

ASCETICISM, RELIGION, AND BIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION¹

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This article initially argues that asceticism and related phenomena in classical India and in Christian antiquity suggest the existence of a universal, shared, innate human predisposition. After providing descriptive data on the widespread belief in a soul distinct from the body, along with cross-cultural accounts of ascetic practices, the article turns to a general reflection concerning the characteristics of an innate disposition termed the 'ascetic instinct' in light of other such dispositions, notably the 'language instinct' hypothesized to exist by some linguists. Further evidence in support of the proposed ascetic instinct, this time drawn mainly from tribal societies, is also presented. The article concludes by drawing on recent research on language and symbolic thinking to propose how this counter-reproductive universal arose and how it has survived in human beings.

1. Introduction

The editors of a recent volume on asceticism, Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, make the following observation in their introduction (1995: xxv):

So we are left in the late twentieth century with a long history of scholarly exploration of asceticism that is as frustrating and confusing, as naive and limiting, as it is impressive in scope, productivity, diversity, and depth. We are still without a comprehensive theoretical framework for the comparative study of asceticism.

This short statement expresses as well as any other a central problem of the study of asceticism, and of religious studies in general. We find asceticism in a variety of different cultures, and there seems to be no

end to the number of its manifestations. All these manifestations can be studied and compared, but to what does all this lead? As Wimbush and Valantasis point out, no one in the field really seems to know. Although the contributions collected in their volume add to the richness of information we already have about asceticism, none of them appear to address head-on the problem raised by the editors in their introduction, even though there are some articles that address theoretical issues (e.g., those by Valantasis and Bushell).

The present study is meant to address the question (not addressed in the volume of Wimbush and Valantasis) of how Darwinian evolution produced human beings that are apparently inclined to engage in asceticism and related activities. Because these activities are "counter-reproductive", their presence constitutes a challenge for those attempting to explain how such a feature could have developed and survived. Edward O. Wilson, the founder of sociobiology, was aware of this challenge (1978: 169-193), and attempted to show the evolutionary advantages of religion. Sociobiology's successor, evolutionary psychology—which in its more refined form does not claim that all human behavior can be explained by the presumed survival value it once supposedly had—still has a hard time accounting for behaviors that reduce reproductive success. One of its more sophisticated representatives, Henry Plotkin, formulates the problem in his book *Evolution in Mind* in the following manner (1997: 101):

There is no more stark illustration of the problem [of applying sociobiological theory to humans] than the existence of celibate priests. Biologically speaking, these are people of very low inclusive fitness, yet culturally they are persons often of high social standing and power. It is possible to spin a contorted tale about the evolution of celibacy in a small number of people in a social group because their teachings, which have a greater impact because of their sexual abstinence, raise the fitness of others, and hence their own inclusive fitness since such people will often have genetic relatives in the community. But this is just a story and a not very convincing one at that.

Plotkin then continues: "The simple point, that results in untold complexity, is that our behavior has at least two causal forces acting upon it, and sorting out what influence is coming from where is exceedingly difficult. It is the old nature-nurture problem writ large." A few pages later he adds: "in the face of powerful cultural forces, the influence of inclusive fitness on our behavior may be so reduced as to be undetectable by the gross methods of observation and question-

¹ This article has gone through a number of stages. At different phases of its development it has profited from the reactions of the following scholars: Walter Burkert, Richard Gombrich, Axel Michaels, and the anonymous reviewer for *MTSR*. I thank all of them for their observations and criticisms, and also for their encouraging remarks; a scholar of humanities addressing the issues dealt with in this paper is likely to feel more isolated than ever. It goes without saying that the responsibility for the opinions expressed remains entirely my own.

naire studies. This is not a problem confined to obscure and rare practices like celibacy in priests" (110).

It appears that evolutionary psychologists, or in any case some of them, are ready to concede that at least one often recurring aspect of asceticism, i.e., celibacy, is a particularly hard nut to crack. There is no gene for celibacy, and the sexual abstinence among otherwise respected members of society is to be explained mainly in terms of nurture. The question is whether evolutionary psychologists can get away with this answer. They are certainly right in pointing out that the cultural background of the ascetics must play an important role in explaining their behavior. However, if it is true that asceticism, including celibacy, occurs in many altogether different cultures, the question has to be addressed why this particular feature is so widespread. In other words, the exclusively cultural approach might perhaps explain its presence in any one particular culture, *but excludes, by its very nature, a generalized explanation that is valid for all cultures in which comparable features are attested.* Cultural dissemination is no serious candidate for a solution either, for in an important respect it begs the question. If it is true that otherwise unrelated cultures borrow from each other one specific feature, celibacy and asceticism in our case, but nothing else, this in itself might be seen as an indication that a universal predisposition selects or at least favors this feature.

Outside the limited area of evolutionary psychology, the human sciences do not seem to be in a hurry to address these baffling questions. A notable exception is Walter Burkert's *The Creation of the Sacred* (1996). Burkert emphasizes that religious practices and beliefs are too widespread to be left exclusively to students of culture. His book concentrates on a number of aspects of religion which, though important and undeniably part of what is commonly called religion, are not the ones singled out for study here.² Only a short remark in a subsequent publication (Burkert 1998) suggests that celibacy may be a good example of a "cultural parasite". In general, Burkert's work reminds us of the fact that religion is hardly a unitary phenomenon, and that a large variety of often widely differing phenomena are all simultaneously designated by this ambiguous term. We can learn

² A review symposium dedicated to Burkert's book appeared in this journal (vol. 10-1), featuring articles by Pascal Boyer, Willi Braun, Daniel Dennett, Tomoko Masuzawa, C. Robert Phillips, and a reply by Burkert; see also Saler's later discussion (1999).

from this that it cannot be a useful exercise to try to "explain religion". Defining or redefining religion will not help either.³ On the contrary, we may be well advised to drop the concept itself for all but reasons of convenience, and concentrate on sets of phenomena that share as clearly defined features as possible. Any such set may happen to be a subset of what we commonly call religion, or it may combine 'religious' with 'non-religious' traits. The same applies to asceticism. It does not matter in the least what people traditionally call 'asceticism'. The phenomena combined under this banner may or may not share a common feature. But then again, in order to arrive at any kind of explanation at all, we will have to concentrate not on what people call 'asceticism' or 'religion', but on features that are clear and well-defined to the extent possible.⁴ The features to be analyzed in this study will be those that are presented in at least one tradition as belonging to a coherent set of phenomena.

The above reflections show the direction which our inquiry will take. The first question to be addressed will be: Is asceticism (including the practice of celibacy) wide-spread enough to allow us to conclude that it must be looked upon as more than an incidental feature of this or that particular culture? The second question, which cannot be separated from the first, is: Is it possible to describe in more precise terms what exactly it is that recurs in different cultures? Asceticism and celibacy being notoriously vague terms, we will need to specify what we will be talking about. Is there something more specific that expresses itself in, or through, many (though not necessarily all) of the behaviors which we collect under these two terms? These questions will be addressed in sections 2 and 3, which deal with some forms of ascetic behavior and their context in two specific cultural areas: classical India and early Christianity, respectively. These sections provide us with a set of features that might conceivably constitute something like a human universal. The identification of this provisional universal will then give rise to the general question concerning what shape innate behaviors and ideas—if and when they exist—assume; this question will be addressed in section 4. Section 5

³ See Gombrich (1996: 2): "Much that has been said and written in the field of comparative religion is, alas, a waste of time, because it has been concerned with a search for 'correct' definitions."

⁴ Below, it will be explained why there are limits to the extent to which such features can be precisely defined.

of the essay will then proceed to show that evidence from a variety of mainly tribal cultures supports the idea that certain forms of asceticism and celibacy can indeed be looked upon as expressions of an innate predisposition. The problem that will remain concerns the adaptive value of that particular universal; this problem will be dealt with in section 6.

It will be clear from the preceding that no attempt will be made in this paper to collect all, or even an important part, of the evidence that may be taken to support the existence of the universal presented in this article. Evidence of that nature, I believe, can easily be multiplied, by taking other religious movements and cultures into consideration. At this point it is, however more important, in my opinion, to try to attain clarity as to what a universal may look like and what role universals may, and may have to, play in the human sciences. The time has come for the human sciences to stop ignoring what is happening in the biological sciences and to face the fact that human beings, whether we like it or not, are the result of countless generations of Darwinian selection.⁵

2. *Examples of asceticism and religious thought in classical India*

Numerous visitors to India through the ages have been struck by the feats performed by its ascetics, among which one—prolonged motionlessness—has often prompted comment. Motionlessness is a recurring feature in Indian asceticism. This is not to say that all of Indian asceticism can be reduced to the sole concern of reducing or suppressing bodily action. But remarkably many Indian ascetics, both past and present, did and do pass at least part of their time being

⁵ While preparing this publication it became clear to me that much of the biological and neuroscientific groundwork necessary to carry this project to completion had been carried out in a remarkable recent book, *The Symbolic Species*, by Terrence Deacon (1997). This book, though primarily dealing with “the co-evolution of language and the human brain” (the book’s sub-title), presents a theoretical analysis of what distinguishes human beings from other animals. Deacon’s argument, besides being highly illuminating and convincing, contains the elements needed to make sense of the data from religious history collected in the present study. In later sections of the paper it will therefore be necessary to repeat some of Deacon’s arguments, but in a condensed manner. The danger of thus distorting Deacon’s otherwise eminently coherent and impressive train of reasoning is, of course, great. Readers with a serious interest in the thesis of this article are recommended to turn to *The Symbolic Species* for further clarification on obscure points.

immobile, often in specially chosen uncomfortable positions. Of course, the duration of this motionlessness may vary. Religious literature is full of stories of human or divine beings who maintained such positions—e.g., standing on one leg—for thousands of years. Most others had to content themselves with less, but we will see that some invited death precisely by abstaining from all other forms of activity.

