

Preface: I have had to cut down a paper that was originally over thirty pages to a document less than 1/3 of its original size. As a result I have had to state implicitly what was once an organically developing argument. Furthermore, it was quite obvious in the larger version that I was confining the study to a rather narrow problem: identity construction in the church versus identity construction in the market. It is not my intent with this paper to say that we should fast for the express purpose of bringing down the market. Rather, I am circumscribing two components of the more complex issue of identity formation and arguing that one effect of liturgical fasting is the formation of persons who resist market “production” of “identity.” I use the term “production” ironically to underscore the market’s mimicry of the church and I use the term “identity” simply for the lack of time to develop a justify a better term.

SACRED HUNGER:

FASTING AS ECONOMIC RESISTANCE

The pallet display was introduced to Wal-Mart by Hane’s parent company, Sara Lee. To save stocking costs packages of underwear was stacked in the middle of a busy aisle. This experiment was so successful that pallet displays were placed in every Wal-Mart’s “action alley.” Underwear sales skyrocketed, a phenomenon accounted for not because people were wearing out their underwear like never before, but because of what industry leaders call “increased wardrobe inventory”¹ which is a fancy way of saying that people bought the underwear because it there, because it was stacked high, and because it was cheap. This is a typical example of something that happens every day: We—consumers—consume for consumption’s sake. The effects of unnecessary consumption may not be felt in the world of boxers and briefs, but what about oil? Or Round-up Ready soybeans? Or the behemoths we drive? The argument that follows makes two basic presuppositions. First, unnecessary and excessive consumption will do us in if not restrained. The second relates to the method of my argument. I have noted that when theoretical arguments (perhaps especially theological arguments) are accepted our behaviors rarely change. Therefore, the argument to follow will be pragmatic without dispensing with the theoretical by concerning itself with Christian praxis. I will offer liturgical, ritual fasting as a counter-

1 N Wal-Mart Effect, 69.

economic practice to excessive consumption (which I will show is an ecclesial problem as much as it is an economic one). My thesis is that such fasting is a mode of economic resistance because it is a discipline that constructs and maintains identity through properly-aligned relations to God and neighbor rather than purchase. In the first place, through a brief chronology of the market I will show that a number of historical currents have given the construction and maintenance of identity over to the market instead of the church. In the second section I will counterpose consumption with the ascetic ideal typified in the lives and sayings of the desert *ammās* and *abbas*. Finally, the market can commodify anything, even religious practice. I will offer a commodified theology of fasting as a foil to a corollary I draw out of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann's theology of time to argue that fasting resists commodification only within the liturgical cycle of the church.

I. OVERCONSUMPTION

Any criticism of Adam Smith needs to be hedged by two observations. The first is that by freeing the market from state and church interference Smith hoped to give poor laborers a better shot at improving their standard of living. The second is that the evils of self-interest have been greatly exaggerated. It is a rather benign motive, less like outright greed and more like a mother dividing her sandwich between her starving children rather than giving all of it to a beggar.² Smith did not advocate the kill or be killed ethos of Social Darwinism, but he made a critical error when he universalized and naturalized self-interest. Karl Polanyi, who analyzed this error at great lengths, argued that it contributed to the creation of the cultural *mythos* that all people are naturally market players. It turns out, says Polanyi, that the modern market was not

2 Amartya Sen is also driven by Smith's primary motivation, and has reiterated this oft-neglected aspect of the study of economics. See *Development as Freedom*, (New York: Anchor, 1999), esp. 89f, 107.

natural but created by business tycoons—marketeers—who exploited Smith’s error.³ He goes on to say, “The self-regulating market was unknown; indeed the emergence of the idea of self-regulation was a complete reversal of the trend of development.”⁴ Marketeers called for the dismantling of England’s poor laws—what in economic terms is called a social “safety net”—so that land and labor might be commodified at a greater rate. They claimed that, “Labor should be dealt with as that which it was, a commodity which must find its price in the market.” According to Polanyi, this meant that, “The laws of commerce were the laws of nature and consequently the laws of God.”⁵ Thus, by exploiting an error in the *Wealth of Nations*, way business tycoons made themselves gods of the market.

