

MONASTICISM IN THE LIGHT OF VARIOUS RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

Monasticism is a phenomenon in which a person isolates and separates himself from the worldly goods to attain an exalted level of spirituality symbolizing his intense love for God. In today's world it has taken the shape of a tradition and a ritual in various religions. Christians are thought to be the originator of monasticism and followers of other religions are assumed to have gotten the true inspiration from them. Christianity has the largest following of monasticism and then come the religions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism respectively in order of emphasis. The other religions like Ananda Marga, Bon, Judaism, Manichaeism, Scientology, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism also have influences of monasticism but not of a very high degree.

But the religion of Islam condemns this practice vehemently. This is because Islam is a religion that organizes all aspects of life; it is not only for worshipping or isolation rather it stands for maintaining a healthy balance between the world and religious obligations. Islam organizes human nature, but does not go against it. There is not a class of clergy in Islam; nor is there celibacy. It therefore is a complete code of human life.

This article is based upon a comprehensive view of major worldwide religions on monasticism. It curtails to the basic elements of this tradition only.

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The Encyclopedia of Monasticism gives a very comprehensive definition of monasticism, “The word monasticism has been derived from the Greek word monos meaning alone and thus has come to denote the mode of life pertaining to persons living in seclusion from the world, under religious vows and subject to a fixed rule, as monks, , friars, nuns, or in general as religious. The basic idea of monasticism in all its varieties is seclusion or withdrawal from the world or society. The object of this is to achieve a life whose ideal is different from and largely at variance with that pursued by the majority of mankind. Taken in broad sense monasticism may be found in every religious system which has attained to a high degree of ethical development i.e. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism etc. First applied to Christian groups, both Latin and Greek, the term monasticism is now used to denote similar though not identical, practices in various religions.” (1)

Hence it is claimed that a form of life which flourishes in environments so diverse must be the expression of a principle inherent in human nature and rooted therein no less deeply than the principle of domesticity, though obviously limited to a far smaller portion of mankind.

The renowned book ‘Many People, Many Faiths’, further explains, “One extremely important social development in Christianity was monasticism. In order to serve God better, and in search of security and purity in a corrupt and chaotic society, young men- and not long afterward, women- left society to remain unmarried and form communities focused on the worship of God. Monasticism is traditionally of two kinds: the more usual form is known as the coenobitic, and is characterized by a completely communal style of life; the second kind, the eremitic, entails a hermit’s life of almost unbroken solitude and is now rare.” (2)

As it has been mentioned earlier that the phenomena of monasticism exists in a range of religions but the origin can be dated back to only one religion and that is, Christianity. It is actually from this religion that other religions got the inspiration of dwelling alone for gaining the exalted levels of spirituality.

The book 'Emergence of Monasticism' states, "Monasticism was unknown in Christianity until the end of the third century. Most of the early Christians continued to own private property after their conversion, and marriage was not condemned. St. Paul expressed a personal preference for celibacy, but admitted there was no "command from the Lord" on the matter. Widows were treated with special respect, but those under the age of 60 were enjoined to remarry and bear children. Missionary and charity work were emphasized over personal meditation and spiritual development." (3)

Bradley Holt expounds about the history, "However, there were strands within Christianity dating back to the time of the apostles that emphasized asceticism, celibacy, poverty or moral perfection. Fasting was an accepted discipline in the early church. It became customary for older widows to remain single and devote themselves to prayer and church work. Celibacy was lauded as a higher calling by not only St. Paul, but also The Shepherd of Hermas and the Marcionites. In 305, a synod in Spain required celibacy of bishops. By then, the custom had already been established that members of the clergy should not marry or (if widowed) remarry after ordination." (4)

It is cited in the book, 'Experiencing the World's Religions', "Christian monasticism probably sprang from a number of influences. One was Essene Movement and another was the fact that Jesus had never married. So we can say that historically idea of Christian monks is based on the Gospel accounts of the lives of Jesus Christ and the Apostles." (5)

Old Testament models of the Christian monastic ideal include such groups such as the Nasserites, as well as Moses, Elijah and other prophets of Israel.

The constant reference of monasticism in an implicit or explicit way in the Christians' Holy Books shows the significance of monasticism in Christianity.

