



# THE I.B.TAURIS HISTORY OF MONASTICISM

THE WESTERN TRADITION

I.B.TAURIS

G. R. EVANS

**G. R. Evans** is Professor Emeritus of Medieval Theology and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge. She is the prolific author of many highly praised books in the fields of medieval and Reformation history, theology and the history of ideas. These include *Augustine on Evil* (1982); *Alan of Lille: The Frontiers of Theology in the Later Twelfth Century* (1983); *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (1988); *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages* (1991); *The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Medieval Period* (2000); *Problems of Authority in the Reformation Debates* (2002); *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers* (2002); *The First Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church* (2004); *Anselm* (new edition 2005); *Belief: A Short History for Today* (I.B.Tauris, 2006); *The Church in the Early Middle Ages* ('The I.B.Tauris History of the Christian Church', 2007); *The University of Cambridge: A New History* (I.B.Tauris, 2010); and *The University of Oxford: A New History* (I.B.Tauris, 2010, paperback 2013). Her *A Short History of Medieval Christianity*, in the 'I.B.Tauris Short Histories' series, will be published in 2017.

‘There are already many books that explore monasticism, Christian and non-Christian – most of them written from the point of view of those living such a life in the past and present. This engaging and readable new volume, however, deals with the links between monasteries and their surrounding cultures, from the first centuries of the Christian church to modern times. The relationships and histories outlined here come from the pen of one of our most able medievalists, and add greatly to the material available.’

– **Benedicta Ward, SLG, Reader in the History of  
Christian Spirituality, University of Oxford**

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G. R. EVANS

**I.B. TAURIS**

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*St Benedict has had the training of the ancient intellect, St Dominic of the medieval; and St Ignatius of the modern. And in saying this, I am in no degree disrespectful to the Augustinians, Carmelites, Franciscans, and other great religious families, which might be named, or to the holy Patriarchs who founded them; for I am not reviewing the whole history of Christianity, but selecting a particular aspect of it.*

John Henry Newman, 'The mission of St Benedict', *Atlantis*,  
January 1858, *Historical Sketches*, Vol. II, 377.



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# Preface

The Gospels describe the founding of a religion of love, in which forgiveness and freedom were hallmarks. The question whether that relieved Christ's followers of the obligations of the laws of Old Testament Judaism was early raised, though not speedily resolved. The 'Council of Jerusalem' (Acts 15) made some key decisions about the requirement that converts should be circumcised, but the arguments continued.

The consensus in the end was that, for Christians, a liberating New Testament 'grace' had been substituted for – or rather somehow fulfilled and completed – Old Testament 'law' with its detailed requirements. Why, then, did the hermits who first embraced their hard solitary life in the discomforts of the deserts of North Africa and the Near East, see themselves as surrounded by demons intent on distracting them and dragging them down? Why did they believe so fiercely that heaven was to be entered only after years of striving and self-imposed suffering? Why did a life of deprivation and struggle as a monk or nun come to have such strong attractions for Christians down the centuries?

This book begins with that paradox, but it is chiefly about another puzzle which emerges from this first one. How did this 'fringe' way of life become so comfortably embedded in so many societies, its adherents acquiring wealth and power? The extremist ideas about how to live a holy life which took root in early Christian Egypt and Palestine spread across North Africa and Europe and attracted interest in the Latin-speaking west of Roman Europe, where numbers of monastic houses were being established by the sixth century. Monks and nuns, and later canons and friars, began to develop a version of this dedicated and demanding way of life adapted to the society of Western Europe. For a thousand

years, the region embraced them, offered them money and lands, regarded them as a spiritual asset to the whole of society. The central chapters of this book explore this great age of monasticism in the West and its modern legacy.

