

# MINIMALISM:

## Investigating the Motivations and Goals of Contemporary Self-Sacrifice

### Abstract:

This thesis examines current trends of minimalism and considers the ways in which it is compatible with theories of ritual, spirituality, and asceticism. This is accomplished by a literature review of the relevant theories, which inform a series of questions used to guide an investigation into contemporary examples of minimalism. A series of blogs and articles are used to gather data and further inform the possibility of minimalist practices being spiritually or ascetically satisfying.

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I, **Andrea F. Reeve**, hereby declare and guarantee that this thesis entitled **Minimalism: Investigating the Motivations and Goals of Contemporary Self-Sacrifice**, has been independently drawn up by me, that no sources and resources other than those stated by me are used, and that the passages in the work whose verbal content or meaning derive from other works - including electronic media - is taken by citing the source if borrowing is made known.

Nijmegen, June 20, 2021

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## Introduction

A central feature in all studies of culture and humanity; anthropology, archaeology, art, history, religion, and ritual; is the complex relationship between people and their possessions. Theories abound as to why items carry such significance, and how humans ascribe meaning to them. This gives rise to a foundation from which to explore the curious trend of minimalism, where people seek to *reduce* their possessions by reassessing their relationship to their belongings, and donate or discard that which they deem unworthy by new-found, selective standards.

This popular movement is forerun by authors who describe methods of decluttering, which denote a transference of meaning: people relinquish their possessions, presumably in exchange for something deemed to be more important. This necessarily entails a reassessment of what *is* valuable to the individual; the ensuing benefits reported by minimalists vary from increased physical or mental space and financial freedom to moral satisfaction, improved health and prolonged feelings of relief, lightness and peace.

These latter testimonials are of particular interest, as they suggest that the loss of objects may yield benefits which could be argued to be spiritual: a deliberate alteration of one's frame of mind, core identity, or value system. What is more, these benefits arise from heavily ritualized methods, some citing traditions that date back a couple of centuries. Ultimately, the process of minimalism results in dissociation from one's belongings, and refocuses on new values; it upends societal norms, implying a criticism of normalized values. This potentially speaks to ascetic motivations, and associated goals of meaning conversion and bettering oneself through negation or deprivation.

The **research problem** emerging from these trends is that they pose a bold contrast to the norms of greater Western culture; they abrade against the typical directive of portraying one's wealth and status through one's possessions. Curiously, this movement also runs parallel to the rise in self-reports of Westerners identifying as 'spiritual but not religious'. Given other contemporary behaviours which speak to forms of secular spirituality, or even secular asceticism,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to my previous thesis, *Secular Asceticism: A Contemporary Analysis*.

it may be possible that contemporary minimalism is connected to more traditional impulses towards austerity which are exhibited historically in the religious West. Such possibilities have not been thoroughly examined, aside from a brief reference that shall be expounded on in the description of minimalism.

To better explore this matter, the central question addressed in this thesis is: **How can contemporary minimalist practices be understood in light of relevant theories of spiritual and ritual practice, and can they be further illuminated by historical practices of asceticism?**

This query can be reduced to the following sub questions which will guide the structure of this thesis:

1. What is contemporary minimalism and why is it practiced?
2. What do ritual studies theories reveal about minimalist practices?
3. What theories of spirituality are relevant to minimalism?
4. In what ways can minimalism be compared to ascetic practices?
5. How do the experiences of contemporary minimalists compare with these theories?

Addressing these questions demands a literature review of the relevant theoretical frameworks. The incorporation of these three approaches (*ritual, spiritual, ascetical*) is ideal in that none of them are mutually exclusive, however they are all capable of standing independently from one another. This allows placement of contemporary practices on a spectrum that does not assume the presence of any of these elements. Such a method permits flexibility in describing practices which are deeply personal, and anticipates a profound variety in motivations and benefits.

The first section includes research outlining the most popular modes of minimalist practice and the motivations and benefits reported by their user base. Examples of specific practices follow, which will serve as a basis for the proceeding section on Ritual. This second section will briefly consider the ritual elements of contemporary minimalism using Bell's *Characteristics of Ritual Activities*, and then explore possible relations to each relevant *Spectrum* category. The third section considers an eight-fold definition of spirituality imported from the field of healthcare, and a theory of spiritual practice according to Kees Waaijman, followed by his *Schools of Spirituality*

examination of asceticism. The fourth section continues into asceticism-proper, taking a historical overview from Margaret Miles and a theory from Richard Valantasis. Using this combination of theories in tandem with contemporary perceptions through a netnography exploring blogs and articles by people engaging in minimalism, it will be possible to triangulate the likelihood of contemporary minimalism being a spiritual or ascetic practice.

This approach should achieve the **research aim** of gaining a better understanding of minimalist practices in societal and individual contexts, by combining historical theories from ritual, spirituality, and asceticism, alongside the analysis of relevant contemporary data. Ideally this should help define subsequent areas of research by nuancing the ways in which contemporary practices are satisfying; what needs are being addressed, and how people today might be supported by the fields of study from which the above theories derive.

## 1. Minimalism

### 1.1 What is Minimalism?

In the broadest sense, ‘minimalism’ refers to a lifestyle in which one voluntarily reduces their possessions, usually with the aim of simplifying one’s life or for the sake of some greater moral concern. The reducing process typically signifies a re-examination of one’s needs versus wants, but may entail a variety of other motivations. For example, minimalists may hold ideals of *anti-consumerism*, in which they avoid buying anything unnecessary to reduce dependency on corporations. They may espouse *frugality* as a financial stratagem or in response to poverty (strictly speaking, however, minimalism denotes a voluntary lifestyle). A person may also embrace minimalism in response to opposing extremes of hoarding, as they hope to relieve feelings of claustrophobia or crowdedness in their home.

The definition of minimalism is often stretched beyond items in the home; in some of the forthcoming examples, instructions are included which aim to reassess one’s bad habits such as substance abuse, toxic relationships, or excessive eating. Minimalism is likewise done for simplification, organization, and ensuring one spends their time, money and energy on what is truly important to them.

Some research has been done comparing minimalism to traditional asceticism; however, it refers to the *aesthetic* of minimalism within popular culture and media.<sup>2</sup> This notion of minimalism as an aesthetic is a popular trend which offshoots from the minimalist lifestyle, however it is not a concern of this thesis; making one’s home *appear* to contain fewer items, or emphasize empty space and straight lines is a different type of minimalism than that which seeks to reduce one’s belongings. I shall therefore ignore all aspects concerning aesthetic minimalism unless it is demonstrated as a motivator of my respondents.

‘Voluntary simplicity’ is the driving factor behind the minimalism with which I am concerned. At its core, it says not only ‘I have all I need’, but additionally takes the stance that

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<sup>2</sup> Travis Cooper, “Post-Industrial Asceticism from Goop to Kinfolk Magazine,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 47, no. 3–4 (April 8, 2019): 7–13, <https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.35707>.

retaining items which are not necessary or highly valued is acutely *harmful*. The reason behind this detriment may vary, as do the benefits reported by minimalists. This will be expanded on shortly; psychological meta-analyses have shown that minimalists report greater subjective well-being and happiness, in addition to indicators of life-satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> These positive markers occur primarily in the areas of autonomy, a sense of competency and interrelatedness to others.<sup>4</sup> To explore why this might be the case, I shall provide more detail on some of the core motivations of minimalists.

## ***1.2 Why Minimalism?***

### *1.2.1 Questioning the Directive*

A key motivator for minimalists is that embracing simplicity retaliates against the ‘standard’ busy, complicated urban life which focuses on the accrual of wealth, status, property and a particular ‘class’ of possessions. In essence, minimalism establishes a *change in lifestyle* which allows one to value quality over quantity. By not participating in the consumerist culture, a practitioner hopes to become less enslaved to the societal norm of ‘desire, purchase, receive, become happy’. This ideally results in more free time and autonomy, as one might justify working less.

Empirical evidence indeed suggests that materialistic lifestyles predict significantly lower life satisfaction; it has been intimated that when the needs supported by minimalism (autonomy, competency, and interrelatedness) are not met, the materialist response is compensatory ‘retail therapy’ which serves to distract from, rather than address, the lacking inner needs.<sup>5</sup> The minimalist, however, sees consumerist culture as a manipulative force, spurred on by corporate greed. Their idyllic scenario involves reclaiming a sense of wholeness that Western culture believes is accomplished through the acquisition of goods. In this way, being content with less

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<sup>3</sup> Stacey A. Rich, Sharon Hanna, and Bradley J. Wright, “Simply Satisfied: The Role of Psychological Need Satisfaction in the Life Satisfaction of Voluntary Simplifiers,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 2017): 89–105, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9718-0>.

<sup>4</sup> Edward L Deci and Richard M Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Kennon M. Sheldon and Tim Kasser, “Psychological Threat and Extrinsic Goal Striving,” *Motivation and Emotion* 32, no. 1 (March 2008): 37–45, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-008-9081-5>.

allows escape from the ‘hedonic treadmill’, and gives one the freedom to decide for themselves what they truly want.

The most relevant academic research on self-reported benefits of minimalism comes from Lloyd and Pennington’s study, which incorporates 10 qualitative interviews. They identified five major themes of satisfaction:

Autonomy (freedom/liberation, aligning with values, authenticity);  
 Competence (feeling in control of environment, less stress and anxiety);  
 Mental Space (saving mental energy, internal reflecting external);  
 Awareness (reflection, mindfulness, savouring); and  
 Positive Emotions (joy, peacefulness).<sup>6</sup>

Minimalists clearly derive value from the process of devaluing of their belongings; to address this curiosity, the question must be asked, why do people ordinarily value the objects which minimalists discard? If we consider an algebraic use of Kopytoff’s commoditization theory, which essentially states that the rarer an item is, and the more it reflects the identity of its owner(s), the more potential worth said object may have.<sup>7</sup> It seems then, that minimalists engage in a process of either de-singularization of, or disidentification with their possessions. In other words, any sense of scarcity is deemed false or irrelevant; and the personal meaning one attributes to a specific item is decoupled from it before discarding.

This is an interesting notion: if a person revokes a sense of identification with an object, does this displaced identity resurface elsewhere?

### *1.2.2 Identity & Perspective Shifts*

In the domestic context, it seems a minimalist deliberately invites an identity crisis through this exercise in value allocation. If Kopytoff’s theory functions in this way, then a few options present themselves: the sense of identity which has been divorced from items simply ceases to

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<sup>6</sup> Kasey Lloyd and William Pennington, “Towards a Theory of Minimalism and Wellbeing,” *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology* 5, no. 3 (October 2020): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41042-020-00030-y>.

<sup>7</sup> Igor Kopytoff, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 181.

exist; identification with retained items increases; or identification is deliberately allocated to some non-object (experience, activity, belief etc.).

Yet, the process of bringing awareness to one's identity (whether or not one is conscious of the consequences of object-identification) seems to essentially pose the question 'who is my ideal self?', and 'is this [action/item/lifestyle/value system] compatible with this model?'.<sup>8</sup> The hope is to define one's ideal, and elicit less conflict between this ideal and one's actualized behaviour. To have less conflict results in less constriction or sense of warped identity while alone *or* in social situations.<sup>9</sup>

The psychology of ownership itself is a complex phenomenon. The first major empirical study on possession showed that there are two broad factors by which people ascribe value to their things: usefulness, and associations with the individual's identity.<sup>10</sup> To mindfully question whether an item should be retained, the implication involves questions such as, 'what is the item?'; 'by what means did I receive it?'; 'what does it mean to me?'; 'how does it relate to my other objects or activities?'.<sup>11</sup>

In a societal context, this shift of values allows a person to perform their identity in a different way.<sup>12</sup> This becomes complex owing to the personal meaning ascribed to objects, relative to societal meanings. Belongings in the affluent-West often serve as an indicator of a person's identity or social status; to the minimalist, their lack of belongings expresses a cultural criticism, but from the perspective of the society the minimalist seems aloof or antisocial because of their refusal to participate in accordance with expectations. The intensity of this can vary depending on the specific culture and what is lacking; not having a car will have certain meanings to the individual (perhaps it pollutes at a literal and moral level), but the same lack represents something

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<sup>8</sup> Don Bannister and Fay Fransella, *Inquiring Man: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, 3. ed., reprinted 1993 (London: Routledge, 1993), 138–39.

<sup>9</sup> Bannister and Fransella, 140.

<sup>10</sup> Lita Furby, "Understanding the Psychology of Possession and Ownership: A Personal Memoir and an Appraisal of Our Progress," *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 6, no. 6 (1991): 459.

<sup>11</sup> Furby, 458.

<sup>12</sup> Bannister and Fransella, *Inquiring Man*, 135.

different to the society in which it is normal to have a car (the person must be of a lesser class to be always taking the bus).

This discrepancy is highlighted in minimalism because objects are traditionally a crucial element of world-building in any societal unit. Disagreement on their significance is disruptive because this is an on-going and mutually-participatory process.<sup>13</sup> At a surface level, the minimalist may be judged as poverty-stricken for their lack, but if given the opportunity to explain their reasoning, judgements may be more directed at their personal value systems which criticize the culture in which both parties participate. This may result in conflict, because criticism of the society in which one still lives may leave those engaging in typified behaviours feeling judged for following directives which they have not questioned. This is frequently a concern when citing moral reasons for declining to engage in normalized behaviour.

### 1.2.3 Morality

In the areas listed above; autonomy, competency, mental space, awareness, and positive emotions; one can see the exploration and execution of issues to do with morality that the minimalist hopes to address. They examine their existing value systems; decide how best to control their environment to make it manifest; reportedly enjoy a clearer conscience for doing so; must use mindfulness throughout this process; and feel good about themselves for successfully changing their behaviour and environment.

This is intricately connected with the greater social context; according to G. Harpham, all cultures provide a framework for criticisms and subsequent countercultures. This is not necessarily a rejection of the culture per se, but a moderate way of (dis)engaging with its problematic values. Additionally, the parent culture heavily influences what the moral dimensions are upon which one might focus, providing *empowerment* over one's re-entrance into societal roles.<sup>14</sup> This was further a point in my previous research with Malina,<sup>15</sup> and seems to be demonstrated by minimalists who

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1967), 18.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xi–xii.

<sup>15</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 1995), 166.

champion environmental issues, vegetarianism and veganism, and more commonly, anti-consumerist sentiments.

#### *1.2.4 Environmental Justice*

These latter issues of consumerism are worth special attention. Minimalists are often profoundly motivated by ecological concerns; overconsumption, lack of sustainable business practices and severe threats of global warming urge an increasing number of people to make changes to their lives.<sup>16</sup> The support of this cause alone is linked to higher self-reports of well-being;<sup>17</sup> it is unsurprising, then, that this is one of the common motivations of contemporary minimalists to step away from cultural standards of unnecessary consumption. This influences not only what a minimalist keeps in their house, but also their diet, their method and quantity of transportation, and more profoundly, their family-planning.

An unprecedented number of young adults are choosing to go childfree due to overconsumption, overpopulation, and general uncertainty about the future. Millennials in particular are choosing to sacrifice having a family because of these social concerns.<sup>18</sup> Even though the affluent-West can afford to establish families, they are increasingly choosing not to do so because it is judged as immoral; they avoid worsening environmental crises, and exposing new life to a society with corrupted values. It is these social criticisms; the sacrifice of possessions, particular foods, and families which speak most profoundly to traditional ascetic impulses. This will be elaborated on later.

#### *1.2.5 Meaning-Making*

These major motivators towards minimalism all have in common a component of *meaning-making*. Generally speaking, this is a process in which an individual and their culture co-arise in a mutually participatory process.<sup>19</sup> This points to a notion popularized by Bradd Shore: meanings

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<sup>16</sup> Lloyd and Pennington, “Towards a Theory of Minimalism and Wellbeing,” 123.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Binder and Ann-Kathrin Blankenberg, “Green Lifestyles and Subjective Well-Being: More about Self-Image than Actual Behavior?,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 137 (May 2017): 304–23, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2017.03.009>.

<sup>18</sup> Sabrina Helm, Joya A. Kemper, and Samantha K. White, “No Future, No Kids—No Kids, No Future?,” *Population and Environment*, March 16, 2021, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11111-021-00379-5>.