"If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite, 3 he must abstain from wine and other

fermented drink... 5 During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the LORD is over; he must let the hair of his head grow long. 6 Throughout the period of his separation to the LORD he must not go near a dead body.... 8 Throughout the period of his separation he is consecrated to the LORD.”(6)

“In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea... 4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (7)

The female role models for monasticism are Mary the mother of Jesus and the four virgin daughters of Philip the Evangelist:

“On finishing the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, greeted the brothers, and stayed with them for one day. 8 The next day we left and came to Caesarea. We went to the home of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him. 9 He had four unmarried daughters who could prophesy. (8)

The monastic ideal is also modeled upon the Apostle Paul, who is believed to have been celibate, and a tentmaker:

“I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. 8 Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am”. (9)

But, the consummate prototype of all modern Christian monasticism, communal and solitary, is Jesus:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance

as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (10)

In Christianity, a man who enters monasticism is known as monk and woman as nun. “A monk is not necessarily a priest, nor need a priest be a monk. A monk or nun is an individual who has made a public vow to observe not only the Ten Commandments and the law of their respective Church authority (as has every other Christian), but also the counsels of perfection (e.g., chastity, poverty and obedience) and the rules set by the founder of their particular religious order.” (11)

Monasticism is regarded as an integral and vital aspect in Christianity in the ancient and modern world alike. Quoted from the book ‘World religions Today’, “It was monasticism that provided the bridge of civilization, bringing technological development and the light of learning to a European period that has been otherwise described as the Dark Ages. Whenever Christianity tended to get grow corrupt with worldly power and success, it was monasticism that provided reform movements to call the church back to its spiritual mission.” (12)

Buddhists state monasticism to be one of the most fundamental institution of their religion.

“The order of Buddhist monks and nuns was founded by Gautama Buddha during his lifetime over 2500 years ago. The Buddhist monastic lifestyle grew out of the lifestyle of earlier sects of wandering ascetics, some of whom the Buddha had studied under. It was not really isolationist or eremitic: the sangha was dependent on the lay community for basic provisions of food and clothing, and in return sangha members helped guide lay followers on the path of Dharma. Individuals or small groups of monks – a teacher and his students, or several monks who were friends – traveled together, living on the outskirts of local communities and practicing meditation in the forests. Monks and nuns were expected to live with a minimum of possessions, which were to be voluntarily provided by the lay community. Lay followers also provided the daily food that monks required, and provided shelter for monks when they were needed. During the Buddha's time, many retreats and gardens were donated by

wealthy citizens for monks and nuns to stay in during the rainy season. Out of this tradition grew two kinds of living arrangements for monastics, as detailed in the Mahavagga section of the Vinaya and Varsavastu texts:

1. avāsā: a temporary house for monastics called a vihara. Generally more than one monk stayed in each house with each monk in his own cell, called a *parivena*.
2. ārāma: a more permanent and more comfortable arrangement than the avasa. This property was generally donated and maintained by a wealthy citizen. This was more lavish (as suggested by the name – Araama means both pleasant and park). It generally consisted of residences within orchards or parks.” (13)

“Monks and nuns are expected to fulfill a variety of roles in the Buddhist community. First and foremost, they are expected to preserve the doctrine and discipline now known as [Buddhism](#). They are also expected to provide a living example for the laity, and to serve as a "field of merit" for lay followers, providing laymen and women with the opportunity to earn merit by giving gifts and support to the monks. In return for the support of the laity, monks and nuns are expected to live an austere life focused on the study of Buddhist doctrine, the practice of meditation, and the observance of good moral character. The relative degree of emphasis on meditation or study has often been debated in the Buddhist community. The buddhists monks and nuns are collectively called Sangha” (14)

The lifestyle and duties of buddishts entering into monasticism are precisely explaine dn the book, ‘Religions of the World’, “The Sangha follow a code of training rules designed to help them avoid the distractions of everyday life that lead to greed, hatred or delusion. These are rules that guide spiritual practice, as well as a code of behavior that benefits community life. Many members of the Sangha, monks and nuns, live a celibate lifesyle attached to a monastery, although in some traditions monks do marry and live with their families in or around monasteries. At times individual may choose to leave their shared monastic life for periods of meditation and study in

secluded dwellings such as huts or caves, sometimes they may take any shelter that is available on a mountain or in a forest. However, the heart of Sangha lies in the teaching, discipline, study and support of communal life.” (15)

Quoted from the book ‘Monasticism in East Asia’, “Buddhists monastic institutions and missions became vehicles for the spread of literacy and culture throughout the ancient world and held an important place in promoting charitable causes, building libraries, hospitals, schools, and universities. Even today, in Southeast Asia, many monasteries serve as free accommodations, retirement homes, and homes for the homeless or chronically ill. Poor families frequently use monasteries as hostels. They serve as village libraries and centers of news and information, and the surplus money is used to make schools.” (16)

Buddhism and monasticism seem to be a complementary pair, wherever the buddhists communities flourish, so does the monasticism.

Peter Harvey states, “As Buddhism spread literate culture into many societies in the process of political unification and organization, it is not surprising that the sangha(buddhist monks) came to wield political influence, or even political power, in a number of countries.” (17)

The third major religion which holds a high regard for monasticism is Hinduism.

