermediary subject" in relation to prevailing worldviews and social structures.[36]

Implications for education emerge here. Guided by Cahill's analysis, the historical overview we conducted in the honors course invited consideration of alternative subjectivities, with recourse to the Gospel all struggling with the question of participation in war. To conceptualize the complex development and diversity of the positions, I used a visual schema showing theological and ethical meaning-making as occurring, for each individual or group we studied, within a particular "ecology" of political, economic and social influences. We then "mapped" our own meaning-making in relation to September 11 within our contemporary ecologies, informed by categories from this tradition. Insights emerged regarding the ways that key individuals and communities in various times and places came to differing appropriations of the central Christian classic of "love your enemies," and how these interpretations affected their stances regarding the use or nonuse of violence.[37] Acknowledgement of the very diversity of historical re-

[33]Augustine, 405 (chap. 2).

[34]Elizabeth A. Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven: A Spirituality of Everyday Life* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 144.

[35]Dorothee Sölle, "To Be Amazed, To Let Go, To Resist: Outline for a Mystical Journey Today," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation,* ed. Janet K. Ruffing (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 47, in which she draws on Henry Suso's advocacy of "dis-education."

[36]Valantasis, 801-02.

[37]In *Love Your Enemies,* Cahill sees the "hard sayings" of the Sermon on the Mount as central to ethical attempts for Christians to come to terms with violence within their

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sponses helped to create the dispositional space that made deeper examination of present responses possible in light of the hoped-for future.

Practices of renunciation and embrace, whether sparked by or precipitating a transformed disposition, need intentional ascetic training to be refined and produce proficient ascetic performers. Within the theology classroom, the central pedagogical training practice can be called "ascetic conversation."

Ascetic Conversation

Participants in ascetic education are situated in the epistemological—and, for Christians, eschatological—space of intermediary subjects. The primary ascetic practice to be cultivated in the educational setting, I believe, is one of disciplined conversation across the differences recognized in such space. Such conversation provides a nonviolent pattern of engagement in which renunciation and embrace may result in a release of power that builds up relationships rather than destroys them. The issues raised, in particular, by the differences between Western and Muslim understandings in the wake of the terrorist attacks make such dialogue both imperative and newly problematic.

Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, in a cogent discussion of "difference" and educational attempts to address it, advocate what they regard as a constructive "postmodern" approach in which attempts are made to "reappropriate, redefine, and reground" so-called "modernist" values and worldview with a sense of continuity.[38] While pluralism is assumed, toleration and mutual respect can be advanced through dialogue and can sustain differences in flexible ways. We can enter dialogue expecting neither the elimination of all difference nor an unchanged set of irreconcilable divisions, but rather with hopes of deepened mutual understanding; "[D]ialogue can proceed in a manner that *aims toward* careful, respectful, non-dominating agreement."[39]

An important task within such dialogue is continual clarification of the assumptions inherent in one's existing sets of relationships. Thus the acknowledgement of the epistemological influences in our own communities can equip us, in ascetic education, to risk conversation with others' sources. Educational scholar Kenneth Bruffee posits that adults live and make meaning at the boundaries of what he calls "knowledge communities." Our capacity for learning is enhanced when we examine the many meaning-making groups in which each of

"eschatological horizon." See esp. chaps. 1 and 2: "Pacifism or Just War Thinking?" 1-14, and "The Kingdom Come?" 15-38.

[38]Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61 (November 1991): 397.

[39]Ibid; emphasis added.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

us participates: family, ethnicity, neighborhood, political affiliation, nationality, religion and others. Some of these communities are overlapping; some are "nesting" inside one another; some are opposed. Recognizing this complex configuration of influences, we can engage in new conversations at the "boundaries" of the knowledge communities to which we are already affiliated. A transformative "reacculturation" becomes possible which brings us into "a larger, more inclusive community of knowledgeable peers."[40]

Using the metaphor of asceticism, such boundary conversations "stretch" our capacities in ways that create and release power to transform the boundaries themselves through the changed consciousness of participants, their ascetic performances honing their abilities for future dialogue. Burbules and Rice draw on John Dewey to assert that:

> To the extent that group identification is an element in the formation of personal identity, one's identity will be more flexible, autonomous, and stable to the degree that one recognizes one's self as a member of various different subcommunities simultaneously.[41]

Through naming and analyzing the various knowledge communities to which they belong and how the terrorist attacks have affected these, American Christians will better understand the limitations and opportunities in the present situation. Such conversation requires confronting internal ambivalence and resistance to change, but is integral to personal growth and the ability to thrive amid pluralism.