<sup>19</sup> Urs Fuhrer, *Cultivating Minds: Identity as Meaning-Making Practice* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), xi.

are “twice-born”, in that they occur simultaneously at a socio-cultural level, as well as an individual level during specific occasions.<sup>20</sup> This is intensely displayed in the world of material things; any given item is constructed, purchased and used or displayed according to a Platonic notion of ‘perfection’. This idyllic concept behind the item drives one to possess it in the first place, because it is thought to be useful, efficacious or enjoyable, and these attributes are usually assigned by the culture of origin. In this way, items are assigned a place in the world, and certain expectations develop regarding their possession and how an individual interacts with them.<sup>21</sup>

In the context of minimalism, this means that the more a society values a particular class of item, the more radical its transformed meaning may become if the decision is made to dispose of it. Meaning-making is a process of structuring identity of one’s Self and things in relation to it, and is heavily influenced by the greater culture even if actions are taken *against* the directed norms. Restructuring identity and object-meaning results in changes to the person, and they become more radical in relation to their culture; new properties will then emerge in this changed interrelation between individual and their society.

The assignment of new meaning to (a lack of) things is discussed fruitfully by N. Levy, a philosopher who examines phenomena of downshifting. He describes ‘superlative meaning’ as being a paradox: if one derives meaning from something which has a distinct end-point, once this is reached it leaves one in crisis – however if it is not completable there seems to be no point to it, and frustration emerges from this futility.<sup>22</sup> He solves this paradox by transcending meaning through what he describes as spiritual engagement; this is denoted by the pursuit of activities for which the goal makes itself known through a gradual process, rather than being specifically defined at the beginning.<sup>23</sup> This could be argued in application of the pursuit of knowledge: there is no arrival, but the goal (and even the process) becomes clearer through progression towards it. This

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<sup>20</sup> Bradd Shore and Jerome S. Bruner, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning*, 1. iss. as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 68.

<sup>21</sup> Fuhrer, *Cultivating Minds*, xiv.

<sup>22</sup> Neil Levy, “DOWNSHIFTING AND MEANING IN LIFE,” *Ratio* 18, no. 2 (June 2005): 176–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2005.00282.x>.

<sup>23</sup> Levy, 184.

means that voluntary simplicity does not necessarily possess meaning as an end in itself, but may be part of a greater practice in which meaning develops through learning and gradual refinement.<sup>24</sup>

To demonstrate how such abstract concepts work in practice, some examples of popular minimalist practices will be helpful; how they are organized, and what they offer to their practitioners. Consider the motivations of identity, morality and meaning-making moving forward into descriptions of common forms of minimalism.

### ***1.3 Examples of Minimalist Practises***

#### *1.3.1 Marie Kondo and Decluttering*

One of the most popular associations with minimalism is the prescribed method touted in Marie Kondo's book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, which offers detailed instructions on how to reduce one's possessions, alongside topical examples from inside the home with her clients.<sup>25</sup> Kondo's work is often credited as an inspiring catalyst which convinced people to begin reducing their belongings, however the claim exists that her methods are *not* minimalism, for the sole reason that they are presently heavily commercialized. Her website features a shop which sells multiple books and a variety of items, including storage containers and hangers, in addition to non-essential items specific to the minimalist *aesthetic*, such as vases, candles, essential oils, and quartz crystals paired with matching tuning forks.<sup>26</sup> Owing to this, I will specify that I am not concerned with the commercial elements of Kondo's franchise, however her methods *do* describe a widespread, ritualized way to assess and reduce one's possessions, which speaks to the minimalism with which I am concerned.

In Chapter 2 of her book, Kondo engages in striking degrees of animism in her experience-based method of deciding what items to keep; she assumes that *every* item will be discarded, excepting those which are found to 'Spark Joy' in her client. Her focus is on changing the *mindset* of her client, rather than simply organizing; this process of analyzing what gets to stay, which must occur in one fell swoop, transforms the underlying mindset of the minimizer. "When you put your

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<sup>24</sup> Levy, 189.

<sup>25</sup> Similar processes include *Goodbye Things: The New Japanese Minimalism*, by Fumio Sasaki and *The Joy of Less* by Francine Jay.

<sup>26</sup> "KonMari | The Official Online Store of Marie Kondo," accessed March 25, 2021, <https://shop.konmari.com/>.

house in order, you put your affairs and your past in order, too.”<sup>27</sup> Kondo purports her methods as helping clients not only part with their unnecessary belongings, but additionally spurred them to get a divorce, lose weight, or improve their performance at work. This suggests that clutter in the home reveals something greater in one’s life that needs to be put right.

The way in which Kondo discusses objects is worth lingering on: she describes them as though they were sentient and had the capacity to feel happy or dejected. When an item is rejected by her client, Kondo picks it up, thanks it with sincere gratitude for a ‘job well done’, and bids it farewell. In further chapters, she provides extraordinarily specific ways of organizing retained items, including how best to fold clothes and store them in ways which ‘makes them happiest’. It seems that Kondo attempts to demonstrate deep respect towards her client’s possessions, allowing the person to part with their items without guilt, by means of provoking a sense of closure. Kondo insists that forgotten and unused items in the home feel more ‘rejected’ than if they were discarded or rehomed; being neglected in such a way is an affront to their ‘dignity’.

The method itself is quite simple, but the environment and mindset are paramount. One should engage in this process privately, lest family intrude and derail the process of decluttering. There should be no other distractions either, and Kondo explicitly bans the use of background music or ongoing conversations; one’s attention should be solely focused on each item in turn. All items are placed on the floor, then picked up – this process *cannot* be done visually: every individual book and hair tie must be physically handled – and one asks, “Does this spark joy?” and disposes of anything that does not elicit an immediate “Yes”. All other items are thanked for their service, then thrown out or donated.

This process must be completed during one tidying ‘marathon’; never as a gradual process. One assesses their belongings in the order of: clothes, books, papers, miscellany, and mementos, in order to ‘hone’ one’s sense of joy while progressing from least to most rare or sentimental items (this seems to correspond with Kopytoff’s theory of object-value deriving from its scarcity and expression of identity). The retention of any object must be done on a basis of *intuition*, and never

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<sup>27</sup> Marie Kondō and Cathy Hirano, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, First American edition (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014), 3.

rationalization. Mentally, it is important to keep one's reason for discarding foremost in the mind: a new lifestyle with idealized space which suits one's desired activities; a home that is relaxing and welcoming; ultimately, this reason can always be reduced to the creation of an environment in which one can be happy. Finally, one is conscious of the investigation of one's identity; one cherishes retained items, rather than hating discarded ones. Kondo insists that discarded items *do* serve a purpose, namely, to train one's knowledge of what *does* 'spark joy'.

Once one has assessed what items are truly important and reflective of one's ideal life, a subsequent step may be the downsizing of one's living accommodations. This is often seen as a milestone in minimalist communities, especially as seen in the light of anti-consumption and environmental issues; someone embracing simplicity may relish the change to a rural environment. This speaks to trends within minimalism which underscore the practitioner's lack of belongings.

### 1.3.2 *Tiny Houses*

Downsizing one's living space at its most extreme is represented by the Tiny House movement, where a person seeks to minimize the physical footprint of their home. Distinction is made between a 'Small House' (37 - 93 m<sup>2</sup>) and a 'Tiny House' (less than 37 m<sup>2</sup>)<sup>28</sup>. Inspiration for this movement is often cited as Thoreau's *Walden*, where the author describes a two-year period after building a house in a remote, forested location; he recounts the process of becoming entirely self-sufficient, and reconnecting with nature, in addition to his personal values. His diary-type book presents his experience alongside a criticism of his culture of origin, speaking well to the motivations of contemporary minimalists.

*It would be well perhaps if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies, if the poet did not speak so much from under a roof, or the saint dwell there so long. Birds do not sing in caves, nor do doves cherish their innocence in dovecots. However, if one designs to construct a dwelling house, it behooves him to exercise a little...shrewdness, lest...he find himself in a workhouse, a*

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<sup>28</sup> "Tiny House FAQs," accessed March 29, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170614004601/http://tinyhousecommunity.com/faq.htm#what>.

*labyrinth without a clew, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead.*<sup>29</sup>

While the ostensible focus of the Tiny House movement is taking what space one needs and no more, it has become synonymous with the motivations behind it, rather than its manifestations. It promotes a lifestyle of simplicity, and usually suggests locations close to nature, alongside sufficient property to establish a self-sufficing food garden. This further curtails dependence upon corporations and serves to critique the values of society upended by this practice: over-consumption, ostentatious displays of wealth, long working hours, and elite status enjoyed solely by the wealthy. In this way, the social order is questioned alongside Thoreau: “The condition of the operatives ... cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched.”<sup>30</sup>

The motives of those building Tiny Houses usually overlap with environmental concerns; this influences the materials used for building, the methods of electrical supply (solar panels are typical), in addition to addressing homelessness. However, this latter issue is not necessarily a humanitarian endeavour; getting the homeless off the streets keeps them from polluting ecosystems of parks and water systems near which they tend to camp.

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<sup>29</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers ; Walden, or, Life in the Woods ; The Maine Woods ; Cape Cod*, The Library of America (New York, N.Y: Literary Classics of the United States : Distributed to the trade in the U.S. and Canada by Viking Press, 1985), 26.

<sup>30</sup> Thoreau, 24.



Figs. 1 & 2: Tiny Houses in the Netherlands.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> “Tiny House in Nederland? → 21x Écht Leuke Tiny Houses,” accessed April 24, 2021, <https://www.parkvakanties.nl/blog/algemeen/tiny-house-nederland/>.

There has been some interesting collection of qualitative data, involving interviews with 30 respondents either living in, or in the planning stage of moving into a Tiny House. These surveys indicated the primary motivating themes behind the decision to live in this minimalistic environment: financial security, autonomy, focusing on meaningful relationships, and simple living.<sup>32</sup>

Curiously, 23 of these respondents reported beginning their plans for Tiny House living in response to an existential crisis.<sup>33</sup> They further emphasized the *process* more than the result: methodically minimizing items and assessing what was truly valuable helped to explore core issues surrounding their identity and further determine what they truly wanted in life. This addresses one of the most common complaints of respondents: feelings of ‘enslavement’ due to the perceived requirement to work long hours for space and objects they did not need. Instead, new value was derived from focusing on relationships and self-sufficiency; this led to an ensuing sense of ‘freedom’.<sup>34</sup>

The presence of a defined process seems to be a critical element in both Kondo’s decluttering techniques, and minimizing for the sake of downgrading one’s living space. It may be possible that the methodological nature helps establish, but more importantly, *maintain* this alteration of one’s lifestyle. As the methods are one of the most concrete and quantifiable data sets available, I will explore these phenomena from a ritual studies perspective, providing a foundation for the later, and more abstract notions of spirituality and ascesis.

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<sup>32</sup> Severin Mangold and Toralf Zschau, “In Search of the ‘Good Life’: The Appeal of the Tiny House Lifestyle in the USA,” *Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (January 17, 2019): 4, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8010026>.

<sup>33</sup> Mangold and Zschau, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Mangold and Zschau, 10.

## 2. Ritual Elements of Minimalism

The second question asks how ritual studies might inform minimalism; this stems from how profoundly ritualized its methodologies are. The use of rites in themselves do not necessarily suggest spirituality – many secular behaviours are ritualized – however, the presence of ritual provides a framework that can be useful to establish and maintain the potential of spiritual satisfaction. I will predominantly use Catherine Bell’s theories of ritual to consider popular minimalist methods.

### 2.1 Characteristics of Ritual-like Activities<sup>35</sup>

There are a few elements in the examples just explored which parallel Bell’s description of ritual-like activities. The ritualization of minimalist techniques is likely a contributing factor to the trend’s success: it is especially helpful for the novice minimalist to have prescribed procedures which set a precedent, while promising specific benefits. Especially in Kondo’s case, there is highly formal conduct and strict adherence to an arbitrary set of rules, which specify *how* one should minimize, *with whom* one may minimize, and that one must complete decluttering in one marathon effort.

These methods are additionally highly performative, in that one must physically handle each object and engage in a deep assessment of identity; of note here, is that the *ritual objects* are used to reinforce *or* truncate the identity, and are often immediately abandoned after their purpose is served. Thanks to Kondo’s intense animism, these objects serve as *sacred symbols* regardless of their retention. Helpfully to the novice, Kondo appears genuinely concerned with the object’s *own* experience in this process of tidying and disidentification, helping her clients gain a sense of closure.

In the case of the Tiny House movement, minimalistic rites necessarily serve as a foundation, since one must choose their few belongings before committing to live in such close quarters. It also is a profound commitment to minimalism; Tiny Houses usually occur in small communities – and once in a Tiny House there is no option to *stop* living a minimalist lifestyle for

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<sup>35</sup> Catherine M. Bell and Reza Aslan, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford Univ Pr, 2009), 138–64.

lack of space. In this way, it is an intensification of minimalism and its disciplined mode of life; reversing such a decision would be complicated at a level of finances and real estate, but also through social pressure since Tiny Houses frequently occur within communities. Notable too, this movement features a profound sense of *traditionalism*, stemming from Thoreau's *Walden* which has been inspiring people towards voluntary simplicity since its publication in 1854. This serves not only to strengthen a sense of ritual, but acts as an adhesive for such communities.

While such characteristics may suggest ritualistic associations with minimalist practices, it is important to situate these within established categories of ritual. This will serve to narrow down the *function* of minimalism in these practices, which in turn aids in the classification of its use at a spiritual or ascetical level.

## ***2.2 Rites of Passage***<sup>36</sup>

A Rite of Passage is the most obvious ritual category which applies to minimalist practices. This demarcates a transition between one life-stage to another, involving extremely complex issues of core identity, at both personal and sociocultural levels; this bears on one's relationship to society, in addition to how one is viewed *by* society. A new mode of being is ushered in, accompanied by different social status, responsibilities, and privileges. Particularly relevant to our topic, is that rites of passage often involve ritual objects; the giving or annihilation of objects are used to signify a shift in identity.<sup>37</sup>

Victor Turner, citing van Gennep, is typically the authority on rites of passage. He details the process of change resulting from such a rite, including a *separation* from the preceding stage (questioning society's normalized directives, considering a minimalist practice), a *liminality phase* in which someone disidentifies from their previous markers of status (the process of minimalism; rejecting and retaining items which are placed on a spectrum between sacred and profane), and *reintegration* into society after this metamorphosis, complete with new attributes and duties (a consolidated lifestyle change in which one focuses not on one's belongings, but other aspects seen to be more important to one's identity and purpose in life).

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<sup>36</sup> Bell and Aslan, 94–102.

<sup>37</sup> Bell and Aslan, 100.

*The process of assessing how you feel about the things you own, identifying those that have fulfilled their purpose, expressing your gratitude, and bidding them farewell, is really about examining your inner self, a rite of passage to a new life.<sup>38</sup>*

Here, Kondo herself explicitly surmises her method as ‘a rite of passage’. Accordingly, she repeatedly describes clients’ struggles with processing their past via handling their belongings, and the implication is that the superfluous things one retains represents a less tangible mental blockage, entangled with the person’s core identity. This is likewise applicable to less acutely ritualized methods of minimalism. These issues of identity, assessment, and expressing one’s values in the guise of a ‘new’ person can be applied even to casual forms of minimalism as one grooms their identity through deliberate, formalized object use.

This can be expanded to more general minimalists who take on a sense of responsibility, either for the sake of self-development, or giving back to society through efforts towards global welfare or volunteering with their increased free time. Those in Tiny Houses emerge from their rites of passage with a new identity, location, and community, which serve to reinforce their decisions towards minimalism and the reasons for which this decision was made. In every case, the minimalist reforms their identity and hopes to emerge as someone with more solidified values, for which they feel empowered to act on with greater efficacy and autonomy.