The widening division of Europe's Christians from late antiquity into Orthodox and Roman Catholic, East and West – which became formal with the schism of 1054 – has never been fully mended. This is partly because the cultural separation of the Greek and Latin Christian communities which began so many centuries earlier had brought about divergences too profound to be mended by an agreement over a limited number of specific doctrinal differences. The full story of Eastern monasticism from that time of losing touch must be told elsewhere, though the first chapters of this book are set on the common ground which the early Christians shared. Nor can this exploration include forms of monasticism in other world religions, for example in Buddhism, though there has been some exchange of influence in very recent times.

In the Orthodox East monasticism has tended to cling firmly to its early forms and its first relationships with society. There remains the mystery of the long-term survival of the less fixed monastic way of life in the West, through enormous political and social change for nearly two thousand years. Each generation in a monastic community or order thinks about what it is doing in the terms of its Rule or what it understands to be the special vision of its founder. But these have had to be re-expressed in each generation in the terminology and with the assumptions of later ages. Balancing the continuity of a way of life against its contemporary relevance and viability is no small task, intellectually or practically. Monasteries were widely suppressed in Protestant Europe at the Reformation, but the call to this way of life continued to be felt. New experiments are still being tried, in a 'West' which has now expanded vastly in a geographical sense and includes the New World of the Americas, discovered by Europeans in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and further expanded as the world was explored in succeeding generations.

The author of a book on monasticism who has never lived the monastic life should approach the task with humility. This is a manner of life not to be undertaken lightly, a life of self-sacrifice and obedience now peculiarly out of tune with the expectations of modern Western life. It demands one's all. It involves a practice of humility going far beyond the courtesy of an admitted outsider writing as an interested observer. But an outsider may perhaps venture to criticise some of what has happened down the centuries as well as to applaud the heroic spiritual intentions.

# Abbreviations

- Augustine, *Confessions*: Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1998)
- Bede, *EH*: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, eds. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969)
- Bernard of Clairvaux, *LTR*: Bernard of Clairvaux, *Opera Omnia*, eds. J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot and H. Rochais (Rome, 1957–74), 8 vols
- Calvin, *Institutes*: Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Edinburgh, 1845–6)
- Cassian, *Institutes*: Cassian, *Institutes*, ed. Boniface Ramsay (New York, 2000)
- CCCM: Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievals
- CSSL: Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
- CSEL: Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
- Eusebius, *EH*: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*
- Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. Zimmerman: Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, ed. O. J. Zimmermann (Washington, 1959)
- Guibert of Nogent, *De Vita Sua*: Guibert of Nogent, *De Vita Sua*, ed. G. Bourgin (Paris, 1907) and Guibert of Nogent, *Self and Society in Medieval France*, trans. J. F. Benton (Toronto, 1984)
- I Leap Over the Wall*: Baldwin, Monica, *I Leap Over the Wall* (London, 1949)
- Lawless: George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule* (Oxford, 1991)
- MGH: Monumenta Germaniae Historica
- PG: *Patrologia Graeca*
- PL: *Patrologia Latina*

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- Ralph Glaber, *Histories*: Ralph Glaber, *The Five Books of the Histories*, ed. N. Bulst, trans. John France and Paul Reynolds (Oxford, 1989).
- RB: Benedict, *Rule*, ed. and trans. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN, 1982)
- S: *Anselmi Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt (Rome/Edinburgh 1938–68), 6 vols
- Tertullian, *Apologeticus*: Tertullian, *Apology*, ed. and trans. A. H. Woodham (Cambridge, 1843)

# Introduction

A history is not a handbook. This cannot and should not pretend to be a book on how to be a monk or nun in the Western world. A history ought to be written with a degree of detachment, though readers who have themselves chosen the monastic life may not agree. Outsiders have ways of glimpsing what the life means, by reading about it in the writings of those who have lived it, and talking – at least to those whose commitment as professed religious permits them to hold conversations with those still in the world. This ‘getting inside’ in imagination cannot be the same as ‘entering’ to live the life in reality. On the other hand, the successful religious who wanted to write about the life for outsiders would also face a difficulty of translation into words intelligible to those who have not experienced it, in rendering profundities understood on the pulses.

