

What Do We Call IT?

New “Monasticism” and the Vocabulary of Religious Life

“The letter of the Rule was killing, and the large number of applicants and the high rate of their subsequent leaving shows the dichotomy: men were attracted by what Merton saw in monasticism and what he wrote about it, and turned away by the life as it was dictated by the abbot.” (Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The good times and hard life of Thomas Merton*, p. 77)

“Fourth, the new monasticism will be undergirded by *deep theological reflection and commitment*. . . . by saying that the new monasticism must be undergirded by theological commitment and reflection, I am not saying that right theology will of itself produce a faithful church. A faithful church is marked by the faithful carrying out of the mission given to the church by Jesus Christ, but that mission can be identified only by faithful theology. So, in the new monasticism we must strive simultaneously for a recovery of right belief and right practice.” (Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre’s After Virtue* [1997], pp. 75-76 in a chapter titled “The New Monasticism”)

Whether we like the term or not, it is here, probably to stay. “Monasticism.” Is that what it is, new “monasticism”? Is that what we should call it? The problem begins when you try to choose a textbook that covers the history of things. Histories of monasticism only cover the enclosed life. Celtic monasticism prior to Roman adoption is seldom covered. The mendicants, the beguinages and the Jesuits are not treated. And of course, if we are trying to include discussion of Protestant cousins, the Anabaptist communities and such are never mentioned.

But the term adopted today by many is “monasticism.” Ever since Jonathan Wilson’s chapter cited above, the *Christianity Today* article of November ‘06, and the publication of *Twelve Marks*, the term has been “monasticism.” Or has it? We note that Scott Bessenecker’s *The New Friars* (IVP, 2006) reviews a number of new movements (InnerCHANGE, Urban Neighbors of Hope [UNOH], Servant Partners, Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor, and Word Made Flesh) and old movements (Celts, Franciscans, Jesuits, Nestorians, Moravians) under the term “friars,” emphasizing the missionary flavor of these movements. At least two of these new movements (InnerCHANGE and UNOH) use the term “order” to define themselves. Shane Claiborne is scheduled to speak at a UNOH gathering in the near future. There is increasing interest in new Celtic communities like Iona, Northumbria and St. Aiden’s Trust. There is a budding development of solitaries collecting around the *Raven’s Bread* newsletter. Some kind of convergence is developing. But is it “monastic”?

I think it might be helpful to clarify vocabulary. As Jonathan Wilson, in his call for a new monasticism writes (in the quote above), the faithful mission and practice of the Church is and ought to be clarified by faithful theology. As a student of theology and things monastic myself, I wish to new movements to find themselves and avoid a few of the pitfalls that haunted movements in the past.

Which brings me to the quote about Merton and his followers. This statement was made specifically about Thomas Merton’s own monastery and the problems of the abbot. Nonetheless, I think there is a more general point to be taken here. We are all aware of the

excitement at the onset of a movement, an excitement which, at times, lags behind the reality of community life. Without proper clarification, there is a potential in new monastic movements for a gap between expectation and practice. Hence the need for wise clarification offered both to those involved in shaping monastic movements (leaders) and those who are interested in the same (followers).

And so with all this in mind, a few reflections on terms.

1) “Religious” and “religious life” -

Today we have all kinds of associations with the term “religious.” I remember Fritz Ridenour’s well-known book, *How to Be A Christian Without Being Religious*. Certainly we would not want to be “religious.” Nonetheless, the term “religious” in official Roman Catholic circles is the proper term for a life consecrated to God. “Religious life” is the phrase used to describe a pattern of living given over to the service of God (specifically identified by particular vows, usually those of poverty, chastity, and obedience). Perhaps, with modifications, what we are really talking about is a renewal of religious life (perhaps I should write a book on how to be religious and still remain a Christian).

2) “Order” and “Holy Orders”

If you look up the term “order” or “holy orders” in an encyclopedia from a liturgical tradition, you will find a discussion of “ordination”: priesthood, deacons and so on. The hierarchy of the church is arranged through “orders.” This is not exactly the term what we are looking for. So why, you may ask, do InnerCHANGE and UNOH try to recapture the term “order” for their organizations? Keep reading.

3) “Monasticism”

The term “monk” and “monasticism” hearken back to *monachos* or “alone.” It has generally referred to the notion of withdrawal. Histories of monasticism cover eremitical or anchoritic monasticism (solitary life) and coenobitic monasticism (communal life). But apostolic (missionary) forms of spirituality are seldom discussed under the heading of monasticism (although I have seen them treated here and there - there is a bit of looseness in the term for some). Yet while the term “new-monasticism” ultimately refers to Alasdair MacIntyre’s reference to St. Benedict (see the last sentence of his *After Virtue*), many of the movements emerging today have little in common with official understandings of “monasticism.” Most of the communities today are movements of “advance” rather than “withdrawal” (with, perhaps, the exception of the new solitaries). Like the Jesuits, the mendicants, and the Moravians, there is really a blend of the communal and the missionary in these movements. Not “monastic” in the formal sense. So what are we to do? On the other hand, there has been development over the years in many monastic orders themselves. Some of these orders are quite apostolic (for example, many communities of Benedictines). So perhaps, in this developed sense, the term “monastic” is legitimate.

