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Christian Spirituality Group

“The New Monasticism”

Evan Howard, presiding

Introducing New Monasticism

Welcome to the Christian Spirituality Group of the American Academy of Religion. This afternoon our topic of discussion is “the new monasticism.” We have a delightful set of contributions to our discussion provided by our three presenters, Brian Campbell, Philip Harrold, and Martha McAfee. My name is Evan Howard, and I will, by way of introduction, provide an overview of new monastic phenomena.

So, just what *is* “new monasticism”? The answer to that question depends on where you draw your circle. The fact of the matter is intentional communities and ascetical or alternative expressions are forming all the time. There is the global spread of the French-born Community of the Beatitudes. There are the groups connected with the Northumbria Community in the UK--who commit to a set of common values and practices and who maintain mutual accountability and encouragement largely through email contact. We could discuss the shifts in the character of quasi-Anarchist collectives in the West. And so on.

As with the history of religious life more generally, the forms of new experiments in Christian living vary greatly. There are “new friars,” small teams of missionaries sharing Christ in deed and word among the poor of the world. There are “new siblings of the common life,” drawing from the heritage of monasticism to form communities of solidarity and influence. There are “new solitaries,” experimenting with the life and ministry of the hermit. Once again, many expressions could be explored. In light of the summary presented in your program book, I will focus my attention on those groups recently comprehended under the labels “new

monasticism,” and “new friars.”

The historical development of new monasticism can be divided into three seasons. In the **first season**--from WWII to 1974--some early seeds of change were planted.¹ During this season Roman Catholics were re-defining the nature of religious life, both in anticipation of, and in response to the Second Vatican Council: a redefinition which is often symbolized by new monasticism in the socially aware solitude of Thomas Merton and in the socially active communities of the Catholic Worker.² Protestant experiments in community life--such as Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde community, Eberhard Arnold’s Bruderhoff, the Taizé community, Clarence Jordan’s Koinonia Farm, and Reba Place Fellowship--stimulated renewal in Europe and America.³ From the late 1950s through the early 1970’s a youth “counter culture” was exploring religious community with abandon.⁴ Perhaps one of the most significant themes communicated through these seeds has been the call to “live” the Gospel of Jesus Christ (or perhaps more particularly a call to follow the evangelical counsels), frequently symbolized by new monastics today through a quote from Bonhoeffer’s letter to his brother proclaiming that, “the restoration of the church will surely form a new type of monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of life lived according to the Sermon on the

1 Interesting enough, the phrase “seeds of change” is the phrase used by Patricia Wittberg to describe the early developments leading to the decline of membership in Catholic religious orders. See Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 210–13.

2 See Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 210–17 and Volumes III- VI of *The Journals of Thomas Merton* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco). For the early history of the Catholic Worker see Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1952).

3 Developments in Protestant community life during this period are surveyed in Donald G. Bloesch, *Wellsprings of Renewal: Promise in Christian Communal Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, publishing, 1974), 52–98. An explicit review of these roots by the new monastic community can be found in Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 23–39.

4 One of the best sociological analyses of this movement is Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. eds. Bellah, *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976).

Mount in the following of Christ. I believe it is now time to call people to this.”¹

In the **second season**--from 1974-1993 these early seeds were watered and new seeds were planted. It was a season of decline for Roman Catholic religious orders and the youth counter culture. It was a season of growth for American evangelicalism. Reba Place Fellowship experienced a charismatic renewal and gave birth to Reba Place Church as membership swelled. A number of socially active leaders, communities and organizations associated with what became known as “the evangelical left” emerged in this season, all of which have become mentors and elders to new monasticism: inspirational speakers and writers such as Anthony Campolo and Ronald Sider, groups like Jim Wallis’s Sojourners community and John Perkins’s Christian Community Development Association, and publications like *Sojourners Magazine* and John Alexander’s the *Other Side* magazine.

At this same time developments were also taking place in missiological theory. In 1974, Ralph Winter, one of the key figures in the development of Fuller Seminary’s influential School of World Mission, published an article in the *Journal of Missiology* on “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission.”² In this article he distinguished between what he called “modalities” (parish-type structures which include people of all ages, genders and commitment levels), and “sodalities” (monastic or mission structures which restrict membership by commitment and often other factors). Winter began to make a call for Protestant missions to rethink themselves in conscious relation to historic Catholic missionary “orders.” He writes, “I believe that Protestants have underestimated the Roman orders, and that after two centuries of extensive Protestant mission experience, it is high time to recognize these unusually committed fellowships or “orders” for what they are, namely a marvelous invention. .