The history of monasticism in the West has its narrative, but it also has its themes. Several of these have thrust themselves into controversies century by century. A guide may be helpful to the reader who wants to be able to position such topics in the emerging story, so these first chapters offer a snapshot view of the way these concerns have reappeared at different times.

## **Is monastic life a foreign country?**

You are interested in joining a religious order? You may read a variety of invitations online.<sup>1</sup> But that may not be enough to take you inside the reality of the life. ‘When I entered at the age of twenty-nine, both my abbot and novice master thought that I already knew most things about monastic life because I had earned



a doctorate in theology.’ The highly educated modern ‘postulant’ who wrote this found he did not know anything about the life’s ‘implicit rules, rhythms and techniques’.<sup>2</sup> There has been a further shift, which he also notes, away from the understanding that monastic life is traditionally ‘for life’, and not a mere phase in a person’s self-development. A decline in ‘vocations’ in most parts of the world, and a greater tendency for recruits to leave, means that many long-established houses now consist of a tiny number of very elderly members.

Dom Bernhard, the Austrian Benedictine just quoted, took stock of some implications late in 2013:<sup>3</sup>

At Kremsmünster Abbey we have become strangers in our own place. A monk that guided tourists in our observatory was once asked, ‘Do all tour guides wear these black uniforms?’ Other lay tour guides are sometimes asked, ‘Does someone still live in this castle?’<sup>4</sup>

It seems to Dom Bernhard that this loss of a general understanding of the purpose and value of the monastic life can easily extend to the monks themselves. ‘We have also become strangers to ourselves.’<sup>5</sup> This affects the process of ‘formation’, the technical term for the training and ‘shaping’ of a monk or nun. No longer does his abbey receive a steady stream of boys from its school, clear about what they are taking on when they become postulants.<sup>6</sup> The last monk who had entered Kremsmünster Abbey through the school – and remained – had begun his life as a monk twenty-five years earlier. Few, if any, candidates seeking to become monks or nuns now have never lived ‘in the world’. Indeed, they are encouraged to have done so.

### **Is monastic life a special calling?**

The consecrated life was conceived when it began in the first centuries as a special call to certain individuals to live a particularly ‘radical’ Christian life.<sup>7</sup> Can monks and nuns expect to find themselves on a fast track to heaven? When they take their vows, do they place themselves in a special category, not shared by those who are merely baptised? In the later Middle Ages any suggestion being a monk or nun is a special calling roused the indignation of John Wyclif and others. He said it was as though monks and nuns laid claim to a second ‘baptism’, and thought themselves superior to other Christians. This challenge later underlay much of the hostility to monks and friars during the Reformation.

In one respect the monastic life is different from any other. It offers a route for withdrawal from distraction in order to concentrate fully on God. Early monastic writers speak of *anachoresis* (withdrawal) and renunciation as a help to spiritual concentration. A favourite theme of medieval monastic writers seeking to teach prayer was the idea of ‘entering into the chamber of your mind, emptying it of distractions and closing the door’ (cf. Matthew 6.6, Vulgate).<sup>8</sup>

William of St Thierry (d. 1148) taught that a monk’s spiritual reading should be equally concentrated. Merely dipping into a book, he says, is not very edifying. It teaches nothing of lasting value. It makes the mind capricious and what is read does not stick in the memory. A favourite metaphor was that of chewing and digestion, indeed digesting as the stomachs of cattle perform it, for what is in the mind’s stomach should be brought up for frequent further ‘rumination’ as a prompter to prayer.<sup>9</sup>