It is this extreme form of motionlessness that deserves our attention.⁶ It manifests itself for the first time in extant Indian literature in the religion of the Jainas. This religion is associated with a historical teacher who was a contemporary of the Buddha. This teacher of Jainism is known by the name of Mahāvīra. The early Jainas, i.e., the followers of Mahāvīra, dedicated themselves to forms of asceticism in which motionlessness played a particularly important role. The sacred texts of the Jainas thus depict, sometimes in great detail, how a person who is advanced enough to face death through inaction should go about it. They emphasize the need to abstain, as far as possible, from all activity, and many Jainas through the ages have chosen for just such a death. Voluntary death through fasting has remained popular—if that is the expression to use—in Jainism right up to the present day. For many centuries, the sacred hill of Shravana Belgola in southern India has been a center for such chosen deaths. Inscriptions on this hill testify to one hundred and fifty deaths of this kind during the last one thousand five hundred years (Settar 1989: xxvii). Recent cases of ritual fasts to death of this kind (which the Jainas refuse to characterize as suicides) include that of Śāntisāgara in 1955 (Jaini 1979: 1), and that of a nun in 1989.⁷

Jainism is not the only religious movement in India in which immobilization plays an important role. (We will consider further cases below.) Jainism, however, presents us with more than a remarkable practice. It also provides us with a local, theoretical context in which this practice makes sense. Jaina practitioners invite death through motionless asceticism in order to escape from the effects of their actions. The background of this search for liberation is the belief that actions have consequences—positive or negative, depending on the

⁶ Most of the remainder of this section is based on research which has been published separately (e.g., Bronkhorst 1993; 1993a; 1995; 1998; 1998a; 1999; 2000; forthcoming; forthcoming a; forthcoming b).

⁷ Dundas (1992: 156) comments: “the recent interest and excitement elicited by a Sthanakvasi nun who died at the age of eighty-seven after a fast of fifty-one days is testimony to the relative rarity of the religious death.”

nature of the action concerned—in a future life. The deeds of a person are responsible for a renewed birth after death, all in a repetitive cycle that will, at least potentially, go on for ever. The inspiration behind Jaina religious practice is the hope to escape from this ongoing cycle. Clearly, good deeds are useless to attain this goal, for they too give rise to rebirths—albeit good rebirths. In order not to be reborn at all, one has somehow to stop all activity. This is what Jaina ascetics try to do.

Even this simple sketch demonstrates that, in this case, religious practice and religious belief go hand in hand. The practice of immobility could thus be interpreted as a response to a problem posed by a particular theoretical position, often vaguely referred to as the doctrine of karma. It is, of course, equally possible that the doctrine of karma came to be developed to make sense of an already existing ascetic practice. However this may be, we note that practice and theory together constitute a coherent whole, the elements of which cannot easily be separated from each other.

It is clear that Jaina ascetics pushed their convictions to extreme lengths. Moreover, they believed that their ascetic practices had a double effect. On the one hand, abstaining from actions would call forth no further results; this part is almost tautological, given the way they interpreted the doctrine of karma. However, these same Jainas had carried out deeds before they had become ascetics, both in their present and in earlier lives. Those earlier acts clamored for retribution and had to be dealt with somehow. Jaina doctrine had an easy answer: the suffering evoked by immobilization destroys whatever traces remain of earlier acts. A correctly executed course of asceticism will therefore solve both sides of the problem, allowing the ascetic to reach liberation at the moment of death; he will not be reborn, and never again be part of the cycle of deaths and births that keep most other living beings in their grip.

The belief in the double efficacy of asceticism is an essential part of early Jainism. This is clear from the fact that not only the early Jaina texts themselves explicitly say so; it is confirmed by early Buddhist texts which characterize the fundamental beliefs of their religious competitors. As an example of such a statement from an early Jaina text consider the following: "By being without activity the soul does not bind new karma and destroys the karma that was bound before" (*Uttarajhayana* 29.37, cited in Bronkhorst 1993: 37, 27). An early Buddhist text ascribes exactly the same point of view to the Jainas, in the

following words: "As a result of the annihilation of former actions by asceticism, and of the non-performing of new actions, there is no further effect in the future; as a result of no further effect in the future there is destruction of actions; as a result of the destruction of actions there is destruction of suffering; as a result of the destruction of suffering there is destruction of sensation; as a result of the destruction of sensation all suffering will be exhausted" (*Majjhima Nikāya* I.93 l. 2-10, cited in Bronkhorst forthcoming).

And yet it is by no means evident that present motionlessness should destroy the traces of past acts. Interestingly, another early religious movement, known by the name of Ājīvikism, rejected this notion. Ājīvikism seems to have split off from Jainism around the time of Mahāvīra, and one of the reasons for doing so appears to have been precisely this issue. For the Ājīvikas motionlessness had but one effect, that of not producing new acts. Traces of earlier acts would not be influenced by it; even total motionlessness would not stop rebirth after death for most people. The Ājīvikas incorporated this idea into a deterministic vision of reality, in which each living being has to pass through a pre-determined number of births and states of existence until, after countless aeons, all acts have been retributed and no traces of them remain. Motionlessness at that point will be the appropriate and inevitable thing to do, just before leaving once and for all the cycle of rebirths (Bronkhorst forthcoming a).

What has been said about early Jainism applies with equal force to early Ājīvikism. Both were ascetic movements whose attempts to suppress all activity fitted the local theoretical position accepted by its practitioners. For them, belief in the efficacy of acts and the practice of inaction were two sides of the same coin.

It bears mentioning that the belief in the doctrine of karma and the practice of motionlessness do not always go hand in hand, not even in India. There have been ascetics who performed remarkable feats of motionlessness without believing in the efficacy of acts, as there have been believers in the doctrine of karma who did not perform, or even approve of, asceticism. For the time being, however, we will continue to concentrate on those Indian thinkers and practitioners (and they are numerous) for whom the truth of the doctrine of karma is beyond all question. Many of them were not Jainas, but shared with them the conviction that motionlessness is an essential part of the way to liberation, even if they do not all preach motionlessness until death. Beside restraint of movement in general,

many texts emphasize the importance of immobilizing the mind, or the breath; abstaining from food and drink is also a particularly widespread aspect of the termination of bodily activities. All these restraints, in various combinations, are recommended in a large number of early Hindu texts. (Bronkhorst 1993: chapter 4).

In order to evaluate the implications of the close parallel between ascetic practice and religious conviction in these cases, we have to consider some other responses that have been proposed to the problem associated with the doctrine of karma. According to this doctrine, acts lead to retribution, usually in a future life; the non-performance of acts is a vital step towards avoiding rebirth. However, other responses than asceticism are possible, and some of them may indeed be as old in India as the ascetic response. Common to these other responses is the belief that the essential part of human beings, their self or soul, is inactive by its very nature. According to an important number of thinkers, the knowledge, or realization, that one's soul—i.e., that which one really is—is not involved in any form of activity whatsoever, guarantees that one is not involved in the retribution provoked by the acts carried out by one's body and mind. Central to this response is the notion of a soul that is inactive by its very nature. Such a notion is almost omnipresent in the religious literature of classical India, and has been worked out in detail in the main schools of Brahmanical philosophy. They do not all agree on the details, of course, but they do agree on one thing: the soul does not act; it does not do anything.

This central notion finds its simplest expression in the current of thought commonly known as Sāṃkhya, which exists in various forms, and finds expression in a large number of texts and movements. In its systematized form it is known as a philosophy, a variant of which is adopted in the classical texts on Yoga. Systematized Sāṃkhya, as well as many of its less systematized expressions, divides the world into two fundamentally different kinds of entities: those that are active, and those that are not. Inactive are the souls of living beings, which are presented as being pure, motionless consciousness. Everything that can act, that is changeable, falls under the heading Material Nature (*prakṛti*), which covers more than mere matter. Indeed, mental activity, being active, does not take place in the soul, but in Material Nature, which therefore includes something one might call subtle or mental matter. The notion that consciousness can be still, or rather is still by its very nature, is fundamental to this

vision of the world. Without this notion, the soul would be deprived of consciousness, its one remaining feature (don't forget that the soul is and has to be totally inactive), in which case one might seriously question the need to postulate the existence of a soul at all. Sāṃkhya has a great deal to say about the structure of Material Nature. On the other hand, the problem of how to explain that an inactive but conscious soul interacts with active, unconscious Material Nature—a problem which is inseparable from the fundamental structure of Sāṃkhya thought—proved very difficult, and no solution that gave full satisfaction was ever found.

Philosophical Sāṃkhya postulated the existence of numerous souls—one for each living being—beside Material Nature conceived of as single and unified. Since all souls are nothing but consciousness, without activity or even memory, and therefore indistinguishable from each other, there is no real need to postulate so many souls. Theoretically a single soul might do for all living beings, and there are indeed variants of Sāṃkhya where this position is taken. We will have more to say about this position in connection with Vedānta, below.

An altogether different, and by and large more sophisticated, vision of the world was elaborated within the school of philosophy called Vaiśeṣika. Here, too, the fundamental notion was that of an inactive soul, but the way it was conceived of was very different from that of Sāṃkhya. The soul—or rather the souls: one for each living being—was thought of as a substance, like other substances such as vases and human bodies. Unlike the latter, however, each soul was believed to be omnipresent, to fill the universe, and therefore to be incapable of movement. Since action in Vaiśeṣika is primarily thought of as movement, the soul, being motionless, is inactive by its very (omnipresent) nature. This does not prevent it from interacting with the rest of the world, however. Like other substances, the soul is thought of as having, or being able to have, qualities. These qualities are not, however, the same as the qualities that inhere in, say, a vase (e.g., color, mass, etc.). As one of its qualities, the soul has what is called "effort" (*prayatna*), which can have an effect on the body. This can lead to the unexpected situation that the soul, though itself inactive, can be the agent of the activities of the body. Vaiśeṣika was careful to specify that mental activity, far from being an activity of the soul itself, is nothing beyond the fluctuation of other qualities of the soul, which do not affect the soul itself (i.e., the soul without, or

abstracted from, its qualities). Vaiśeṣika succeeded in this way in offering a solution to the problem that baffled Sāṃkhya adherents. It managed to present a model in which an inactive soul can interact with the rest of the world in a way that accounts in a more or less satisfactory manner for the world of our experience. Note that Vaiśeṣika was not obliged to postulate, as Sāṃkhya had been, the existence of motionless consciousness. Indeed, the liberated soul as conceived of in Vaiśeṣika, i.e., a soul without qualities, was thought of as being unconscious. Liberation, it was maintained, resulted in a state of unconsciousness similar to that of a stone. No wonder that Vaiśeṣika had some difficulty inspiring enthusiasm among religiously-minded people.