Many churches in America have paid homage to these gods. Vincent Miller argues that this is apostasy because it denies the presence of Christ in the neighbor who has been made “invisible” as market relations become the primary mode of human interaction.⁶ But most of us can be forgiven this apostasy because industry has trained us to negotiate identity through purchase. Miller outlines three major industrial shifts that have gotten us where we are today.

For the sake of time I’m going to have to summarize in broad strokes a more complex argument. The first step in this process is occasioned by Frederick Taylor who did two things. First, he “deskilled” by making task mundane and simple. A deskilled laborer does not know what a normal workload should be. He only knows to pull the same crank

3 Ibid., passim. See esp. 257-68.

4 Ibid., 71.

5 Ibid., 122.

6 One example of the invisible neighbor is the migrant worker. Our food is grown and harvested in large part by people who are “off the radar,” so to speak. For all intents and purposes, they do not exist. When we buy food at most grocery stores (rather than say, a farmers market), we contribute to the farmers who employ underpaid and often undocumented migrants. This is not to say that the migrants are not “better off” than they were in their home countries or that migrant farming is not a means toward greater mobility. The issue is much more complex. I use this example only to illustrate that most of us have absolutely no relationship to those who produce our food.

three times every 15 seconds. In the second place, after seeing a laborer add an addition to his house after hours, Taylor quadrupled his factories quotas and increased pay by 60%. This dramatically shifted worker behavior. Instead of gathering raw materials and building a fireplace, a laborer would now order a wood-burning stove from a catalog on credit and make the payments with his increased wages.

Second, Henry Ford capitalized on technological advances to deskill labor even more. But more importantly a “sociology department” monitored workers behavior at home to make sure that they were in no way wreckless with their money. Otherwise, they might not be able to buy one of Ford’s cars. In this way, says Miller, Fordism occasions the birth of consumption as the natural counterpart of production.⁷

The final part of this equation is advertising. Even though household behavior had begun to change, many goods were still grown and produced in the home. Therefore the “captains of industry” had to become “captains of consciousness.” Exploiting new cultural values like progress, efficiency, modernism, and power they claimed that foods produced by “modern scientific methods” were safer than those home-made goods and that clothes stitched in a factory were of a higher quality than hand-stitched items.⁸

Thus while the rhythms of the home became defined by the rhythms of the factory, advertising filled the cultural vacuum caused by industrialization to give order to that rhythm.⁹ These new habits and modes of persuasion combined to produce people largely defined by what job they did and what they bought or sold.

The point is not to blame modern consumers. Purchase has become quite simply a given means of identity maintenance in our society. We maintain a sense of self through a discrete

7 Ibid., 41-42.

8 Ibid., 42-46.

9 Ibid., 84.88

series of market transactions by purchasing certain types of clothes, cars, food, etc.¹⁰ (**perhaps comment on anti-establishment stores in malls**) This phenomenon becomes an ecclesial problem as the market begins to play a greater role than the church in the production of persons.

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Ideally, the Christian's identity is given by her relationship with her Creator, but in reality the gods of the market tend to exert far greater control over identity production than the Church. Since both Christianity and the market shape identity on the level of habit, a theology of economy must offer alternative practices that train Christians to construct identity in ways other than those offered by the gods of the market.¹⁴ The Church need what M. Douglas Meeks has called a "transformative praxis" to teach the body the difference between true and false need.¹⁵ It is to such a praxis that we now turn.

II. FASTING AND IDENTITY FORMATION

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10 Ibid., 144.

11 Ibid., 217. N: One might object at this point and say that in a capitalist economy consumers hold more power than the producers. This is a powerful myth, one that the producers need us to believe, but one this is ultimately false because it assumes the existence of an informed and intelligent public. The economist Charles Lindblom has studied this myth and concluded that it does not take into account the powerful role that advertising exerts on public behavior. He says, "Market elite persuasion of mass [what I am calling consumers] is so persistent and relentless, so widespread, and so inventive in its appeals that one must ask how much room it leaves in the mind for thinking about other things—or thinking at all rather than simply reacting."

12 Ibid., 212-25. N: (**This is why there are toys in the frozen food aisle of the grocery store and candy near the check-out. Advertisers don't want you to think but to stop thinking and buy on impulse**) Thus, "[Market elites]," says Lindblom, "often intend to confuse rather than clarify, giving not a reason to chose but a reason-overriding impulse."