Swami Bhaskarananda writes in his book, “ In their quest to attain the spiritual goal of life, some Hindus choose the path of monasticism (sanyāsa). Monastics commit themselves to a life of simplicity, celibacy, detachment from worldly pursuits, and the contemplation of God.” (18)

“A Hindu monk *is called a sanyāsī, sādhu, or swāmi.*”(19)

“A nun is called a sanyāsini, sadhavi, or swāmini. Such renunciates are accorded high respect in Hindu society, because their outward

renunciation of selfishness and worldliness serves as an inspiration to householders who strive for *mental* renunciation. Some monastics live in monasteries, while others wander from place to place, trusting in God alone to provide for their physical needs. ^[20] It is considered a highly meritorious act for a lay devotee to provide sadhus with food or other necessities. Sādhus are expected to treat all with respect and compassion, whether a person may be poor or rich, good or wicked. They are also expected to be indifferent to praise, blame, pleasure, and pain.

A sādhu can typically be recognized by his ochre-colored clothing. Generally, Vaisnava monks shave their heads except for a small patch of hair on the back of the head, while Saivite monks let their hair and beard grow uncut.

A Sadhu's vow of renunciation typically forbids him from:

- owning personal property apart from a bowl, a cup, two sets of clothing and medical aids such as eyeglasses;
- having any contact with, looking at, thinking of or even being in the presence of women;
- eating for pleasure;
- possessing or even touching money or valuables in any way, shape or form;
- maintaining personal relationships.(21)

Jainism is yet another religion which has a large number of ardent followers of monasticism.

Anne Vallely writes in her book, “Jainism has two branches, and each has a slightly different take on monasticism. Digambara monks do not wear clothing. Digambaras believe that practice represents a refusal to give in to the body’s demands for comfort and private property- only Digambara ascetics are required to forsake clothing. Digambara ascetics have only two possessions: a peacock feather broom and a water gourd. The Shvetambaras are the other main Jainist sect. Svetambaras, unlike Digambaras, do not believe that ascetics must practice nudity. Svetambaras are commonly seen wearing face masks

so that they do not accidentally breathe in and kill small creatures. A full Jain monk in either Svetambar or Digambar tradition- can belong to one of these ranks:

- Acharya: leader of the order
- Upadhyaya: a learned monk, who both teaches and studies himself
- Muni: an ordinary monk” (22)

The book ‘Jains in the World’ has the text, “Jain Muni or simply Muni is the term often used for Jain monks. A Jain monk does not have a permanent home and does not have any possessions. He wanders barefoot from place to place except for the four months of the rainy season. A Jain monk is not a priest; rather he is himself a worshipped one.” (23)

The above four religions explained in context of monasticism are those which stress a great deal on this issue while the ones mentioned below do not pay as much emphasis but not that less, that it would be insignificant to state.

- “Ananda Marga has both monks and nuns (i.e. celibate male and female acharyas or missionaries) as well as a smaller group of family acharyas. The monks and nuns are engaged in all kinds of direct services to society, so they have no scope for permanent retreat. They do have to follow strict celibacy, poverty and many other rules of conduct during as well as after they have completed their training.
- Bön is believed to have a rich monastic history. Bön monasteries exist today, however, the monks there practice Bön-Buddhism.
- Judaism does not support the monastic ideal of celibacy and poverty, but two thousand years ago taking Nazirite vows was a common feature of the religion. Nazirite Jews abstained from grape products, haircuts, and contact with the dead. However, they did not withdraw from general society, and they were

permitted to marry and own property; moreover, in most cases a Nazirite vow was for a specified time period and not permanent. In Modern Hebrew, the term Nazir is most often used to refer to non-Jewish monastics.

- Manichaeism had two types of followers, the auditors, and the elect. The elect lived apart from the auditors to concentrate on reducing the material influences of the world. They did this through strict celibacy, poverty, teaching, and preaching. Therefore the elect were probably at least partially monastic.
- Scientology maintains a "fraternal order" called the Sea Organization or just Sea Org. They work only for the Church of Scientology and have signed billion year contracts. Sea Org members live communally with lodging, food, clothing, and medical care provided by the Church.
- Sikhism and the Bahá'í Faith both specifically forbid the practice of monasticism. Hence there are no Sikh or Bahá'í monk conclaves or brotherhoods.
- Zoroastrianism holds that active participation in life through good thoughts, good words and good deeds is necessary to ensure happiness and to keep the chaos at bay. This *active* participation is a central element in Zoroaster's concept of free will, and Zoroastrianism rejects all forms of asceticism and monasticism." (24)

Islam, the absolute and final religion, does not support the trend and practice of monasticism rather it condemns it with conviction. Islam is a religion that organizes all aspects of life on both the individual and national levels. Islam organizes your relations with God, yourself, with your children, with your relatives, with your neighbours, with your guests, and with other brethren. There is not a class of clergy in Islam, nor is there celibacy. Islam therefore is a complete code of human life.