A third way of dealing with the nature of the soul is most clearly exemplified in the currents of thought collectively known by the name Vedānta. Here the soul of each individual is believed to be identical with a world-soul, often designated by the term *Brahma*, and invariably described as immutable (often *akṣara*). This idea already finds expression in the early Upaniads which are part of Vedic literature. It is variously elaborated in the different schools of Vedānta that make their appearance from the second half of the first millennium C.E. onward. The best known of these schools is the so-called Advaita Vedānta whose most famous representative is Śaṅkara (c. 7th century C.E.). His system adds to the identity of individual soul and *Brahma* the notion that phenomenal reality is not real, which of course facilitates the task of showing that the soul and *Brahma* are by their very nature inactive.⁸

The insight that one's real self, one's soul, is different from both body and mind, and never acts, is useful, but a practical question may remain. What does the body do once this insight is obtained? The Bhagavadgītā offers an answer which has found many receptive listeners. This text may very well be the most widely studied and recited text of Hinduism these days, and has been so for a long time. This text preaches an attitude of separation of soul from body that is obtained by cultivating non-attachment with regard to the results of

⁸ This is not the place to explore any further the various ways in which this particular conception of the soul has been embedded in elaborate systems of philosophy. It is, however, interesting and important to note that Vedānta, in its multiple forms, became the most widely accepted philosophy of India, and has to a considerable extent been able to dislodge other philosophies (such as Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika) in the course of the second millennium C.E.

one's actions. Once such non-attachment is attained, Material Nature (i.e., body and mind) will act according to its own devices, no longer involving the soul. The activity of a person who is no longer attached to the results of her deeds, the Bhagavadgītā teaches, follows the rules of the caste to which she belongs. For instance, the great warrior Arjuna, to whom the text's teaching is directed, will behave like a warrior and exterminate without qualms the members of his family who fight in the opposing army, if only he does not fight in order to win the battle or to obtain a kingdom. He must remain aloof, and will in this way remain unsoiled.

The direct link between this teaching and the doctrine of karma is, once again, undeniable. Deeds bind the soul to unwelcome results as long as the soul is involved in those deeds and in the results aimed at. When the soul takes its distance, the material world (which includes the body and the mind of the person concerned) may move on, even though it may no longer act exactly the way it acted as long as the soul was involved. But the activities of a person's body and mind bring no karmic consequences to her soul, if this soul has succeeded in dissociating itself from them.

It will be clear from the above examples that a very important part of classical Indian religious practice and thought presents itself as a set of coherent answers to the problem of karma. Since activity leads to undesired consequences, one must either abstain from all activity, or dissociate oneself from it, or find out that one's real self is by its very nature inactive. In practice these different answers are often combined, so that one may practice asceticism and believe in the unchangeable nature of the self. The situation might have been even clearer, and even more coherent, had it not been for the disturbing presence of Buddhism, which for many centuries exerted an enormous influence both on non-Buddhist religious practice and thought, and in this way muddled the waters considerably.

It seems clear that early Buddhism—and this means, first of all, the historical founder of Buddhism himself, as represented in its early texts—rejected both immobility asceticism and the notion of an inactive soul. He rejected both because he did not accept the doctrine of karma in the form in which many of his contemporaries accepted it. Early Buddhism accepted the doctrine of karma in a different form: not one's physical acts, but one's desires and intentions bring about karmic consequences. This implies that physical immobilization in itself cannot influence the process of karmic recompense, and it also

means that there is no need to propose the notion of an inactive soul. Buddhism therefore taught an altogether different path to liberation, essentially a psychological path culminating in the destruction of the roots of desire. No degree of asceticism, no insight into the true nature of the soul could bring about this destruction. Instead, the way taught by the Buddha involved interiorization, in the form of heightened awareness and meditation, meant to prepare the adepts for the crucial mental transformation from which they would emerge as "awakened" and liberated persons.

The Buddhist path was difficult to practice, and the alternative understanding of the doctrine of karma was difficult to grasp. An analysis of Buddhist literature shows that many early converts apparently did not find it easy to abandon the doctrine of karma to which they were accustomed and in which the *deeds* rather than the *desires* of a person play a central role. Understandably, then, Buddhism was affected by some foreign practices, and even developed ideas that were not altogether different from the notion of an inactive self which its early practitioners had rejected. As well, influence in the opposite direction—from Buddhism to other, non-Buddhist, religious currents—started later, but became very strong. The result is that a number of practices taught in the Yogasūtra and other ascetic texts have been shown to be borrowings from Buddhism, and that orthodox Brahminical philosophies such as Vaiśeṣika and Advaita Vedānta have been thoroughly influenced by it.

Although this is not the place to disentangle the various strands of influence that come together in the religious texts of classical Brahmanism, it can be pointed out that, in spite of the entanglement, the features mentioned earlier are still recognizably present. Forms of asceticism in which immobilization plays a central role remain popular in India, and visions of the self as being inactive by nature have lost none of their appeal (e.g., the continued popularity of the Bhagavadgītā is well known).

In the next section of the paper, we will discover that features similar to the ones here identified occur elsewhere. However, the Indian material connects these features in a way other cultures may not. The forms of religious practice studied (asceticism and non-attachment to the fruits of one's deeds), as well as the notions about the true nature of the self encountered, are in India responses to one and the same problem situation: the belief in the future effects of acts as embodied in the doctrine of karma. However, the fact that the

same features can also occur elsewhere in situations where there is no belief corresponding to the doctrine of karma might suggest that asceticism and belief in the immutable nature of the self are not really responses to the doctrine of karma, not even in India. The doctrine of karma might, instead, be understood as a kind of rationalization, a cultural construct which unites a number of pre-existent practices and beliefs that are not necessarily related—at least not necessarily related in the manner presupposed by the doctrine of karma.

Rather than discarding a potential insight with which the Indian material presents us, it is preferable to take the hint and see whether these phenomena may really be related. Of course this does not mean that the modern scholar should accept the doctrine of karma. Various related religious phenomena do not call for an explanation in terms of a theory about what the world is like, but rather in terms of a shared human predisposition. It is in fact rather easy to see that the phenomena under consideration, all of them, can easily be understood as expressions of a shared disinclination to identify with body and mind. The ascetic takes the decision to abandon his or her body (the Sanskrit term, *kāyotsarga*, is exactly the term used in Jainism to refer "to one of the best known of Jain ascetic practices, frequently portrayed in art, performed by assuming a motionless position, with arms hanging down without touching the sides of one's body" [Dundas 1992: 148]). Followers of the Bhagavadgītā do the same, with this difference that they are convinced that the body (including the mind), when left to its own devices, will behave in a manner which agrees with the caste to which they belong. The philosopher, finally, gains the insight that he is different from his body and mind.

Note that no Indian text that I know of identifies a disinclination to identify with body and mind as a factor behind the practices and beliefs at stake. Identifying this disinclination does not help us to arrive at a better grasp of the self-understanding of Indian ascetics and philosophers. Their self-understanding, as I pointed out above, is embodied in the doctrine of karma. This self-understanding, however, does not mean that there may not be such a disinclination. We will see that the assumption that there actually is one is helpful in dealing with comparable material from other cultures.

3. *Examples of asceticism and martyrdom in early Christianity*

The complex of classical Indian ideas and practices discussed in the preceding section is not unique. Christianity, during the early centuries of its existence, took many different forms, some of them succeeding each other, others existing side by side. In this richness of currents, practices and opinions, something very similar to what we have come to know in India can be recognized.

Putting aside chronological considerations for the time being, let us first concentrate on asceticism, as we did in the case of classical India. In the preceding section we examined the dominant theme of immobility; Christian asceticism offers numerous examples of the same behavior, for physical immobility was practiced among Christian ascetics. The *Historia Lausiaca* reports that the monk, Adolius, would stand all night on the Mount of Olives praying and singing, remaining immobile even if it rained or there was frost. Elpidius observed a rigorous fast for twenty-five years, eating only on Saturdays and Sundays; he would remain standing all night (Delehaye 1923: CLXXXII). Theodore of Sykeon, despite grave injury, is said to have stood like an iron statue through a night, continuing in praise to God without sleep (*Life of Theodore of Sykeon* ch. 115; Dawes and Baynes [trans.] 1948: 164). A certain monk called John, according to the *Historia monachorum*, spent three full years standing under a rock, virtually without sleep, and eating nothing but the Eucharist brought to him on Sundays by the priest, until his feet began to rot and exude pus (Festugière 1964: 87). Theodoret, the fifth-century bishop of Cyrrhus, describes various forms of asceticism that were in use in his days. Among those who exposed their bodies to the open air, thus enduring the opposite conditions of being now frozen stiff by the bitter cold, now scorched by the blazing sun, he discerns some sub-varieties: some stand continually, while others divide the day between sitting and standing (Williams 1985: 88-89, n. 36; Delehaye 1923: clxxxiii-clxxxiv). The so-called stylites belong in this same category. Simeon, the first stylite, was said to have stood on a pillar for thirty years; Daniel spent thirty-three years on three pillars, at the end of which "his feet had been worn away by inflammation and the gnawing of worms" (Dawes and Baynes 1948: 69).

We have seen that practices like those described above were practiced in India accompanied by theoretical developments which stressed the immovable nature of the true self. Something similar

happened in early Christianity in a number of currents of thought collectively known (perhaps without sufficient justification; see Williams 1996) by the name 'Gnosticism'—a loosely affiliated group believing that knowledge concerning the true nature of the self, which is utterly distinct from the body and even from the mental activities, is the means by which salvation is attained. The real self is spirit and identical with God, therefore a divine spark. Numerous passages in the Gnostic gospels show that God, and by implication the real self of each human being, never acts.⁹ Those who possess the *gnosis* constitute the "immovable race",¹⁰ which is "incorruptible" (*Gospel of the Egyptians*, NHL: 199, 200, 202, 203, 205), or "immutable" (204-205). The *Dialogue of the Savior* exhorts the disciples that "we should leave behind our labor and stand in the rest; for he who stands in the rest will rest forever." One must weep because of the deeds of the body. The Lord will bring to his disciples "everything that does not move", for they are from that place. The text concludes: "It behooves whoever has understood the actions to do the [will] of the Father" (230, 231, 233, 238).