### ***2.3 Rites of Exchange and Communication<sup>39</sup>***

Many rituals involve some type of exchange relationship: something is sacrificed with the expectation of some return, whether offerings to the divine, or to humans who petition divine on a patron's behalf. This can be entirely secular, for example, reciprocal gift giving on special occasions or mundane services rendered. Rites like these are often woven into the cultural norms of interpersonal expression; even the exchange of money for goods, facilities, or advice. Oftentimes these rites express respect towards people and reify the encompassing social hierarchy; this might look like petitions for favours, or making demands of an underling.

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<sup>38</sup> Kondō and Hirano, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*.

<sup>39</sup> Bell and Aslan, *Ritual*, 108–14.

In minimalism, the most comparable form of exchange rite is that of sacrifice, and this is also noted in Kondo's methods: the object is sanctified, even though it becomes unavailable; this is a distinctive element in exchange rites, and is the bare element in, for example, a burned sacrifice.<sup>40</sup> Sacrifice can be used to seal a contract or denote union with some form of Order, whether it be cosmological or a secular organization. This renders it as an exercise in sustaining relationships, and ultimately any sacrifice is offered in the hopes that it will secure some kind of well-being in return.

The hope for well-being is surely a prime motivation of minimalists, but special attention should be paid to what rituals are *denied*. Mary Douglas describes 'consumption rituals'; giving and receiving gifts are an important form of normalized social engagement, and refusing to give or receive a gift can be interpreted as anti-social.<sup>41</sup> This issue is often a huge point of contention in contemporary minimalism, particularly when it causes conflict in family relationships. It could additionally be argued that the purchase and anticipation of ordered goods has become highly ritualized in middle-class Western culture; refusal to participate in this may lead to awkward social tensions.

#### ***2.4 Rites of Affliction***<sup>42</sup>

"Rituals of affliction attempt to rectify a state of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered; they heal, exorcise, protect and purify." Given the context of social criticism, one can see that minimalism is indeed an attempt at alleviation from what is perceived as corrupted values espoused by society. This is inherently dependent upon the values of culture versus the individual; the minimalist sees the state as neglecting particular moral or mental concerns, and hopes to address these issues at a societal level rather than personal. In the case of over-consumerism, everyone must confront their habits and hijacked mindsets. Ritual methods are often used to address psychological issues like this; for the sake of their well-being, the person will question the greater cosmological (or societal) order; human need senses affliction (even when entrenched in

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<sup>40</sup> Bell and Aslan, 112.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1996), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=170084>.

<sup>42</sup> Bell and Aslan, *Ritual*, 115–20.

societal norms) and seeks a means to address it. Hence minimalism offers a way to relieve one's own induction into entrenched and problematic cultural beliefs.

*There is significant similarity between meditating under a waterfall and tidying. When you stand under a waterfall, the only audible sound is the roar of water. As the cascade pummels your body, the sensation of pain soon disappears and numbness spreads. Then a sensation of heat warms you from the inside out, and you enter a meditative trance...It closely resembled what I experience when I am tidying. While not exactly a meditative state, there are times when I am cleaning that I can quietly commune with myself. The work of carefully considering each object I own to see whether it sparks joy inside me is like conversing with myself through the medium of my possessions.*

This is a curious quotation which describes the act of minimalizing as a confrontation with identity; a careful grooming of Self through objects, which is implicitly correlated to a painful but meditative experience. The power (roaring; pummelling) of the water, juxtaposed with 'cleaning' is presented as a purifying force, helping one to connect with their core values ('commune with myself'; 'see whether it sparks joy inside me'). The deliberate toleration of the waterfall's onslaught is coupled with the destruction of identification to one's belongings. The upshot is that while the process may be uncomfortable, the gains achieved in realizing one's craven state by disidentifying with objects alleviates one's state of affliction and ultimately supports well-being.

### **2.5 Political Rites<sup>43</sup>**

The political elements of minimalism are most relevant to the chapter on asceticism, but the foundation which promotes their efficacy is steeped in ritual. Essentially this denotes a power imbalance, where rites construct power and distribute it to particular people. At once, this can solidify the morals of a particular group, empowering their cause; and it can revoke power through critiques of greater society, allowing minimalism to function in an anarchical way.

When power is reclaimed, the minimalist is empowered and the cause behind the societal criticism becomes more important than the culture *or* the probing individual. The reason for this is twofold: the sheer number of people whose actions are being questioned; and the criticism itself

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<sup>43</sup> Bell and Aslan, 128–35.

is appointed as a ‘higher concern’. For example, advocating or practicing minimalism with anti-consumerist overtones with the hope of environmental welfare and combatting climate change implies that *the environment* is inherently of greater importance than the *societal standards* which the criticism aims to alter. In the context of Tiny Houses, a community of minimalists collectively criticize their culture of origin, and the way in which this occurs will likewise influence the social dynamics of the small community of minimalists; and perhaps the most vocal for the cause are the ones who accumulate the most power.

## ***2.6 Contemporary Application***

There are some repeating themes in the intersection of minimalism and this ritual studies approach that would be informative for data collection. It would be helpful to learn the specific processes used, and how strictly defined they are, which would nuance the results of the practice. For example, questions stemming from the concept of a *rite of passage*, regarding if someone feels that they have taken on a new identity: what has changed, and how this change occurred? Object-relations would also be interesting to explore: what feelings a respondent might have towards discarded items, including the social ramifications of discarding items that give the impression of a rejected gift, resulting in strained relationships. It would be interesting to know about changes in headspace, a sense of sacrifice or purification that might occur from minimizing, or perhaps feelings of animosity towards the respondent’s culture of origin, or feelings of respect towards fellow minimalists.

This recalibration of perspective regarding one’s greater culture exists owing to rites which either changes one’s view, or questions societal practices which may be problematic. This process reportedly provides such benefits as a newfound sense of freedom, expression of one’s realized morality or identity, emphasizing the importance of relationships, and feelings of peace and contentment. In hopes of diving deeper into *why* these benefits occur from minimalist practices, an examination of spiritual theory and practice is in order. I will proceed with such an exploration for the sake of comparison, but hope to tread lightly enough not to force compatibility if it is not in fact present.

### 3. Spiritual Theories

#### 3.1 Defining Spirituality

The third question of whether minimalism is compatible with theories of spirituality requires agreement on what is meant by the term *spiritual*. Most definitions of spirituality from the fields of theology or religious studies tend to be either limiting or vague. While the concept itself is slippery, and by nature ineffable, I chose to bring in a model from the realm of healthcare sciences. The advantage to this is that such a definition seeks to be inclusive of the profound varieties of spiritual expression, so it casts a wide net. Yet the efficient approach used to create this definition speaks to very precise components which are easier to wield in practical analyses.

In Meier, O'Connor, and VanKatwyk's *Spirituality and Health: Multidisciplinary Explorations* a definition of spirituality is given which stems from a cross-study of 27 systematically analyzed definitions. This yielded eight major themes which I will expand on in order of frequency of occurrence, using the provided literature in addition to interpretation by means of topical examples.<sup>44</sup>

##### 3.1.1 Meaning or Purpose

This category refers to the foundational subject according to which one orients their worldview or understanding of the universe. It may additionally be driven by the ultimate values or morals one engages in. More abstractly, it can point towards what is perceived to be one's Ultimate Goal; an object or experience one yearns for above all else. Traditionally this could be God and religious frameworks of the cosmos; in a more secular context, it could be a striving for peace, simplicity, or conversely, activism for the sake of social or environmental justice.

##### 3.1.2 Connection and Relationships

One's relationship to a Greater Other or simply other people may contain a spiritual dimension. In this way, one's ontological state is re-examined and integrated as part of an expansive network outside of oneself. Spirituality can speak to awareness of these connections,

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<sup>44</sup> Augustine Meier, Thomas St. James O'Connor, and Peter VanKatwyk, *Spirituality and Health Multidisciplinary Explorations* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2009), 45, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10121158>.

and be manifested by the performance of one's small part on a greater social or divine stage. At a micro level, the relationship to oneself can be an important component of spiritual practice. At a macro level, one may consider themselves relative to their cosmological situation or vis a vis a particular global issue. This may additionally be evident in how one perceives the consequences of their actions as they influence others, for example, offering support to other devotees, or foregoing certain comforts so others may partake of them.

### *3.1.3 God or a Transcendent Other*

Many definitions of spirituality mention a Greater Other, however its use varies: some purport this as the primary, or even originating factor of spirituality, while others use this factor to differentiate between *spirituality* and *religiosity*. Its commonality in descriptions of spirituality, however, unambiguously refers to a concept that is never fully arrived at, because it is beyond human understanding; yet it still influences human existence by means which cannot be fully determined. For example, the origin of life or the universe, and the phenomena of consciousness are not well known, but we still experience the consequences of these things. Spirituality provides a context to relate to these things, despite their unknowability.

### *3.1.4 A Transcendent Self*

Another common theme is the examination, discovery, or mindful changing of the Self of the spiritual person. Most definitions explain this category as a means by which one develops the Self to facilitate stronger relationships, empathy, and integrity. By its stricter definitions, it is a deliberate grooming of one's identity and core values in order to align better with one's ideal state (even if perfection of this state is unobtainable). This also serves as a firm grounding point from which one can bear deprivation or denial for the sake of their values, thusly speaking to ascetic drives. This points to the motivations in play when disidentifying from possessions or pleasurable activities: it puts one in touch with their 'true Self', as the false aspects of identity are discarded.

### *3.1.5 A Vital Principle*

This refers to an animating, or lifegiving force that is typically impersonal. It can be likened better to 'energy' than 'God', as it is associated with health and greater overall wellbeing. This is the core of the life-experience, and is the active element behind (re-)incarnation. As I interpret this

definition, the vital principle is comparable to the Chinese qi, speaking to a foundational energy driving all sentient life. People today tend to cultivate this by means of meditation, yoga, moral vegetarianism/veganism, in addition to more secular practices of health and fitness, gardening (especially self-sustenance gardening) and avoiding behaviours such as smoking and superfluous consumption of food, drink, or intoxicants. Concerns over biodiversity may likewise speak to profound significance allocated to the sacrality of life-essence.

### *3.1.6 Unifying or Integrating Forces*

This refers to an impersonal force which allows one to participate in a greater Entity, by means of denoting a complex web of interconnections which function synergistically. This results in a notion of reality which is at once completely beyond the Self's experience or control, but can still be engaged with in a meaningful way (especially with those closer to one's Self in the lattice of connections). In a sense, it is like the conductor of an orchestra who permits a variety of contributors to create something far beyond what any individual might amount to on their own. This kind of force could be illustrated religiously through the concept of communal rites (i.e., the Sabbath or fasts), or in worldwide efforts which strive for non-violence or environmental justice, as benefits would only be reaped if everyone agreed with, and contributed to the cause.

### *3.1.7 Personal and Private*

The most major differentiation between *spirituality* and *religiosity* in these definitions is that the former tends to be relativized to the Self rather than a collective. In this way, one can have an independent spiritual practice in which there is a flexible mode of engaging with the above elements, rather than acute, prescribed religious orthopraxy. Spirituality tends to be described relative to one's *own experience* of morals, values or relationships, where as religion can (but does not have to) provide a framework in which spirituality may function. In a more secular setting, this might mean exploring one's personal values which differ from those of the normalized, greater society in which one lives; altering habits of lifestyle or consumption in a way which is personally satisfying rather than adhering to an externalized set of rules.

### *3.1.8 Hope*

This last category denotes spirituality as something which fosters one's will to live. Hope is what drives a person to weather the storm of a personal crisis, insecurity, illness, or the death of a loved one. It allows a person to stay motivated in times of distress by imagining that things will get better, or that current suffering will yield future returns. This is not singular to spirituality, but is intricately connected with the aforementioned categories, particularly meaning and purpose. Spirituality can help define what one is striving for; one can hope for a lighter conscience resulting from the avoidance of consuming particular things or behaving in specific ways, or trust in an improved state of health and overall wellbeing after observing a difficult fitness regime.

Spirituality is a capricious concept, well in line with its etymology of being an essence of air; it is uncapturable, yet ubiquitous and ever-present like wind, or music. In a similar way, it is a thing that is undeniably perceived, despite its flighty nature. Many definitions of spirituality from the humanities specify that spirituality is particular to practices,<sup>45</sup> but the interpretation espoused moving forward is that *spirituality* is a state perceived by the individual in question. A person inclined to provoke states of profound connection or meaning may be described as *spiritual*; they may or may not maintain their original identity while doing so; the meaning or connection invoked expresses the underlying foundation of their value system; and *spiritual acts* may be sought through both active or passive experience or practices.

I also move forward with the understanding that *spirituality* may exist within *religiosity* but that this is not necessary. To differentiate, I would emphasize in particular that religion tends to be more organized, with highly structured rule systems, hierarchies, and political connotations. *Spirituality* refers to something more dynamic, and in secular cases may denote a deliberate break from perceived injustice in power dynamics present in Western religious organizations (by this I refer mainly to the abuse of women and children, issues concerning bodily autonomy, and strict adherence to particular values and customs).<sup>46</sup> Instead, *spirituality* alludes to emphasis on *individual expression*, and hopes to be more fluid and flexible than arbitrary, doctrine-based adherence. Yet the two concepts can and do intertwine, and are frequently mutually supportive.

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<sup>45</sup> Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 47–49.

<sup>46</sup> Note that this means *spirituality* may be just as *political* as religion, esp. in the form of countermovements.

### 3.2 Theory of Spiritual Practices

The most practical exploration of *spiritual behaviours* is led by Waaijman's *inductive approach*; this is spirituality as informed by the living practices of people, rather than theological theories.<sup>47</sup> Congruent with the definition given above, spirituality can exist within or without a religious framework, but this lack of an organizational element changes its expression. The more orthopractic a school of spirituality is, the less it may be moulded to an individual; this fosters a 'cookie-cutter' experience which is more acutely religious.<sup>48</sup> In the absence of such a defined doctrine, spiritual engagement tends to express itself at a deeply personal level, and consequently may be difficult to identify. In its most visible forms, this individualized spirituality manifests in the home; this may be expressed in family relationships, domestic rituals, or engagement with personal items. The practitioner themselves becomes the central aspect, rather than a distinct, organizational force.<sup>49</sup>

A particularly relevant subtype described by Waaijman is *marginal spirituality*. This denotes a double-loyalty which will come into play in the forthcoming discussion of asceticism: the person is *capable* of behaving according to greater societal norms and expectations, but choose instead to behave *counter* to this, even though it might disadvantageous. Double-loyalty allows the person to radically criticize societal standards while within said society, because they could viably 'pass' as a typical citizen, but choose not to do so – however, their resistance may occur privately.<sup>50</sup>

To speak more specifically of marginal spirituality and how it applies to an individual, anthropologist Victor Turner is referenced, first on the occasion of *structure/anti-structure*, and secondly harking back once more to van Gennep's *rites de passage*. In *Structure and Anti-structure*, the parent culture and its norms, expectations, and value system forms the 'structure'. The 'anti-structure' refers to dissention against the status quo, with the hope of inciting change; if

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<sup>47</sup> K Waaijman, "What Is Spirituality?," *Acta Theologica* 27, no. 2 (March 4, 2010): 2, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v27i2.52309>.

<sup>48</sup> Waaijman, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Waaijman, 9-10.

<sup>50</sup> Waaijman, 12.

not change to the original structure, then potentially establishing a new counterculture in which the objecting citizens might thrive.

A *counterculture* well describes minimalism's (highly marginal) relationship to greater Western standards, and also parallels Waaijman's description of spiritual practice.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, a double-loyalty is nearly always present, as by definition the self-reported information from minimalists is available because of their choice to participate in society by means of books, blogs, documentaries, and discussion forums. In a more general sense, minimalism is compatible with this theory of spirituality because of its highly personal nature; the person decides for themselves what minimalism is – what their individual needs are, what wants can be thwarted, and what is valuable enough for them to keep. Likewise, minimalism is expressed in the home, affects interpersonal relationships (sometimes detrimentally when there is conflict over the worth of items) and the process of minimalizing is often ritualized according to private traditions.

