

MODERN DISLOCATIONS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE¹

I THE BACKGROUND

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

IN order to see the modern needs of religious men and women in perspective we should sometimes look across the Christian monastic scene back to the natural origins of religious life in primitive and pre-Christian religions. These origins, although they do not include the supernatural vitality of a life dedicated to the following of Christ, have yet a fundamental bearing on the way religious behave throughout the ages. Grace builds on nature, and there are natural origins even for religious life, which thus has a specifically human character as well as a divine. After many hundreds of years' progress in ways of life and of culture, there almost inevitably arises a threat of dislocation, when those living the traditional culture are severed from its roots. In the case of monastic life² (just as on a wider field of the whole Christian way of living), the many centuries of existence have led to a tremendous elaboration which can become in part artificial and with little natural support. To alter the metaphor, such forms of life continue to grow like a tree spreading its branches in ever more complicated patterns against the sky; as its vitality increases, so do the branches and twigs multiply; but there comes a time when the tree begins to 'run back' and the extremities wither. The pattern remains, but it remains an artificial pattern without the green bark and living sap. Such a picture, of course, is not true of the undying Church of Christ in herself; but it can sometimes be true of the manifestations of her life. The monastic life, for example, in its mature vigour revealed a pattern, the glory of which is to be seen in the thousands of noble abbeys and priories and convents throughout Europe. But from time to time it has shown signs of 'running back', and it may be that it withers in its extremities because its natural roots have become atrophied.

If we return, then, to the pre-Christian types of monastic or

1. A Paper read to the 'Life of the Spirit' Conference at Hawkesyard Priory, October, 1951.

2. The words 'monk' and 'monastic' are used here in a general sense, i.e. for a cenobitical or communal form of religious life.

religious institutions, we find that they can be roughly divided into two main types: the grouping of men or of women together for the ritual worship of God, and the organised grouping of ascetics or individual seekers after God. Of these two, the most primitive seems to have been the first; though it would perhaps be a mistake to regard any form of monastic life as being very primitive in character. Wherever the ritual worship of the god has developed to any degree, there will be found certain colleges of priests or religious-minded men who assist the priests. It has been suggested that there were Druidical communities of this nature which formed a priestly corporation; and the Shinto worship in Japan supported certain hereditary 'orders', which were distinguished according to the individual deity each order was destined to serve. In Mexico and Peru, if we are to believe the first Western invaders who saw the religion in too Christian a pattern, there were ascetic orders attached to certain gods; there were deacons and deaconesses, the former attending to the temple worship, the latter to the temple sewing; there were 'virgins of the sun' who were dedicated to the god from infancy and watched, in their secluded and virginal life, over the sacred fire. In Europe, again, there were Orphic communities and Roman sodalities connected very closely with the ritual surrounding special gods, such as the Roman *Luperci* dedicated to the cult of a god of fecundity. In all these communities or clubs, the primary motive for meeting and for living together was the service of their deities. Indeed, they may be classed as liturgical communities concerned in the first place with the *opus dei*. And for this reason they were in touch with the rhythm of nature, the rise and fall of the sun, the passing of the seasons, the tilling of the soil, by which their religious festivities were regulated.

More evidence, however, is at hand for discovering the make-up of the other kind of monastic dwellers. The men who overcome their flesh with violence have usually been more numerous and more vocal. The organised groups of ascetics and seekers after perfection do not originate from a sense of the need for common life in a common worship. The ascetics were originally of an individualistic turn of mind, seeking to be apart from their fellows, and aiming as far as possible at independence from bodily concerns. Continence and extreme temperance were their characteristics; and their celibacy was originally an individual act of

separation from the ordinary social relationships of their kind. In higher and more cultured civilisations such ideals were fostered by a dualistic attitude towards human nature, so that the severity of self-denial was aimed at the conquest of the body and the freedom and tranquillity of the mind. It became necessary for such men to live together in community in order that they might the more easily supply their physical needs and also to train each other in the ways of the spirit. Their individualism was thus modified by the common life and in the highest cultures they began to develop a wider social conscience. Of the Buddhist monks, for instance, Ananda Coomaraswamy writes that their 'Enlightenment' 'is a positive social and moral advantage to the community' for 'a certain number of its finest minds, leading a life that may be called sheltered . . . remain unattached to social activities and unbound by social ties'.

Nevertheless, the main drive of such a monastic movement, particularly that which arose in the East, was towards the total indifference or '*apatheia*' as regards the physical side of human existence. Enlightenment could only be reached in this manner:

A heart untouched by worldly things, a heart that is not swayed

By sorrow, a heart passionless, secure—that is the greatest blessing.

