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CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM AND ITS PLACE IN HISTORY

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VERY many and very varied were the influences that helped to mold the infant church of Christ. The deeply religious trend of ancient Jewry, the noble philosophy of cheerful Greece, the ideals of the sorrow-loving East, the imperial spirit of mighty Rome, — all had their share.

While Greece found God in everything, and deified the lovely earth she knew, Asia had long ago come to the conclusion that matter is essentially evil, that flesh is very vile, and therefore the world is to be fled. Five hundred years earlier than the days of Christ such conceptions had inspired Gautama Buddha to give a rule to monks and nuns, but that was very far from being the first institution of monasticism. Christ eating and drinking amidst the busy haunts of men had been accepted as a far nobler figure than John the Baptist fasting in the wilds. Asceticism was largely foreign to the early spirit of the church, though the ideal may find much support in the New Testament itself, particularly in such passages as the seventh chapter of First Corinthians. But after three centuries, or less, had passed since the birth of Christ, when pagan monks, apparently in Egypt first, had seen the light, the ideal spread through Christendom with great rapidity, from end to end. Very shortly we find Christian monks pursuing their most varied avocations amidst the dense forests of northern Europe, on the hot sands of Sahara, and by the treeless rocks beside the Nile; under the towering mountains of far Armenia and in the lonely rock islands of the Atlantic off the remotest Irish shores.

It is one of the most striking paradoxes of all time that this Eastern system, aiming only at the highest conceivable religion, did far less for personal holiness than for reconstructing the civilization of the earth. Those who fled

the world in despair became its rulers. The spiritual descendants of those who spurned the earth's noblest culture became the chief agents in laying the foundations of our yet more material civilization. The monk as civilizer is a far more obvious figure in history than the monk as saint. Modern Europe is a monument of the cloister.

In surveying the long story of Christian monasticism, at least four great periods may be descried. The FIRST is connected with such great names as those of Basil and Jerome; interest is centered chiefly in the countries washed by the eastern Mediterranean. Gradually the ascetics got complete control of the church. This was against their earliest ideal. The first monks were laymen, and Cassian [1] declares that their desire for holy orders sometimes proceeds from vainglory. It was St. Augustine of Hippo who first instituted a rule of priests living together under vows, such as in later years would be called regular canons. In the Orthodox Church to-day all the higher ecclesiastics are invariably and necessarily monks. Some of these solitaries carried the gospel to the remotest bounds of earth, particularly those who are formally ranked heretics. Thus the Nestorians preached with great success in China, and thence brought the silkworm to Constantinople as early as the sixth century. But within the Empire itself the object of the monk was purely self-centered: by withdrawing from a world that was utterly lost he hoped to save his soul. That can hardly be deemed a very useful monasticism which counted as its very noblest fruit the hermit St. Simon Stylites, dwelling on the top of his column, forever bending his forehead to his feet and holding out his arms crosswise in prayer, but making not the slightest effort to support a falling state and refusing even an imperial request that he would mediate in the miserable squabbles that were tearing the very vitals of the church. The morose Jerome, writing in 414 to congratulate a Roman girl, named Demetrias, who has taken a vow of vir-

[1] Institutes, book xi. chap. xiv.

ginity, exclaims: "Good Jesus! What exultation there was. . . . My words are too weak. Every church in Africa danced for joy. . . . Italy put off her mourning and the ruined walls of Rome resumed in part their olden splendor. . . . You would fancy the Goths had been annihilated."[1] Yet, despite this somewhat unpatriotic view of the loss to civilization by Alaric's sack of Rome, Jerome in his cell at Bethlehem was doing noble service to mankind by translating the whole of the Scriptures into the vulgar tongue of the West. That in other ways as well the monks did noble things for knowledge is evident from the enormous mass of MSS. that their libraries have shielded from destruction. This development of a taste for learning was undoubtedly a later phase; St. Anthony, the chief father of Christian monks, had stoutly declared that "he whose mind is in health has no need of letters." The disgraceful lawlessness that so frequently marked the early councils of the church must also be credited chiefly to the wild turbulence of unlettered monks, frequently more willing to anathematize than to bless; so much more ready to strike than to reason, that, as Milman says,[2] their bravery often shamed the languid patriotism of the imperial troops. Nor can it reasonably be doubted that the decline and fall of the Empire was largely promoted by the monasteries. By dissuading so many of the noblest and the best from mar-

[1] One Hundred Thirtieth Letter of Jerome, sect. 6: in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. vi. p. 263.