This ritualization parallels, yet contrasts with Kondo's methods which are extremely rigid. This does not detract from its potential of being spiritual, but her method is more akin to 'religion' according to this definition: the specific and arbitrary process she prescribes bears consequence on its portrayed efficacy. This is emphasized by Kondo's touting of her methods as 'never failing' to permanently change a client's mindset, and subsequently, their lifestyle. In doing this, she depicts her followers as 'converts', who are able to enjoy their newfound sense of peace, orderliness, hope for the future, and newfound ability to live their ideal life; these speak to many elements in the definition of spirituality above. Essentially, if *minimalism* is a spiritual endeavour, Kondo provides a religious framework in which to practice it.

### ***3.3 Schools of Spirituality: Asceticism 'in Light of its Praxis'***

Waaijman proceeds to discuss different schools of spirituality, designated by their methods of spiritual expression. The most relevant to our case seems to be the ascetic school; I will explore asceticism-proper in the next section, but here I will focus on its intersection with spirituality. This entails emphasis on the *motivations* behind the practices in question. This should provide sufficient

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<sup>51</sup> Waaijman, 10.

context while helping to illustrate the relationship between spirituality and asceticism, as they do not always occur simultaneously.

The spiritual motive in the early asceticisms, occurring in the late Hellenistic period, were driven by goals of *purification*. Various forms of restriction were used to ward off evil, or were required in various cult practices. This often featured time-tested methods of fasting and sexual abstinence.<sup>52</sup> Once purified and elevated above the instinctual level of the body, the devotee would expect to have improved intellectual or rational capacity. This speaks to a switch from identification with the body, to that of the spiritual-divine. These practices were supported by exercises in meditation and training of the will, cultivating self-control and discipline.<sup>53</sup>

After the second century, the focus became more expressly Christian, with a focus on martyrdom and virginity as inspired by the suffering and imitation of Christ. This ideal merged with the aforementioned Hellenistic practices, adding richness to the motives but still focusing on the negation of bodily drives. This contrasts with the self-focused intents of purification, in that the axis of spirituality is based on likeness to the divinity of Christ, making negation (as expressed through bodily denial) the basic method of spiritual action.<sup>54</sup>

This became intensified over the next several centuries, especially as espoused in monastic settings. Devotees hoped to break more fully with the world in order to turn their attention to ascesis. This was marked by practices of self-examination, self-denial, prayer, and continual movement towards increased sanctification of Self and practice. The specific techniques were also heavily marked by negative methodology: silence, mortification, poverty, and abstinence were the most common means; these led to further negation of one's will, and this was emphasized in a community setting. These few centuries saw the introduction of several Rules: spiritual asceticism now had specific standards, and a few options with varying degrees of intensity. Ultimately, the aim was to cultivate *virtue*, by means of contemplation.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Studies in Spirituality 18 (Leuven ; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2002), 338.

<sup>53</sup> Waaijman, 339.

<sup>54</sup> Waaijman, 339.

<sup>55</sup> Waaijman, 340.

Monasticism enjoyed significant developments after the twelfth century, involving redesigned methods which were created to be more accessible: these allowed the spiritual ascetic to pray more efficiently through meditative aids. This was ostensibly in response to criticisms of excessive focus on negative practices, which proved to be alienating; hence the introduction of positive means by which to forge a sense of connection to the divine. Essentially this was an issue stemming from too much emphasis on suffering, rather than contemplation or connection. A monastic would sometimes lose their orientation, as practices had been disconnected from the meanings which gave rise to them.

Increasingly positive means were used by Western spiritual ascetics, and this exploded in the 1960's in the form of massive monastic reform. A variety of new ascetic exercises were popularized, including focus on scripture, prayer and holding spiritual debates, coupled with increased availability of education. Additionally, some Orders tolerated the integration of non-Christian asceticisms, especially Eastern thought.<sup>56</sup> This popularization of Buddhist principles was particularly relevant to the ascetic interested in the transcendence of suffering towards positive means. This could be accomplished through meditative practices, but the Eastern philosophies were wholly compatible with Christian ascetic standards of abstinence, self-control and questioning the importance of Self.<sup>57</sup>

These notions of discipline and cultivating betterment of the Self appear to also be present in minimalism, as evidenced by testimonials which cite reconnection with core values and movement away from the prescribed directive of portraying status through material goods. Visible is express rejection of the world and the values purported by society, alongside the recalibrated aim of increasing one's morality, connecting with a truer sense of purpose, emphasizing the importance of relationships, and upholding the sanctity of life which is threatened by over consumption. In this way, spiritual facets are developed through practices of minimalism; yet this is merely a *possibility*, and the actual degree of acute spiritual satisfaction would be dependent upon the individual and their self-perception.

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<sup>56</sup> Waaijman, 341.

<sup>57</sup> Waaijman, 341.

The recent injection of Eastern philosophy into Western spiritual asceticisms is similarly paralleled, as is evidenced by Kondo's popularity. Japanese (though not strictly Buddhist) understandings of well-being place emphasis not on explicit happiness, but on feelings of peace, calm, and gratitude for what one already has. A study comparing Western and Japanese modes of life satisfaction indicate that Japanese tend to aim for 'peaceful disengagement' from materialistic pursuits; the ability to accept things as they are is a better predictor of happiness than wealth or status. The most content participants made efforts to avoid being overstimulated, and consciously savoured small, everyday activities, and designated time for relaxation.<sup>58</sup>

### ***3.4 Contemporary Application***

Current perceptions regarding a spiritual experience of minimalism could be investigated by gathering information primarily on issues of meaning: how minimalism relates to what is meaningful, whether it stems from minimalism itself, or from the negation minimalism creates – this could be explored by considering how a minimalist distributes their freed time and money. If minimalism is seen as supporting an increased sense of what is meaningful or valuable in life, it would be compatible with the definition of spirituality above; if a person feels as though they are making a true difference to the community or the world, this would likewise be compatible with Waaijman's theory of spiritual practice. Borrowing from ritual studies, it would also be interesting to know if people perceive a similar headspace or routine when discarding, or if they sense a direct relation between discarding and feelings of peace or calmness.

Given the possibility of spiritual satisfaction derived from minimalist practices of self-denial and borderline embracement of poverty, I would like to examine the compatibility of minimalism with ascetic history and theory, divorced from its spiritual context. This should aid in the triangulation of defining minimalism on the spectrums of *spiritual* and *ascetic*; it is true that many asceticisms were motivated and expressed by spiritual means, but the exchange-relationship denoted by asceticism does not strictly require a spiritual component. It may be possible that even though minimalist practices *can* be spiritual, they might be more recognizable as *ascetic*.

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<sup>58</sup> Chiemi Kan, Mayumi Karasawa, and Shinobu Kitayama, "Minimalist in Style: Self, Identity, and Well-Being in Japan," *Self and Identity* 8, no. 2–3 (April 2009): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860802505244>.

## 4. Ascetic Theories

The fourth question asks what asceticism's relationship is to conceptual notions of minimalism. The prospect of deriving satisfaction through the negation of items or rejecting worldly endeavours speaks to minimalist practices at a surface level, but an in-depth exploration will help determine if the parallels are superficial or resonant. To begin this query, a history of ascetic practices is provided which concentrates on views towards the material world within Western traditions. Following this is a theoretical framework of asceticism which should serve as an acceptable basis of comparison.

### 4.1 A History of Ascetic Practice

This history of asceticism stems from Margaret Miles' *Fullness of Life*, where she discusses the history of Western ascetic practices by focusing on treatments of the ascetic's body. I have selectively incorporated information which could be reasonably applied more generally to *material items*. This permits a relatively brief description of historical asceticisms, concentrating on their perceptions of materiality.

*[The dichotomy of 'spiritual' and 'worldly']<sup>59</sup> sets the human being either in the perspective of connection to the source of life and being, or in that of the disorientation caused by clutching at objects of immediate pleasure and enjoyment. Such objects, good in themselves, become "too dear" in that the person becomes attached to them instead of to the source of life and being.<sup>60</sup>*

#### 4.1.1 The Early Church

Given the hostile climate in which early Christians found themselves, it is unsurprising that one of the prominent themes we see in the earliest ascetics is martyrdom. Prior to Constantine's conversion, the model of practicing 'daily martyrdom' was a popular mode of asceticism well into the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>61</sup> It is noteworthy that martyrdom was acknowledged for its spirit of sacrifice, and not the liberation from a bodily prison; in fact the remains of a martyr were often considered "more

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<sup>59</sup> The original language is very scriptural: 'spirit' and 'flesh', the former being on good terms with religious ascetic doctrines, the latter referring to lust, avarice, and other sins founded in the physical world.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret R Miles, *Fullness of Life Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism*, 1981, 157.

<sup>61</sup> Miles, 20.

precious than costly stones, and more valuable than gold”, and saintly relics were allocated a corresponding reverence.<sup>62</sup> This combined with an overall mode of secrecy among Christians, complicated by pressure from Gnostic writers who wrote despairingly of the body and everything in the worldly realm, believing it to be inherently evil.<sup>63</sup>

Corporeality was thus the locus of debate between Gnostics, and figures such as Tertullian (160), who insisted that the soul needed physicality in which to exist; even Christ adorned a material vessel in order to intervene in the world.<sup>64</sup> In this vein, he advocated an asceticism which permitted the body to ‘rest’ by minimizing the body’s acute needs through fasting and celibacy. This allowed a redirection of one’s energy to the divine, however it should be noted that this presumes a closed energy system which yields connotations of bodily care as detracting from spiritual health. This is a repeating theme throughout Western asceticisms.

The contemporary thought of Clement of Alexandria (150) headed a movement involving ascetic practices as an affirmation of life, in which he defined life as an essence deriving from God.<sup>65</sup> He suggests that a person should strive to elevate their virtue and proceed higher in the ranks of things which are ‘lovely’, and resist being drawn down into lower states. In this view of materiality, the physical world is tolerated as it provides a means to an end, but it is rife with the danger of idolatry. Clement purports that freedom of the soul is defined by its nonattachment to the worldly realm, and such attachment leads to ‘deadness’. To aid in practice, he differentiates between the ‘body’ and ‘fetters of the flesh’; the material is necessary for a good life, but attachments (particularly involving false worship) are problematized.

‘Deadness’ is also a primary concern of Origen (184). He engaged in his own profound ascetic practice and is easily the most prolific early Christian writer. In these writings, he emphasized a productive tension between a person’s freedom and duties: bodily asceticism is

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<sup>62</sup> Cyril Charles Richardson et al., eds., *Early Christian Fathers*, The Library of Christian Classics 1 (Louisville London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 156.

<sup>63</sup> Miles, *Fullness of Life Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Miles, 24.

<sup>65</sup> Miles, 37.

encouraged through mild practices of training, rather than harsh punishment.<sup>66</sup> He resisted valuing materiality, and focused instead on works of the soul.<sup>67</sup> His skepticism regarding material objects was based on their capacity for corruption: this concern hails from the resurrection of Christ, and the radically imbued meaning associated with such a physical embodiment. These questions of meaning were his primary concern, and he wrote extensively on the importance of *allegorical* understandings rather than literal interpretations; this may speak to the significance of an object as *representative* of something Greater.<sup>68</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Augustine

Born in 354, Augustine was particularly interested in the human condition, especially as it relates to ‘deadness’. This began when he noticed an odd imbalance regarding people’s striving for happiness, yet a determination to never actually achieve this state.<sup>69</sup> He saw profound discontentment, save if one assigned primary importance to God. The human will that lusts after material things needs to be ‘healed’, and this is accomplished through love of God (which is synonymous with ‘life’).<sup>70</sup>

Those who do not achieve this love of God suffer from addiction and enslavement within the worldly realm to which they are so attached. The notion of concupiscence is reviled; Augustine warns against lustful desire that is believed to bring happiness, as the resultant positive feelings are always fleeting, and these temporary satisfactions come at a high cost. These include things like sex, food, power, and possessions. Yet, Augustine is careful to specify that these things are valuable if treated with respect – worldly things do not need to be shunned, but should be honoured without over-estimating their worth.<sup>71</sup> In this way, the material world itself is not evil, but our worship of it or abuse of it is.

#### 4.1.3 East and West After Augustine

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<sup>66</sup> He regretted not taking this advice, and called his personal practice “an immoderate lust for purity” in his *Commentary on Matthew*

<sup>67</sup> Miles, *Fullness of Life Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Miles, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Miles, 62.

<sup>70</sup> Miles, 66.

<sup>71</sup> Miles, 70.

Emerging from Augustine's philosophy, the early Christian notion of hierarchy developed, in which physical matter is lowest and God is highest.<sup>72</sup> However, owing especially to Christ's incarnation and increased importance of eucharistic theology as espoused by Cyril of Alexandria (376), God was understood to have a more active relationship to materiality.<sup>73</sup> This was evident in significance ascribed to pilgrimages, the occurrence of spectacular miracles, and active intercession from saints through reverence of their relics, which were understood to be extremely powerful. The natural world was the locus of holy forces, including Benedict's (480) miracles, and the belief of Saint Oswald's site of death being imbued with holy powers; even soil removed from this site was powerful after its relocation.<sup>74</sup>

These understandings manifested in practices of asceticism which acutely harmed the body, but healing of both body and spirit was expected in return.<sup>75</sup> In terms of regarding material goods, there is an interesting rise in the 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> century of devotion aided by images and icons. However it is explicitly stated, similarly to Augustine, that so long as the object of worship is God and not the materiality of the aid, this is an acceptable practice. Saint John of Damascus (675) poignantly expresses this sentiment:

I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked. I do not reverence it as good – far from it; how can that which has come to be from nothing be God?<sup>76</sup>

#### 4.1.4 A Thirteenth Century Synthesis

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the incarnational importance of the physicality of Christ, and the hierarchy proposed and elaborated by Pseudo-Dionysius began to merge. God was a force who interacted with the material world, and imbued certain objects with miraculous powers; this was particularly embraced by Francis of Assisi, who promoted modes of holiness by means of

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<sup>72</sup> Miles, 80.

<sup>73</sup> Miles, 84.

<sup>74</sup> Miles, 92.

<sup>75</sup> Miles, 87.

<sup>76</sup> St John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 29.

interaction with the world and material objects.<sup>77</sup> This was exemplified by Francis being the first saint to allegedly receive the stigmata.

If the material world is filled with delights, then any goodness and pleasure derived from them ultimately were founded in God. This awareness should accompany one throughout their dealings in the world, to ensure that it is not the object itself which is venerated, but the One from whom it came. This is where hierarchical merging comes in: as described in Bonaventure's portrayal of Jacob's Ladder, the material world exists on the lowest rung; it is lowest in the greater cosmological hierarchy, but its engagement is still useful, and an important first step to ascension.<sup>78</sup>

This hierarchical understanding was also espoused by Aquinas, and he likewise enjoined the incarnational and hierarchical significance working in tandem with one another. It is not wrong to take pleasure in worldly matters, but extravagant desire and feelings of urgent need are symptomatic of sin and should be warded off.<sup>79</sup> Objects can also be fruitfully used to understand divine concepts, but such analogies cannot be the only contributor to this knowledge; it must ultimately be bestowed through God's grace.<sup>80</sup>

#### *4.1.5 Overview*

The evolution of Christian ascetic practices has resulted in a gradual change from animosity towards the world, to using objects in a way which is skillful. These practices aim to aid in the control of passions which distract an ascetic from dwelling on God.<sup>81</sup> In turn, this fosters development of the soul, which manifests in an impenetrable calm and the possibility for connection, giving rise to a more profound glorification of God.

This resulted in a gradually increasing appreciation for monastic settings. Ascetics tended to move away from self-focused development and its associated solitude, towards serving God in communities and helping Brothers to do the same. Indeed, some Rules expressly oppose eremitical

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<sup>77</sup> Miles, *Fullness of Life Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism*, 115.

<sup>78</sup> Miles, 120.

<sup>79</sup> Miles, 131.

<sup>80</sup> Miles, 122.

<sup>81</sup> Miles, 139.

life as it does not provide an outlet to address flaws like anger or impatience. Monastic settings also provide encouragement and support for ascetical endeavours, which had been lacking in solitary practices.<sup>82</sup> As such, these communities established countercultures in which the sacrifice of societal expectations; namely sex, power, and possessions; expressed a criticism of the sins of their culture of origin.

