

The Legacy of Medieval Monasticism



What happened?

The appeal and power of monasticism in medieval society

- Christian monasticism emerged as a culture that emphasised separation from worldly norms and stringent practices of self-denial (*asceticism*)
 - It first arose in Egypt and the Near East in the 3rd and 4th centuries, a prosperous part of the Roman Empire and at a time where Christianity is increasingly well accepted and powerful.
- But in the Latin West it became a powerful social force across the Middle Ages:
 - a respected religious elite within late antique and early medieval society and a vanguard for Christianisation of pagan regions
 - a powerful land owning and economic force
 - a driving influence on education and intellectual culture - as well as sometimes providing other 'social services': hospitals and hospitality, charity for poor
 - an institution that framed expectation of women in medieval society, but also granted exceptional female monastic figures unusual levels of social and religious power
 - an adaptive force, able to fill multiple social niches whether in the countryside or the towns

What happened?

The tense existence of monasticism within medieval society

On the other hand, we have also seen how monasticism sat in some degree of tension with society.

- Monastic men and women themselves often sought new ways to escape worldly influence and fractured into many groups as a result
- Wider society did much to promote monasticism but was also quick to criticise and satirise it
- By the late Middle Ages, when a very rigorist (e.g. Observant) approach to monasticism gained social influence, one also sees the rise of points of view (e.g. Luther) that suggest that such rigours are entirely unnecessary!

Medieval monasticism and society: Common themes

Taking these things into account, the relationship between medieval monasticism and the world can be seen as an ongoing conversation – a negotiation of needs, aspirations, anxieties, etc. Here are just some of the many overlapping “back-and-forths” occurring within this conversation:

Withdrawal and attraction

- Monastic withdrawal from the world can be seen as a rejection of wider medieval society for the betterment and salvation of its adherents. But in order to carry this out, they required external support. Monasticism survived because it found an audience: indeed, it came to be demanded by that same external society, which also expected to gain from supporting monastic men and women. Thus, approaches to monastic world-renunciation and withdrawal were always followed by or even simultaneously accompanied by a pull into a society, as monks sought necessities and supporters sought to draw near to holy men.

Humility and power, poverty and wealth

- Monasticism flourished in no small part because many people – not only monks and nuns! - saw the religious and social value in religious practitioners who denied themselves, who truly devoted themselves to humility, who gave up the goods of the world to follow Christ. The way in which outsider supported monastic institutions – to ensure that these features were present in and a benefit to society –, however, inevitably entailed giving these practitioners a higher religious status, worldly power, and access to accumulated institutional wealth. The humble and poor always had the potential to quickly appear arrogant and wealthy!

Medieval monasticism and society: Common themes

Asceticism lived for society or a programme for an ascetic society?

- The role of monks in society was to go beyond the social norm in religious penitence, perfection, and service not only for themselves but for others. In doing so, however, it was natural that outsiders would take influence from them, and attempt to imitate aspects of their religious lives and outlooks: this tendency bears witness to monastic appeal but also threatened the specialness of monastic devotion and service.

A broad social good or a paid service?

- Monks were inevitably always expected to act for more than their own salvation. But in the course of monastic expansion, stronger and stronger individual claims on that vicarious benefit were made by benefactors: i.e. the monks should pray for me and my family most of all! Were monks to serve society in general through prayer and charity or were they to provide directed benefit for those who had donated? With the former, there was the risk of not gaining enough funds to survive by losing out to other religious practitioners who were prepared to show greater devotion to their benefactors. With the latter, there was the risk of being perceived as a “paid service” for those who could afford it rather than a broad social good.

Medieval monasticism and society: Common themes

Spiritual freedom and institutions

- Monasticism promised its adherents a freeing of the spirit from both the sins and cares of the world and a closer communion with God. But in order to establish this vision in a lasting way, the establishment of more restrictive long-term institutions compatible with wider social expectations was required. This was not always perceived as a contradiction: many medieval monks were in fact able to find genuine spiritual promise, both defensive and ameliorative, in things like Rules, statutes and constitutions, which came to be perceived as spiritual matter despite their mundane appearance. But the image of early monks in the “desert” unbound by such things often spoke to other, more freewheeling, more counter-cultural possibilities for fervent monks. Meanwhile the presence of so many institutions inevitably raised the question (e.g. to Lutherans) of whether monastic men and women really enjoyed greater spiritual freedom than those who made no vows at all.