[2] Latin Christianity, vol. i. p. 344. Of all our great church historians, Milman seems to be the fairest to the monks, with Gwatkin at the opposite extreme. Few really great works on the history of monasticism as a whole have been written. Montalembert's splendid book, The Monks of the West, stands nearly alone. Harnack's Das Mönchthum is the least satisfactory of all his works. On the other hand, much has been written about particular phases of the subject by members of different orders themselves, particularly Cardinal Gasquet. Some excellent English antiquaries and historians are devoting themselves very largely to monasticism today, particularly Sir William St. John Hope, Hamilton Thompson, G. G. Coulton, and D. H. S. Cranage.

riage, they disastrously affected the population.[1] Tertullian seems to have this at the back of his mind when he asserts,[2] "Our numbers are burdensome to the world, which can hardly supply us from its natural elements," though the context is the question of transmigration. Ambrose makes an extremely curious and interesting defense, — which does not sound very plausible, — but we have no means of verifying his facts: 'If any one imagines that by the existence of nuns the human race is diminished in number, let him reflect that where there are few nuns there are still fewer men; where vows of virginity are more common, there the population is larger. Tell me, how many nuns are professed in Alexandria and all the East each year? Here in the West we have fewer births than they there receive vows of virginity!'[3]

Except by such as regard asceticism as something noble in itself, this earliest period of monasticism must be counted a failure on the whole. It has hardly even yet been superseded in the East. Few impartial students of the Orthodox Church can doubt that its vast hordes of ascetics have done at least as much to destroy as to build it up.

But a very different judgment indeed is demanded by the SECOND, or early mediæval, period, when even the sternest critic of their ideal must pay a tribute of admiration to the chief rebuilders of the world.[4] During the sixth century a new and most noble figure comes upon the monastic stage, and quite unknowingly onto the broad arena of the whole history of man, — Benedict of Nursia (b. 480, d. 543). His famous rule is in form merely an effort so to regulate the life of monasteries as to secure to their inmates that peace which the world cannot give. But in the

[1] The proofs that dwindling of population was a large factor in the decay of the Empire are given in Seeley's Roman Imperialism.

[2] De Anima, chap. xxx.

[3] Milman, History of Christianity, vol. iii. p. 219; he quotes the passage in the original Latin, but does not supply the reference.

[4] As Charles Kingsley, in his chapter on "The Monk a Civilizer," in The Roman and the Teuton.

rebuilding of civilization, which was the glorious task of Christianity after the hopeless ruin of the Empire of the West, these monks took a mighty part, remained perhaps the chief driving force in life till the Middle Ages had almost run their course. Now has the monk become the chief actor in the history of the world, the most prominent worker in well-nigh all the varied acts of man. A somewhat misleading impression of the monk is apt to be carried away from the ordinary histories of mediæval times. Too much tribute is apt to be paid to his piety; to his learning, at least all that it deserves; but of his noble work as the practical man of affairs, raising up the fabric of our Western culture, the half is seldom told.

It is obvious enough that, in so brief a paper as the present, an epitome of mediæval history would be wholly out of place; rather let the monk be surveyed in the midst of his innumerable activities, carrying out works dreamed of by St. Benedict himself about as much as the present importance of this land was conceived by those who first laid down the feeble foundations of little cities by the grey Atlantic shore.

And first of the monk as *educator*. No one can doubt that it was chiefly by the recluses that some spark of learning was kept alight during the long and dreary years after the Western Empire fell, and before some measure of new flame was kindled at the brilliant court of Charles. That revival itself was largely monastic, and many of the great Emperor's advisers were monks, particularly Alcuin of England, whom he made a sort of minister of education and also abbot of Tours. Alcuin had been one of the products of a most brilliant local revival during the seventh and eighth centuries in the Northumbrian convents, a time of British glory that centers around the deathless name of Venerable Bede, the first great English scholar, the only real historian that Saxon England knew. This noble culture in its turn was inspired chiefly by the missionary zeal of those great Irish ascetics whose restless

