

Monasticism and the Desert

Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10.37–8)

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16.24)

On the most basic level, monasticism is a literal interpretation of biblical commands such as these and others found in the gospels. A person who wishes to be a Christian must take up the same burden as Christ. He or she must forsake family and friends, indeed all human ties. He or she must also seek freedom from the demands of the body, especially for food and sex. This is to be done through a rigorous programme of self-denial that should tame the appetites and free the soul to approach as closely as possible to God.

The general term for a person who follows such a regime is ‘monk’, from the Greek *monachos*. The word means something like ‘solitary’, and the first Christian monks were indeed hermits who withdrew from the villages of Egypt and into the desert in order to free themselves of society’s demands and temptations. The most famous of these men was Anthony, whose *Life*, written by St Athanasius of Alexandria, became one of the founding texts of Christian monasticism.

From Egypt monasticism spread through the eastern Roman empire, especially in Syria. Many forms of monasticism arose. Though some hermits continued to live quite alone, there was a strong tendency for ascetics to congregate together. By living in one place they could reinforce each other’s determination as well as cooperating to earn their living. Such communities could vary from the loosely organized to the strongly regulated. Some gathered around charismatic leaders.

Monasticism was transmitted to the western half of the Roman empire as well. Here the island monastery of Lérins, off the south coast of Gaul, was very influential, as was the monastery of St Martin at Marmoutier. From Gaul it spread to Britain and, later, Ireland.

Why did monasticism emerge when it did? One explanation is that it coincided with the end of persecution and the acceptance of Christianity as the main religion of the Roman empire from 313 onwards. The early church had consisted of a committed minority within society who were prepared to face discrimination and even death for their faith. When the church expanded to include the majority of the population, the most committed believers may have felt the need to embrace the harsher regime of asceticism in order to achieve the purest possible Christian commitment. But any single explanation for such a large phenomenon is bound to be a simplification.

Reading

The following is a useful guide to early monasticism:

Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (London: 2000).

The following article deals with the concepts of desert and ocean, particularly within monastic spirituality. The first few pages, 155–61, are the most relevant for our purposes; the rest deals with the idea of God as a desert, which takes the author to texts later than the period we are dealing with here.

Bernard McGinn, 'Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition', *The Journal of Religion*, 74.2 (April 1994), 155–81.

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