Pessimism and perfection

- Monastic self-denial was founded simultaneously on a very negative outlook on man’s susceptibility to sin and a very positive outlook on his spiritual nature and potential. But, if ones pushed too far one way or the other, the purpose of the monastic state became unclear: i.e. if man was so sinful and flawed, what were the point of ascetic efforts? (A Lutheran point – they believed that the damage to man at the Fall was so great that his efforts meant nothing and only God’s grace and response in faith held out hope of salvation). On the other hand if man had the inner potential to improve his spiritual quality through effort, then why couldn’t he feel confident in achieving this out in the world and with fewer restrictions?

Monasticism and the modern era

Monasticism is still very influential throughout the Early Modern period

- Western monastic institutions become established throughout the world as European exploration expands
- In terms of numbers, there were never more Franciscans in the world than in the 17th and early 18th centuries.
- The Minims, a late medieval/early modern order (see lecture 9), also reach their height (100s of houses) in the 17th century.
- New monastic reforms also continue and find prominence
 - The Trappists – an “Observant”-style reform of the Cistercian Benedictines was begun in 1664 at La Trappe abbey in France. They become famous not only for their rigorous lives but also their beer brewing and run nearly 200 monasteries today across the world.
 - The Congregation of Saint Maur – a Benedictine reform with “Observant” inspiration – gathers together many existing Benedictine houses in France and beyond from the early 17th century; their work also provokes a monastic intellectual rebirth, with Maurist monks making an impact with publications on history and literature that went far beyond monastery walls

Nevertheless, despite this continued importance, there is the growing sense after the Reformation-era that monastic institutions were not quite as socially and culturally dominant as they were before, even in the Catholic world.

- Above all, the kind of secularisation of monastic property seen in the English Reformation becomes more common even in predominantly Catholic regions in the late 18th and 19th centuries: e.g. in France both just before and after the French Revolution (1789)

Monasticism and the modern era

What ultimately led to the slow shift of monasticism away from its medieval social prominence in the West? The reasons are complex:

The rise of the “state”?

- So much Church property came to be increasingly targeted by growing states – with administrations to pay and standing armies and navies to feed! - from the early modern period onward. And monasteries were some of the greatest stores of this wealth. More generally, their enclosures and lands, even more than many other Church properties, enjoyed particular exemptions from governmental power that acquisitive states became keen to end as they sought to expand power and control.

Increasing social and economic opportunities?

- Monastic recruitment had often been associated with younger sons and unmarried daughters. But an increasingly varied and growing economy provided new enticing possibilities in the world that were more widely accessible.

Science and the greater sophistication of human knowledge?

- Greater ability to understand and explain the world through earthly logic arguably drew attention away from the contemplation of the divine.

Monasticism and the modern era

And in the most recent times (i.e. 20th and 21st centuries):

Increasing questioning of religious certainties?

- While the Protestant Reformation provoked significant wars and persecutions on all sides for centuries, a religiously varied Western society would ultimately come to peace by accepting the questioning of long-held religious certainties. In the 20th century especially, this has led to greater agnosticism and atheism, but even among religious people, dogmatism seems rarer: monasticism, a Christian culture that seems particularly tied to religious certainty, appears more out of step as a result.

Increasing preference for choice and immediacy?

- Monasticism is a “long-game”: a life of world-renunciation and self-denial made for long term benefit to one’s soul on earth but especially in the afterlife. Modern life, meanwhile, is full of choices on every level, and the possibilities for rapid gratification have also become especially strong in last 100 years. If you can satisfy yourself both easily and in very varied ways in the modern world, the value of long-term effort for eventual gratification seems less appealing to many.

Notably, perhaps the most spectacular decline in religious communities since the French revolution era suppressions is found from the second half of the 20th century.