*Monks saw that although secular culture claims to govern these and thus minimize conflicts that would endanger society, these instincts are essentially concupiscence, the direction of infinite human longing to the possession of objects which, though good in themselves, cannot fulfill such longing.*<sup>83</sup>

It was not material objects or the worldly realm which was problematic, however they served as a distraction from what was truly important for an ascetic. While some antagonistic attitudes existed towards worldly things, it was not hatred of the world that was at the heart of ascetic mindsets, but keeping one's sight properly fixed; any cultivation of negativity (for example, fasting or celibacy) served as allegory for the soul's longing expressed in one's body. This acted as a kind of vacuum, where one more easily identifies with such longing, but realizes it is not satisfiable through material means. This sacrificing of material things speaks well to minimalism, but a broader approach should help determine what kind of relationships are fostered to things *outside* of physical objects, as this seems to be the driving factor and is not addressed in this history.

#### **4.2 A Theory of Asceticism**

An exchange-relationship, paralleling exchange rites, is perhaps the most astute way of describing theoretical ascetic practice. An ascetic sacrifices their time, autonomy, or certain activities in exchange for some perceived benefit. While this may operate within a religious framework or be motivated by spiritual causes, Valantasis' theory of asceticism makes clear that this may be practised in wholly secular circumstances. He presents asceticism as primarily a social criticism. It rejects the demands of society or religious institutions, and creates a new countermovement.

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<sup>82</sup> Miles, 143.

<sup>83</sup> Miles, 145.

*Asceticism consists of any performance resistant to an externally projected or subjectively experienced dominant social or religious context specifically intended (almost as a cognitive impulse) and purposefully performed in order to inaugurate a new and alternative subjectivity. This new subjectivity may be understood both intersubjectively (those people and events constituting the social self of the individual) and intra-subjectively (those with whom the agent interacts beyond the individual social body). Social relationships must be transformed in order to support the new and alternative subjectivity. The symbolic universe or construction of reality must be adapted and changed in order to explain and sustain the resistant subjectivity.<sup>84</sup>*

According to Valantasis, the instigating factor behind asceticism is a social critique, which causes the prospective ascetic to examine their place in society and further refine their ideal Self and life.<sup>85</sup> This involves a deconstruction of the old Self; hence negating ascetic practices; and ushers in new values and behaviours, and often includes a reassessment of one's environment to reflect such values. This is already abundant evidence of overlap between Valantasis' theory of asceticism and minimalism, but a deeper dive into the elements of this theory, as well as ascetic practices throughout history, will help shed light on possible compatibility.

Valantasis describes four elements used to characterize asceticism: performance, culture, relationships, and subjectivity.

#### 4.2.1 Performance<sup>86</sup>

The performances involved in an ascetic practice serve to place the practitioner within their greater contexts: what are they criticizing? How is meaning transformed? This meaning – both that of the original culture and the individual – is deconstructed, altered and re-integrated by ascetic practice. This promotes the transformation of *actor* into an idealized *character*; this may speak to a constant striving for perfection that is never completely realized. The practices are comprised of behaviours which are repeated and performed with great intentionality, which allows the ascetic to master themselves, and grow closer to the better Self purported by their ascetic ideal. Such

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<sup>84</sup> Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism*. (Provo: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 132, <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5706805>.

<sup>85</sup> Valantasis, 26.

<sup>86</sup> Valantasis, 27.

performances are theatrical or ‘rehearsed’, suggesting an element of self-consciousness, and ideally works towards an improved counterculture which is more virtuous, authentic, etc.

#### *4.2.2 Culture*<sup>87</sup>

This element of cultural context, of both the original and reformed society, is accordingly the framework which gives rise to the ascetic process. The communal structure and expectations dictated by culture is deconstructed through deliberate questioning, and individual notions are re-examined and retained, or rejected according to the ideal set by the ascetic(s). The result is a counterculture which provides an improved framework and set of standards. This groomed culture does not necessarily have to consider itself othered from, or better than its parent culture; it also does not have to be mutually excluded from it, and an ascetic may be fully comfortable engaging in both cultures so long as their values are kept in sight.

#### *4.2.3 Relationships*<sup>88</sup>

One’s interaction with others from the vantage point of this ascetic counterculture is profoundly impacted; the social order, whether in a parent or counterculture, is a reifying force. The directive of with whom and how one interacts reinforces the identities of both parties, and places them in relation to one another and the greater community. Likewise, these relationships are subject to new limitations depending on the rules of the counterculture. Special attention may also be paid to the ways in which expression of relationships differs from the parent-culture.

#### *4.2.4 Subjectivity*<sup>89</sup>

These preceding three elements allow an ascetic to engage in a new foundational perspective which influences how they perceive themselves in relation to reality. The previous subjectivity is not necessarily forgotten or rejected, and a person may adhere to multiple subjectivities depending on their circumstances. However, notions of virtuousness and what is ultimately meaningful tend to undergo a permanent change; this allows the ascetic to function in

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<sup>87</sup> Valantasis, 28–29.

<sup>88</sup> Valantasis, 29.

<sup>89</sup> Valantasis, 29–30.

both culture and counterculture, but with a fundamental understanding of the ‘correct’ mode of being.

This theory of asceticism ultimately generates a method of concrete behaviours and practices which achieve a certain theoretical goal which was inspired by perceived corruption or disparities in one’s culture of origin.<sup>90</sup> Ascetic countercultures may be informed by values, religious texts or figures, and social ideals, but they ubiquitously aim to help one graduate from the wretched, towards a perfected, idyllic person. This is established through ritualized performances which allow concrete action to bring about this change. Even though perfection itself might not be an actualizable goal, the ascetic becomes empowered to aim for the closest possible state.

#### 4.2.5 Asceticism as Empowerment

If the emphasis Valantasis places on empowerment is correct, then asceticism is essentially a political movement. The culture of origin is deprived of power, which is then shifted to the criticizer who takes action to rectify perceived wrongs. Even if an ascetic sacrifices their autonomy, they can become *more autonomous than a typical citizen*, and this is maintained in their solitary or communal practice.<sup>91</sup> To borrow from Foucault, this resistance against political power or societal expectations can reveal problematic power dynamics within society. To engage in such criticism through ascetic means brings to the fore questions of Self juxtaposed with issues of external power dynamics.<sup>92</sup> This is deeply connected to the notion of changed subjectivity; foundational understandings of the world and one’s place in it are thoroughly re-examined.<sup>93</sup>

These power dynamics include power expressed *over* the Self. One alters their behaviour after questioning where power over them can be reclaimed; by asking ‘what has power over me?’, a judgement can be made if this is appropriate given structured values, and the Self is fortified with autonomy because of this expression of power.<sup>94</sup> This can have far-reaching social

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<sup>90</sup> Valantasis, 32.

<sup>91</sup> Valantasis, 38.

<sup>92</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 210, 217.

<sup>93</sup> Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 43.

<sup>94</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), xxiii.

consequences if the ascetic lives in a community: a group of people with similar criticisms of external power gain power *over* this imperfect entity, in turn bolstering the social group, and undermining normalized cultural beliefs.<sup>95</sup>

*Asceticism, however, is also by nature transgressive, because the new always emerges from the discounting of the common or accepted, or from the rejection of the socialized acceptable, in order to move toward something that at once rejects that priority to construct a novelty.*<sup>96</sup>

Valantasis uses Nietzsche's 'lazy person' versus 'youthful soul' to emphasize that asceticism is always a subversion of the culture of origin. If an act of self development – even through intense denial and pain, like the Greek origins of asceticism as physical training – is congruent with societal norms, it is an act of *formation*, not *asceticism*.<sup>97</sup> The ascetic *always* seeks goals against the grain of cultural expectations.<sup>98</sup>

#### 4.2.6 Harpham and Social Consequences

The notion of ascetics as social critics is not solely adhered to by Valantasis. Harpham characterizes ascetics as 'social engineers', as they question and reform community standards, consistently holding themselves to rigorous standards.<sup>99</sup> He discusses contemporary asceticisms, and sees current practitioners as necessarily rejecting the world from within it; while they are radical from society, they see society radically by critically reconstructing the meaning of societal behaviours and value systems.

*The life of the eremite was at once squalid and pretentious, beneath civilization and far beyond it, subhuman and semidivine.*<sup>100</sup>

He further differentiates between cenobites (communally living ascetics) and eremites (solitary ascetics) by the social ramifications of their practice. Given the difference of their mode of interaction with society, he suggests that cenobites sacrifice themselves and gain the world,

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<sup>95</sup> Bob Hodge and Gunther R. Kress, *Social Semiotics* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1988), 151.

<sup>96</sup> Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 61.

<sup>97</sup> Valantasis, 128.

<sup>98</sup> Valantasis, 113.

<sup>99</sup> Wimbush and Valantasis, *Asceticism*, 327.

<sup>100</sup> Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, 23.

complete with the associated social and political power; and eremites sacrifice the world and gain themselves, as they are prone to battling more *interior* problematics, and their development is centered around Self rather than community.<sup>101</sup> Applying this to a contemporary case study suggests that it may be possible to discern the social concerns of the potential-ascetic by looking at where development is expected; in the individual or larger groups. My point here is that perhaps minimalists who practice in the home for the sake of peace and calm are more akin to the eremite, as opposed to the cenobitic mindset of those who promote anti-consumerism for the sake of environmental concerns which affect the global community.

#### 4.2.7 *The Constructed Ascetic Universe*

Given the above social complexities, there are a few nuances which should be considered regarding the attitudes exhibited by ascetics. An ascetic may retain or reject any particular symbol from their culture of origin; and those which are rejected may have their meaning inverted.<sup>102</sup> This means that the standard of '*possessions indicating status and wealth*' transforms into 'lack of possessions indicating status ('I do not submit to societal expectations') and wealth ('because I can save money/time/resources by not participating in object-identification')'.

However, because of the tension between parent- and counterculture, the ascetic must constantly maintain their values and self-validate despite a hostile environment. This is complicated by similarities *or* inversions of power structures between the ascetic and original culture; once the questioning of greater society has begun, it must be maintained as an ongoing process to develop.

It must also be highlighted that the identity of an ascetic universe is always defined in opposition to its culture of origin; in this way, Western norms serve as a foundational element, defining ascetic reactions to it through its rejection.<sup>103</sup> This makes the goals of the ascetic incredibly dynamic, owing to complex relationships between the ascetic, other ascetics around them if applicable, the goal driving their practice, and the opposing culture; as any one of these

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<sup>101</sup> Harpham, 22.

<sup>102</sup> Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 74.

<sup>103</sup> Valantasis, 76.

change, the dynamics of other elements shift.<sup>104</sup> This results in the ascetic goal being constantly refined, added to, and subtly or significantly changing. As such, ascetic practices and their meanings may also evolve over time, even if they are steeped in a greater ascetic tradition. This also gives rise to the potential awareness of three selves in the ascetic; the self deriving from the culture of origin, the current self existing in a dynamic process of de- and re-construction, and the future or goal self, to which the ascetic strives.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, this liminal state of the ascetic is never acutely finalized.

### *4.3 Contemporary Application*

To consider these issues of personal and societal developments, some themes emerge which might aid in assessing compatibility between minimalism and asceticism. It would be interesting to gather data on how a respondent feels towards greater Western culture and consumerist values, versus the microculture they hope to create in their home, or small-scale community in the case of Tiny Houses. If they are part of a community, perhaps they would be more inclined to encourage other minimalists in their endeavours or otherwise provide social support for others hoping to adhere to analogous lifestyles. Questions also arise regarding the meaning of discarded objects to the minimalist, and where energy or resources is refocused once they are emitted from the practitioner's life. Perhaps these resources are seen as contributing to self-development; but it is also possible that they are geared towards social development instead. This distinction might clarify a cenobite/eremite divide, or negate the existence of such a parallel. These questions shall be expanded on in the proceeding chapter.

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<sup>104</sup> Valantasis, 142.

<sup>105</sup> Valantasis, 144.

## 5. Self-perception in Contemporary Practices of Minimalism

To compare the ritual, spiritual and ascetical elements with contemporary minimalist practices, the method of netnography was chosen. This was guided by Kozinets' comprehensive guide on the collection and analysis of data on the internet existing in online forums or blogs. My intention with this research was to collect qualitative data, as this thesis primarily concerns the subjective meanings behind practices, which yields profound variety in the motivations and benefits of minimalism.<sup>106</sup>

In accordance with Kozinets' account, a collection of key words from the major theoretical concepts were chosen in the search for appropriate sources.<sup>107</sup> These terms were selected or modified on the basis of application to secular concepts; words such as *meaning* or *purpose* rather than *spirituality*, as well as pings onto concepts of *community*, and *countermovement* to investigate possible ascetic concepts. All sources were chosen according to their content's relevance to the *research sub-questions*, without consideration of the positive or negative support of spirituality, ritual et al. This judgement of relevance was made after significant browsing of the available information, to ascertain the tone and agenda of each source.

A main reference for data collection was reddit.com, which encompasses thousands of highly specific subcommunities.<sup>108</sup> The */r/minimalism* community is comprised of minimalists, some of which engage in practices described in this thesis. External links are frequently posted, and the community votes up or down, indicating their judgement of relevance to the subreddit. This means the actual blogs and articles used are external to reddit, but the popularization of these threads is linked to the tone of this community. */r/minimalism* tends to bias *against* spiritual notions, in favour of rationalism and environmental emphases. Owing to this, I chose to use it as my primary search tool to avoid confirmation bias. Google was also consulted, particularly in relation to *Tiny Houses* accounts.

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<sup>106</sup> Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Ethnographic Research in the Age of the Internet*, 1st ed (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd, 2010), 42.

<sup>107</sup> Kozinets, 87–94.

<sup>108</sup> Reddit.com is renown for having a subcommunity for every topic; every game, television series or hobby will have its own subcommunity, and these 'subreddits' are maintained by moderators.

These specific blogs were chosen primarily due to their relevance to certain key words, translated from the frameworks above into secularized terms likely to be associated to minimalism.<sup>109</sup> I also selected blogs that provided information that was relevant (though not necessarily confirming) to the goals of minimalist practice explored above. This method of selection permitted relevance to the framework without automatically validating it, while also yielding sources which are informative to multiple facets of my research. As such, most blogs here include methods (either promoted, or a narrative of a personal experience) in addition to initial motives, stumbling blocks, unforeseen consequences, and a conclusion that sometimes yields different benefits than those perceived at the onset of practice.

The communities or sites explored here are frequently used as entry points for people interested in minimalism; they provide resources which serve to guide the interested user, in addition to offering a ‘holding space’ while they begin, allowing them to ask questions or compare pre-existing styles.<sup>110</sup> Some sources are in a diary or journal format, and some are articles on news sites and magazines; a description of each source will be provided to contextualize the information derived from it.<sup>111</sup> Following a general description which illustrates the tenor and goals of the source, a more detailed analysis is provided, informed by the key themes already detailed within the preceding frameworks. Additionally, I discuss the commentary posted by users where it is available and relevant to the research questions, but this is more to capture the tone rather than a deep exploration of the specific contributions.

I will first explore the accounts which refer to the examples of contemporary practices previously detailed, then graduate to accounts which diverge from those popular methods.

### ***5.1 The Tiny Life***

This is a blog predominantly authored by Ryan Mitchell, which discusses the philosophy behind Tiny Houses and the ways in which it can be broadened into one’s life. It explicitly presents Tiny House living as a way of dealing with emotional and identity issues. It reports on the most

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<sup>109</sup> Such as routine, meaning, values, transformation,

<sup>110</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography*, 12.

<sup>111</sup> Kozinets, 46.

common factor driving people to live in Tiny Houses – stress, of various kinds – and advises on how to recognize such concerns and encourages healthy coping mechanisms to deal with them.<sup>112</sup>

Specific advice is also given towards the end of ritualizing one’s lifestyle to conform with minimalist values: establishing routines and prompting a certain headspace in order to achieve a lifestyle change on the grandest scale possible. A deep relationship to one’s Self is promoted through this suggestion, in addition to deep introspection and getting to the root of repeating problems in life. Minimalism is additionally prescribed at a non-material level: weeding out commitments, obligations or thinking patterns that do not contribute positively towards one’s wellbeing. This process enables the user to discover a sense of purpose, and derive meaning from their life.<sup>113</sup>

The background behind *The Tiny Life’s* directive of self-analysis and improvement is an express criticism of the norms set by societal expectations. It is stated that people tend to live ‘on autopilot’, and awareness helps create meaning through the examination of one’s true relationship to their resources, network, and Self; this includes a reassessment of what is truly good, valuable, or worth one’s time.