energy carried them over the sea far out into the Atlantic and to the lonely volcanic rocks of Iceland, which they were probably the first of men to see; over the land through the fair plains of France to the mountain valleys of Italy and Switzerland. Such was their contribution to learning that in the dark ages it was said no man in western Europe could speak Greek who was not Irish-born or at least Irish-taught. Musing to-day amid the severely impressive ruins of Clonmacnoise on the lonesome peat bogs by the Shannon, where the wide plain of rich red browns rolls away unbroken to the distant hills, where the grey chapels and crosses are unshaded save by a single ash with hardly any leaves, emphasizing the treeless desolation of the land, or in the peaceful Wicklow valley with green fields and forests sloping to a chattering brook, where the tall round tower and roofless churches of Glendalough still stand by the two lakes whose still waters mirror the rock-strewn mountain sides, it is inspiring to reflect that Greek literature and the learning of the past were here preserved in the darkest days that Europe ever knew since history began, and that students from all Christendom were reading in these monastic schools, on the very confines of the world, as profitably as others amid all the glittering splendor of the best seats of Arab learning in Mesopotamia and Egypt and Spain. Of these black ages it is not too much to say, Had monks perished, then learning had gone too.

Arthur Leach[1] maintains that, at any rate after the eleventh century, the monasteries were not special homes of scholarship; by that time it was rather secular than regular clerks who did what was done for letters. In the universities ascetics did not bear much part until the rise of the friars, though a few monks were constantly in residence. At Oxford the Benedictine Order maintained Gloucester Hall, whose buildings are now incorporated into Worcester College. In the great abbeys whose lovely ruins are even now one of Europe's greatest glories, there

[1] History of Winchester College.

was as a rule but scant provision for books. The superb House of Fountains, whose church, chapter house, and other buildings are as noble monuments as Gothic architecture can boast, possessed no other library than a couple of little closets at either side of the chapter door. On the other hand, copying MSS. was a most important part of the duties of the monks, and at Chester may be seen the cells in which they sat while thus engaged, along two cloister walks. And in the customs of the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, besides other ancient European seats of learning, many relics of monastic life are preserved to this very hour. Still, on the whole, the impression received from Chaucer's Prologue, that in his time both in learning and in devotion to duty the secular clerks were better than the regular, is confirmed by visitations and other mediæval records as to the condition of the religious houses.

As *chroniclers* of contemporary events, providing much of the material for the past story of our race, monks were exceedingly prominent. Facilities for such work were probably better in a large abbey than in any other place. And, as we should expect, it was in such great houses as Westminster and St. Albans that the most interesting records were written. Their guest houses would seldom be empty. In the rule of St. Benedict it is hospitably ordained: "All guests who come shall be entertained as though they were Christ." And so in the actual course of their duties some of the monks would hear what was going on, wherever Christians went and came, from those who had themselves borne part. The chronicles of the monks are not written, as a rule, from any narrow point of view; a man like Matthew Paris wrote history with no small charm.

It is perhaps in the capacity of *statesman* that the monk has least received his due. It was not logical that the world should be ruled by those who had left it in disgust, and who, in the judgment of their greatest lawgiver, ought never to stray beyond the pale of the house in which they

had taken their vows. They never sought worldly power, at least in earliest times. On the contrary, many of them strenuously resisted when it was forced into their hands. But when (in 587) Gregory the Great was compelled to sit in the papal chair in very lawless days, a monk became the ruler of the whole Western Church, and for all practical purposes king of Italy too. He dealt with his new duties with such transcendent skill that a great tradition was established in the world. Monks were proved to be capable of handling the great problems of that day better often than any one else. The cloister had evolved an efficiency that the world without did not know. So in later years it did not seem in the least unfitting that twenty-nine English abbots had seats in the House of Lords. They were sometimes more numerous than the lay peers, and always exceeded the bishops in number; legislation was largely in their hands when that famous upper house was more democratically constituted than it is to-day, and hereditary peers were in the minority. In those days the cloister was by far the most obvious ladder by which a boy brought up in the humblest home might rise to be one of the most prominent in Europe. For within the cloister ability was far more valued than birth, and the abbot of a great house ranked with the proudest nobles in the land. Magna Carta was written in the Abbey of St. Edmundsbury. The self-government of the monks in their chapter contributed very largely indeed to the development of the free institutions of England. The abbot of Westminster was wont to invite his fellow members of Parliament to adjourn from the king's palace of St. Stephen to the chapter house of the great abbey hard by. A most interesting description of the government of a large house is given in the "Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond,"[1] a monk of Bury St. Edmunds; and there is no doubt that the procedure of Parliament was largely patterned on the custom of the

[1] Carlyle's authority for Past and Present.

chapter house of an abbey. Monasticism made a splendid contribution to the development of democratic liberty.

