



Church History, Monasticism

Causes of Monasticism

The origin of the meaning of Monasticism originated with the Greek word *μόνος* (monos) meaning “living alone.” This life was characterized by poverty, chastity, and obedience. It was also a life lived in common to a particular rule. It was lived in seclusion.

Origin: movement and periods of monasticism: Fourth century: laymen leave community church and go live the hermit life. 10th-11th century: monastic reforms invoked. 13th century: the little Friar monks, little fat monks, middle ages begin. The counter reformation: reformation within the Roman Catholic church to counteract the Protestant Reformation.

Philosophical influence: primarily Gnosticism. The dual philosophy, matter is evil and spirit is good. Led to asceticism by the monks. Deprive the body, free the soul from it.

“Scriptural” separation doctrine: They read more into 1 Corinthians 7 than was there. They read celibate life into it, for example.

Psychological causes: retreat from problems and harsh realities of life. To escape the morals and contamination of the times, and a more individualistic approach to God.

Historical causes: deterioration of the Roman Empire caused despair of social reform. Thus, many ran from the immorality.

Geographical: Monasticism took place in the East at the beginning where climate was conducive to outdoor living.

Development stages of Monasticism

The origin was the ascetic practices of the church. The second stage was the withdrawal from society. The third stage might be called the “attraction”, this being found in the “holy” life of the hermit. The fourth stage was that of the organized communal type of living.

Different kinds of Monasticism

Oriental Monasticism:

In Asia Minor there were celibates both male and female devoted to the major gods and goddesses, like Cybele, the Great Mother, and Demeter. The Jews had the monastic group called the Essenes to which John the Baptizer belonged.

Christian Monasticism:

This originated in the practice of Christians before any organized efforts existed. At an early date, some believers began to abstain from marriage with the practice based on 1 Corinthians 7. The asceticism, deprivation from meat and drink, for spiritual reasons was taken from passages such as 1 Corinthians 8. Others took passages on prayer, meditation, or charity and made those the focal points of their lives.

Founders of Monasticism

The founder of Christian Monasticism, Anthony (250-356 AD) was an ascetic, lived in Egypt about 250 AD and was one of many there. He retired in 285 AD to an old fort and lived in seclusion on the Nile for about 20 years. He was persuaded to allow others to join him and to lead them. This he did according to



fourth century tradition.

The Monasticism of St. Pachomius:

Founder of the first real monastery in 320 AD at Tabennisi on the Nile. A real monastery or convent is called a coenobium. From the Greek κοινός (koinos) and βίος (bios) meaning a common life. He established one monastery for women and about 10 for men with about 7000 monks in this order.

Asia Minor Monasticism: 390-459 AD.

This form was very practical hermitical, that is, a life lived in a more individualistic way, by one's self. An example of this kind of Monasticism was Simion Stylites who sat on a little platform surrounded by a railing on top of a 60-foot pole or column for 30 years. Stylites preached from this pole, met the dignitaries there and from which he had great influence. The term Stylites comes from the Greek word for pillar, stylites.

Greek Monasticism, from St. Basil the Great: 329-379 AD.

St. Basil was the founder of Monasticism in the Eastern or Greek Church. He adapted the rule of Eustathius to the Greek ideals. His order was known as the Basilians.

Roman Monasticism:

St. Athanasius took two monks to Rome in 340 AD. From this simple beginning, the monastic impulse moved west from Italy to Gaul to North Africa.

Benedictine Monasticism:

The actual founder of Western Monasticism and its founder Benedict of Nursia, 480-543 AD. Basic tenets of this brand of Monasticism were work, same law and order for all members including the abbot, the corporation monastery and monk were united for life. It was a loose knit organization of chapters called abbeys with their heads called abbots.

Irish Monasticism:

St. Columba founded an order of monks similar to the Greeks and Egyptian orders. These orders could be called austere, mystical, and pious. One predominant characteristic was that they were great missionaries. Dates for this: 521-597 AD. They evangelized Scotland, North England, North and Central Europe. The Benedictines evangelized the rest of Europe. Irish Monasticism finally succumbed to the Benedictine rule by the eight century.

In 910 AD, William I the Pious, Duke of Guienne founded a monastery at Cluny.

The second abbot of Cluny obtained certain papal privileges. He was named Odo. He made it a great center of religious revival and won over the Benedictines of Monte Cassino and Subiaco.

By 1150 AD about 400 monasteries from Scotland to Poland, Italy to Palestine had affiliated with him at the Cluny monastery. The abbot of Cluny became the absolute head of all the monasteries of the affiliations and had total control over its 10,000 monks. This affiliation of monks became rich and declined after 1350 and disbanded in 1790 AD.

The Calmaldulian Hermits:

This was a hermitical order founded by St. Romuald who at the age of 20 entered a monastery of St. Apollinaire in 970 AD. He later left the monastery, joined a group of hermits near Venice and desired to reestablish Egyptian and Syrian hermit orders. His followers later became monks. Presently the order



had both hermits and monks.

The Cistercian Order: 1098 AD.

It was founded by St. Robert of the Benedictine order in France. They were called “white or gray monks” because of their clothing. It had two outstanding heads to its order. St. Stephen Harding: 1109-1134 AD. St. Bernard of Clairvaux: 1134-1154 AD. Their major thrust was to reestablish the rule of Benedict.

They made contributions to agriculture and stock breeding. By 1154, there were 230 chapters in this order. By 1200, there were over 500 abbeys. This order was nearly wiped out by the Reformation of the 16th century and the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.

After the 19th century, they had a revival in their order. They are divided into three groups: Common Observance: mainly in Austria and Hungary with 30 monasteries. Middle Observance: with 15 monasteries. Strict Observance: Trappists with 60 monasteries, part in Canada and some in Normandy.

Augustine Monasticism:

The Rule of Augustine: from Epistle 211, written to some nuns and became the basis for the expanded rule later attributed to his name. Have several groups: Augustian Canons: were a preaching order and went under several names: Austin Canons, Canons Regular, and Black Canons.

Augustian Hermits or Friars: 1200-1250 AD. Organized by the Pope to bring spiritual unity into the Augustinian Order. Had a general elected by the chapter and provincial officers, assistants and definitors, and visitors.

Evaluation of Monasticism

The contributions made by Monasticism: Became an experimental farm. Kept scholarship alive by means of education and copying manuscripts. Became repositories for great works, collecting them. Kept records and histories. Monks became missionaries. Became the refuge for outcasts of society.

Negative contributions: Brought adverse effects on Christian society. Too many of the best men and women were drained off of society. The great men were in the monasteries. The celibate life, practically eliminated the posterity of the intelligent. It created a double, standard, one for the monk, and one for the common man.

Brought adverse effects on the individual. Produced spiritual pride. Produced laziness, gluttony, avarice, wealth and this became the character of the monk. Brought adverse effects on the church by developing the hierarchy system.