

**THE HELLENIC ORIGINS  
OF CHRISTIAN  
ASCETICISM**

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The Hellenic Origins of Christian Asceticism by Joseph Ward Swain

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**JOSEPH WARD SWAIN**

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CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM

BY  
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ASCETICISM

INTRODUCTION

For many years, and particularly since the appearance of Havet's *Le Christianisme et ses origines*,<sup>1</sup> and of Harnack's monumental *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*,<sup>2</sup> and the publication of Hatch's celebrated lectures on *The Influence of Greek Thought and Usages upon the Christian Church*,<sup>3</sup> scholars have realized that the origins of Christianity are to be sought in the Greek world even more than among the Jews, and that the Greek philosophers were the fathers of Christian theology, rather than the Hebrew prophets. In recent years, and particularly since the advent of the twentieth century, large numbers of special studies have appeared in which the dependence of the early Christians upon the Greeks of their day is clearly set forth: it is shown that in their special doctrines, such as those concerning salvation, redemption and immortality, as well as in their cosmological and moral theories, the Christians did not differ materially from many of their contemporaries. Up to the present, however, no study has been made of the origins of Christian asceticism from this point of view. Scholars have, of course, been aware that at the period of the rise of Christian asceticism, there was a considerable movement in the same direction in the Greek world, and have correctly inferred that it exercised a certain influence upon budding Christian asceticism. Moreover, scholars have attempted at times to account for certain fea-

<sup>1</sup> Paris, 1872-1884.

<sup>2</sup> Freiburg, 1886 (1 ed.).

<sup>3</sup> *Hibbert Lectures*, 1888.

tures of Christian asceticism by invoking Greek parallels: Zeller tried to explain the ascetic movement among the Christians of the first centuries as a survival of Cynicism;<sup>4</sup> many years later Weingarten attempted to derive Christian monasticism from an ascetic cult which he had found in the temple of Serapis at Memphis;<sup>5</sup> Reitzenstein, approaching the subject from the point of view of comparative literature, has more recently shown the influence which the contemporary aretologies had upon the early stories of Christian monks.<sup>6</sup> But these writers have only dwelt upon certain sides of the subject: if they attempted to generalize, as Weingarten did, and held that they had discovered the true and only source of Christian asceticism, their conclusions were wholly false.<sup>7</sup> The trouble was that there has been, up to the present, no rounded picture of the asceticism of the Greeks at the time, and consequently when scholars noticed resemblances between early Christian ascetics and the Cynics, or the recluses of the Serapenn, or some other special cult, they at once concluded that they had found the source of the Christian ascetic movement, for they completely ignored the other Greek forms of asceticism then prevalent. It is the purpose of the present study, then, to attempt to draw such a picture of Greek asceticism as will enable others to see to exactly how great an extent the Christians were dependent upon the Greeks for their ascetic ideas and ideals; it is the intention to give a rounded picture of Greek asceticism in the various forms in which it appeared at the time of the spread of Christianity. But no attempt will be made to show how these ideas were transferred into Christianity, or to write of early Christian asceticism: that would be too large a subject,

<sup>4</sup> *Eclecticism*, p. 303.

<sup>5</sup> *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums in nachconstantinischen Zeitalter* (1877).

<sup>6</sup> *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen* (1906).

<sup>7</sup> For a scholarly criticism of these various theories, though from an orthodox Catholic point of view, see Leclercq, in *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie chrétienne*, art. "Cénobitisme."