Ascetic conversation in educational settings, as with ascetic performances in general, requires specific rules of practice. Drawing on Burbules, Mary C. Boys provides a list of conversational virtues: mutual respect, trust, concern, perseverance, emotional authenticity, tolerance, patience, openness to giving and receiving criticism, ability to admit one's fallibility, translation of one's concerns into terms intelligible to others, self-restraint, and thoughtful and attentive listening.[42] The communal virtues invoked for Christians in passages such as Colossians 3:12-17 can be seen as discipleship analogues to these. Such approaches help to shape important ground rules for ascetic conversation, and affirm the inescapable reality of particularity while seeking a commonality that is constructively postmodern, in Burbules and Rice's terms. Thus a type of conversation emerges that fosters ascetic enlarge-

[40]Kenneth A. Bruffee, *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 12.
[41]Burbules and Rice, 404.
[42]Mary C. Boys, "Engaged Pedagogy: Dialogue and Critical Reflection," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 2 (October 1999): 133.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ment and flexibility, rather than talk that hardens prejudices and confirms the insularity of groups.

The classroom conversation in the honors course was an attempt, faltering at times, to cultivate such virtues among the student participants and in their modes of engaging other conversation partners in the post-9/11 cacophony. I encouraged the modeling of mutual respect and a listening attitude in small and large group discussion. Our readings also provided illustrations of both conversational "virtues" and "vices." For example, we studied the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' statement, "Living with Faith and Hope After September 11," and the subsequent response by a number of Catholic leaders, "A Catholic Community Responds to the War: Living with Faith and Hope."[43] While differing in their analyses and judgments regarding current United States policy, both seek to address themes of discipleship and citizenship in a communal, ecclesial context. Both model conversational virtues in naming the anguish of Christians responding to the attacks. Both move from the present trauma to insist on a long-term response to the underlying threats to peace such as global poverty, repression of human rights, the arms race and the lack of effective worldwide authority. Such disciplined conversation within faith communities offers transferable models of ascetic dialogue that will equip students, especially American Christians, for the pluralistic settings in which they must also speak.

Failing the test of respectful and constructive discourse, and thus illustrative of non-ascetic approaches, were class readings such as Michael Kelly's "Pacifist Claptrap" and samples of the virulent rhetoric of Muslim extremism. I designed one exam question to lead students, having studied historical examples of Christian pacifism, to offer a response to Kelly's harshly worded indictment of all American pacifists as "objectively" on the side of terrorists in their opposition to the retaliatory war in Afghanistan.[44] They were to formulate likely responses from the pacifist Catholic Worker community and the Ameri-

[43]United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "A Pastoral Message: Living with Faith and Hope After September 11" (11 November 2001), http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/sept11.htm (accessed 29 December 2003); and "A Catholic Community Responds to the War: Living with Faith and Hope," http://www.networklobby.org/tragedy.htm (accessed 24 May 2002).

[44]Michael Kelly, "Pacifist Claptrap," *The Washington Post,* 26 September 2001, sec. A, p. 25. He draws on George Orwell's characterization of World War II pacifists as "objectively pro-Fascist" to develop a parallel claim for post-September pacifism in the United States: "The American pacifists, therefore, are on the side of future mass murders of Americans. They are objectively pro-terrorist. . . . You [addressing pacifists] are saying, in fact: I believe that it is better to allow more Americans–perhaps a great many more–to be murdered than to capture or kill the murderers. That is the pacifists' position, and it is evil."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

can bishops (in light of the "Living with Faith and Hope" statement), as well as their own analyses. For consideration of extreme usage of traditional Muslim language, another exam question asked that students describe and evaluate how either Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden has drawn on Muslim understandings of *jihad* and other central themes, and how these usages are legitimate or not within a responsible interpretation of the aims of Islam.[45]

