

The Monastic Movement

The rise of the monasticism, from late Latin *monasticus*, from Greek *monastikos*, from *monazein* 'live alone,' was an movement that kept the spirit of discipleship alive in a church that was consistently growing more and more worldly.

“For over a millennium, in the centuries between the reign of Constantine and the Protestant Reformation, almost everything in the church that approached the highest, noblest, and truest ideals of the gospel was done either by those who had chosen the monastic way or by those who had been inspired in their Christian life by the monks.” p. 84, Turning Points.

Protestantism itself began with the monastic experiences of Martin Luther. Once Luther, Calvin, Cramner, Menno Simons, and other leaders of the Reformation concluded it was necessary to break from the Roman Catholic Church, they drew their support from Scriptures and from the writings of the monks particularly the writings of Augustine(353-430), who had been not only a learned theologian, busy bishop, and energetic polemicist but also the founder of a monastic order. Luther began his biblical study and theological reflections as an Augustinian monk.

If we read scripture in our own language, we benefit from the tradition started by the monk Jerome(342-420) who translated the Hebrew and Greek into Latin, the Latin Vulgate.

Most hymns from that period came from monks like Gregory(540-604) and Bernard Clairvaux(1090-1153).

The first history of Christianity in the English speaking world, started with a monk named Bede(673-735).

Francis of Assisi(1181-1226) aroused those around him to see the goodness in God's creation, Brother Sun, Sister Moon, All things great and small.

It was never a perfect answer to the question of how to live the Christian life, but at least it was asking and seeking after an answer and a way of life.

Turning point - many significant times. Anthony, the first recorded monk, who left his family farm in Egypt and went to the edge of the desert to find God, 270.

Basil of Caesarea who defined the Holy Spirit, 370.

Athanasius the great defender of Christ's divinity in the 4th Century.

One we will consider as a central figure is Benedict of Nursia (in Italy) who gave the most decisive and most beneficial shape to monasticism in his Rule, a document that help regulate a zealous spirit that bordered on fanaticism, for curbing asceticism that would have easily slid into Gnosticism or worse, for preserving the centrality of Scripture in a movement that made much of the inner spiritual illumination, for recalling prayer to the heart of the Christian life, for linking religious experience with the basic realities of work, study, eating, and sleeping.

Benedict was educated in Rome (480-550) where he found the standards of the Christian life so degenerate that he abandoned the city for a life of solitary religious devotion at Subiaco. Because of his reputation for spiritual insight, many gathered around him and he founded twelve separate monasteries with twelve monks each.

From those who gathered around him, in the early days, he became the object of jealous attacks. He moved south of Rome to Monte Cassino where he established a monastery that still exists to this day. It was probably after arriving that he began to write his Regula. This Rule soon won nearly universal approval as providing the shape for monasticism in the West.

Let's look at the conditions that lead these believers in this direction. Conditions in the 4th and 5th centuries provided powerful motivations for the spread of monasticism. The persecutions under Decius in the mid-third century and under Diocletian in the early 4th C took place at the same time that economic difficulties disoriented traditional patterns of life throughout many parts of the Roman Empire, especially Egypt. The first monks, like Anthony, who left for the Egyptian desert were departing a world where both religious and secular conditions lay in disarray.

But a more powerful motivation was not persecution or poverty, but success. With the rise of Constantinian church-state establishment, the life of a Christian "professional" shifted to privilege not hard times.

Service under Constantine and the following emperors gave stability access to power, and a reasonable opportunity for wealth.

Monasticism was a response, often inarticulate, that reflected spiritual concern about the church's success. The self-denial and privations of the

monks, although self imposed, were a way of recovering the ideals of martyrdom and suffering.

Unfortunately, this effort was beginning to create a two-tiered picture of Christianity. Soon monks, were the “athletes of God,” seeking the true Christian faith, while ordinary people in ordinary human circumstances were consigned to a subordinate spiritual level

Yet despite this danger, under Constantinian style cooperation, they did become the conscience of the church.

1. ironically, renouncing wealth and the world, gave them a sought after voice and authority. With the absence of an agenda, became a source of neutral advice.

Story of Simeon Stylites(390-459)

Simeon who lived in the vicinity of Antioch, Syria, became a anchorite or solitary monk. in early adulthood. At some later stage he departed into a desert region where he began to building a pillar as his place of abode. For the last decades of his life, he remained perpetually on this pillar, which he continued to construct until it reached a great height. Simeon thought isolation would allow him to focus only on the spiritual. Sounds like an eccentric odd ball. Yet his story is remembered because he had a steady stream of visitors for help. He is attributed to bringing conversion and reconciliation between warring factions both in the church and without. His acceptance of the Chalcedon Definition of Jesus led to that region accepting it. He is a person who seems to have no agenda.

2. In a day when society was breaking down, Egypt economic collapse, or in Italy, the collapse of the emperors, they provided order. Much like in our day, we attract many people from broken homes and families, because in a world that is reluctant to take strong stands except on tolerance, the Bible and church gives their life order.

3. Scripture was a key to their calling. Antony, the first of the monks, had gone into the desert after hearing Matthew 19:21 read during as Sunday sermon(if you would be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.) He had only recently received a substantial inheritance of land from his parents. The scripture so captivated that he went out and acted on it. I Cor. 7, for example commended the unmarried. “It is good for them to stay unmarried as I am.” John the Baptist’s life in the desert as an unmarried seeker for God loomed just as large. I Thess. 5:17 - pray without ceasing.

4. Role of asceticism: In the West practical solutions were more important than theological speculation. Tertullian for example held out that one who sought reconciliation needed to pass through distinct stages: penitence (or active sorrow for sin), mortification (deadening of the flesh through ascetic practices), merit (securing of the right to be rewarded by God), and satisfaction (reparation by alms, fasting, or other good works for the damage done to God's holiness.). It was all dependent upon God's grace through the cross, but they had the effect of making conscientious human effort quite important. Eastern asceticism has other sources. Neoplatonic tendency forms of thought played a part of their understanding. Neoplatonic thought had the tendency to treat the created realm as only a shadow of ultimate realities - which were located beyond the material realm. These principles affected Christian thought particularly in the Eastern part of the Med. world. Augustine was also connected to this world view. Our culture does tint our lenses as we even look at the Bible. This is important particularly with the Monastic movement, since the combination of Platonic thought with some scriptures and examples could lead them off to the bush to be close to God. They would take Paul's injunction to remain unmarried, if possible, to shape the monastic ideal of chastity which was aided by the Platonic dualism, flesh being evil and spirit being good.

Shortfalls:

1. salvation by works vs justification by faith. Story of Luther, torn by guilt till he rediscovered justification by faith in Romans.
2. question - does ascetic privations, disciplines, to the body, affect the true seat of sinfulness? Col. 2
3. question - does the incarnation of Christ, with the full humanity affirmed by Chalcedon, justify withdrawal from the world in the way that monks practiced this withdrawal? John 2:11 - first miracle to promote a feast. Verses on the comparison of John and Jesus - Drunk to Monk.