"The aeons who really exist dwell in silence. Existence was inactivity" (*Zostrianus*, NHL: 391). The *Allogenes* observes, similarly: "if you wish to stand, ascend to the Existence, and you will find it standing and stilling itself according to the likeness of the One who truly stills himself and apprehends all these in silence and effortlessness." "Standing", here as well as elsewhere, implies immovability, as has been pointed out by Williams (1985: 35, 71, 82). The same text admonishes: "when you become perfect in that place, still yourself."

⁹ E.g., God, or the "established truth", is described as "immutable, imperturbable, perfect in beauty" (*Gospel of Truth*, NHL: 38). The light of truth is immutable (46). The Father, who is the root of everything, is "inimitable and immutable" (*Tripartite Tractate*, NHL: 55), "immeasurable and immutable" (*The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, NHL: 337). He is unchanging good, characterized by unchanging glory (*Eugnostos the Blessed*, NHL: 210, 213). His words are eternal and unchanging (*Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, NHL: 294). He is invariable, unchanged, unalterable, unchangeable, "with immutability clothing him" (*Tripartite Tractate*, NHL: 55-57). "In an unwavering and immovable way he grasps those who have received the restoration while they grasp him" (94). The heavenly realm is called the "Adamantine Land" (*The Hypostasis of the Archons*, NHL: 154; see also Layton 1976), and the *Untitled Text* from the Bruce Codex applies the epithets "immovable" and "adamantine" to the Father (Williams 1985: 65).

¹⁰ This term occurs in the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *Three Steles of Seth*, and in *Zostrianus*. All occurrences have been discussed in Michael Allen Williams' monograph on this subject (1985).

And again: "[do not] further dissipate yourself, [so that] you may be able to stand, and do not desire to be [eternal] lest you fall [in any way] from the inactivity in you of the Unknown One." "Cease hindering the inactivity that exists in you". Stillness and silence are often used in this text as attributes of God. "Nothing activates him in accordance with the Unity that is at rest", he "stands continually", is "the One who is at rest" possessing stillness within himself (*Allogenes*, NHL: 449-452).

The emphasis on the immovability and stillness of the soul, and of God with whom the soul is identical in essence, is all the more noteworthy because these views on the self and on God are often incorporated into an elaborate system of mythology. After all, mythology needs actors, not non-actors. The unavoidable result is that the myths do not always seem consistent, and occasionally seem to contradict themselves. No doubt this was the price that had to be paid for the attempt to keep the main actors immovable—apparently a feature that was too central to Gnostic thought to be dropped.

Of course, Gnosticism and Christian asceticism do not date from the same time. The ascetic practices which we considered above have been recorded from the fourth century C.E. onward. For instance, we know that the young Antony started living in the desert around 275 C.E., and the *Vita Antonii* (3) records that he was inspired by an old man who had been a hermit since his own youth. But this is the earliest information concerning Christian ascetics that we possess. Gnosticism, on the other hand, flourished already in the second and third centuries C.E., and perhaps earlier. Yet, the cult of martyrdom, which can be looked upon as a predecessor of asceticism, was, to a considerable extent, contemporaneous with Gnosticism. The ideal of martyrdom plays a major role already in the books of the New Testament, and in the Christian writings of the immediately ensuing period. Contrary to the manner in which the martyrs are generally perceived, they are no mere victims of religious persecution. In fact, they are not victims at all. The ideal martyr is a victor who, in spite of being subjected to the most atrocious tortures, remains courageous and does not flinch. Like ascetics, martyrs prove that they are in control of their senses in the most extreme of circumstances. Also like ascetics, they do not give in, even when they are free to do so. It is indeed a characteristic of the ideal martyr narrative that they be given one or several chances to avoid their sufferings. The ideal martyr is, until the end, encouraged by his torturers to abandon his

or her Christian convictions, or just to make sacrifice for the emperor.

The theme of Christian martyrdom is referred to in the New Testament (Baumeister 1980: 66; Frend 1967: 58).¹¹ The Christian must take up his cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8.34; Luke 14.27; Matthew 10.38). "There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life" (Mark 10.29-30). "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matthew 5.11-12). The disciples are continuously warned in the Gospels that they will be persecuted for Jesus's sake (Mark 13.9-13; Matthew 24.9-13; Luke 21.12-19; John 15.18-21). When the apostles faced their first difficulties with the ruling powers, they rejoiced "that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5.41). Soon Stephen was to be the first martyr who followed the fate of his master by being stoned to death (Acts 7.54-60).

For our present purposes it is interesting to turn to the *Acts of the Martyrs*, where the essential features of martyrdom are clearly depicted. *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* describes the nobility and courage of the martyrs in Smyrna.¹²

Who indeed would not admire the martyrs' nobility, their courage, their love of the Master? For even when they were torn by whips until the very structure of their bodies was laid bare down to the inner veins and arteries, they endured it, making even the bystanders weep for pity. Some indeed attained to such courage that they would utter not a sound or a cry, showing to all of us that in the hour of their torment these noblest of Christ's witnesses were not present in the flesh, or rather that the Lord was there holding converse with them.

¹¹ The cult of martyrdom was no Christian invention, however. It had been present for more than a century preceding the birth of Christ (Baumeister 1980: 6; Frend 1967: 22; van Henten 1989). Clear instances occur in II Maccabees. Perhaps the earliest theology of martyrdom is found in Daniel 11 and 12, dating from soon after 168 B.C.E. Suffering on the part of the wise as a result of firmly resisting attempts to corrupt them is depicted as purification (11.32-35), which will be followed by everlasting life (12.2).

¹² For the following passages, see Musurillo 1972: 3, 13, 25, 27, 47, 53, 67, 69, 107

Polycarp himself, when about to be nailed to the equipment on which he will be burned alive, asks his torturers not to do so, "For He who has given me the strength to endure the flames will grant me the strength to remain without flinching in the fire even without the firmness you will give me by using nails." Carpus, in the *Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice* (Greek recension), while being hung up and scraped, kept screaming "I am a Christian" until he grew exhausted and was no longer able to speak. Papyrus, passing through the same ordeal, did not utter a sound. Both then were burnt alive, praying and smiling. The martyr Justin expects to ascend to heaven after being scourged and beheaded, if he endures. An extreme example of endurance is Blandina who, during the persecution in Lyons, received refreshment and rest, and acquired insensibility to her present pain on account of her admission "I am a Christian; we do nothing to be ashamed of"; this in spite of the fact that her torturers admitted that they were beaten, that there was nothing further they could do to her, after having tortured her in every way from dawn to dusk. Sanctus, similarly, resisted his torturers with such determination that he would not even tell them his own name, his race, or the city he was from, whether he was a slave or a freedman. To all of their questions he answered in Latin "I am a Christian!" He maintained his firmness even though his body was stretched and distorted out of any recognizably human shape, and again when the same tortures were applied to his swollen and inflamed limbs some days later. Perpetua had to be firm against the urgent requests of her father to abandon her faith, before she is led to her death in the arena.

The connection between martyrdom and asceticism did not escape the Christians themselves (Viller 1925; Malone 1950). Restraint was considered the preparation of martyrdom. This is clear from the *Martyrs of Lyons*, where the apostates are said to be those who had not exercised themselves, while the others had learned to confess their faith. Tertullian is likewise of the opinion that he who has killed his flesh is sure to be victorious in the battle of martyrdom. A Christian should not remarry; in that way he will be better prepared for persecution and firmer in martyrdom. Virginity, widowhood, continence in marriage, along with fasting and asceticism, are thus all preparations for martyrdom. Origen observes that, beside the perfection of martyrdom obtained in a short time, there is the slow practice of all virtues and the progressive perfection of a man which consists of the

perfection of all virtues. Cyprian considers virgins the most illustrious among the Christians and admonishes them to live in the spirit of the martyrs. Other early Christian authors are of a similar opinion (see Viller 1925: 106-108, 110-111, 113; cf. Malone 1950: 14).

There is another interesting parallel between martyrdom in early Christianity and asceticism in India and, subsequently, in Christianity. The case in India may be taken as example. There, insight into the true nature of the soul was seen as an alternative to asceticism, even though some considered a combination of the two was most desirable. We find a similar belief among certain Gnostics, who held that their *gnosis* made martyrdom unnecessary (Pagels 1980: chapter 4). The *Testimony of Truth*, for example, ridicules those who think that mere testimony secures salvation; they fall in the clutches of the authorities. They are "[empty] martyrs, since they bear witness only [to] themselves." The true testimony, which leads to salvation, is when man knows himself and God who is over the truth (NHL: 407-408, 411). Public confession and subsequent martyrdom are decried in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, because it is wrongly thought that this makes one pure. The orthodox Christians are accused of oppressing their brothers, claiming that God has pity on them through martyrdom, since salvation comes through it (NHL: 341, 343).

This aspect of Gnosticism is confirmed by a number of early orthodox authors. Justin the Martyr, for instance, complains that the Gnostics "are neither persecuted nor put to death". Irenaeus tells us that the Gnostic heretics "even pour contempt upon the martyrs, and vituperate those who are killed on account of confessing the Lord". Tertullian goes to the extent of claiming that Gnosticism exerts its greatest attraction upon weak Christians in times of persecution. Ignatius, who joyfully met his fate of being eaten by wild beasts, rejects the Gnostic view that Christ was a spiritual being and only appeared to suffer and die; in that case martyrdom would be in vain. Hippolytus uses the same argument (Pagels 1980: 83-89).