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, eds Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995), 424.

2 Ralph D. Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, rev. ed., Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, reprint, 1973 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1992), 45–57.

.¹ Winter's influence stimulated a lively interest in forming Protestant missionary orders.

One of these early pioneers of Protestant missionary orders was the New Zealander Viv Grigg, a graduate of the Fuller School of World Mission. In 1979 Grigg moved into a garbage dump/squatter settlement of Tatalon in Manila in order to bring the presence of the gospel to some of the 3 million slum dwellers there.² Ultimately he catalyzed a number of missionary movements among the urban poor in Asia. In his book, *Cry of the Urban Poor*, written in 1984, Grigg documented his research regarding missionary efforts worldwide, concluding that, “*the greatest mission surge in history, aimed at the last frontiers, has entirely missed the greatest migration in history, the migration of rural peasants in the third world to the great mega-cities.*”³ His solution to this failure of missions was a return to the historic vows in missionary orders. His passion was to, “thrust out groups similar to the devotional communities of 12th century preaching friars, or the wandering Irish monks that converted Northern Europe between the fifth and ninth centuries, before the Catholic hierarchy gained control there. In our case we must send communities of men and women, married couples and singles, with commitments to live as the poor among the poor in order to preach the kingdom and establish the church in these great slum areas.”⁴ He speaks specifically of a recovery of the vows of non-destitute poverty, temporary celibacy and evangelical humility. Grigg is the founder of Servants of Asia's Urban Poor, one of the “new friar” orders mentioned in the influential November 1996 Christianity Today article on new monasticism and in Scott Beseneker's popular book, *The New Friars*.⁵

1 . Ralph Winter, “William Carey's Major Novelty,” *Misiology* 22, no. 2 (1994 April 1994): 203–22.

2 His story is told in Viv Grigg, *Companion to the Poor*, reprint, 1984 (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1990).

3 Viv Grigg, *Cry of the Urban Poor: Reaching the Slums of Today's Mega-Cities*, reprint, 1992 (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004), 10.

4 *Ibid.*, 17.

5 See Rob Moll, “The New Monasticism: A Fresh Crop of Christian Communities is Blossoming in

Another of the early pioneers in missionary orders was John Hayes. In 1983 Hayes, like Viv Grigg, moved into the center of poverty, only for Hayes it was the “Minnie Street” ghetto of Los Angeles. And like Grigg, Hayes catalyzed the formation of a number of teams which would relocate with poverty-stricken populations of the world. This was the foundation of InnerCHANGE. In 1985 while attending a workshop at the University of San Francisco, Hayes heard the idea of “missionary orders.” Ultimately InnerCHANGE adopted the idea for their own organization, developing an intentional integration of missional, prophetic, and contemplative currents and adopting practices of retreats, sabbaticals, novitiates and such. *InnerCHANGE: A Christian Order Among the Poor* has been an influential force among the new friars, modeling a ministry of simple loving friendship among the forgotten of the world.¹

In 1980, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre published a reconsideration of the philosophical foundations of ethics. In the inspirational conclusion his work, MacIntyre issued a call for the salvation of our culture. He argues that

“ What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another--doubtless very different--St. Benedict.”²

Blighted Urban Settings All Over America,” Christianity Today, September 2005, 38–46; Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). For more on SERVANTS, see www.servantsasia.org.

1 For InnerCHANGE’s story see John Hayes, *Sub-Merge: Living Deep in a Shallow World* (Ventura, CA: Regal books, 2006) and www.innerchange.org.

2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press,

Through the first season of our history, seeds of radical living--life according to the evangelical counsels of the Gospel--were planted. Through the second season, this same theme was affirmed while new seeds--those of mission and community--were planted and watered.

In the **third season** (1994 - the present), these watered seeds have begun to sprout.

While Catholic religious orders were on the decline, Protestant and ecumenical religious communities started springing up all over. Less visible has been the establishment of “new friar” organizations such as Servant Partners, Urban Neighbors of Hope, and Word Made Flesh which have given ever richer expression to the missionary order impulse.¹

More visible, however, has been the establishment and networking of activist communities in the United States. Perhaps this story has its beginning in the student protest of a proposed forced removal of a group of homeless folk in Philadelphia in September of 1995. Shane Claiborne, a student of Anthony Campolo and one of the participants in that protest, found in his developing solidarity with the homeless community a new lease on the Christian faith. After a stint in Calcutta volunteering with Mother Theresa and another at Willow Creek Church, one of the largest mega-churches in the United States, Shane returned to the slums of Philadelphia to found, with others, the Simple Way community, one of the most influential of the young new monastic communities. Shane and company have been involved in all sorts of creative activism, and since 1997 have drawn similar-minded communities together in a regular “family reunion.”²

1981), 245.