13 M. Douglas Meeks has made a similar case, arguing that advertising mimics the role of God in human identity formation. He argues that the modern free market can only work by not letting needs be met, since once people are satisfied there is no more reason for them to buy. Therefore, modern anthropology had to construct the human being as naturally insatiable, making a way for a market theory that locates the greatest good in the unending growth of the market. To encourage this growth, advertisers must to convince consumers that they are not fulfilled, self-actualized, or fully human until the products they push are purchased.

14 See Vincent J. Miller, "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously," *Horizons* 2 no. 2, (2000): 276-95.

15 Meeks, *God the Economist*, 164-67.

16 Here we begin a drastic change of location both temporally and geographically. The desert fathers and mothers seem like a far cry from 21st century America, particularly when we compare their lifestyles to our own. I am holding up the stories and sayings of the desert monastics as an ideal not to suggest that we imitate their

History

For the sake of time I am going to skip the historical section where I argue that the birth of monasticism should not be attributed to the sudden influx of “goats” into the church occasioned by the peace of Constantine. A more likely explanation is that monasticism served as an alternative form of martyrdom in a climate now devoid of regular persecutions. I am also going to move very quickly through what was a longer presentation of the ascetic themes gleaned from the various sayings of the desert fathers and mothers.

Askesis

Two components of fasting are particularly important for our interests. First, fasting is never absolute denial but the reduction of quantity and variety. Ascetics limited the quantity, frequency, and variety of their meals. St. Antony’s is supposed to have eaten one small meal of bread with salt and water almost every day.¹⁷ Other sayings indicate that the ideal was to eat about one-sixth of what most of us would consider normal.¹⁸ When an ascetic would eat, she would always try to avoid eating to satiety. One said, “Since I became a monk, I have never eaten bread to satiety, nor drunk water, nor slept to satiety...” Luxuries like fruit or wine were rare and often appear as forms of temptation in the sayings.¹⁹ Second, fasting was suspended for the sake of hospitality or a feast. Monks would break fast if they had a visitor. When one hermit had visited another hermit and was about to leave, he apologized saying, “Forgive me, abba, for

askesis in its full rigor (**though I must confess that I think we could all use a little more rigor**). Rather, by examining their ascetic practices, particularly fasting, in relation to their theology of the self, I intend to offer the desert mothers and fathers as an example of an alternative way to construct identity.

17 Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, para. 7.

18 *Ibid.*, para 23.

19 *Wisdom*, para. 20. (N: as the following example illustrates: “It was said of an old man that one day he wanted a small fig. Taking one, he held it up in front of his eyes, and not being overcome by his desire, he repented, reproaching himself for even having had this wish.”)

preventing you from keeping your rule,” to which the second replied, “My rule is to welcome you with hospitality, and to send you on your way in peace.”²⁰ Monks would also break fast on feast days (even if their feasts were austere). One monk fled from the Paschal feast to his cell to eat a boiled beetroot without bread.²¹ While some ascetics would probably have drunk wine at a festival, one is reported to have said, “Take this death away from me.”²² During a feast the scales were certainly tipped toward under-indulgence. Nevertheless this basic pattern of fasting and feasting remained. Furthermore, if askesis replaces martyrdom, then strict fasts and the anorexic feasts could be a way of preparing oneself for the great feast in the kingdom of heaven.

Theology of Fasting

The purpose of *askesis* is not to kill the body to save the soul. Most stories where monks take that position are reports of aberrations and failures. For instance, one monk was tempted with lustful thoughts of the wife he left behind, so he intensified his *askesis* but the thoughts remained. When he asked his elder about this, he was told to eat because he had made his body too weak to resist the demons. Upon heeding this advice, the temptation left him soon after.²³ The best ascetics knew that the purpose of their discipline was not emaciate the body but to restrain its pleasures.²⁴ Through *askesis* the monk learned how to dominate her passions. Suffering was not virtuous for suffering’s sake, but it was to bring the body under the control of the mind.²⁵

20 Ibid., 136.

21 *Wisdom*, para 28.