(*Sutra Nipala.*)

The Jain monk takes a vow of complete renunciation of all desire, so that he may settle down in entire indifference to the things of this world. The manichean element in eastern religion which tended to regard all the bodily side of human existence as a necessary evil, led at the next step to asceticism and so to community life. It meant a religion which became centred on the elect who were such by their superior state of indifference and detachment from the things of the flesh. In the segregated community life alone could be found the perfect way of living such religions. There are various, though obscure, references to manichean communities of the elect in Syria and Egypt at the beginning of the Christian era. They prayed seven times a day, devoted themselves to ceremonial purifications by water as well as to physical purification by austerities. These may have been in some way connected with the Jewish Therapeutae, who prayed and lived in something of this way but who also devoted some time to study

whereby they sought enlightenment. Perhaps the Essenes at the time of our Lord were of this character; and certainly the Islamic schools of Dervishes later, with their yoga practices, were intent on attaining freedom from the body.

Of these two groups the ascetic is evidently the more man-centred in its character. The technique of the community of worshippers is the technique of rubric and ritual, of sacrifice and the praise of the gods. The technique of the ascetic was that of personal perfection, ways of developing the intellectual side of man to its fullest stature. For the temple devotees, community life seems to be more essential and a more constant element in the life of the monk who fulfilled his duties perfectly. For the ascetic the higher he progressed in the way of perfection, the more remote did he become even from his fellow monks, as he sank, perhaps, into the absolute ground of his being—in nirvana.

It is of great interest that the first type of Christian monk was of the ascetic character. Perhaps, even those early monks were influenced by the Eastern perfectionists around them—the therapeutae or the manichees. They began as individual seekers after the perfectly detached life. St Anthony, the father of Christian monasticism, gathered these hermits into a loose organisation, but left them to vie with one another in ambitious struggles for the attainment of the highest indifference to material creation. Manual labour under such conditions was regarded as no more than a necessary encumbrance; it had no established connection with the still accidentally common life of the monks.

It was natural that the ascetic ideal should be accepted enthusiastically by the early Christians, since our Lord had preached poverty and self-denial so emphatically. The taking up of the Cross was essential to the Gospel. But the influence of neo-platonism, which had perfected the dualism of body and spirit, tended to draw away from a full incarnational conception of man and consequently to inspire the taking up of the cross with an almost manichean attitude towards the mortification of the flesh. By the time Cassian came on the scene the influence of the neoplatonists, from Origen to Cassian's own master Evagrius, had gone deep into the lives of the Egyptian monks. The majority of them followed this individualistic ascetical ideal. The contemplative life could not be lived in community, but only in the hermit's cell (Coll. 19, 9). Indeed, the full ideal of perfection was only attainable in the

hermitage—an esoteric doctrine which owed something surely to gnostic influence. Work in the open, they thought, tended to dissipate the monk's concentration; and agricultural work was incompatible with the contemplative life because the multitude of thoughts generated by these labours made the prolonged silence unbearable (Coll. 24, 3, 4, 12). Such an attitude was typical of the exaggerated dualism of the ascetical type of religious life; and it inevitably uprooted the monk from the native ground of his grace and virtue. His life showed little recognition of the divine rhythm of the seasons and their expression in the liturgical year.

But it was not in fact typical of the truly Christian monastic ideals. Soon after Anthony had gathered his ascetics together, Pachomius came to moderate the austerities and to insist on common work in field and garden for the common good of all. And withal he integrated regular services in church and regular perusal of sacred scripture. It was St Basil, however, who really brought to perfection the eastern monastic system. He not only adopted work as a necessary part of common life, but also gave his monks objects for the exercise of human social virtues. Hospitals, hospices and orphanages were attached to the monastery in order to give an opportunity for the monk to keep in touch with reality and to help his fellow men by charity and work. From this arrangement the great monastic tradition of education began. Psalmody at six specified times during the day completed the life for men dedicated to God's service as *men* rather than as individual angels uneasily anchored to a piece of flesh.

Yet it was in the west that the more primitive conception of monastic institutions as primarily a place of communal divine service first took root in the Christian way of life. Eusebius of Vercelli, followed very soon afterwards by St Augustine, adopted the plan of keeping the cathedral clergy together as a single body by giving them a monastic rule. In this way the cathedral services, which by the fifth century were beginning to develop into an imposing ceremonial, could be fully and decorously maintained, and at the same time the clergy themselves could be assisted to live a holy and perfect life together. Thus, although the first introduction of monasticism into the west had been of the Antonian character of individual asceticism, this movement towards a common life of worship as the *raison d'être* of community life led to the characteristic balance of western monasticism. It was, of

course, St Benedict who combined the two elements of individual asceticism and separation from the world with regular common life conducted round the Lord's altar. It was not that he broke with either of the previous traditions. He was considerably influenced through Cassian by that neo-platonic background of rigour and the war-waging against the flesh. Yet he modified the extreme austerities to bring them into line with the common life of Christian men of Italy. At the same time he viewed that common life as, in the words of a great Benedictine commentator, 'a school of God's service' in which the primary community duty was the celebration of the liturgy and the divine office.¹ But duties of the very same service lay in the fields and workshops, and also, of course, in the calefactory.