The fact that they had taken special vows did not necessarily exempt the monks from the sternest duties of the world. In 1118 a few poor *knights* in Jerusalem solemnly swore to protect the newly won Christian state. Largely under the inspiration of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153),[1] at the Council of Troyes, they adopted the Cistercian rule. The houses of the Knights Templars (as they were called from their dwelling in the Holy City) were barracks and convents in one; Jacques de Vitry describes them as "rough knights on the battle field, pious monks in the chapel; formidable to the enemies of Christ, gentleness itself to his friends." The suppression of this noble order in 1312 is one of the most mysterious tragedies of mediæval days. But other soldier monks had come upon the stage. Perhaps the most brilliant feat of arms that any of them performed was the heroic defense of Malta by the Hospitalers of St. John of Jerusalem, when in 1565, under their gallant master, La Valette, they defied the whole force of the Turks when their power was at the full, and did much to make the Mediterranean safe for the shipping of Christian men. This order still exists and is Protestant in part; as in the case of the ambulance work of St. John. And at Rome it yet maintains a little dilapidated church, and a garden with clipped box hedges, high up on the Aventine Hill. Another of these great military orders was to do less noble work. The Teutonic Order, so called from the nationality of most of its knights, under-

[1] This remarkable man, "last of the Fathers," was a great leader in organizing the Cistercian Order as a protest against the laxity of the Benedictines. He greatly rejoiced to find some practical and very necessary work that the monks could do, such as guarding the sepulcher of Christ. In this he was following the example of St. Bernard of Menthon, who in 962 built a hospice amid the Alpine snows for the protection of pilgrims and other travelers. Keeping open communications was a work in which monks took a noble share.

took to guard the frontier of Christendom against pagan Lithuanian and Slav hordes. In course of time it developed the strongest standing army in Europe, and with the Hanseatic League it Germanized wide lands along the Baltic shore. At the time of the Reformation its grand master was a member of the Hohenzollern house; he became a Protestant, secularized the order, and practically put Prussia on the map. Thus the military tradition of that state, and much of its spirit too, — for the order developed a most ruthless code, — is directly to be traced to monasticism. Verily it is not wholly as saint that the monk has written himself so large across the record of mankind!

The rule of St. Benedict provides that if possible a mill, a garden, and a bakery shall exist within the precincts of every monastery, that the brethren may not need to wander out into the world. In devoting themselves with energy to *agriculture* the monks were carrying out both in spirit and letter the ideal: *Laborare est orare.* The cultivable area of Europe was very largely extended by the work of the solitaries. The food supply of England during the war has benefited by the way in which large parts of the dreary swamps of Norfolk were converted into fertile fields by the monks of the great abbey of St. Benet, Holm. The coöperative farming of the monks was a great improvement on the crude strip-cultivation of the feudal manor, and there was hardly a convent in the open country that did not benefit the agriculture of its district. When the estates of the monasteries were rented they were generally good landlords. No serious disputes disturbed the good relations between the monks and their peasant neighbors. Monks were generally popular in the country, however different was the case in towns.[1]

[1] Where constant disputes as to jurisdiction and privileges caused almost endless bickerings. At places like Norwich and Sherburn, town- and cowl-riots were sometimes exceedingly serious. At Bury St. Edmunds may be seen to this day the monastic gateway with

Possessing wide lands, especially among the beautiful Yorkshire dales, the Cistercians became great *traders* in wool, the chief commerce of mediæval England, whose importance is attested to this very day by the Lord Chancellor's woolsack seat. It was sent for manufacture to the cities of Flanders, where its profits helped to raise those glorious structures so wantonly destroyed in the war. That the Cistercians were keen men of business there can be no doubt at all. When Fulk of Neuilly reproached Richard Lionheart with having three daughters whose names were Luxury, Greed, and Pride, for whom husbands should be found, the King retorted on the priest that the spouse of Luxury should be the prelates of holy church; of Pride, the Knights Templars; and Greed should most appropriately be wedded to the monks of the Cistercian Order![1] There was a tinge of ingratitude in the last reference, seeing that, only three years before, the Cistercians had had to contribute a whole year's wool toward the ransom of the King.[2]

Excellent use was made of the vast wealth of the monasteries in erecting those glorious churches that are the greatest legacy we have received from mediæval years. In England half the cathedrals were the work of monastic hands, but those of the Continent were raised by the laity. Still everywhere church *architecture* was influenced chiefly by the lavish examples set by the monks.