- 1 See, for example, Ashley Barker, *Collective Witness: A Theology and Praxis for a Missionary Order* (Springvale, Victoria, Australia: Urban Neighbors of Hope, 2000); Ashley Barker, *Surrender All: A Call to Sub-Merge with Christ* (Springvale, Victoria, Australia: Urban Neighbors of Hope, 2005); Chris Heuertz, *Simple Spirituality: Learning to See God in a Broken World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); and www.unoh.org, www.wordmadeflesh.com, and www.servantpartners.org. For further reflection on forms of monasticism and missionary strategy see also George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Win the West... Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).
- 2 See, for example, Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006); Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: The

In 1998 philosopher Jonathan R. Wilson, published a book evaluating the impact of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* for the church. In the last chapter of this book, he evaluated MacIntyre's call for a new Benedict. Wilson, however, longed for "not a new St. Benedict, but" for "Christian communities that may produce a new St. Benedict."¹ He called the development of these communities a "new monasticism." He looked for the formation of communities of Christians characterized by a sense of God's purpose of the healing of the world's fragmentation, by its offer of life for the whole people of God, by spiritual disciplines and by deep theological reflection.²

Another student of Campolo's--and a friend of Shane Claiborne's--was Jonathan Hartgrove. He began visiting the Simple Way community with his friend, Leah Wilson (who happened to be philosopher Jonathan Wilson's daughter) in 1999. They joined forces (Jonathan and Leah were married - hence Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove), and in 2003 Jonathan and Shane travelled to Iraq with the Christian Peacemaker Teams to embody a ministry of presence amidst the violence of the invasion of Baghdad. Having experienced a powerful example of hospitality by the local Iraqi people in a town called Rutba, upon returning to the States, Jonathan and Leah founded the Rutba house community in Durham, North Carolina, a house of hospitality and reconciliation in the midst of a low-income neighborhood. The network of kindred communities was growing. In 2004 Wilson-Hartgrove and the Rutba house received a grant to draw some of these kindred spirits together for a gathering to "help us discern the shape of a new monasticism."³ The shape they found was published in the influential *School(s) for*

Simple Way/ Zondervan, 2008).

- 1 Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's After Virtue* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997),á70.
- 2 Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's After Virtue* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997),á72–76.
- 3 *The Rutba House, School(s) for Conversion: Twelve Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005),áx.

Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism,⁴ and the movement has exploded ever since.² In the third season of growth we have seen the full development of a recognizable new monastic sprout, complete with distinguishing “marks” of some kind or another.

Today, a number of mission teams and local communities would identify themselves with either “new monasticism” or the new friars. There are between eighty and one hundred communities in the United States currently associated with new monasticism and over 800 individuals have attended at least one of their weekend training workshops called “Schools for Conversion.” This summer’s PAPA Fest (People Against Poverty and Apathy) opened registration for one thousand attendees and in one week the registration was full. New friar missions teams employ approximately 250 staff currently and are serving the poor in in 20-25 different countries worldwide.

Again, I have provided the background for only a segment of monastic-inspired movements emerging currently. Philip Harrold and Brian Campbell will supplement my introduction with their own introductions to other expressions. So, how might we characterize *this* segment of new monasticism? I see a few features worthy of mention, drawing from visits, interviews, from the central *Twelve Marks* and other foundational documents of the groups represented:

First, new monasticism is *communal* and even *communitarian*, interpreting the Gospel as communicated *for* a people and *through* a people. It is predominantly *urban*, with a strong emphasis on relocation to the forgotten wastelands of the urban ghettos (though I am seeing a rise of interest in rural expressions). It is *missional*, with a clear outward thrust, yet with a

1 Ibid. For further reflections on this shape see also Jon Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007). For Wilson-Hartgrove’s story and work in racial reconciliation see Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *To Baghdad and Beyond: How I Got Born Again in Babylon* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005) and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Free to be Bound* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008).