However, it may not be correct to think that all Gnostics rejected martyrdom. Yet it seems likely that martyrdom played the same role *vis-à-vis* the Gnostic sects as did asceticism *vis-à-vis* the notions about the inactive nature of the soul in India. This is not surprising; voluntary martyrdom and asceticism share some striking features. Both the martyr and the ascetic refuse to act on the urges of the body even where these are extreme. In the case of martyrs, these urges are provoked by outsiders; ascetics often provoke them themselves.

Those Gnostics who rejected martyrdom did not for that reason choose for a life of ease and comfort. The author of the *Testimony of Truth*, for example, while rejecting martyrdom (see above), speaks out for restraint: "No one knows the God of truth except solely the man who will forsake all of the things of the world, having renounced the whole place ...; he has subdued desire every [place] within himself." Renunciation of wealth, of sexual intercourse and of the world are thus advocated (NHL: 410, 414). The *Apocalypse of Peter* goes to the extent of accepting the martyrdom of some (NHL: 343; cf. Pagels 1980: 94).

When comparing the situation in early Christianity with the one prevailing in classical India a number of similarities strike the eye. In both cultural spheres there were individuals—whom we may call ascetics or martyrs depending on the circumstances—who were determined to face extreme circumstances without reacting to them. In both cultural spheres we also find people, often different from the former ones, who are convinced that their souls are inactive, immovable. The Gnostic Christians identified their souls with God, who is described in terms of immovability. This corresponds to the Indian identification of the soul with *Brahma*. (The Indian conceptions elaborated in the classical Sāṃkhya system and in the Bhagavadgītā appear to have no parallels in early Christianity.)

The coexistence of (so-called) Gnosticism and martyrdom/asceticism in early Christianity might be looked upon as no more than historical coincidence. However, such a position is difficult to maintain in the face of the Indian evidence. There, asceticism and the belief in the inactive nature of the self are clearly related, the intermediate factor being the doctrine of karma. In the case of early Christianity, too, one might therefore consider the possibility that Gnosticism and martyrdom/asceticism are related to each other, even if there is no explicitly formulated doctrine of karma to constitute the link.

How can this relationship be explained? Did the early Christians borrow these ideas and practices from India, or did the Indians borrow them from the Christians? The second of these two possibilities has to be discarded, at least in this form, for purely chronological reasons: religions like Jainism existed many centuries before Christianity came into being. However, the thesis of borrowing in whatever form is not likely to take us very far.¹³ Although it is conceivable that

¹³ Compare the remarks about cultural dissemination in the Introduction, above.

someone takes over an idea from a distant culture, it is much harder to see how such a borrowed idea could become so fundamentally important in a religious movement. (Don't forget, there was no large-scale missionary activity of Indians in the Roman world, nor of Westerners in India.) It is even more difficult to conceive of the transfer of a two-branched system, presumably from India to the Roman world, without the intermediate link (i.e., the doctrine of karma) coming along with it. But the most unsatisfactory aspect of this thesis is that, even if borrowing did take place, we would still need an explanation why such a complex of ideas should be so widely accepted by the borrowers.

It has already been suggested that the whole set of practices and ideas in India may be expressive of one and the same underlying predisposition, described so far in negative terms: the disinclination to identify with body and mind. It will be clear that the same formulation can be used to cover the features of early Christianity discussed in this section. Both the martyr and the ascetic were determined to let their bodies be their bodies, and the Gnostic was in possession of knowledge which confirmed that his real self was indeed altogether different from his body. Both the Indian and the early Christian evidence therefore suggest that a common human predisposition expresses itself through these cultures' various forms of asceticism, martyrdom and wisdom teaching. It is time to have a closer look at what we may expect from a "common human predisposition".

4. *What do innate predispositions look like?*

It would be easy to concentrate on the different cultural contexts in classical India and early Christianity, and to accumulate data that would 'prove' that the similarities presented in the preceding sections are no more than superficial and that they are interpreted very differently in the two cultures. Any textual scholar worth his or her salt can drown the similarities pointed out above in a flood of reflections, arguments, and textual passages that can convince almost anyone that it would be rash to make hasty comparisons, and that much more textual study will be required before anything in this regard can be said with a minimum of certainty. These scholars overlook that their conclusion is already part of their method. It is obvious that any human universal—supposing, for argument's sake, that there are

any—will be completely overgrown by traits belonging to the specific culture in which it expresses itself. The more we concentrate on those differing cultural traits, the more the common universal will, predictably, recede into the background. This does not prove that there are no universals, but merely that culturalists follow a methodology which excludes *a priori* that there might be any.

It will be useful to make a comparison with the case of language. Languages are infinitely diverse (i.e., have features that are culturally specific), and the more languages one studies, the more differences are likely to appear. It is possible to study what language users in different cultures have thought (and think) about their own language, but the results, though interesting, may not be of much use to the linguist interested in studying language *per se*. (An important exception is constituted by the indigenous tradition of Sanskrit grammar, which has been able to provide European linguists with new insights.) In spite of this great variety between languages, there is a growing consensus among linguists that human language has an innate component.

More will be said about language below. The few remarks so far made allow us already to draw some provisional conclusions. If—and for the time being I emphasize *if*—the set of ascetic practices and religious beliefs studied in the preceding sections are somehow expressive of one or more general human predispositions, it is not necessarily of interest to know what the actors involved thought about this themselves, or how it was embedded in the cultural situation to which they belonged. An exclusive emphasis on “understanding in context” might have the effect of obfuscating the universal predisposition that expresses itself through the phenomena at stake. This does not exclude that the local understanding of these phenomena—such as the Indian conviction discussed above to the extent that certain forms of asceticism and beliefs about the inactive nature of the soul are inherently related to each other—may occasionally add to our understanding of them. But they do not exhaust or limit our understanding of them.

Partly because of the specific cultural situations in which innate predispositions are always embedded, they may be difficult to recognize. If it is true, as has been suggested above, that the parallel complexes of religious practices and ideas found in India and in Christian antiquity are to be understood in terms of a common innate predisposition, the question has to be addressed how such an

innate predisposition can be described and distinguished from the numerous accompanying features that reflect the cultural situations in which it finds expression.

There can be no doubt that human beings are born with a variety of innate predispositions. Perhaps the most obvious one is sexuality, which humanity shares with a large number of other animals. We will not deal with this particular instinct, but note that it can express itself in a great variety of ways. Indeed, the editors of a recent volume on sexuality distinguish between sex, which is a natural fact and lies outside history and culture, and sexuality, which “refers to the cultural interpretation of the human body’s erogenous zones and sexual capacities” (Halperin et al. 1989: 3). It is also important to observe that this perhaps most essential of human instincts does not inevitably lead to sexual activity; the celibacy of the ascetics studied in this article proves that an important number of people tried and try to resist its urges, no doubt with varying degrees of success. Here as elsewhere it is important not to identify human predispositions with “fixed programs”; as Boyer (1998: 91) rightly points out, such fixed programs would be maladaptive.

It will not be of much use to compare the universal which we suspect may be linked to aspects of religious and ascetic behavior and thought with sexuality (or sex). Religious and ascetic behavior, unlike sexuality, are confined to human beings, without clear parallels in other animal species. Moreover, though many manifestations of what is commonly called religion are heavily infused with emotion, the aspects that have attracted our attention in the preceding sections are not.¹⁴ Both asceticism (of the kind under consideration here) and the views about the nature of the self appear to be essentially dissociated from emotion, or even ways to conquer it. The emotions to be conquered include, of course, sexual emotion. It therefore does not make sense to see in these practices and beliefs the expression of a universal, an instinct, that has much in common with sexuality, its enemy. In order to make a useful comparison with the propensity that interests us we need another universal that is confined exclusively to human beings and devoid of strong emotional dimensions. One such universal—confined to human beings and devoid of a strong emo-

¹⁴ Jaina authors, for example, have always been adamant that the voluntary death chosen by their ascetics is not suicide, precisely because the latter involves the passions (Dundas 1992: 155).

tional dimension—is particularly important and has received a fair amount of attention in recent years: language.

The idea that language has an innate component has gained many adherents since Noam Chomsky first published his review of J. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* in 1959. The expression "language instinct" is sometimes used, as in the title of Steven Pinker's recent book (1994), in which he traces this usage back to Darwin. One of Chomsky's arguments against the behaviourist Skinner, and therefore for the language instinct (although Chomsky does not use this expression), is that many sentences uttered by language users have never been uttered before, which excludes the idea of a limited number of learnt responses, as Skinner proposed. That is to say, the innate component of language is invoked to explain the fact that linguistic behavior is not limited, not confined to the constant repetition of a finite number of learnt expressions.

Much has been written about the precise nature of this language instinct. Some believe that it is responsible for the Universal Grammar (UG) that is supposed to underlie all human languages. Others maintain that the innate component of language does not rigidly determine the limits of the possible in human languages, but embodies preferences—preferred ways of using language. This is the position of Derek Bickerton (1981), who has tried to show that "new" languages, primarily Creoles, always share certain syntactic features which are not necessarily present in already existing languages. In other words, although children are pre-programmed to learn languages that obey certain syntactic rules, they can adjust to, and therefore learn, languages that do not correspond to their inborn expectations.

In spite of the almost general agreement about the innate nature of the ability to use language, there is no agreement that this ability has been acquired as a result of Darwinian selection. Surprisingly, even prominent linguists such as Chomsky and evolutionary thinkers such as Stephen Jay Gould have suggested otherwise (Piattelli-Palmarini 1989). This position has come under attack in recent years (e.g., Pinker and Bloom 1990; Pinker 1994; Dennett 1995: 384-393), even though critics find it difficult to specify how exactly Darwinian evolution could have given rise to language.

Perhaps the most convincing solution to this problem suggested to date comes from Terrence Deacon in his book *The Symbolic Species* (1997). A characteristic feature of human language is that words do not merely refer to their objects; words also represent other words.