All this world activity of the ascetics was in the interest of European civilization[3]; but beyond any peradventure

loopholes behind the statues, so that when the town attacked, the saints could be pushed down onto the heads of the assailants with flights of arrows to follow!

[1] Flores Historiarum, 1197 A.D. (Rolls Series), vol. ii. pp. 116–117 (from Hoveden).

[2] Matthew Paris, Chronica Maiora (Rolls Series), vol. ii. p. 399.

[3] It is remarkable that, during the middle ages of Japan, monks took a rather similar part as chroniclers, farmers, artists, traders, soldiers, and sometimes politicians. There is also, at any rate, a superficial resemblance in the planning of monastic buildings round cloister courts.

it was utterly destructive of the type of character that Benedict desired. Long before the Reformation was in sight, the monk was apt to be far less a saint than a practical man of affairs living in a pleasant club. For archæological evidence is conclusive that the dwellings of monks were more comfortable, on the whole, than the contemporary homes of the laity. No thirteenth- or fourteenth-century castle can compare, in the convenience of its internal arrangements, with the domestic buildings at Fountains or Furness. This so preyed on the mind of the noble St. Francis of Assisi that he was led to the founding of an ascetic order of a different type, thus all unconsciously starting the THIRD period in the history of Christian monasticism, that of the friars. St. Benedict's stern prohibition of monks owning anything at all had been rendered farcical by the fact that the orders possessed a quarter of the soil of western Europe. So the friars were to be so poor that they should need to beg their bread; their orders should give them nothing, not even homes. Scorning merely to save their souls and leave the world apart, the friars were to minister to the outcast and beggars, to seek out the classes that the parish clergy hardly touched. Success was immediate and very great. The cheerful barefooted Franciscans were everywhere enthusiastically received. Within a few years of 1208, about which time their order began, three others sprang up with much the same plans and ideals. The Order of St. Dominic dates from 1216; the Austin Friars (to whose ranks Luther belonged) claimed the great name of St. Augustine of Hippo, and the Carmelites, not to be outdone, asserted they were founded by Elijah, who seems to be the only Old Testament character to be reckoned a Christian saint.[1] The first generations of friars insisted upon worshiping in wooden huts; they were everywhere immensely respected. But success brought its well-nigh inevitable result. Within

[1] As patron of the Flying Corps of the army of the late Russian Empire, he seems to have been a very qualified success.

a century they were celebrating in magnificent minsters and charging large sums to laity who wished to be buried in their holy soil. The old prohibition of their orders owning property did something for the English law of trusts! The fact that, unlike the monks, they were able to perform parochial duties and to receive fees that should have gone to others, made them loathed of the parish priests. But gradually the distinction between friar and monk became attended to less and less; by the time of the Reformation it was almost entirely lost.

What may be called the FOURTH period in the long story of Christian monasticism was inaugurated when, on the Feast of the Assumption in 1534, Ignatius Loyola and his little band knelt together in the chapel on Montmartre, and constituted the Society of Jesus. The Middle Ages had run their course. The Reformation was sweeping the world. A new era had begun, and neither monk nor friar was very well equipped for the new battle with Protestantism. The old democracy was cast aside, a military organization was adopted. No Jesuit convent ever possessed a chapter house. The members of the new order were not to deliberate, but simply to obey. At one time or another they have ruled great kingdoms, particularly in Austria and Poland, where our present problems are to some degree the legacy of what they did. One of their original members, Francis Xavier, realized nearly four hundred years ago the latent powers of Japan. Their paternal work among the Indians of Paraguay is one of the few bright chapters in the story of Latin intercourse with the aborigines of America. Their scientific and educational works are known throughout the earth. Their artistic taste carried the barocco style to nearly every country of Europe. The great men of the earlier orders were often apt to place the world above the church [1]; much of their

[1] The great chancellor, Thomas Wolsey, cardinal and archbishop as well as Benedictine abbot, was of a very secular spirit, almost anti-clerical at times. No tendency of the kind ever showed itself among the Jesuits.

work would have been strongly reprobated by those whose rules they were supposed to obey. But, in striking contrast, perhaps no institution of the earth has ever quite so exactly fulfilled its founder's desires as the much-discussed Society of Jesus. Many other orders have been founded in the Church of Rome and during the Laudian revival and later in the Church of England too, but their history hardly forms a part of the record of the world at large. The days when the earth could be ruled by monks have forever passed away.