This brings to the fore a prominent focus of the blog: how to deal with others during a transition into minimalism or Tiny Living. There is plain acknowledgement that the Tiny House movement brings to light the problematic nature of normalized cultural directives, and this recognition leaves people who participate in them feeling attacked: “People work their whole lives to get as much stuff as they can, to suggest that is wrong, in a way, is to suggest their life’s work is wrong.”<sup>114</sup>

Owing to this confrontation, Tiny House living involves a leap of faith, where you jump from a place in typified society, to a place of critiquing it. The blog likewise suggests that Tiny

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<sup>112</sup> “How to Destress Your Life: 6 Tips to Beat Stress Today | The Tiny Life,” accessed May 30, 2021, <https://thetinylife.com/how-to-destress-your-life/>.

<sup>113</sup> “5 Reasons Most People Never Discover Their Purpose | The Tiny Life,” accessed May 30, 2021, <https://thetinylife.com/5-reasons-most-people-never-discover-their-purpose/>.

<sup>114</sup> “Top 5 Biggest Barriers To The Tiny House Movement,” accessed May 30, 2021, <https://thetinylife.com/top-5-biggest-barriers-to-the-tiny-house-movement/>.

Houses are an exceptionally brazen form of criticism: “Tiny Houses are an extreme and only serve to spark a conversation about how much house and possessions do you really need”.<sup>115</sup> One could achieve self-improvement and cataloguing of values in a small home or apartment, which would be less confrontational, more convenient, as well as cheaper in many locales. This makes the Tiny House movement a bold statement, rather than a quiet distancing.

*The Tiny Life* is interesting to this thesis because its wholistic approach encompasses many themes of the frameworks. The referencing to ritual is explicit, and is cited as a necessary means to achieve a true change of *lifestyle* rather than just a surface-level engagement with minimalism; the intentions of these rites speak both to a *rite of passage* in that one’s identity changes,<sup>116</sup> as well as rites of *affliction* and *politics*,<sup>117</sup> as one seeks to relieve the imposed values of materialistic society, and undermine its wielded control.

The aforementioned changes to identity include a deep investigation into personal values, meaning, and cultivating healthy relationships; this speaks to some elements of the definition of *spirituality*.<sup>118</sup> Waaijman’s theory of *marginal spirituality* is suited to this approach, in that a counterculture presents in the form of a small community abrading against societal norms. Furthermore, each individual is permitted their own individualized value system which they are encouraged to develop from within this community.<sup>119</sup>

These theories all support the ultimate role of criticizing society from within these small communities, which further speaks to the theory of ascetic practice.<sup>120</sup> This is explicitly noted, as the quotations above indicate acute awareness that the *point* of the Tiny House movement is to boldly state that something is wrong with society; one could express their values which differ from greater society in a much quieter way. This act of social criticism seems to be a driving factor in the *tiny living movement*.

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<sup>115</sup> “Solutions To Tiny House Living Barriers: Social Pressure & Fear | Tiny Life,” accessed May 30, 2021, <https://thetinylife.com/part-two-solutions-to-the-top-5-barriers-of-the-tiny-house-movement/>.

<sup>116</sup> See section 2.2.

<sup>117</sup> See 2.4-5.

<sup>118</sup> See 3.1.1-1.2.

<sup>119</sup> See 3.1.7 for issues of personalization; 3.2 for Waaijman’s theory of spiritual practices.

<sup>120</sup> See 4.2.

## 5.2 Marjolein in het Klein

*Living from your heart, from your soul, requires growing up. It calls for the path of the hero. To dare to stand alone and to dare to trust that you will meet the people on your path who connect with your soul's desire.<sup>121</sup>*

A more personal account discussing Tiny Houses is provided by Marjolein Jonker, the founder of the Tiny House movement in the Netherlands. She describes the process of being inspired by minimalism and gradually moving towards a pioneering lifestyle, spurred on by profound feelings of discontent. She hoped to change herself, in addition to society. Her blog is largely concerned with the legalities of Tiny House living, but includes many articles on the philosophy behind her lifestyle.

Her dysphoria with Western values motivated her to make big changes to her own. She was unhappy with her relationship to herself, her lifestyle, in addition to disturbing environmentally based global issues. Her blog encourages those interested in minimalism to reflect on what makes them truly happy; by examining the issues in one's life, one's boundaries and limits, and desire towards change, awareness is cultivated that leads to a more fulfilling life.<sup>122</sup> Jonker emphasizes that this process of internal exploration should occur completely offline, so as not to be distracted or influenced by outside sources.

*Consciously working on your self-development is something that I think fits the Tiny House philosophy very well. In my opinion, it is a very conscious way of living and a deliberate choice for a certain lifestyle.<sup>123</sup>*

The benefits Jonker cites include simplicity, financial ease, greater autonomy, and being able to pick up and move her entire house. However, the public face of her blog is most heavily invested in environmental and sustainability efforts.<sup>124</sup> She presents heavy criticism against agricultural norms in the Netherlands; Tiny Houses addresses this by allowing more space for

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<sup>121</sup> "The System Is Broken, so Be a Hero – Marjolein in Het Klein," accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.marjoleininhetklein.com/en/2020/10/19/the-system-is-broken-so-be-a-hero/>.

<sup>122</sup> "A Moment of Self-Reflection – Marjolein in Het Klein," accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.marjoleininhetklein.com/en/2019/12/18/a-moment-of-self-reflection/>.

<sup>123</sup> "A Moment of Self-Reflection – Marjolein in Het Klein."

<sup>124</sup> "In the Beginning... There Was a Feeling of Discontent – Marjolein in Het Klein," accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.marjoleininhetklein.com/en/2015/02/20/in-the-beginning-there-was-a-feeling-of-discontent/>.

surrounding nature, personal gardens, and promotes ideals of sustainability and environmental wellness.<sup>125</sup> Jonker further makes the suggestion that Tiny House communities can create food forests, permaculture, and other microbiomes that are self-sustaining, even when human care is absent.

*Residential functions, new nature, and healthy food production – they can all coexist. I think we must first stop seeing those functions as separate from each other. I am a human. My primary necessity of life is food and water. I am nature and I cannot live without it. I don't flourish until I live in a way that makes me feel part of that nature, supports it, and feels connected with it.*<sup>126</sup>

It is plainly acknowledged that Jonker's ideals contrast with cultural norms, and she urges everyone to take it upon themselves to address societal problematics at an individual level, and then teach by example. However, this must be done with the offending society as the background; one must 'play along' with its financial and legal systems, in the company of like-minded people who also originate from this flawed culture.<sup>127</sup>

Ultimately such an effort should help to alter the faulty social systems, as more people become aware of radical change occurring in small communities, and attempt to understand their revolutionary philosophy; eventually this should result in societal change on a grand scale. Yet, Jonker asserts that she does not want to change the world – she wants to change humanity. She hopes to promote a newfound attunement to the planet upon which we depend, giving rise to communities which espouse equality, compassion, and satisfaction with having their simplest needs met.<sup>128</sup>

As Jonker's blog is written as a personal account, rather than instructions for a novice minimalist, different elements of the framework arise compared to the preceding example. To an extent, a *rite of passage* is implied in changes to the author's identity, but less acutely since it has

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<sup>125</sup> "Housing, Nature and Food Production in Balance – Marjolein in Het Klein," accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.marjoleininhetsklein.com/en/2020/11/15/housing-nature-and-food-production-in-balance/>.

<sup>126</sup> "Housing, Nature and Food Production in Balance – Marjolein in Het Klein."

<sup>127</sup> "The System Is Broken, so Be a Hero – Marjolein in Het Klein."

<sup>128</sup> "If I Were Allowed One Wish – Marjolein in Het Klein," accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.marjoleininhetsklein.com/en/2018/02/06/if-i-were-allowed-one-wish/>.

already occurred at the time of writing. Emphasis instead is placed on notions of *hope* for a simpler and more *autonomous* life, in addition to eliciting far-reaching changes in Western society that will promote sustainable living.<sup>129</sup> This tells us more about the benefits of minimalism than the process of achieving it.

Notions speaking to *spirituality* are also apparent in the way Jonker discusses a sense of needing to feel connected to nature, especially regarding the food she eats.<sup>130</sup> This broadens what her definition of *relationships* is, and places intense import on treating every *one* and *thing* around her in a certain way that denotes respect for the other entity, in addition a sense of duty expected from herself.<sup>131</sup> This is a highly integrated and complex web of interconnections, which results in enormous significance placed on the consequences of her own actions.

This informs Jonker's fixation on changing humanity (if not 'the world'); *society* is a problem because it does not adjust itself to *nature's* constraints. Currently, this is a reversal of how society views nature, however this approach is not realistic or sustainable. A recalibration of values is called for, and she explicitly criticizes society for upholding destructive modes of life, speaking to ascetic notions for the sake of environmental justice.<sup>132</sup>

### 5.3 *The Art of Simple*

*The Art of Simple* is a blog that features a wide variety of authors, and contains posts addressing both Tiny Houses and Marie Kondo. It is generally concerned with voluntary simplicity without a keen focus on one method over another, which suits its composite of writers. There is an abundance of general advice and motivational articles for the novice minimalist, and many external links to more specific websites, including some considered in this chapter of the thesis.

This blog tends to address micro-issues when practicing minimalism, such as how much is enough, and how to deal with conflicts in relationships arising from minimalist efforts. A popular entry acknowledges the value that can be derived from gifting old possessions and giving them

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<sup>129</sup> See 3.1.8.

<sup>130</sup> See 3.1.5.

<sup>131</sup> See 3.1.2.

<sup>132</sup> See 4.2.7.

‘new life’;<sup>133</sup> this practice elicits guilt in some practitioners, however, they are assured that such a practice still speaks to anti-consumerist values. Their discussion mirrors Marie Kondo’s, and even Kopytoff’s notion of an object’s biography;<sup>134</sup> one should acknowledge a thing’s performance before discarding it, or allow it to continue performing for someone who will put it to better use. This suggests that the item attains the status of a ritual object, by treating it as ‘sacred’ simply by virtue of bearing value, even if it is not valuable *to the practitioner*. Finding the best place for it becomes the ‘kindest’ thing to do.

Another common issue faced by a novice minimalist is discovering that some types of decluttering are discovered to be more challenging than others. The question is posed, ‘what do these challenges this indicate about my core values?’ – the reader is urged to consider how their identity was expressed before becoming a minimalist. As identity is turned over and refined, it is possible to glean what is unchanging (thus, presumably true) in terms of personality, expression, personal ethics etc.

With such information in hand, one can decide the best method to achieve their goals. Ethan Waldman describes his own process of deciding to build and live in a Tiny House.<sup>135</sup> This is because his value system centered around freedom; he wished to avoid debt, achieve more personal autonomy, and elicit a greater scope of choice between work versus time devoted to his hobbies or family. For him, Tiny House living was illuminating, because he had to be selective about what he surrounded himself with. He ended up prioritizing more efficiently, and became better acquainted with his values and identity.

Voluntary simplicity, especially in a Tiny House, is shown to *always* keep a practitioner prioritizing their items, finances, and time, because they have no place to put superfluous items. Additionally, if they want to spend less time working, they sacrifice monetary wealth.<sup>136</sup> To this end, Natashya Newman describes being newlywed, and learning to live with her partner in a one-bedroom apartment with no kitchen. This proved to be a steep and unpleasant learning curve,

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<sup>133</sup> “5 Things I Learned From Tidying Up,” accessed May 28, 2021, <https://theartofsimple.net/tidyingup/>.

<sup>134</sup> See 1.2.1.

<sup>135</sup> “Why I Chose the Tiny House Lifestyle,” accessed May 30, 2021, <https://theartofsimple.net/tiny-house-lifestyle/>.

<sup>136</sup> “Rediscovering Simplicity,” accessed May 30, 2021, <https://theartofsimple.net/rediscovering-simplicity/>.

however she and her partner quickly became attuned to their core needs, and even when they eventually upsized, they avoided superfluous items or space.

A permanent move into a Tiny House, or even a small apartment reinforces a minimalist lifestyle, because there is simply *no option* to waiver.<sup>137</sup> This reportedly results in greater intention towards the items retained, and the experiences one trades in exchange for the rejected things; one becomes better attuned to what truly matters, and is more able to savour and enjoy these things. Likewise, the quality of relationships may increase because close quarters mean there is no possibility to escape confrontation, so problems must be confronted effectively.

As the focus of this blog is solidly on honing one's sense of personal identity, it parallels spiritual notions more than ascetic, simply because the 'goal' of the practice is not defined in relation to greater society. Since the desired results are open-ended, so is the specificity with which a claim can be made to congruency with the above frameworks.

Being more concerned with individual practice, this blog provides prominent examples of *exchange rites*; this is largely regarding recontextualization of these rites. The significance of gifted items is highlighted in multiple posts, as practitioners face a stumbling block in the realization that the values they ascribe to a gifted item is different from that of the giver.<sup>138</sup> The rite of gifting an object, for example, to someone for their birthday imbues it with a certain significance which makes its disposal taboo.

The repeating theme in this blog is a deeply personal one of self-exploration, particularly of identity and values.<sup>139</sup> Social ramifications are discussed, but only at a domestic level. This means the blog is congruent with spiritual theory but is oddly lacking a social criticism present in most other entries in this chapter.

#### ***5.4 Becoming Minimalist***

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<sup>137</sup> "How Living Small Lets Me Dream Big," accessed May 30, 2021, <https://theartofsimple.net/dreambig/>.

<sup>138</sup> See 2.3.

<sup>139</sup> See 3.1.1, 2, 4, 7.

This site provides a broad introduction to minimalism as a general philosophy. It is written in a blog-style, and most entries are written by Joshua Becker. It presents as an accessible source for people entering into the world of minimalism, citing studies via summaries in magazine articles, in addition to some self-referential links.

*Owning less frees us to pursue happiness, joy, meaning, and fulfillment  
in things that actually matter—however we choose to define that.*

*Our possessions are not passive.*

*They are not merely indifferent in our pursuit of happiness and meaning.<sup>140</sup>*

This well-demonstrates the site's general attitude towards minimalism. The search for meaning is best pursued through autonomy and assessing what possessions actually mean to the user, and how one's freedom may be usurped through over-valuing items. In other words, belongings can serve as a distraction from things which actually make one happy. "Possessions are not passive" is an interesting phrase in this context: objects which do not serve sufficient meaning have an active and detrimental role in our "pursuit of happiness and meaning".

The most commented on post on this site talks explicitly about 'Rational Minimalism'. This post promotes autonomy above anything else, in that it essentially says 'you must find what minimalism is best for you and your values', emphasizing that no two people will practice minimalism the same way. This is 'rational' in that it makes sense from the perspective of individuality, yet the reasons for which one practices minimalism still center around notions of meaning, happiness, peace and expression of values.<sup>141</sup>

The comment section for this particular post contains many individuals referencing their styles of minimalism, including the more unusual items or collections they have chosen to keep. Curiously, there seems to be a trend of parents and grandparents posting here, which yields two interesting pieces of information: firstly, the demographic of minimalists on this site tend to belong

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<sup>140</sup> "It's Not That Possessions Won't Make You Happy...", accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/happiness-not-possession/>.

<sup>141</sup> "Find a Rational (Non-Extreme) Minimalism That Works For You," accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/find-a-rational-minimalism-that-works-for-you/>.

to an older demographic, and secondly, they reference having an inordinately large number of children (11 and 13 are the most).

While readers are encouraged to explore their individuality, there are some guidelines for how to attain happiness and meaning outside of items. One such post discusses the consequences of focusing on experiences rather than things; Becker uses baseball games as his example, citing profound feelings of identification owing to his attending games with his father as a child. He describes the crowd, the food, the atmosphere – the ritual in its entirety, which achieves a particular experience which is heavily laden with meaning.<sup>142</sup> For him, this meaning is manifest through immersing himself in important relationships, and autonomy since a mosaic of chosen experiences are understood as better expressing his identity than items.