They are incorporated into individual relationships with all other words of the language. This explains that we can learn the meaning of a word merely from other words, as in when using a dictionary, sometimes without having direct acquaintance with the denoted object: we all know the meaning of "angel", but few of us have ever met one. This referential relationship between words is what Deacon calls "symbolic reference"; it forms a system of higher-order relationships that is to be distinguished from the indexical relationship between a word and its object. Accordingly, language acquisition cannot take place without symbol learning. The part of the brain primarily linked to symbol construction, Deacon argues at length, is the prefrontal cortex. It is the prefrontal cortex that is relatively much bigger in human beings than in other animals, including our nearest relatives, the apes. The conclusion seems inevitable that there has been co-evolutionary interaction between brain and language evolution. Symbol learning, once in use in whatever primitive and undeveloped form in our early ancestors, put a premium on brain developments in the prefrontal region that would facilitate and enrich this practice. Since the capacity for symbol learning, though limited, is feebly present in chimpanzees and bonobos, it is not necessary to assume that the brain had to grow before the earliest manifestation of speech (or other form of symbol learning) could take place. It is rather the use of speech (in whatever form, but based on symbolic reference) that explains the subsequent growth in evolution of the relevant parts of the brain.

This is no doubt an attractive explanation for the evolutionary development of general language ability, yet it says very little about how a specific language instinct, or a UG, might have come about. In this connection Deacon reminds us that languages, far from being unchanging, evolve over time at a rate thousands of times faster than genetic evolution in human beings. If, therefore, linguists are surprised by the capacity of children to learn to speak, and if they postulate that those same children must already, in the form of UG, have an innate capacity (since otherwise they would not be able to distill the rules of grammar out of the sentences they get to hear), they overlook a crucial fact. During the time that humans have used some form of language, language has adjusted to its speakers, generation after each new generation. The UG that linguists speak about is therefore situated, not in the child, but in the language it is learning. It is due to the evolution of language, and much less to that of human

beings, that the fit between language structure and the expectation of the children who learn it is close. Deacon observes:

Once we recognize this evolutionary process as the primary source behind the universality of linguistic features, and abandon the assumption that to be universal a feature must be hard-wired into the brain, it becomes evident that we may have vastly underestimated the range and variety of language universals, or near universals.... I think ... we should not be surprised by the extent to which even high-level conceptual patterns of linguistic representation and discourse share near-universal features in most languages, simply because we are all members of the same species, sharing many common perceptual, behavioral, and emotional biases. (121)

"Language universals," Deacon points out on the same page, "are, in this interpretation, only statistical universals, but supported by the astronomical statistics of millions of speakers over tens of thousands of years. They are, despite their almost epiphenomenal origin, for practical purposes categorically universal."

We will have occasion to return to Deacon's ideas when discussing asceticism and religion in a later section. For the time being, it is important to point out that Deacon presents a way of thinking about universals which does not postulate that they have to be hard-wired into the brain. Indeed, he argues that "although our brains and sensorimotor abilities exhibit many adaptations for language that together might be called an instinct, grammatical knowledge cannot be one of them" (328). Deacon says many extremely interesting things about the way the use of language may have had an effect on the evolution of the human brain, but little about why there are certain universals of grammar and not others. His following statement may come closest to an answer: "the co-evolution of languages with respect to human neurological biases may not just be a plausible source for emergent universals of grammar, it may be the only plausible source" (340). He pleads against what he calls "monolithic innatism" and speaks instead of "an extensive array of perceptual, motor, learning, and even emotional predispositions, each of which in some slight way decreases the probability of failing at the language game" (350).

None of the authors that we have so far considered objects to the idea that there is such a thing as a language instinct in human beings, but what they say about it is progressively less distinct. All agree, as they should, that the existence of a language instinct does not conflict in any way with the presence of many different languages. The par-

ticular language any child is going to speak is not determined by its genetic constitution—not by its language instinct—but by the community in which it grows up. This in itself shows that the language instinct is not the same kind of thing as the instinct by which birds make their nests, or bees perform the dances that inform their co-workers where to find honey. No, the language instinct leaves an enormous amount undetermined—to begin with, the specific language that a particular child is going to speak. The question is to what extent it determines anything at all. As already noted, some maintain that there is such a thing as a UG, hard-wired in each child, so that no human language can deviate from it. Others, among them Bickerton, think of the inborn part of language as expressing itself as a preference which will invariably find expression in newly created human languages, especially in Creoles, but not necessarily in all existing human languages. And finally there is the argument, supported by detailed considerations of the way evolution works, that UG is not the kind of thing that gets anchored in the human mind by genetic assimilation. There may yet be shared features in human languages—universals of a kind—but they are *statistical* universals, determined by the fact that languages, in the course of their evolution, adapt to the human beings, i.e., the children, that learn them generation after generation.

What we can learn from this brief discussion of language considered as a human universal is the following. The existence of a universal in no way implies that rigidly identical behaviors will necessarily be observed in all human individuals or even in all human societies. That is to say, the absence of identical behaviors or of identical ideas by no means implies that no universal can be involved. Just as in order to find the shared features of all or most human languages one needs to abstract from often immense surface differences, one may have to abstract from surface differences (primarily determined by cultural and social context, we may assume) in order to find the universal we are looking for (or supposing it exists). And even when these surface differences have been peeled away, it is far from certain that something very specific will be uncovered. Linguists have long postulated the existence of a UG, but we have seen that, if it exists at all, it may be more fluid than has previously been thought. It seems safer to speak of a set of predispositions or, along with Deacon, of statistical universals.

All this implies that, in order to strengthen the idea that the forms of asceticism detailed in sections 2 and 3 of this essay are manifestations of a shared predisposition, it is necessary to determine whether sufficiently similar phenomena are current in other cultural areas of the world. The absence of such phenomena in one or more regions will not constitute proof that no shared predisposition, no human universal of the kind looked for, exists. Nor will it be necessary to find in other regions more or less exact replicas of what we came across in the Indian subcontinent and the classical Mediterranean world. This may at first sight look rather wishy-washy, and the risk of unrestrained subjectivity in the selection of evidence is a real one. Yet we have already formulated our universal in a rather precise manner as "the disinclination to identify with body and mind"; we can give this formulation a more positive twist, by speaking of "the attitude of being different from body and mind". Either way, we have a sufficiently precise formulation to allow us to test whether material corresponding to it occurs in altogether different cultures. The next section will take up this task by considering religious and related phenomena that occur in a great number of tribal societies.

5. *A human universal confirmed*

The notion that the self is different from body and mind—including both thought and volition—is abundantly attested in a number of so-called primitive societies. In fact, different kinds of souls are often distinguished in such societies. One of these, called 'free-soul' by researchers, though thought to reside in the body, plays no role in the latter's activities. Nor does it play a role in ordinary thought-processes. It is free to leave the body (and is therefore sometimes designated 'external soul'), and does this when its owner is asleep or in trance. The adventures of this 'free-soul' may be remembered as dreams. Religious specialists, such as shamans, are often considered capable of sending out this soul on errands such as finding back someone else's lost soul. It is essential for a person that their free-soul does not stay away for too long from their body; if it does, then the persons concerned are likely to lose their senses or even their life.

Hans Fischer (1965: 243) designates the most wide-spread form of soul in Oceania *dream-ego* ('Traumego'). The dream-ego leaves the body during sleep and thus explains dream experiences. However, it

does more than this, for states of unconsciousness and fainting are also connected with its departure from the body. This soul is only observed when the person concerned is not able to do anything (Fischer 247). It is clear that this dream-ego is what we just called, following Hultkrantz, 'free-soul'. Fischer is of the opinion that the dream-ego is the principle of life and of consciousness, and as such is the *precondition* for thought, feeling and will. It does not by itself think, feel or will (321, 324). In much of Melanesia and Micronesia the word for dream-ego also denotes the shadow or reflection. In Polynesia, on the other hand, different words are generally used. Fischer arrives on this basis at the conclusion that in the whole of Oceania the concept of a 'spiritual double' exists beside that of the dream-ego (255, 262). They are respectively the 'outer' and the 'inner' aspects of the same being, for which Fischer deems the designation 'free soul' appropriate (273).

This same type of free-soul is found among the Batak, where it is called *tondi* or *tendi*. Beside this, an 'external double' is known, which, among the Karo Batak, is closely related to the *tendi*, yet not identical with it. The same concept, but not the external double, is found on Sumbawa, the Batu Islands and the Mentawai Islands (Leertouwer 1977: 205).

Many of the peoples of northern Eurasia know a free-soul, the aspect of a person that manifests itself outside the body. It can leave the body during sleep and thus explains dreams, or during trances in order to communicate with other souls or supernatural beings. This soul represents the personal individuality of its owner, and as such can be called his or her 'self'. Yet, the question what role this soul plays while its owner is awake is as a rule not even asked. It is, however, assigned different seats in the body by different peoples: the (whole) body by some; the skull by others; the body or the head by others again. The free-soul in this area manifests itself outside the body in the shape of its owner in reduced size; this is especially the case in eastern Siberia. Other manifestations include whirlwinds, lightning or fire, big animals such as bear and reindeer, and small-winged animals. Most important for our present context is that the free-soul in northern Eurasia does not take part in the activities of the body. This is visibly the case where the activities of the soul take place only when the body is motionless, i.e., asleep, unconscious, or in trance, which is most common. The close connection of the free-soul with the person as a whole is never in doubt. It also happens that a soul

acts, to some extent, independently of the body even while the body is engaged otherwise. In this case it is appropriate to speak of a 'double'. In Finnish popular belief the free-soul can become a double when its owner is struck by a particular illness characterized by giddiness, despondency, weakness and the like. The illness is cured when the double is returned to its owner by the appropriate method. Another double acts as messenger of death, among the Finns as well as elsewhere.¹⁵

In North America, too, the free-soul is commonly inactive while in the body, although it is sometimes said to "keep watch". This soul is usually conceived as having the appearance of its owner. It is often, but not always, represented as a shadow. It may also appear as light or fire. The free-soul may be very small in size, and take many shapes, such as a bird or something else.¹⁶

The Netsilik and Iglulik Eskimos of North America knew a free-soul which was thought to be a miniature image of its owner. It could leave the body in trance, dreams and sickness; in the case of sickness it had to be restored to the body. Under specific circumstances it could permanently reside outside the body; its owner was then considered invulnerable. Similar ideas prevailed in other Inuit groups. The free-soul was usually thought to reside in an internal organ, such as a kidney or the liver, when not outside the body during dreams, etc. (Oosten 1976).