Monasticism today

- And yet Christian monasticism is still with us and an important part of the Catholic church today. Within this popular and important belief system, an otherworldly spiritual elite retain relevance to millions of Catholics around the world. Even some of the strictest and enclosed forms remain vital.
 - Recommended: *Into the Great Silence* (rentable on Amazon), a 2006 film about current life in a very austere Carthusian monastery, to which the filmmakers enjoyed unprecedented access.
- Medieval monks themselves also remain important and beloved saints in many parts of the world.
- In addition ascetic and contemplative spiritual and religious practices retain interest in new ways: some of the most popular non-Christian religious, spiritual and even “wellness” practices have a world-flight or ascetic element – even things like “yoga retreats”! Even if these ideas have different origins, the fact that they have entered Western culture so easily may well be connected with our own cultural heritage.

Medieval monastic vestiges in modern life

Beyond these things, how does the legacy of medieval monasticism effect us all today:

Continuing influence on cultural identity and landscape?

- E.g. local saints that are still remembered (sometimes even by non-Catholic or even non-Christian people); important monuments that shape our understanding of and attachment to landscapes

Influence on public institutions?

- E.g. the current Western models of schools, universities, hospitals and charities all have monastic roots.

Influence on economic practices?

- E.g the idea of Max Weber: asceticism – in the sense of training and concentrated activity - was formerly a primarily religious pursuit, but after the Protestant Reformation came to be applied to worldly pursuits and industry, sparking a capitalist revolution

Right: remnants of a sixteenth century secular hospital in Central London – looks like a monastery!



Medieval monastic vestiges in modern life

Influence on intellectual culture?

- So much of pre-modern intellectual culture – whether it be science or arts, and including ancient works – was in one way or another transmitted and refracted by monastic thinkers, writers and copyists

Influence on politics?

- Monasticism was partly about sinful people fleeing a wicked world to focus on penance, but within coenobitic houses especially monks and nuns tried to envisage more perfect community. And this has had its effect on political thought. To take one example, can we imagine the impact of socialistic thought being so great without centuries of monks and nuns proposing goods in common and common life more broadly?

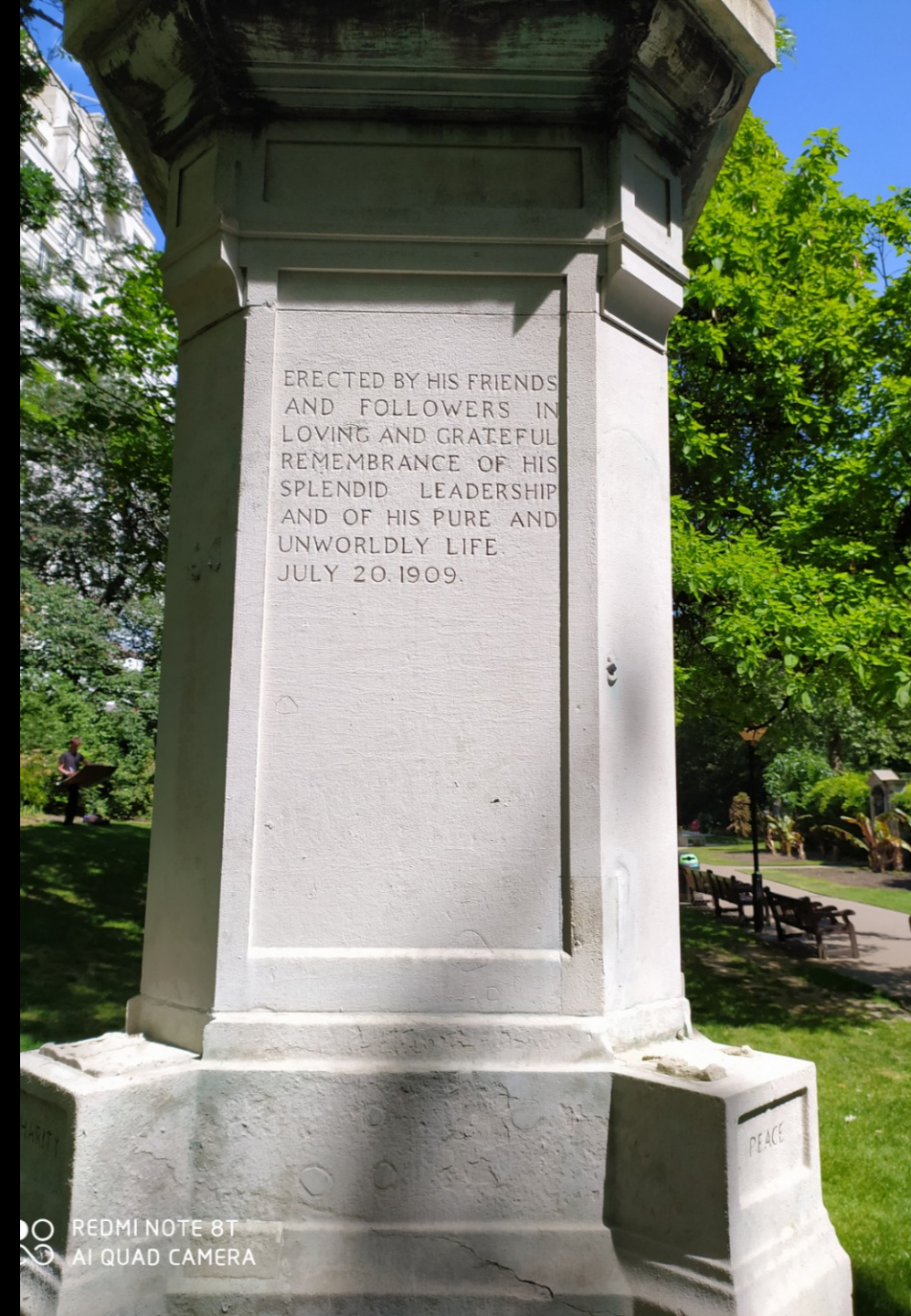
Medieval monastic vestiges in modern life