It is curious to see such intense references to ritual experience in the example of baseball games; the result of this rite is a reified sense of one's identity through the vehicle of nostalgia and honouring important relationships. This parallels *rites of passage* as identity and autonomy are reinforced.<sup>143</sup>

Alongside the promotion of experiences-instead-of-things, it is clear that this blog is heavily rationalized in its presentation. References to simplified scientific articles are common, and there is very little that could be interpreted in an acutely spiritual light; the comments reflect this rational leaning. That being said, the goals still concern autonomy, individuality, core meaning, happiness, and better relationships.<sup>144</sup> The author also describes the benefits he derives from minimalism as feelings of lightness or peace which parallel spiritual endeavours, but they might be perceived at an intellectual level through 'mental space'.

### ***5.5 The Minimalists***

*The Minimalists* consist of a partnership between Joshua Fields Millburn, and Ryan Nicodemus. They are a popular gateway into minimalism, with two successful documentaries on

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<sup>142</sup> "Why Experiences Are Better Than Things," accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/experiences/>.

<sup>143</sup> See 2.2.

<sup>144</sup> See 3.1.1-2, 6-7.

Netflix,<sup>145</sup> several books, a multi-authored blog, and they additionally tour across North America giving talks on the benefits of minimalism and how to get started.

Their approach is deeply personal, preferring to speak rather than write, so my main source of information is derived from the documentary *The Minimalists: Less is Now*. This information is also made available on their website, which features a large blog ring and active user base.<sup>146</sup>

Millburn, like many authors already discussed, was prompted to delve into minimalism owing to a profound sense of discontent. He had established an American-dream-esque, wealth-driven lifestyle, accumulating objects to the point of financial crisis despite earning a high income. In the midst of this discontent, he was confronted with the sudden deterioration of his mother due to cancer. She died less than a year after her diagnosis, and he describes making one last trip to his childhood home to deal with her possessions.

Millburn hired the largest U-Haul truck available with intentions of driving all of his mother's possessions across the country, back to his own residence. This plan was reassessed after he discovered boxes underneath his mother's bed containing his old school paperwork; Millburn described the onslaught of memories coming back to him and a sudden realization which would change his relationship to material things. "Our memories are not *in* our things: they are inside us." His mother was not holding on to this obsolete paperwork; she was holding on to a memory of her son, and the presence of the items were a prompt, not the valuable thing itself.

With this epiphany, Millburn donated the majority of his mother's items to friends, local charities, and with the proceeds of what was sellable, he donated to the organizations which funded her chemotherapy. Letting go of these items prompted a sense of liberation, as they were now permitted a new and productive life, meanwhile he was allowed to abandon concerns regarding a 26' flatbed truck worth of possessions.

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<sup>145</sup> -- Canadian Netflix.

<sup>146</sup> "The Tweet That Changed My Life | The Minimalists," accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.theminimalists.com/tweet/>.

Upon arriving home, Millburn soon reduced his own possessions by about 90%. He recounts how his life became simpler after establishing his true values; this was made manifest by increased importance placed on relationships, hobbies and skills. The benefits he reports are profound developments in these areas, in addition to feelings of lightness and freedom. He insists that quieting the directive of consumption allowed his inner voice to make itself known, and further reveal his true passions and ultimate meaning in life.

The epiphany which drove Millburn to become minimalist, and further inspire his friend (Nicodemus mentioned above), was spurred by an emotionally charged *rite of passage*.<sup>147</sup> The death of a parent and the required action of the only son to manage their remaining possessions came with a series of expectations that Millburn intended to meet – hence why he drove across the country and rented the largest truck he could find. However, the process of this rite inspired him to behave in a different way from the prescribed norm. It is curious that a confrontation with mortality precipitated, what was for Millburn, an innovative solution that would be the catalyst for changing the lives of many people.

While *The Minimalists* present as highly rational, many of the motivations and benefits center around exploration of values, ultimate meaning in life, relationships, and hope for better living for the future.<sup>148</sup> The ends of minimalism are, again, presented as lightness, peace, and feelings of freedom which possessions seem to detract from.<sup>149</sup> This speaks to spiritual notions, and while they do not insist that a reader ‘converts’ everyone they know to minimalism, or overtly criticize societal norms, they *are* one of the major countermovements under the minimalist banner.

This lack of criticizing the parent culture distances it from ascetical frameworks, even though *The Minimalists* are a counterculture. Such criticism is perhaps implicit, but it is not a focus of their agenda. Instead, they hope to inspire people to reassess their values and reconnect with what is *more* meaningful than their belongings.

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<sup>147</sup> See 2.2.

<sup>148</sup> See 3.1.

<sup>149</sup> See 3.1.4, 7-8.

## 5.6 Ann Patchett

The next sample comes from an article written by Ann Patchett, a contemporary best-selling author. Her engagement with minimalism was also precipitated by a confrontation with mortality. This occurred when her friend's father died, and Patchett accompanied her while she sifted through his possessions.<sup>150</sup> Patchett describes this as an archeological process; they dug through the strata of the deceased's belongings, progressively going further into his history. Her friend made a comment that stuck out to Patchett: "He made everything magic when he was alive... Now it's all just stuff".

This is an eloquent summary of minimalism. The items served as symbols for identity or prompts for nostalgia; they were connections to the past, associated to people or experiences, but these memories exist whether or not the item is present, handled, retained etc. After seeing this process, Patchett was inspired to confront her *own* morality by minimizing her possessions. She realized if she did not do this, the task would be left to somebody else to perform similar judgements and inspections. Further, she realized that the items which served as catalysts to distant memories were a distraction from the present moment.

*This was the practice: I was starting to get rid of my possessions, at least the useless ones, because possessions stood between me and death. They didn't protect me from death, but they created a barrier in my understanding, like layers of bubble wrap, so that instead of thinking about what was coming and the beauty that was here now I was thinking about the piles of shiny trinkets I'd accumulated.*

Reassessment of her belongings and recalibrating what was important enough to retain allowed Patchett to feel like she was living more intentionally, and with increased meaning. Additionally, themes of animism arise as she found herself wondering how items would 'feel' about their abandonment, either through disuse or dislocation. "How would those plastic plates ... feel when they realized they were on their way to the basement? It was as if I'd run my fingers across some unexpected lump in my psyche. Jesus, what was that?" – she described feeling guilt

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<sup>150</sup> "How to Practice | The New Yorker," accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/08/how-to-practice>.

about discarding objects, but this soon ebbed away and was replaced with feelings of lightness and freedom. Similarly to Kondo, Patchett discusses how certain items “deserved” to be used – even if she had already decided to discard them, and they had been successfully decoupled from her identity.

Visible are connections not only with Kondo, but with Millburn’s example in *The Minimalists* above. Disidentifying from possessions became an exercise in confronting mortality as a *rite of passage*, where one emerges from the process lighter, and more intensely aware of one’s values.<sup>151</sup> Patchett’s example reads as more spiritual, in that her core meanings are more intentionally explored, however this is mostly owing to its narrative as a personal account, rather than a prompt for others to stop and think about their own homes.<sup>152</sup> The undertones of anthropomorphism also prompt a more spiritual-sounding report than Millburn, and similarly Patchett’s account does not enter the realm of social criticism on an explicit level. This makes her account more compatible with spiritual than ascetic theories.

### **5.7 No Side Bar**

The next example takes on an even more internal form of minimalism. No Side Bar features a variety of authors, and emphasizes slowing down as a form of *mental* decluttering. This turns minimalism into a focus on ‘mental hygiene’, and in doing so, highlights the importance of *voluntary* simplicity, where one’s autonomy comes to the fore. Choice becomes the central element in this practice, and is a key component of staying motivated.

An important part of this practice is the deliberateness with which one ‘does nothing’. It is suggested to establish days in which one avoids all scheduled obligations to reduce overstimulation, and allow spontaneity.<sup>153</sup> Ideally, this results in disidentification from items, mindsets supported by consumerism, as well as from one’s profession because earning money is seen as insignificant in comparison with development of one’s ‘true Self’. It is maintained that the

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<sup>151</sup> See 2.2.

<sup>152</sup> See 3.1.1-2, 4, 7-8.

<sup>153</sup> “How a ‘Do Nothing’ Day Changed My Life,” accessed May 28, 2021, <https://nosidebar.com/do-nothing-day/>.

high-performance, rat-race culture is not compatible with minimalism, and is harmful for one's mental health.

The re-emergence of identity is also alluded to within some of the texts.<sup>154</sup> One identifies not with retained items themselves, but in what they illustrate by their retention and value assigned. The reader is encouraged to hone personal expression by examining the patterns visible in their retained items, in addition to what discarded items were *supposed* to mean, but failed in their expression of it. In this way, previous non-minimalist tendencies can inform core values which have not been acutely described; this indicates patterns which help to solidify one's identity.<sup>155</sup>

Issues of identity are also taken up by describing minimalism through the process of negation. In theory, a minimalist should be unconcerned with current trends, or what others think of them. They should not live in the past (this is exercised through object-disassociation), and their practice of minimalism should ensure that they do not neglect their families. They avoid succumbing to missing out on family time, which might have previously been an issue because of excessive time spent working.<sup>156</sup>

The accounts on this blog all tend to focus on issues of identity, and reinforce this through autonomy and relationships. It reads largely as a motivational site, and is less concerned with the process, or 'flavour' of minimalism, and instead repetitively discusses the positive effects it can offer the individual. The tone veers into the territory of promoting minimalism as an alleviation of *affliction*, in that it suggests that intentionality is required to actualize one's individuality and engage in life in a meaningful way, because society actively such things for the sake of capitalist gains.<sup>157</sup> This import assigned to meaning, autonomy, relationships and connectedness all speak to spiritual notions, though it does address its readers as though they belong to one 'simple living community' as other blogs tend to.<sup>158</sup> This may result from its wide variety of contributors.

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<sup>154</sup> See 1.2.2.

<sup>155</sup> "A Definitive Guide to Minimalist Fashion," accessed May 28, 2021, <https://nosidebar.com/minimalist-fashion/>.

<sup>156</sup> "10 Things Minimalists Don't Do," accessed May 28, 2021, <https://nosidebar.com/things-minimalists-dont-do/>.

<sup>157</sup> See 2.4.

<sup>158</sup> See 3.1-2, 4, 6-8.

The criticism of greater society certainly exists in *No Side Bar*, however it is not the focus of the articles. The norms of overworking and overvalue of monetary wealth are criticized, but the focus is entirely on moving the individual away from these ideals, rather than addressing the society itself. This suggests more relevance to spiritual theory than ascetic, but perhaps speaks to a more passive asceticism (i.e., eremitical).

### ***5.8 Be More With Less***

This blog is run by Courtney Clover, who writes about voluntary simplicity in the capacity of a guide who helps streamline the underlying reasons behind the choice for a simple lifestyle.<sup>159</sup> Suggestions are provided which inform the most effective methods of minimalism, including how to groom one's mindset to correspond with relevant goals. The tone is akin to psychotherapy; underlying emotional issues are brought into the fore to address unhealthy emphases on destructive or distracting endeavours, such as an overaccumulation of stuff.

Minimalism in light of this blog is seen as a therapeutic approach to letting go of what stuff *means* to the individual. By releasing objects – especially those which are emotionally charged – one can loosen the grip that grudges, guilt and anger have in the practitioner's life.<sup>160</sup> A material method is even offered to address this: Clover suggests writing down one's emotional baggage and burning or tearing up the paper. This could also apply to the sentimental objects associated to those emotions, but they should at least be discarded because retention is detrimental. This process of destroying things purportedly allows people to engage with their emotional struggles through a material means to address dissatisfaction in one's life.

A refocus is called for, harnessing one's attention and reclaiming it from previous, unproductive sinks. One should not spend all their time consumed with thoughts of themselves, but should instead focus on their social network. Specific advice is given regarding one's schedule: a minimalist should take pains to prioritize what truly matters in life, and always be vigilant to find

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<sup>159</sup> "Start Here to Simplify Your Life - Be More with Less," accessed May 29, 2021, <https://bemorewithless.com/about/>.

<sup>160</sup> "22 Ways To Simplify Your Life (I Dare You to Only Choose One) - Be More with Less," accessed May 29, 2021, <https://bemorewithless.com/justone/>.

unnecessary commitments that drain time and energy.<sup>161</sup> This grooming also applies to ruminations about the past and future, as it detracts from resources that could be spent on more important things; even daily routines must be assessed for superfluous habits that do not add to one's life.

According to Clover, this needs to act in tandem with reassessment of one's goals in life. By being satisfied with less, time and energy can be reclaimed rather than lost towards arbitrary goals we have been fed by greater society.<sup>162</sup> Additionally, fewer obligations encourage engagement with life in the present, rather than projections into the past or future. Clover maintains that voluntary simplicity lets its practitioners realize that they have been neglecting relationships for the sake of monetary and material wealth. She discusses this at length, while hastily adding that while minimalist attitudes help foster relationships, one should not rely on close friends or family participating in one's newfound lifestyle; minimalism is *always* an individual effort.<sup>163</sup>

The blog strikes a curious balance between making specific suggestions all minimalists should follow, while simultaneously being intensely personal. The benefits Clover lists owing to this lifestyle include improved relationships, less stress, more mental space, greater spontaneity, familiarization with one's identity, and increased stability owing to the diminution of perceived needs.<sup>164</sup> Many of these speak to notions in spirituality, but the focus is predominantly on relationships to people around the practitioner.<sup>165</sup> The tone of the benefits and goals is more akin to psychological than theological, and this includes the rite suggested of burning objects or paper with emotionally charged writing on it. This seems to address issues of *affliction*, and the exercise itself harkens to a *rite of passage*.<sup>166</sup>

*Be More With Less* does not overtly criticize society, but it does so implicitly by intense criticism of what societal 'defaults' tend to be. The complaints center more around what is

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<sup>161</sup> "The Life Altering Practice of Making Cuts - Be More with Less," accessed May 29, 2021, <https://bemorewithless.com/cut/>.

<sup>162</sup> "10 Meaningful Lessons from The Story of the Mexican Fisherman - Be More with Less," accessed May 29, 2021, <https://bemorewithless.com/mexicanfisherman/>.

<sup>163</sup> "The Biggest Struggle When Simplifying Your Life - Be More with Less," accessed May 29, 2021, <https://bemorewithless.com/struggle-simplifying/>.

<sup>164</sup> "11 Surprising Things About Becoming a Minimalist - Be More with Less," accessed May 29, 2021, <https://bemorewithless.com/surprise/>.

<sup>165</sup> See 3.2, 6-7.

<sup>166</sup> See 2.4, 2.2.

normalized than what is systemic, though the boundaries between the two are blurred. This flirts with the theory of asceticism as social criticism, but the practices speak acutely to the contrast of objects which are useful in the proper context, while avoiding the attribution of excessive meaning to said objects. This means it is compatible with the historical framework of asceticism in the preceding chapter.<sup>167</sup> Minimalism is seen as a *countermovement* but this must be an individualized effort, and not a motive to cultivate ‘converts’.<sup>168</sup>

### 5.9 *A Life in Progress*

The blog *A Life in Progress* also takes a highly personalized approach, and while it may act as a guide, it reads as an individual account. Author Krista O’Reilly-Davi-Digui does offer coaching through this website, but unlike others that offer this service, she presents a deeply personal exploration of her life events that led her, and kept her committed, to minimalism. While her method and reasons for minimizing are specific to her, she offers explanations for how readers may do the same.

The main focus of this blog is on defining one’s core values, and expanding on them to create improvements in life.<sup>169</sup> Resources are provided which guide the reader through exercises of self-exploration, self-development, and self-acceptance as a means to understand one’s values and the most gratifying methods of their expression. Predictably, this almost never involves material items.

*I’ve also found that once you remove one [physical] barrier, it creates space for more emotional or physical clutter to surface... As I worked ... I was forced to address my insecurities and low self-worth... Fortunately, decluttering also opens the door for so many good things, too.<sup>170</sup>*

Physical objects are portrayed as being symbolic of the mental state; it betrays an interior clinging to and overvaluing the past, which obfuscates living in the present. The entries in this

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<sup>167</sup> See 4.1.5.