Such exercises were intended to cultivate the practice of conversation that, without negating important differences, nevertheless works toward constructive public articulations. Tracy's expression of the public viability of the religious "classic" demonstrates this intent (albeit perhaps too confidently):

> For any reader's realized experience of any classic will suggest the singular truth theologians have too long ignored: Any person's intensification of particularity via a struggle with the fundamental questions of existence in a particular tradition, if that struggle is somehow united to the logos of appropriate expression, will yield a form of authentically shareable, public discourse. That discourse will exert its claims as a candidate for classic status waiting to complement, confront or transform all our more usual candidates for publicness.[46]

When focused on religious classics, Tracy names such discourse as systematic theology. The theology classroom, consequently, is a vital ascetic space for fashioning dialogue originating in "intensification" of particularity, brought to public articulation among the in-between community of learners, some of whom are Christian, some not. Such conversation enlarges the self through enlarging the scope of the dialogue and the potential participants. Like the increased capaciousness Augustine envisions for fasting Christians, it allows more effective engagement of complexity and ambiguity.[47]

Ascetic Action

In her analysis of asceticism in Luke and Acts, Susan Garrett posits that self-denial is a condition for following Jesus, but also a practice that habituates the Christian to exercise right judgment about the truly important things in life.[48] While the power that heals blindness and

[45]Samples of Hussein's and bin Laden's exhortations were used in conjunction with analyses from Kelsay, esp. chap. 1, and Reuel Marc Gerecht, "The Gospel According to Osama bin Laden," *Atlantic Monthly* 289 (January 2002): 46-48.

[46]Tracy, 134.

[47]Daloz et al., 111.

[48]Garrett, 87; see, e.g., Lk 12:32-34.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

causes the deaf to hear comes from God through Jesus, those who follow ascetic practices, such as "taking up one's cross," also exercise a kind of power. With the parousia delayed, the devil's sway in the world must continue to be resisted, and the temptation to lose oneself in daily cares must be challenged. Luke "therefore presents certain ascetic disciplines as desirable and effective protections against such dangers, even if *theoretically* they are redundant of salvation through Jesus' name. In other words, in Luke's scheme of salvation *Jesus has power* to heal and to reform, *but ascetic practices also convey such power"* and are important for Christians as they follow the Way after repentance and baptism.[49] Disciples are well advised to make such practices habitual within the framework of their "intermediary" existence.

It is every teacher's hope that the patterns cultivated in class empower students by offering new possibilities for their ongoing attempts to make meaning in their lives. I was gratified, following the completion of the honors course, by occasional comments from students that they felt better equipped to refute extremist claims as a result of their learning. Yet, as is freely admitted by many authors describing their visions of conversation that both transforms practice and sustains the transformation, effective models and forums outside the classroom appear to be few and far between.[50] Theological educators have particular opportunities and responsibilities to create these dialogical spaces, and the post-September 11 framework makes more urgent the development of conversations across differences that are sustainable outside the classroom. Yet this context makes more evident the significant difficulties inherent in the effort.[51]

Ascetic education is certainly committed to forming practices of ascetic conversation that will be transferable to other settings. Paradoxically, however, such enactment may also be evident in nondiscursive public events that provide another way to deepen ascetic disposition, as well as extending an invitation to "enlargement" to those who witness them. In this second alternative, habituated ascetic actions become less the dialogical expression of firmly grounded con-

[49]Ibid., 82. Emphasis in original.

[50]E.g., following a closely reasoned argument for the conditions of authentic public discourse, Kathryn Tanner states that there is no "obvious locus" for it in the United States, though it may function as an ideal "to shape and revise present institutional practices without violating constitutional mandates" ("Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* [1996]: 100).

[51]At the popular level, it has become distressingly clear that new technologies can subvert as well as encourage authentic conversation. See, for example, Thomas L. Friedman, "Global Village Idiocy," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* 13 May 2002, sec. A, p. 9, in which he laments the spread of "hateful lies" among ordinary Muslims throughout the world. For example, Indonesian Muslims with whom he spoke were convinced that 4,000 Jews were warned to stay away from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

victions than the eschatological embodiment of solidarity and faithfulness amid division, gestures of peace on a long road of violence. They may be more likely to occur *alongside* transforming conversation and evolving disposition than to proceed, in a direct and orderly way, *from* them. Or, they may themselves be the first steps in allowing conversation to become possible at all.