The Mundas in India recognize a soul called *roa*, which is the true self; it leaves the body to experience dreams. People are no longer directly conscious of their *roa* as they were in primordial time. The immediate effects of its activity belong to the invisible world. It plays no role in the explanation of trance (van Exem 1982).

Finally, the Germanic peoples knew a soul—called *hugr* or *hamr*—which could leave the body and be active during inactive periods of the body (Hasenfratz 1986: 20, 23).

All these examples from different continents share one important feature: they all signify some kind of entity, a 'soul' in the terminology of the scholars who have written about it, which is not involved in the activity of body and conscious mind even though inseparable from the person. Situations in which members of so-called tribal societies accept to undergo, or even bring about in themselves, pain-

¹⁵ All the cases mentioned in this paragraph are discussed in Paulson 1958.

¹⁶ The cases in this paragraph have been taken from Hultkrantz 1953.

ful experiences while trying to remain unaffected, are equally numerous. In providing the examples below, it should be clear that these two characteristics—a soul not involved in body activity coupled with willfully undergoing painful experiences—comprise phenomena similar in certain respects to asceticism. As in the case of early Christian asceticism, and for the reasons specified above, no attempt will be made to interpret these phenomena in their own cultural contexts. Such interpretations are, on the contrary, purposefully extracted from the description.

The following examples are taken from what are commonly known as 'initiations'. (See the articles collected under the heading "Initiation" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Mircea Eliade [ed.], New York: Macmillan; London: Collier Macmillan, vol. 7: 224-238.) This is not the place to define this term (see Snoek 1987). It is rather my aim to single out some features which frequently occur and which are relevant in the present discussion. We shall first concentrate on puberty initiations.

Proofs of endurance often characterize these initiations. Prohibitions against sleeping, drinking, and eating are common, as are silence, darkness, and suppression of sight. These are obvious attempts to ignore, or overcome, the needs of the body. Not infrequently, endurance of physical pain is part of the initiation, as when wounds are inflicted upon the candidate: circumcision is particularly widespread, but cutting off of a finger, removing incisors, and other bodily afflictions also occur. Often, even if not invariably, these sufferings have to be undergone—and are undergone—with great equanimity. It is not necessary here to illustrate these well-known facts.

The question could be raised whether initiatory trials can really be considered to be related to asceticism. Asceticism, as commonly understood, cannot be dissociated from religion. Is this to the same extent true of tribal initiations? It must here be recalled that, earlier in this article, we abandoned essentialist uses of 'religion' and 'asceticism', so that we are not interested in the question whether something is "really" religious or otherwise. Cases are here presented which exhibit the features we are looking for on the basis of the universal whose existence we have provisionally postulated. It is of no particular interest to know whether these features characterize phenomena that are commonly called religion or asceticism.

It is yet striking to note that these initiations are often the occasion at which the initiand acquires secret knowledge about gods and spir-

its. What is more, the novice becomes part of the spiritual realm himself. For example, during the initiation ceremony of the Australian Kurnai, described by Howitt (1904), secrets are revealed that concern a great Being, called *Mungan-ngaua*, who, having lived initially on earth, left the earth, and ascended to the sky, where he still remains (630). Howitt moreover points out, after describing the puberty rites of the Yuin tribe, that during these initiatory ceremonies the boys are told about the divine being called *Daramulun*, being warned at the same time never to mention these things to women and children. Clay figures of this god are shown during these ceremonies, only to be destroyed subsequently. After losing their incisor, the boys "were led ... to the tree on which the figure of *Daramulun* was cut, and were told of him and his powers, and that he lived beyond the sky and watched what the Murring did. When a man died he met him and took care of him".

Both in India and in Gnostic Christianity we came across the notion that the inner essence of the human being is identical with the highest godhead. This notion, too, is not confined to these two cultures. It is true that the ethnographic evidence is not always clear enough to come to very definite pronouncements. Often the—or a—soul is said to return to God after death, but this does not necessarily imply that the two are identical. It is possible that statements concerning the identity of God and soul require a level of sophistication which is not normally present in the societies under consideration. Yet some examples leave no room for doubt.

The examples from North America collected by Hultkrantz (1953: 189; 1994) concern most commonly the 'breath-soul'. An Abnaki Indian from Canada made the following statement: "In our old religion we believed that the Great Spirit who made all things is in everything, and that with every breath of air we drew in the life of the Great Spirit." This statement identifies one's breath with the 'Great Spirit', and it does more: it tells us that the Great Spirit is "in everything" and therefore omnipresent. A different position finds expression in the belief recorded among the Lenape, that some of them believe their souls to be in the sun, and only their bodies here on earth. In this case, the soul is in the creating deity, the sun, and not therefore in the body. Yet also beliefs of a highest divinity which contained the whole world within itself have been recorded among this people. According to the Creek and the Chikasaw, after death the souls of good Indians went to a supreme divinity called 'Master of

Breath' (or 'Breath maker'). An ancient myth of the Winnebago concerning the origin of death proclaims: "Into your bodies Earth-Maker has placed part of himself. That will return to him if you do the proper things." In Oglala shamanistic speculation *Wakan Tanka*, i.e., 'the Great Mystery', 'the Great God', reveals himself in gods, spirits and demons; he is manifoldness and yet unity. All man's souls are *wakan*; they are included in the Great Mystery. "The word *Wakan Tanka* means all of the *wakan* beings because they are all as if one."

The Ashanti peoples of West Africa know several souls, one of them, the *kra*, being "the small bit of the Creator that lives in every person's body." It returns to the Creator when the person dies. It is the Supreme Being that directly gives to a man this spirit or life when he is about to be born, and with it the man's destiny" (Busia 1954: 197; cited in Hochegger 1965: 288). The return of the *kra* to God after death is confirmed by other investigators (e.g., Danquah 1944: 113; Meyerowitz 1951: 24; Ringwald 1952: 60). One of the souls of the Yoruba is called *emi* or 'spirit'. "This is regarded as the seat of life. It is the part of man which is closely related to the gods. Olorun the Supreme Deity is known as *Elemi*, 'Owner of spirits'. A man's spirit is thus traced to Olorun, and is therefore regarded as the divine element in him" (Lucas 1948: 248). Maupoil (1943: 388; cf. Hochegger 1965: 293) speaks of one of the souls accepted by the peoples of Dahomey, called *se*. The individual *se*, he observes, is nothing but a small part of the great *Se* (*Mawu*), into which it is reabsorbed at death. The *tondi* of the Toba-Batak is identical with the High God according to P. L. Tobing. Although Sinaga (1981: 105) disagrees with this thesis, he admits that "*tondi* 'represents' God in man who shares it according to the extent of his possibility and finitude".

These and similar examples make it plausible that notions of god(s) and notions of soul(s) are often related to each other. Since a number of cultures tend to depict the soul, or a soul, as not being involved in the activities of the body, we may ask whether such a notion of gods, and in particular of the supreme being, as inactive is equally common.

It is. The remote and inactive nature of the supreme being in a large number of societies has been noticed by scholars of religion, and documented in a number of publications.¹⁷ The only activity that

¹⁷ For a survey of the attributes of supreme beings, and for a short description of the history of their study, see the entry "Supreme Beings" by Lawrence E. Sullivan in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14: 166-181.

is often assigned to him is the creation of the world, or of the living beings. Occasionally he is not even considered creator of the world and its inhabitants. Omniscience is an almost universally attested feature of the highest being.¹⁸ It is not usually understood to mean that the highest being knows literally everything. He knows what people do, even in secret. This kind of all-knowing is, of course, primarily a characteristic of human 'soul', also of an 'inactive soul', and it can cause no surprise that it was transferred to the highest being. An obvious extension of the idea of an all-knowing highest being is that of the highest being as a moral agent who may even punish where necessary.

6. *The 'ascetic instinct': On the role of a counter-productive universal*

The examples offered in the preceding section suggest that there is indeed a shared theme in a large variety of practices and beliefs that do not otherwise have much in common. The present section will therefore start from the assumption that there is a universal, a shared predisposition, that makes itself noticeable through these cases and, it may be added, has a role to play in accounting for at least an important part of those practices commonly termed ascetic and religious. For the sake of brevity, and following the now current, hypothesized 'language instinct', I will use the equally unsatisfactory expression 'ascetic instinct'. The question as to how to account for the presence of such a shared predisposition is unavoidable and will be addressed in this section.

The parallel between the language instinct and the hypothesized ascetic instinct goes beyond both having a somewhat inappropriate name. Both are confined to human beings, and both regulate (if that is the word to use) the interaction between individual humans and pre-existing cultural complexes—language and religion respectively. Both individual languages and individual religions evolve, and in doing so will adapt to the predispositions of their users. Both are therefore likely to evolve common features, something like UG in the case of language, something like the features described in the preceding sections in the case of religion. In both cases, it is to be kept in

¹⁸ Attestations of this characteristic have been collected by Raffaele Pettazzoni in a number of publications (e.g., 1931, 1956).

mind that neither individual languages nor individual religions have to conform to the so-called universal features identified in a number of them. There is statistical probability that these features make their appearance as a result of a long process of (cultural) evolution in which other factors play a role, too.

There is another factor that puts our proposed ascetic instinct on a par with the language instinct and in a different category from an instinct like sexuality. The features that we have united under the designation 'ascetic instinct'—primarily asceticism and the inclination to see the self as not involved in activity by nature—are not accompanied by strong emotions, much like language and, notably, unlike sexuality. This is not to say that religion cannot be accompanied by strong emotions. Indeed, the central role of fear in the transmission of many if not most forms of religions is well known (e.g., Burkert 1996: 29; Michaels 1997; Durkheim-Meisterernst 2000), as is the role of love and devotion. However, the features that constitute our proposed ascetic instinct are different. The ascetic and the martyr are not driven by fear; they defy and overcome it. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" St. Paul wrote (1 Cor 15.55); there can be no doubt that his words have inspired countless martyrs and ascetics. Knowledge about the true (inactive) nature of the self is not accompanied by fear either. It is, on the contrary, the definitive way to separate oneself from fear and other emotions.