<sup>168</sup> See 3.3.

<sup>169</sup> “MEET KRISTA | A Life In Progress,” accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.alifeinprogress.ca/meet-krista/>.

<sup>170</sup> “7 Decluttering Tips for a More Authentic and Joy-Filled Life |,” accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.alifeinprogress.ca/decluttering-tips/>.

blog gently expose how people tend to subconsciously identify with things, and suggests how reflection might enable change to take place. Describing her own process of minimalism, she lists off the many types of baggage that was weighing her down; she even references breast reduction surgery in her initial decluttering spree, which ‘lifted so much weight off her shoulders’.<sup>171</sup>

The central question continually asked in the entries, is “What is enough?” – in the home, and in expectations of one’s Self. This question is used to guide the user into a confrontation with identity and core values; minimalism is a vehicle that brings into consciousness what is truly important, and what the best forms of expression would be of these values. Towards this end, many small habits are prescribed which hope to promote mindfulness in daily activities, which in turn increases the quality of time spent with oneself and one’s closest relationships.

The approach of this blog is at once grounded in the authentic experience of the author, while unassumingly providing suggestions for how the reader can initiate their own journey. The focus is on establishing the core meaning or purpose in one’s life, and then orienting one’s efforts towards that. This is achieved through a wholistic approach, incorporating self image and social networks, using objects as a vehicle for exploring previous mindsets, and the contrasting those with ideal attitudes towards the future. This speaks well to spiritual notions of meaning and relationships,<sup>172</sup> and the utilization of objects as a vehicle which permits the exploration and transcendence of Self suggests a life-changing force within minimalist efforts.<sup>173</sup>

### ***5.10 Miss Minimalist***

The last blog explored here is a particularly interesting account. *Miss Minimalist* is run by Francine Jay, who is one of the most popular authors on minimalism, trailing only behind Kondo. She was highly influenced by religious notions: at six years of age in her Catholic school, she and each of her classmates were assigned a specific saint they were to research throughout their elementary education. Being a namesake, Jay was assigned Francis of Assisi, and would be highly

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<sup>171</sup> “7 Decluttering Tips for a More Authentic and Joy-Filled Life |.”

<sup>172</sup> See 3.1.1-2, 3.1.3-5

<sup>173</sup> See 3.1.4,7-8.

influenced by his works.<sup>174</sup> This would instill in Jay a love of animals and a passion for environmental justice, in addition to familiarity with ascetical methods and benefits.

Her approach utilizes a depth method, using herself as an example, of seeking out core issues that prompted her unhappiness. Jay learned that she ‘wanted to want’ things, and that the *anticipation* of acquisition was more gratifying than actually possessing the objects of her desire.<sup>175</sup> Through minimalism, she was able to become aware of this and address her problematic behaviour. “I attribute this change in attitude to the decluttering process—after spending countless hours and much energy undoing my consumer decisions, I had no desire to start the cycle again.”

To reinforce this to her readers, Jay appeals to the innate human desire towards rebellion; she cites her own pleasure at subverting consumerist culture, which she affectionally calls “consumer disobedience”. This attitude encouraged her to embrace her ‘inner rebel’, by deliberately not buying advertised products, taking out loans, or conceding to governmental pleas to stimulate the economy through buying non-necessities.<sup>176</sup> She elaborates:

*I don't know if my contrarian response is a minimalist thing, a frugality thing, or an environmental thing, but I do know this: the purchase of all this stuff is benefiting someone, but it's certainly not us. And the last thing I'm going to do is trade my financial security, my precious space, and the planet's resources for a pile of unnecessary material goods.*

Visible here, is what Jay sees at stake: personal stability and space, as well as a global-scale resource issue. She is highly invested in these environmental concerns, and even moreso in getting as many people on board as possible. “Consumption can be put on the backburner. Our time would then be free for friends, family, and community; and for spiritual, philosophical and cultural pursuits. Imagine what we could do with all that newfound time, energy, and capital!”<sup>177</sup> She hopes to see anti-consumerist efforts evidenced by negation; fewer cars in parking lots, and

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<sup>174</sup> “Historical Minimalist: Saint Francis of Assisi,” accessed May 29, 2021, <http://www.missminimalist.com/2011/11/historical-minimalist-saint-francis-of-assisi/>.

<sup>175</sup> “Wanting to Want,” accessed May 29, 2021, <http://www.missminimalist.com/2011/11/wanting-to-want/>.

<sup>176</sup> “A Short Guide to Consumer Disobedience,” accessed May 29, 2021, <http://www.missminimalist.com/2010/11/a-short-guide-to-consumer-disobedience/>.

<sup>177</sup> “The Minsumer Movement: A Quiet Revolution,” accessed May 29, 2021, <http://www.missminimalist.com/2010/04/the-minsumer-movement-a-quiet-revolution/>.

fewer people at check-out lines. She advises readers to install adblockers into their browsers, and avoid advertisements via television or magazines.

The benefits purported are listed above: more time and mental space for relationships, and ‘spiritual, philosophical and cultural pursuits’. When one cuts tethers to employers because their monetary needs are lessened, working less equates to increased time for what truly matters. Jay also emphasizes the feelings and lightness and peace to be achieved when one is not ‘consumed with consumerism’.

Jay predominantly takes a personal route to describe the motivations towards simplicity, and allows her readers to answer these questions for themselves. The core factors driving her are plainly acknowledged to be spiritual, environmental, and humanitarian; these are intricately interdependent. She refuses, however, to put such motivations ‘in the mouth’ of her readers, as this is such a deeply personal issue which allows one to encounter what is truly meaningful to them. “Most importantly, by not buying, we redefine ourselves: by what we do, what we think, and who we love, rather than what we have. And in the process, we rediscover the meaning in our lives.”

Curiously, in addition to speaking about spirituality directly, Jay also calls on asceticism by name. I would like to contrast two points in light of the frameworks discussed in the previous chapter:

*We can be pioneers of social and economic change simply by consuming less.*<sup>178</sup>

*A lot of people think being a minimalist is akin to being a monk—living a sort of ascetic lifestyle in which you deprive yourself of “worldly” things simply for the sake of it.*<sup>179</sup>

The first quotation states a directive which is directly compatible with ascetic theory; however contemporary perceptions of asceticism are denoted in the following quotation. Given the full scope of ascetic theory, it must be stated that ascetics do not deprive themselves ‘simply

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<sup>178</sup> “Minimalist Living: Movement or Fad?,” accessed May 29, 2021, <http://www.missminimalist.com/2010/09/minimalist-living-movement-or-fad/>.

<sup>179</sup> “The Top Ten Benefits of Being a Minimalist,” accessed May 29, 2021, <http://www.missminimalist.com/2009/10/the-top-ten-benefits-of-being-a-minimalist/>.

for the sake of it'. Deprivation is *never* the end-goal of asceticism, but a vehicle which achieves a certain goal through some type of exchange relationship. Sacrificing comforts for the sake of self-development or social change – especially for a globally-encompassing issue like climate change – is wholly compatible with asceticism.

Another major point of interest in Jay's blog, is the commentary that she explicitly prompts: she asked her readers to express their thoughts on how their minimalist practices are informed by their religion.<sup>180</sup> This was a fascinating read, though not the subject of this thesis; I will summarize by saying that the majority of commentors agreed that minimalism was satisfying in a way which connected deeply to their religion. A small percentage, however, seemed offended by the question, and essentially stated that no religion is the 'most' minimalist mindset. In another thread, Jay asked the same question about how spirituality connected with minimalism; this thread was nigh indistinguishable from the thread on religion.<sup>181</sup> This poses an array of questions which lay beyond the scope of this thesis regarding lay perceptions of spirituality, religion, and their connected practices.

*Miss Minimalist* certainly provided the most relevant data for this thesis, in its acute addressing of ritual, even directly discussing denied *rites of consumption* previously referenced in ritual theory by Mary Douglas.<sup>182</sup> Jay deliberately avoids suggesting novel rites to take the place of denied rites (as Clover does in 5.8), allowing the deeply personal values and meaning to come through, unjaded, in her readers.<sup>183</sup> This greater process of minimalist engagement is presented as an acute act of rebellion; this appeals to human nature as well as asceticism, even though this is not congruent with the definition perceived in contemporary lay contexts.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> "Minimalism and Religion," accessed May 29, 2021, <http://www.missminimalist.com/2011/09/minimalism-and-religion/>.

<sup>181</sup> "Minimalist Living & Spirituality," accessed May 29, 2021, <http://www.missminimalist.com/2010/02/minimalist-living-spirituality/>.

<sup>182</sup> See 2.3.

<sup>183</sup> See 3.1.1-2, 4, 6-8.

<sup>184</sup> See 4.2.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 Overview

Over the course of this thesis a broad understanding of contemporary minimalism was formed by considering theories from the fields of ritual studies, spiritual theology, and ascetic history and theory. These concepts were analyzed for compatibility with the mindsets and benefits represented by current minimalist trends, by means of comparison with samples from practitioners writing about their experience in online blogs and articles.

This comparison generated a few points which illuminate minimalism on a general level. The effort towards understanding what is truly meaningful is ubiquitous in all examples explored in this thesis. Minimalism denotes the negation of items, habits, or harmful relationships in return for something deemed to be of higher importance. This is inherently personal to the individual in question; however, some blogs do prescribe highly specific goals centering around family and community, or environmental causes. The universality of profound meaning being derived from minimalist practices, in addition to the importance placed on relationships and morality makes it compatible with spiritual theories. This is highlighted when considering the general aim of creating a better Self and a better future, flirting with concepts of hope. However, depending upon the individual in question, such benefits may be experienced at an intellectual level; it is difficult to conclude that someone's subjective experience is spiritual unless they are aware of, and comfortable self-reporting this.

It can be said with certainty that contemporary minimalist practices can be, and frequently are, satisfying at a spiritual level.<sup>185</sup> It is also true that minimalism as it is currently practiced is in line not only with Waaijman's theory of spirituality as a *marginal spirituality*, but also Valantasis' and Harpham's ascetic theories in that they imply a strong socio-cultural criticism. This is likely founded upon historic notions in Western thought which influence today's re-examination of one's belongings, asking if one is overvaluing their possessions or using them as a distraction. A more general understanding of asceticism as sacrifice for the sake of self-development or connection with an Other (whether divine or secular) is also highly compatible with minimalism. The

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<sup>185</sup> As exemplified in *Miss Minimalist's* prompt for reader commentary.

categorization of a minimalist practice as being ascetic would thus depend on the individual and the motivation behind their practice. Such an examination might incorporate some more specific criteria elicited by this thesis, which shall be elucidated immediately.

## 6.2 Reflections

The first point that struck me in my analysis was the importance of ritual relative to the quality of minimalist practice, including its permanence as a lifestyle change. Ritual elements were noted to varying degrees in contemporary practices; some were very generic in their described methodology, or neglected this altogether, while others offered extremely specific procedures. I noticed that the more intensely ritual is incorporated into the practice, the greater the reported rate of success was for those following it.<sup>186</sup> This suggests that ritual is a crucial factor for one's success in practicing minimalism, especially long term.

It may be the case that a *rite of passage* as apparent, for example, in Kondo's strict marathon-effort of tidying, not only establishes an initial change of environment, but additionally instills a sense of having pre-made certain decisions. In other words, if one emerges from such a rite with an intense feeling of having made a 'clean cut' from their previous lifestyle, their new identity is so reified that the potential to revert to their previous mindset is lessened. An abrupt lifestyle change is typically associated with white-knuckling while resisting old habits; but even though conscious awareness is required in switching to a minimalist lifestyle, a profound rite makes acting on these new behaviors more of a non-question.

The second point also relates to issues of identity: I asked in chapter 1 what happened to identity when it was decoupled from rejected items.<sup>187</sup> In every example of contemporary minimalism explored here, there are explicit connections between getting rid of items, and gaining a new sense of what is valuable or meaningful in return. Particularly in *No Side Bar*, the concept of mental hygiene is used to explain how to harvest one's identity back from discarded items. This

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<sup>186</sup> I must express my doubt as to Kondo's claim of *never* having a client revert back to a non-minimalist lifestyle; I wonder if such statistics did not 'spark joy' in her assessments, however high success has also been reported by users of Francine Jay, *Be More with Less* and other highly ritualized methods of minimizing explored here.

<sup>187</sup> See 1.2.1.

was also poignant in the examples of confronting mortality<sup>188</sup> where both authors underscored the meanings we assign to items by means of identification with them, and then citing an increased sense of autonomy and sense of self once we no longer consider these external things to be ‘us’.

A third major point of interest is the utter lack of correlation between the intensities of compatibility between *spirituality* and *asceticism*. The wide variety of samples elicited a broad range of motivations and degrees of compatibility with either theory-set, however the presence of one did not predict the other. This suggests that within minimalist practices, ascetic functions are completely independent from spiritual functions. Likewise, a spiritually motivated minimalist is not any more likely to tend towards an ascetic mindset. It appears that these two notions each occur on their own spectrum without any cross-influence.

The final curiosity denoted in this research, is the profound significance of what minimalism indicates in the greater social climate. This was a recurring concept that the framework largely ties to asceticism, however it cannot be overstated that minimalism participates in a greater emerging trend which revolves around exploring and practicing alternative ways of living. The rise of countermovements and the availability of, especially online, platforms has caused radical questioning of societal norms on a grand scale. This would be worth intensive research, particularly from the lens of ascetic theory.

### **6.3 Further questions**

Given these brief conclusions, a few paths emerge for deeper exploration. As both spirituality and asceticism are compatible with a wide range of minimalist practices, how can these theories support minimalism and comparable lifestyles? Relating to the self-perceptions of religious minimalists,<sup>189</sup> in what ways does religion support minimalist practices? Further, do lay practitioners experience a sense of sacrifice or deprivation, or do the benefits outweigh such feelings? The use of ritual to enhance one’s minimalist practice also begs the question: how can rites be used in supporting *other* major changes in lifestyle?

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<sup>188</sup> See 5.5-6.

<sup>189</sup> See 5.10.

Questions relating to further studies in contemporary spirituality also present difficulties regarding data collection; how can interviews be designed in a way which lets people explore notions of ritual or spirituality in a way that does not elicit self-consciousness because of the ‘irrational’ connotations of these terms? While inhibitions in discussing such matters are a concern for researchers, it is clear that profound needs are being met through these ostensibly secular practices which are, at least sometimes, being used to meet spiritual needs.

One of the most significant outcomes of answering these questions is that they provide footing on which to understand an immense array of emerging religious and secular movements: people are embracing personal sacrifice as a means to contribute towards sustainability efforts. This ultimately signifies a fight against deeply ingrained societal norms that have given rise to climate change and abuse of the planet’s resources. These concerns are causing people to rally at a global scale within established religions, new religions, spiritual movements, and wholly secular contexts. Researching these movements and the practitioner’s experience of personal sacrifice for global welfare could provide incredibly important insights regarding contemporary spirituality, secular asceticism, and how people today engaged in such efforts may be best supported.

## Appendix: Blogs and Articles Used in Contemporary Data Collection

*A Life in Progress*

[www.alifeinprogress.ca](http://www.alifeinprogress.ca)

*Ann Patchett*

[www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/08/how-to-practice](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/08/how-to-practice)

*The Art of Simple*

[www.theartofsimple.net](http://www.theartofsimple.net)

*Be More With Less*

[www.bemorewithless.com](http://www.bemorewithless.com)

*Becoming Minimalist*

[www.becomingminimalist.com](http://www.becomingminimalist.com)

*Marjolein in het Klein*

[www.marjoleininhetklein.com](http://www.marjoleininhetklein.com)

*The Minimalists*

[www.theminimalists.com](http://www.theminimalists.com)

*Miss Minimalist*

[www.missminimalist.com](http://www.missminimalist.com)

*No Side Bar*

[www.nosidebar.com](http://www.nosidebar.com)

*The Tiny Life*

[www.thetinylife.com](http://www.thetinylife.com)

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