22 Ibid., para. 12.

23 *Wisdom*, para. 42.

24 The female monk Syncletica said the senses were like the windows of a house. Since the world is aflame with temptations, the windows must be shut lest the inside of the house become filled with smoke. (N)

The Desert Fathers, 124.

25 Belden C. Lane has argued that the desert itself was a key component in the monks’ identity formation. The desert forced structure and ritual in order to survive. A monk who exiled himself to the desert participated in a double movement. First, there was the negative act of separating oneself from the world. The second movement was a positive reevaluation of the self. When the monks fled to the desert they were fleeing their own ego-

Stelios Ramfos rightly argues that the physical danger presented by desert conditions intensified trust in God and love of neighbor by destroying the ego. The church has long recognized the interrelation between love of God and love of neighbor. Ramfos is correct that the desert taught trust in God that would “spill-over” into love of neighbor, but he overstates his case by saying that ascetics tried to destroy the ego.²⁶ ²⁷ Roberta Bondi’s near-classic treatment of monastic anthropology is more helpful because it uses the dominant categories of the time. Invoking Plato’s analogy of the chariot (renaming the horses), Bondi argues that “desire and anger” are fundamental to the perpetuation of human life. The point of *askesis* is not for the charioteer to take up walking (the belief that the emotions must be destroyed). Nor is it to drive the horses over a cliff (the destruction of the ego). The point is to control the horses. **So Plato wanted to strengthen the driver through an anamnestic recovery of knowledge. The ascetics “flip-flopped” it. Their approach was to starve the horses and make them weaker than the will.** The ascetic ideal was to learn to live with what was necessary, and no more, not to destroy the body.²⁸

Fasting is a habit that forms identity in a way directly opposed to excessive consumption. Advertising creates desire. Fasting disciplines desire—starves it! The ascetic deprives the body of what the mind thinks it needs to survive so that the self learns to live with less. Or as...

centeredness. They were not fleeing from society but from themselves, from their need for the praise and affirmation of others. The move toward the desert was as deliberate move toward powerlessness, a move toward faith. One did not move out of society, nor did one move out of physicality, so much as one moved out of oneself (ironically by turning inward). The monks learned to trust God for their survival.

²⁶ Ramfos, *Like a Pelican*, 9-10, 34-39.

²⁷ As an example of such self-denial, we might note that monks who could not reconcile with others were advised to convince themselves that they were really at fault. By not fearing the other, monks were able to love their enemies, to fulfill the Sermon on the Mount. One monk, when he was robbed, ran after his thieves because they had forgotten to take his purse. Perhaps Ramfos puts it too strongly when he says that the monks were to destroy the ego, for it is difficult to think what a person would look like without any sense of self--without an “I”--but his insight that *askesis* used the body to discipline the soul is certainly on the right track.

²⁸ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987, 57-65.

Macarius said to Zacharias, “Tell me, what makes a monk?” [Zacharias] said, “Isn’t it wrong for you to be asking me?” Macarius said to him, “I am sure I should ask you, Zacharias my son. There is something that urges me to ask you.” Zacharias said to him, “As far as I can tell, abba, I think anyone who controls himself and makes himself content with just what he needs and no more, is indeed a monk.”²⁹

III. FEASTING AND FASTING IN THE PARISH

Consuming Fasting

For a period of about two years in the mid-1990’s fasting was the hot topic among evangelicals. Gwen Shamblin, a dietitian, developed a theology of fasting that in many ways mimicked the monastic ideal. She told her dieters to pray when they craved food. She told them to skip meals, maybe even to go a whole day without eating. The most important thing was never to feel full, ever! This *Weigh Down Diet* craze swept across evangelical churches, appealing mostly to women who struggled with obesity. Shamblin ran a website for practitioners of her diet. They could go online and buy books, tapes, videos, and devotional materials dedicated to helping them lose weight through fasting.³⁰

Weigh Down illustrates the power of the market to commodify anything, even religious practice.³¹ Such commodification violates the very spirit of the practice by ripping it from its primary narratives and rituals. Shamblin’s movement mimicked the monastic ideal but missed two essential component of true fasting. In the first place, Shamblin’s heretical fast had no theology of the feast. Nor could the fast be suspended for hospitality; the piety of her practitioners was practiced before others. More importantly in the second place Shamblin’s fast did not restrain desire but shifted it to the ideal body-type. For the desert mothers and fathers

²⁹ *The Desert Fathers*, 3-4.