Language and religion are not in all respects parallel to each other and there are important differences between them. New religions may suddenly arise, where no such thing normally happens in the case of languages. People may be forced to abandon their religion in favor of another one; comparable replacements of one language by another, imposed by economic or political necessity, may as a rule be less abrupt. It is possible, even likely, that religions interact more strongly than languages with other ambient social and cultural developments. All this does not change the fact that, by and large, language and religion, being cultural complexes that individuals normally inherit from their elders and that, in doing so, adapt over the generations to the predispositions of their users, behave in roughly parallel fashion.

Since cultural complexes, such as language and religion, are subject to evolution in a way that is not dissimilar to genetic evolution, sometimes the notion of 'memes' (corresponding to genes in biological evolution) is used to designate the cultural units that are passed on

from one generation to the next and which may be modified in the process. A religion, being a complex that unites a number of memes, is then a 'memeplex'. In spite of the enormous differences—a gene can be chemically identified, the very nature of a meme is difficult to determine; memes essentially depend on the presence of human minds, genes do not; etc.—the evolution of memeplexes can be studied in more or less the same way as that of organisms. Religions, being memeplexes, evolve in such a manner that those containing successful memes have better chances to survive. The most enthusiastic users of the notion of memes (e.g., Susan Blackmore 1999: chapter 15) propose that memetic evolution may account for behaviors that are genetically disadvantageous, or even that memes can influence genetic evolution.

Theoretically it may be possible that the presence of certain cultural complexes influences genetic evolution. Indeed, we have seen that Deacon explains the enormous development of the human brain as a consequence of the crossing of the "symbolic threshold" and the resulting use of language. Genetic evolution could in this case be influenced, even determined, by a cultural change, since the new cultural situation (the use of language) came to accompany our ancestors for such a long time that genetic modifications influenced by it became possible. Language could become a permanent feature of early humans because it greatly augments the chances of survival of those who use it. Cultural features that do not have that effect, on the other hand, will not normally stay around for long enough to become hard-wired in the neural system. This is the reason why Deacon argues against the innate nature of UG.

Those who look upon religion as a memeplex that may have had an effect on genetic evolution will have to make clear in what way and to what extent religion increases the survival chances of those who are religious. They will next have to specify what particular invariant aspect of religion has stayed around long enough to make a transfer into the genetic constitution of human beings not only possible but advantageous. Claims of this nature are, for the time being, highly implausible or at best totally speculative, so that we will not pursue this path here.

It is more promising to recall that the memetic evolution of religion will tend to adapt religion to the inborn predispositions of the humans who inherit the religion concerned, that memes will be "parasitically exploiting proclivities they have 'discovered' in the hu-

man cognitive-immune system" (Dennett 1998: 120). That is to say, it is the religion that adjusts itself to the human being, and there is little or no question of human beings genetically adjusting to their religion. If, as is being argued in this article, a significant number of religions share the feature studied and specified in the preceding pages, this is because human beings have a predisposition that corresponds to this feature, and this independently of their particular religions. The ascetic instinct, then, has not been created by religion but, on the contrary, has played and still plays a role in the formation and replication of existing religions.

So far the situation is not very different from the one prevailing in language formation. The UG, as Deacon argues, is statistically often present in languages because of the presence of certain predispositions in human beings (i.e., the language instinct) that favor its appearance. Similarly, asceticism and the other features dealt with in this article often occur in religions on account of the presence in human beings of the ascetic instinct. There is, however, one important difference: the predispositions that give rise to UG have no discernible effect on the evolutionary fitness of their bearers. The ascetic instinct, on the other hand, has a clear effect on the evolutionary fitness of its bearers, namely a negative one. If the ascetic instinct, as here understood, predisposes to asceticism and sexual abstinence, among other things, then such a counter-productive instinct should have been weeded out long ago by natural selection. How has it been able to stay with us?

We have spoken at some length of the momentous effect that symbolic thinking and language use have had on the evolution of modern humans. Indeed, symbolic thinking and language use are the two features that account for 'humanness' more than any other genetic or cultural features. It is with their help that human beings construct ideas of reality that are beyond immediate evidence, ideas that can then be shared with other language users. Shared, but unverifiable, ideas about reality characterize many if not all religions. Supernatural entities could hardly have come to occupy a central position in religious thought without the use of language or at least symbolic reference. Shared ideas about the nature of the self which, as we have seen, recur in a great number of religions, are equally dependent upon symbolic thinking and language. It seems evident, then, that the appearance of religion has some connection with the appearance of symbolic thinking. But what kind of connection?

Symbolic reference (as explained earlier) goes beyond iconic and indexical reference by creating a network of connections between the symbols themselves. To quote Deacon: "My imagistic and emotional experience in response to the episodes described in a novel is distinct from that of anyone else, though all readers will share a common symbolic understanding of them. The 'subjective distance' from what is represented confers a representational freedom to thought processes that is not afforded by the direct recall or imagining of experiences" (451). Deacon continues:

This is crucial for the development of self-consciousness, and for the sort of detachment from immediate arousal and compulsion that allows for self-control. Self-representation, in the context of representations of alternative pasts and futures, could not be attained without a means for symbolic representation. (451-452)

Consciousness of self in this way implicitly includes consciousness of other selves, and other consciousnesses can only be represented through the virtual reference created by symbols. The self that is the source of one's experience of intentionality, that self that is judged by itself as well as by others for its moral choices, the self that worries about its impending departure from the world, this self is a symbolic self. It is the final irony that it is the virtual, not actual, reference that symbols provide, which gives rise to this experience of self. This most undeniably real experience is a virtual reality.

In a curious way, this recapitulates an unshakeable intuition that has been ubiquitously expressed throughout the ages. This is the belief in a disembodied spirit or immortal 'pilgrim soul' that defines that part of a person that is not "of the body" and is not reducible to the stuff of the material world. In other words, the very process—the development of symbolic representation—that gave rise to language (and the accompanying growth of the prefrontal part of the brain), also gave rise to certain notions, a certain kind of knowledge about the world, and in its train (or in its place) to a certain attitude, all of which express themselves in the phenomena studied in this paper. A number of these phenomena, especially the tendency to abstain from sexuality, are counter-productive from an evolutionary point of view. At first blush one might therefore expect that the universal behind it should have been selected against in the course of time. But this universal, we now know, does not stand alone. In fact, there is no gene (or collection of genes) that is exclusively responsible for this universal. Rather, this universal is an accompaniment of symbolic representation. There may

be no gene for symbolic representation either, but here the situation is somewhat more complicated. Symbolic representation and language, both cultural features, have co-evolved with the human brain, the evolution of the human brain being a genetic development. The ascetic instinct is therefore dependent upon symbolic representation—perhaps inseparable from it. From an evolutionary point of view, then, symbolic representation has increased the chances of survival (and of procreation) of those capable of it through language; language gave its users a decided edge. At the same time, symbolic representation was a handicap, if perhaps a relatively small one, because it saddled those capable of it with certain attitudes, perhaps ideas, which would lead a small minority from among them to renounce sexuality, or to inflict damage to their own bodies.

Since we are talking about natural selection, which is a process that likely requires numerous generations to become effective, it is appropriate to point out that the number of individual sexual renunciants in pre-historic times may have been very small indeed, if there were any at all. The ascetic instinct may not, therefore, have exposed itself to selection pressure on this level until historic times, which—from an evolutionary point of view—is very recent. However, we have proposed a link between certain initiatory practices to the ascetic instinct, some of which involve submitting to, or inflicting damage to, one's body (e.g., cutting of a finger, extracting a tooth, circumcision, etc.). There is no reason to doubt that such practices were current already in pre-historic times, and indeed, they may conceivably have been around long enough to become susceptible to selection pressures. However, if the argument presented in this paper is correct, the ascetic instinct could not be selected away separately, there being no genetic package involving it alone. The ascetic instinct may indeed have slightly reduced the survival chances of its bearers, but this slight reduction was more than offset by the increased survival chances connected to the use of language. For, as proposed in this paper, the ascetic instinct and language are inseparably connected—they may even be two sides of the same coin.

7. *Concluding remarks*

It would be wildly optimistic to think that the preceding pages have finally solved "the problem of asceticism". They have, to be sure,

brought to light a common theme that manifests itself in many forms of asceticism as well as in other practices, such as initiations, and in certain wide-spread popular as well as philosophical notions about the nature of the soul and of spiritual beings. But many steps separate the shared predisposition to consider one's 'self' different from one's body and mind from the decision taken by some few determined individuals actually to stop taking care of their body, or to face the most extreme of circumstances (including torture and death) with indifference. Those steps need to be explored, but that task cannot be undertaken in the present study.

What has been gained by the current study, I believe, is that a basis has been provided for "a comprehensive theoretical framework for the comparative study of asceticism", which was mentioned as a desideratum at the beginning of this study. It is, henceforth, possible to determine the extent to which different forms of asceticism belonging to different cultures are expressive of the shared human predisposition here identified. Cultural differences can then be studied against the background of this common predisposition.

Perhaps some insight has also been gained into other aspects of what is commonly called religion. Frequently attested ideas about the nature of the soul have now lost their status as curiosities and can take their place within a broader understanding of 'human nature'. We have also come one step nearer to an explanation of the wide-spread occurrence of ideas about an inactive, highest god. Here, however, tantalizing problems remain: For example, it remains unclear why symbolic representation should give rise to the idea of an inactive, highest being. More precisely, it is not clear why the idea of an inactive self should be transferred, so as to give rise to that of an inactive highest being. There are, as is well known, numerous examples of religious beliefs that conceive analogously, or even identify, the essence of the individual, i.e., the soul, and the essence of the universe, i.e., the creator or universal spirit. The transfer of properties from one to the other is not, therefore, surprising. The difficulty is to understand how and why symbolic representation should encourage or even facilitate such a transfer.

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Abbreviation

NHL: The Nag Hammadi Library in English, translated by members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity (James M. Robinson, director), 2nd ed. E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1984.

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