2 See www.newmonasticism.org; www.theordinaryradicals.com; and www.communityofcommunities.us.

living tension between charity, solidarity, ecclesiology, justice, and evangelism. It is *intentional*, seeking to recover something of a “consecrated” life of commitment to such values as simplicity, humility, purity, conversion, and stability. It is also characterized by a living *tension of historic recovery and contemporary innovation*. There is a sincere desire to learn from the history of religious life and to experiment with new ways of embodying Jesus living in culture today. And finally new monasticism desires to be *contemplative*, I think more so than many of the expressions that preceded it, though few have taken on the practice of full divine office yet.¹

Who are the “new monastics”? These are people who, to use language given us by Mary Frohlich in her presentation yesterday, are learning to ‘reground’ themselves:

- literally to the earth by planting urban gardens and protesting strip mines
- to their God by recovering the practices of reciting the Divine Office, of taking retreats, and of sabbatical
- to each other by living in community
- to the poor by relocating to the slums
- to the systems and structures of the larger world by volunteering themselves as mediators in situations of violence

These are people who are unimpressed by evangelical spectacle and liberal speculation. They simply wish to live out the Gospel as ordinary radicals.

On the one hand there is Bonhoeffer, calling for a monasticism, “which has in common with the old *only* the uncompromising attitude of life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount.” On the other hand there is the encouragement by Michael Cartwright from the University of Indianapolis whose “own experience in the St. Brigid of Kildare consultations

¹ For a brief reflection on prayer from leaders in the new monastic movement see Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Becoming the Answer to Our Prayers: Prayer for Ordinary Radicals* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

between United Methodists and Benedictines has led him to believe that much can be learned from patient engagement with old monasticism.”¹ Issues of commandments and counsels, the role and nature of the traditional vows, the character of the Rules and rhythms of life, all of this and more must needs be addressed in the consideration of some kind of recovery of religious life today. And this brings us to the contributions of our presenters.

As I mentioned, that which has been identified with “new monasticism” is only a segment of the forms of monastic-inspired life currently emerging. Brian Campbell will expand our horizons further by introducing another movement of religious life, the rise of the intentional solitary, especially as seen in those who identify with the newsletter/ website known as *Raven’s Bread*. Just as our sense of Christian community is being explored by new monastics, so our understanding of what it means to be a religious solitary is being explored by those associated with *Raven’s Bread*. Some are married, some have jobs. How do these postmodern “hermits” navigate the boundaries of calling and location? How do they incorporate the heritage of desert elders, British hermits, recent Catholic pioneers, world religious influences, and postmodern life? And how do solitaries today view their own place or contribution to the church or the world? Brian’s presentation joins thick description with sociological evaluation as he explores the place of intentional solitude in late modernity.

And then there is the question of context. What factors give shape to this “new” monasticism? And, of course, this brings us to a discussion of the characteristics of late modernity. The movement from individualism to community, from dogma to life, from verbal to visual. How do youth today re-imagine spiritual belonging? In our second presentation, Philip Harrold offers us a cultural interpretation of new monastic movements. Philip brings us a

1 Jon Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 44.

phenomenology of the late modern imagination, developed through case studies and dialogue with research in historical consciousness. How do individuals and communities re-interpret the past for the sake of the future? How do Christians move from thinking of the faith as a deposit of individual belief to a corporate way of life? What visions or practices serve to form Christian community and how are these nourished? Philip Harrold will explore image both as memory and construction in his presentation on new monasticism as ancient-future belonging.

“ But,” many will ask, even having heard my overview, “it’s new, but is it *monastic*?” This is precisely the question addressed by our third presenter Martha McAfee. The term “monasticism” has been understood variously over the centuries (for a first survey I would recommend a comparison of the *Oxford English Dictionary* with the *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*). What do we mean by “orders” or the “religious life,” and how do these terms relate to contemporary experiments in consecrated living? Martha will argue that celibacy in particular is constitutive of monasticism. The Benedictine way of life, for example, assumes celibacy as a necessary condition for the kind of conversion facilitated in monastic life. Hence an authentic “monasticism” requires a stricter interpretation of these elements than are given in the new monastic communities as we know them today. Consequently, Martha will argue that these communities should not really be regarded as “monastic.” Rejecting the term “monasticism” as the most appropriate descriptor, however, does not imply any diminishment of the contribution of these communities. In their community life, these groups witness to the character of Christ through the church, much as the Free Church movement has at various times throughout history.

Notes