4) “Religious Orders”

When the term “religious” is linked with the term “order,” we find the phrase formally used to identify institutions recognized by the Church to contain those who are committed to a religious life. Religious orders include “monastic” orders (enclosed or “withdrawn”, for example the Carthusians), “canonical” orders (the Canons Regular), “military” orders (The Knights Templar), “mendicant” orders (the Franciscans), “hospitaller” orders (the Order of Brothers of St. John of God), and “clerical” orders (the Theatines). There are further distinctions between “orders” and “congregations.” Nonetheless, the basic idea of a group of people organized in some fashion with a common vision and way of life given to the service of God seems to fit this phrase nicely. The phrase “religious order” or “religious institution” may be the most accurate phrase to describe what is being explored by many of the new “friars,” “monastics,” “Celts”, and “solitaries” today. When, a number of years ago, I was asked to write a book for the NavPress series on spiritual formation, I suggested a book titled *A Call to Order(s): Wisdom from the Past for Life Today*. The book never made it to the contract stage, but I still like the title.

In the Christian East, these distinctions have no meaning. There is simply one recognized “order,” the order of monks, which requires certain vows and is expressed in a variety of forms of life (hermits, semi-hermits [sketes], and communities of various forms). The roots of Eastern monasticism in Basil’s Rule allow service to the “world,” although this aspect has seldom been primary in the history of Orthodox monasticism. Most Orthodox monasteries today are highly liturgical, with less emphasis on manual labor or apostolic/political service. In any case, both “order” and “monasticism” might be legitimate words to recover with reference to the East, although contemporary expressions might seem foreign to the Orthodox community.

The Protestant world has well-nigh abandoned all these terms (along with the term “rule”). Monasteries were emptied, orders were eliminated, and we relied on grace to make us Christian without being religious. And yet there were those Anabaptist communities, those Moravians, those mission organizations with their common commitments and ways of life, and so on. There are Lutheran sisters here and there, Anglican orders, and, of course, Taizé. And yet, if you examine the term “monk” or “monasticism” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, you will find that after the Protestant Reformation the term “monasticism” itself was broadened. Protestants were no longer aware of or concerned with all the carefully nuanced distinctions between communities and constitutions. And so the term “monk/monastic” was simply used to refer to anything that was considered formally “religious” in the Roman Catholic sense (vows, rules, or the like). It is interesting to note that both the term “monastic” and the term “order” have been drawn into popular use by Protestants (Jonathan Wilson, Viv Gregg) who more than likely were not aware of the finer distinctions between these terms. So in this broader, “Protestant” sense, the term “monasticism” is a perfectly legitimate term to use.

So what are we to do in the light of all this?

I think we can do little about the popular use of terms. The course is set and I'm not sure it will change. There is a similarity in these movements to what missiologist Ralph Winter tries to express with the term "sodality" as opposed to "modality": a special commitment and restriction of membership. Some have tried (with more or less success) to adapt his terms to the developing movement. Some have tried other terms like "intentional living," "consecrated living." In certain audiences it might help to use alternative language in order to soften reactions to overly loaded words. The term "order" is less known, but very important to those missional groups that use it. The cost of their adopting the term has been high and I don't think it will be abandoned for another term soon. Most significantly, I do not think we will see any change of the media's use of "monasticism." Ultimately, the movement will bend the history of the term.

For those of us who are leaders and teachers, however, we can be clear in the context of our teaching. The use of different terms comes with a whole set of questions and history that must be thoughtfully addressed. For example it is difficult to talk about "monasticism" without reflection on "renunciation" and "perfection." I think these are important topics for discussion today, but that the dialogue between "new" monasticism and "old" has not really begun on these topics. If we are to talk about "orders," we must discuss structure and community. Again this is an important topic, but needs to be taken further. How much "holiness" or discipline should a community expect? How legitimate is the distinction between sodality and modality? The history and theology of religious orders have much to offer these critical issues for communities today. Are there different kinds of "orders" with different "charisms" (as in the West), or should we simply organize a single "order" (as in the East)? And frankly we must talk about being "religious" in the formal sense. What does it mean to address money, sex, and power today? Do not the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience have some value today? But, on the other hand, just think of all the twisted history that came from the identification of holiness with celibacy and renunciation.

So, what are we to call it? Perhaps we will know better one hundred years from now.