³⁰ Gwen Shamblin, *The Weigh Down Diet*, (New York: Doubleday, 1997), esp. 41-57, 95-105, 173-84, 245-81.

³¹ Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 84. (N: Buddhist meditation serves as a stress management tool in a capitalist business world devoted to endless acquisition; Yoga is reduced to a physical fitness regimen, the crucifix becomes a brand symbol for the niche marketing of Catholic education. These dynamics do not, however, simply float in the air.)

fasting was also a means to an end, but the end was salvation. Shamblin agreed with them to a point by making salvation contingent upon adherence to her diet.³² **(at one point she actually said that, “If you are fat, you’re not a Christian)** Situated within a liturgical cycle, fasting resists this commodification because it is a decentering, not self-centering practice. A proper fast always requires us to venture out of our cells and feast with others.

Feasting

In the liturgical theology of Alexander Schmemmann, the Church lives in the tension between the kingdom of God and the world, between fulfillment and anticipation. The Lord’s Supper, which participates in the heavenly feast, constitutes the *leiturgia*—the work of the people. The point of the Eucharist is not what happens to the elements but what happens to the people as their lives are defined by the rhythms of the Church. The regular communicant keeps time not from Monday to Friday but from Sunday to Sunday and from Pentecost to Pascha. Every moment of every day is spent in anticipation of the church’s gathering—of the next arrival of the kingdom.³³ This is how the communicant learns to be in her cubicle but not of it. These *kairotic* oscillations between Church and world are set by the Resurrection, not the Ford plant.³⁴

On the other hand, feasting without fasting is just gluttony. Admittedly, Schmemmann writes little about fasting. **Regardless of my own suspicions as to the reasons for this silence,**

32 Shamblin’s theology is now preached through “Remnant Fellowship,” the church “most closely affiliated” with the *Weigh Down Workshop*. See <http://www.wdworkshop.com/church.asp>. In reality, this is Shamblin’s church, the fruit of her work. Its theology is Pelagian, adoptionistic, and Arian. A statement of the church’s theology can be found at <http://www.remnantfellowship.org/rfquestionsnanswers.asp#saved>. (Visited April 25, 2005)

33 Alexander Schmemmann in *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Asheleigh E. Moorhouse, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1986), succinctly explains the concept of the eighth day. He says, “Christ rose on the first day, i.e. on the day of the beginning of creation, because He restores creation after sin. But this day which concludes the history of salvation, the day of victory over the forces of evil, is also the eighth day since it is the beginning of the New Aeon” (78-79). Sunday as the eighth day is not primarily a day of rest, but as a day of new time. It is the time of the eschaton, a time which does not replace the secular but fulfills it by offering it Eucharistically to God (80).

34 Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 59-65.

it does not preclude our our gleaning of a theological corollary from his theology of feasting.³⁵

In the liturgical cycle of the Orthodox church there is no kneeling from Easter to Pentecost because at this time the church abides fully in the time of the kingdom. After Pentecost, the church kneels in penitence because she has once again entered the time of the world.³⁶

Therefore, just as every fast contains an element of joy that anticipates the coming feast. Every feast contains an element of sorrow over living in an unredeemed world. Fasting prepares communicants for feasting by way of contrast. The communicant's mode of operating in the world is one of restraint and discernment that anticipates encounter with the neighbor and the joy of ecclesial gathering.

Liturgical fasting resists commodification into a diet program because its purpose is to make us hungry so that we may feast with our sisters and brothers and be hospitable to our neighbor. It takes sorrowful and anxious stock of the world. The liturgical fast gives the church control over identity formation by giving letting her answer the question we ask more often than any other, "When are we going to eat?" The fast teaches discernment between real need and false need by giving our lives a new rhythm. It slows our rates of consumption and equips the Church to oppose the *ethos* at very heart of our capitalist system by presenting the marketeers with a new kind of unmarketable "subculture."

35 Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 44-45.

36 *Ibid.*, 59-65.

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