Connected with many of these things, monasticism has helped to shape Western values. E.g.

- moral issues around wealth and power
- outlooks on charity and the worth of the poor
- the value of obedience in certain contexts
- the value of communal harmony and peace
- the value of contemplation

Can you think of others?

Right: a monument to the British Member of Parliament, Wilfred Lawson



Sources: Is Monasticism Still Relevant Today?

- A video made by a group of American Benedictine monks about the relevance of their lives today.



Sources: a recollection of Rose Hails, a citizen of Durham

- A recollection of Rose Hails, who lived in Durham during the Second World War, published by the BBC in ...
- The recollection concerns the Luftwaffe bombing of Durham on 30th May 1942.

Sources: a recollection of Rose Hails, a citizen of Durham

The sirens sounded across the city. It was a bright moonlight night following a warm summer day in 1943.

A squadron of the Luftwaffe were right on schedule, their target to bomb the Durham Viaduct that carried the main railway lines from the South to the North of England.

This would also destroy the city and its famous Norman Cathedral, which stands high on a peninsula rock above the River Wear.

The Cathedral was founded by the monks of Lindisfarne when they brought the body of Saint Cuthbert south, to escape the savage Viking raiders early 900AD, and in which his shrine still remains.

As the plane approached, out of nowhere came a mist, descending over the City like a ghostly shroud, hiding every building, as if they had disappeared.

They passed over, dropping their bombs on open countryside doing little damage. No one has been able to explain this phenomenon, and it has become known as "Saint Cuthbert's Mist".

Sources: “Austerity is the New Luxury”, *DuJour Magazine*, Summer 2013

- A magazine article from a “luxury” and “lifestyle” publication
- Full text: <https://dujour.com/lifestyle/expensive-ascetic-retreats-yoga-omega-institute/>

Sources: “Austerity is the New Luxury”, *DuJour Magazine*, Summer 2013

‘The nonprofit Omega Institute, two hours north of Manhattan in Rhinebeck, New York, bills itself as a “university of life,” offering instruction in everything from yoga and meditation to tantric sex and flying trapeze. Twenty-three thousand people come to the bucolic 200-acre campus each year and enter an irony-free zone; people talk a lot about their “life process,” and the staff welcome you without seeming like officious automatons. There are hammocks aplenty, a hilltop sanctuary and forest air so fresh it qualifies as aromatherapy.

