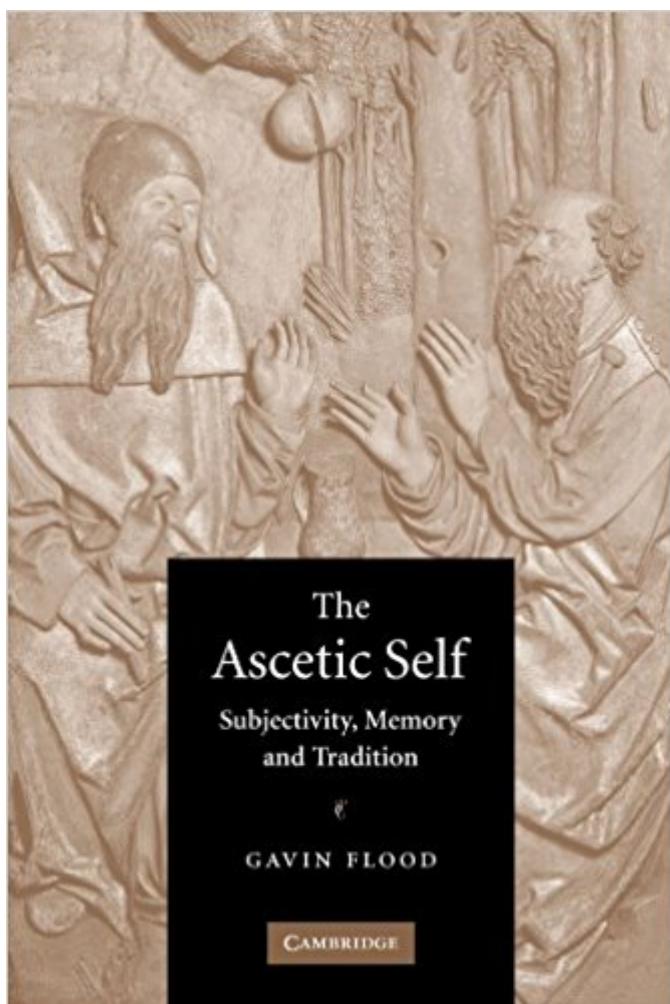


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The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory And Tradition



Synopsis

Focusing on Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, this book argues that asceticism must be understood within the boundaries of tradition. It exemplifies a completely new paradigm for comparative religion which seeks to avoid a problematic universalism on the one hand and an area-specific relativism on the other. The volume's original contribution to methodology will be influential in the future development of comparative religious studies.

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Customer Reviews

Asceticism, the idea of giving up sense pleasures for a spiritual goal, is practised in many religions. This book focuses on Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, and argues that asceticism must be understood within the boundaries of tradition. The book exemplifies a completely new paradigm for comparative religion which seeks to avoid a problematic universalism on the one hand and an area-specific relativism on the other. This ground-breaking contribution to methodology will be influential in the future development of the entire field of comparative religious studies.

Gavin Flood is Professor of Religion at the University of Stirling, and the author of *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

This book is erudite, ambitious, and expertly rendered. While for the advanced student, Flood was able to perform a true piece of comparative religious scholarship, rare in this age. This book is great for those who want a number of approaches to asceticism accompanied by a cutting edge theory.

Highly recommended.

Although Flood is obviously a knowledgeable scholar of religion (his primer on Hinduism is excellent), I found that *The Ascetic Self* had limited usefulness due to Flood's forced and largely unsupported definition of asceticism. More specifically, Flood asserts that there is no asceticism outside of traditional religious contexts -- and only cosmological ones at that. This narrow and arguably untenable definition stands in opposition to the recent work of other scholars of asceticism including Geoffrey Galt Harpham and Richard Valantasis who assert (following Freud, Weber, Foucault and others) that asceticism is fundamental to the formation of culture itself and therefore, a very present force in contemporary Western societies. In the face of this compelling scholarship, Flood's definition just doesn't seem to fall within the 'realm of the true' and therefore represents a crucial flaw in his project. If Flood had wanted to limit the scope of his project to traditional religious contexts, he could have done this without excluding the possibility that some forms of secular asceticism do indeed exist and thrive in modern society.

This book is not recommended for someone beginning to research the subject of asceticism. While the author does a good job exploring themes in ascetical practice, it is clear he assumes the reader already has an idea of what he is writing about. Terms, including those found in the subtitle, are never presented in a clear and delineating manner, and if the writer's intent is to offer "a new paradigm for comparative religion," the book should have been better organized to make his case, as it reads more like a collection of related essays than an effort to establish a new framework. The "essays," though, are good reading, and I found the chapter on Simone Weil informative and his concise analysis of Evagrian cosmology in Chapter 6 to be helpful, so the book is not lacking in providing insights into the subject.

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