Here the emphasis on the embodied character of ascetic practice is especially noteworthy. While, as I have argued, asceticism can legitimately be broadened to encompass many elements of human activity, it also has historically included many types of temporary and specific acts of physical renunciation or other bodily discipline in order to focus more deeply on what is important for fullness of life. Miles upholds the enduring value of traditional practices of fasting, meditation, prayer (often combined with breathing and posture techniques), exercise and celibacy as ascetic methods.[52] For our purposes, the tradition of Christian pacifism provides striking examples of disciples' ascetic actions, manifesting a communally discerned witness to the way of Jesus Christ. Refusal to participate in waging war, with its frequent modern corollary of organized protest, civil disobedience and other forms of resistance, creates an intentional "boundary community" in which goals of changed structures and consensual dialogue are subordinated to faithfulness, and in which the practices of the state are publicly challenged through embodied performance.

Ascetic enactment, then, affects disposition and conversation in ambiguous ways. While dialogue at the boundaries of knowledge communities, shaped by the vulnerability of ascetic illusion-stripping, is intended to release transformative power, subsequent actions may not follow in predictable fashion. Yet at the very least, ascetic education will seek, through conversation that reveals important performance options, to enlarge the capacity to engage with complexity so that participants are driven to continuous ascetic striving—to seek to make habitual such practices as are consistent with their transformed worldviews.

In the third and final unit of the honors course, the actions of Christians and others involved in social movements provided opportunities to consider varieties of ascetic enactments as these emerged from communally reshaped dispositions and conversations—and themselves reshaped dispositions and conversations. In a discussion of the interplay of official Catholic social teaching with grassroots social movements, Marvin Mich juxtaposes, for example, the 1983 U.S. bishops' pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace,* with the Catholic peace

[52]Miles, 162.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

movement; the work of "social Catholics" in Europe and the United States with the promulgation of *Rerum Novarum;* and others.[53] We studied these juxtapositions, as well as contemporary examples of civil disobedience and religious protests by Christian pacifists that have become urgent expressions of communal convictions. For example, as the United States pursued its war in Afghanistan, a confrontation occurred between the cardinal archbishop of Boston and local Catholic pacifists following a Sunday liturgy.[54] An essay exam question required that students consider how either Augustine or Aquinas would have evaluated the protest, and then thoughtfully articulate the students' own positions in support of the cardinal, the protesters, or some other approach.

Disciple-citizens such as the Boston group enact their own transformed subjectivities in order to remain faithful and, in such ascetic performances, to offer audiences a witness that may spark others' changed dispositions. Such actions also, of course, carry sufficient ambiguity to risk "concealment" as well as "disclosure," through possible misinterpretations of the gestures and the actors' motives. Ascetic enactments, if indeed "classic" performances in Tracy's sense, inevitably provoke multiple interpretations among disciple-citizens and in society at large, with the risk of further divisions. Yet, in the ambiguous release of power, they also show the potential of ascetic action both to raise questions and to reconfigure relationships in ways that may invite new conversations. Perhaps our times call for imaginative action that reveals religious classics, in a pluralistic public realm, in non-discursive as well as discursive ways.

Disciple-citizens in a world with newly perceived dangers will continue to wrestle with their participation in the structures of the state, especially as embodied in the world's remaining superpower. Yet they may also perform a vital role in transforming the threatening unknown into a realm of mystery where they continue to believe in a gracious God, known by many names yet calling all to faithfulness. Ascetic education, especially education in theology, may illuminate new possibilities for enlargement of capacities among diverse peoples that provoke refocused vision, foster constructive conversation and make prophetic and conciliatory actions habitual. With Augustine, ascetic educators can orient themselves toward an eschatological horizon in which they, and their students, will be filled "in due time."

[53]Marvin L. Krier Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2001).

[54]Michael Paulson, "Antiwar Activists Protest at Cathedral, *Boston Globe,* 31 December 2001, sec. B, p. 2. The group was protesting Cardinal Bernard Law's support for the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900001596 Published online by Cambridge University Press