The blowing of a conch shell announces the start of meals in the communal dining hall, which serves vegan-friendly and gluten-free options, several types of milk and locally sourced miso. Visitors include schoolteachers and aging flower children, millionaires and celebrities like Mia Farrow. None of them seem to mind busing their own tables; many sleep in tents or rustic dormitory-style rooms with communal bathrooms. What they’re seeking is something more elusive than pleasure or even peace, and that is personal transformation.

“It’s not about who you know or what you’re wearing. It’s about escaping that regimented, masky, label-driven consumerist culture,” says Patty Goodwin, a retired Manhattan executive and Omega board member who started coming to the campus in the early 1980s, when just a few hundred people showed up each season.’

[...]

Many of the richest clients view these ascetic retreats as a way to escape not just the anxiety of modern life but also their money. Emily Bouchard, a partner at the Wealth Legacy Group, coaches inheritors and people whose net worth often exceeds \$25 million on how best “to cope with the emotional impact of wealth.”

“I know what you’re thinking—I’d love to have that problem,” she says. “But for a lot of these ultra-high-net-worth people and new inheritors there can be guilt and shame and a lot of ambivalence about money.” Bouchard went with one of her clients, an heiress who was suffering from a chronic illness, to Rancho La Puerta, a mind-body retreat in Tecate, Mexico. “It isn’t posh,” Bouchard says. “It’s just a place where you can let down your hair and be you. Our culture so strongly identifies somebody by their net worth. To feel a bit like everybody else, to do the same exercises or to wash dishes together in the communal kitchen can really help some people gain a better perspective.”

Sources: Utopia (1516), by Thomas More (1478-1535)

Thomas More

- Born in London to a successful lawyer, second of six children,
- Educated at Oxford, a noted humanist scholar who was an elegant writer
- Considered becoming a monk around the turn of the 16th century: he lived near the London Charterhouse (a Carthusian monastery), and remained close to this house. He also imitated some rigorous spiritual practices (monastic style prayer regimes) and ascetic exercises (e.g. wearing a hairshirt, occasional self-flagellation).
- Decides to marry in 1504, and becomes a Member of Parliament. Becomes an important adviser to Henry VIII.
- But in the 1530s, he refused to follow Henry in breaking with Rome and was executed for treason in 1535

Utopia (1516)

- Thomas's most famous work, published in print in 1516.
- It describes a fictional land and society, and its customs. It is sometimes considered a vision for a better society, sometimes as a satire, and sometimes as something in between
- It has been influential on numerous and diverse later figures: everyone from Spanish Franciscan missionaries in Mexico seeking to establish a new sort of Christian society to Karl Marx!

Sources: Utopia, by Thomas More

Thus have I described to you, as best as I could, the Constitution of that commonwealth, which I do not only think the best in the world, but indeed the only “commonwealth” that truly deserves that name. In all other places it is visible that, while people talk of a commonwealth, every man only seeks his own wealth; but there, where no man has any property, all men zealously pursue the good of the public. Indeed, it is no wonder to see men act so differently, for in other commonwealths every man knows that, unless he provides for himself, however flourishing the commonwealth may be, he will die of hunger, so that he sees the necessity of preferring his own concerns to the public; but in Utopia, where every man has a right to everything, they all know that if care is taken to keep the public stores full no private man can want anything; for among them there is no unequal distribution, so that no man is poor, none in necessity, and though no man has anything, yet they are all rich; for what can make a man so rich as to lead a serene and cheerful life, free from anxieties; neither apprehending want himself, nor troubled by the endless complaints of his wife? He is not afraid of the misery of his children, nor is he worried about raising a dowry so his daughters can marry. Rather, he feels secure that both he and his wife, his children and grand-children, for as many generations as he can imagine, will all live both plentifully and happily; since, among them, there is no less care taken of those who were once engaged in labour, but grow afterwards unable to follow it, than there is, elsewhere, of those that continue still employed.