“The Quranic verse states that Allah rebukes monasticism as a man-made practice that is not divinely prescribed.”

The followers of Islam however turned to another form of elevated spirituality, that could be said to be inspired from monasticism, as quoted in the book, 'Experiencing the World's religions', "Islam had contact not only with sophisticated city dwellers but also with the Christian monks and hermits who lived in Israel, Syria, and Egypt. Their simple lives made a great impression on Muslims, who seemed to desire something similar for Islam. Because Islam rejected celibacy as a religious ideal, the Christian model of monasticism could not be imitated exactly. What emerged, however were lay individuals, who cultivated the spiritual life on their own and groups of devotees, loosely organized around charismatic spiritual leaders." (25)

The Prophet (peace be on him) noted a tendency toward monasticism among some of his Companions. Declaring this to be a deviation from the straight path of Islam and a rejection of his sunnah (recommended practice), he thereby rid Islam's conceptual framework of such a Christian notion.

Abu Qulabah narrated

"Some of the Companions of the Prophet (peace be on him) decided to relinquish the world, forsake their wives, and become like monks. The Prophet (peace be on him) told them with asperity, People before you perished because of their asceticism; they made excessive demands on themselves until Allah brought hardships on them: you can still see a few of them remaining in monasteries and temples. Then worship Allah and do not associate anything with Him, perform the Hajj and the 'Umrah, be righteous, and all affairs will be set right for you." (26)

Abu Qulabah said the following verse was revealed concerning them:

"O you who believe! Do not make haram the good of things which Allah has made halal for you, and do not transgress; indeed, Allah does not like transgressors." (27)

"Those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just (balance) between those (extremes)." (28)

Mujahid narrated, “Some people, including ‘Uthman ibn Maz’un and ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar, intended to renounce their wives, castrate themselves, and wear coarse clothing. Then the above verse and the verse following it were revealed.” (29)

It is reported by Al-Bukhari and others that three people came to the Prophet’s wives and asked how the Prophet (peace be on him) conducted his worship. When they were told about it, they seemed to consider it but little, saying, “What a difference there is between us and the Messenger of Allah (peace be on him), whose past and future sins have been forgiven him by Allah!”

One of them said, “As for me, I will always pray during the night.”

The other said, “I will have nothing to do with women and will never marry.”

When the Prophet (peace be on him) heard about this, he explained to them their error and deviation from the straight path, saying, “I am the one who fears Allah the most among you, yet I fast and I break my fast, I pray and I sleep, and I marry women. He who turns away from my sunnah has nothing to do with me.” (30)

S’ad ibn Abi Waqqas said, Allah’s Messenger (peace be on him) objected to ‘Uthman ibn Maz’un living in celibacy. If he had given him permission (to do so), we (others) would have had ourselves castrated. (31.)

Addressing the young men of all times, the Prophet (peace be on him) said, ‘Young men, those of you who can support a wife should marry, for it keeps you from looking at women and preserves your chastity.’ (32)

From this statement some scholars have inferred that marriage is obligatory for the Muslim who is able to support a wife and that the avoidance of it is not permissible, while other scholars add the further condition for its obligatoriness that he should be afraid of falling into sin.

In fact, it is not befitting that a Muslim should refrain from marriage out of fear of poverty or of not being able to meet his obligations. He should make every possible attempt to find employment, seeking help from Allah, for He has promised to help those who marry in order to protect their chastity and purity.

Says Allah Ta'ala:

"And marry those among you who are single and the virtuous ones among your slaves, male or female. If they are in poverty, Allah will enrich them out of His bounty".... (33)

And the Messenger of Allah (peace be on him) said,

"There are three who have a right to the help of Allah: the one who marries out of the desire to live a chaste life, the slave whose master has agreed to his buying his freedom when he wishes to pay the sum, and the one who fights in the cause of Allah." (34).

“Then, in their wake, We followed them up with (others of) Our apostles: We sent after them Jesus the son of Mary, and bestowed on him the Gospel; and We ordained in the hearts of those who followed him Compassion and Mercy. But the Monasticism which they invented for themselves, We did not prescribe for them: (We commanded) only the seeking for the Good Pleasure of Allah. but that they did not foster as they should have done. Yet We bestowed, on those among them who believed, their (due) reward, but many of them are rebellious transgressors.” (35)

In conclusion it can be very easily deduced that the roots of monasticism are found in a variety of religions and each religion followers have a unique way of practicing it.

But after studying Qur'an and its commentaries and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, we can conclude sound results; it is completely evident that the only final, complete and the most comprehensive religion i.e. Islam does not permit its believers to refrain from marriage on the grounds that he has dedicated himself to the service or

the worship of Allah and to a life of monasticism and renunciation of the world.

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