St Benedict, therefore, inherited the best of both traditions and welded them into a unity in the faith of the Incarnation. From the eastern individual struggle towards liberation and enlightenment he acquired the aim of contemplation as of the essence of his monastic life. This contemplation was to be prepared for by prayer, fasting and discipline to the rule, on the one hand, and by the 'tasting' of the Word of God in the Scriptures (his *lectio divina*) on the other. But with preparations for the life of perfection such as these, he avoided the danger of the esoteric individualism and also of the illuminism of his neo-platonic forebears. On the other side he built up his communities on the firm basis of the natural grouping of men intent upon the divine service. The monks' praise of God lay in close contact, through the liturgical cycle, with the movement of nature, and their silent work in the fields stood as a balance to their singing in the choir. In this way nature was prepared to receive the grace of Christ more readily and grace could enter every facet of the life of a body of men made of flesh as well as of mind.

The reader must excuse this over-simplified version of the familiar story of the rise of monasticism. It has been set down here to show two of the fundamental and opposing ingredients of religious community life. Such was the ideal; and as long as the two mainsprings of religious life were able to turn in mutual action and together able to move that life in unison with the regular development of faith and worship, all was well. But our

1. Cf. Butler: *Benedictine Monasticism* (pp. 31-32).

modern problems go back to the era when that regular growth was interrupted through the excessive speeding of one or other of these mainsprings and through the severance of the monastic life from its monastic roots.

In the first place it was only too easy for the ascetic principle to become over-emphasised and for the religious to become too interested in his own individual perfection by means of techniques of *catharsis*. The monk takes three vows which in themselves are penitential and negative, cutting him off from three great principles of ordinary Christian living. He may be tempted to consider that what he is giving up is the common lot of the herd, and that this is tinged so much with evil that it is impossible to become a contemplative or a true devotee while still using the various properties of this world. He soon begins to equate the *state* of perfection with Christian perfection itself, and this in a negative way. The idea of perfection as being the same as *apatheia*, a passionless remoteness from things of the flesh, or as the lack of commixture with non-spiritual things quite easily becomes the ideal of the individual religious. The rule and constitutions building on the vow overcome self to such an extent that the soul is left almost free of the body; the inner repose of the spirit is unruffled by pain, by insult, by personal attachments. This neo-platonic attitude can be traced in the history of monasticism from St Benedict onwards, particularly in the movements for reform such as the Cistercian movement of St Bernard or of de Rance, or in the Carmelite reforms started by St Teresa. And there is always one side of the teaching of St Thomas regarding the vows and the state of perfection to uphold this view; for the first element in the vowed life is one of denial—self-denial.

On the other hand, emphasis on the objective worship of God has equally disturbed the balance of the monastic ideal since the days of St Benedict. Fr Vincent McNabb used to sum up the trouble in this way: the monks had come to make the mistake of thinking that their first duty was to pray, whereas of course their first duty was to work. The result of this fallacy was to increase the time spent in liturgical functions to unwieldy proportions, while the ordinary serf (the man not called to this higher life of worship) was left to do the work in the fields. This proved to be the first step in dislocating the liturgy from its natural surroundings in the cycle of days and seasons which of necessity regulated the work,

but not now the prayer. Originally, the common prayer to which the religious dedicated himself was the human expression of the 'prayer' of creation as it moved in unending cycles towards its destiny. Easter was the festival of spring and of the growing crops and herds; Pentecost that of the harvest. The Mass was the praise of God through the death of his Word either as the sun sank or at the flush of dawn. Not only the work in the fields, but to some extent also that of the craftsmen was always in touch with these movements and dependent upon them. It was specially necessary that the religious who had cut himself off from the other natural sources of life in his denial by vow of the fertility of marriage and of personal initiative should have remained attached to the basic rhythm of life. But the encroachments of the choir strained that bond too, so that the monastic life tended to become unnatural and artificial, and prayer life began to lack natural roots.

This uprooting is, in fact, the fundamental weakness of a great deal of Christian life, but particularly of religious life. The religious is drawn away from a living liturgical prayer, from a common work shared with brethren and with nature, and from the ordinary rhythm of Christian life. And both the elements we have discussed in monasticism have contributed towards the building of an artificial life which very easily breaks down. The negative and individualistic conception removes natural ties without necessarily forging the bond of a common life lived for God; the positive liturgical conception provides a vast system of things to be said and done together in the divine service but with a developing complexity which makes it naturally difficult to live.

[To be concluded]

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