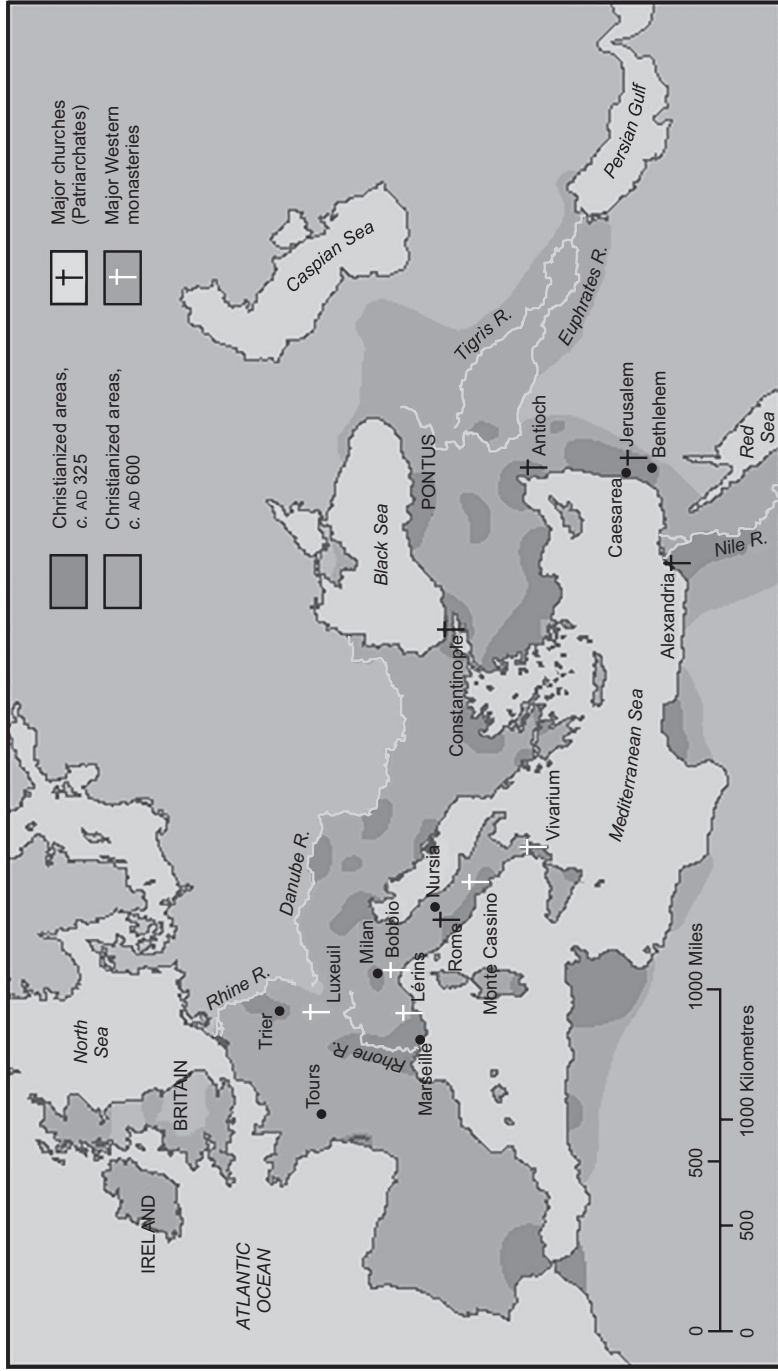
### **Do monks and nuns do any useful work for the world?**

The Gospel story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10.38–42) has become the archetype of a fundamental dilemma. Should the good Christian concentrate on the inward and spiritual life of the contemplation of God or the active, practical life of doing good? Jesus said Mary had chosen the ‘better part’ in sitting and listening to him and not scurrying about like her sister attending to the domestic details of entertaining their guest. Thomas Merton (1915–68) pointed out that those who say that monastic life should be active, because that benefits others, forget that ‘Mary has indeed chosen the best part. It would be a disgrace for her to look with jealous eyes upon the activity of Martha and seek a part in the troubled life of her busy sister’.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Jesus did not condemn Martha’s choice. He merely reproved her for her indignation that Mary had chosen to sit and listen to him rather than help her sister.

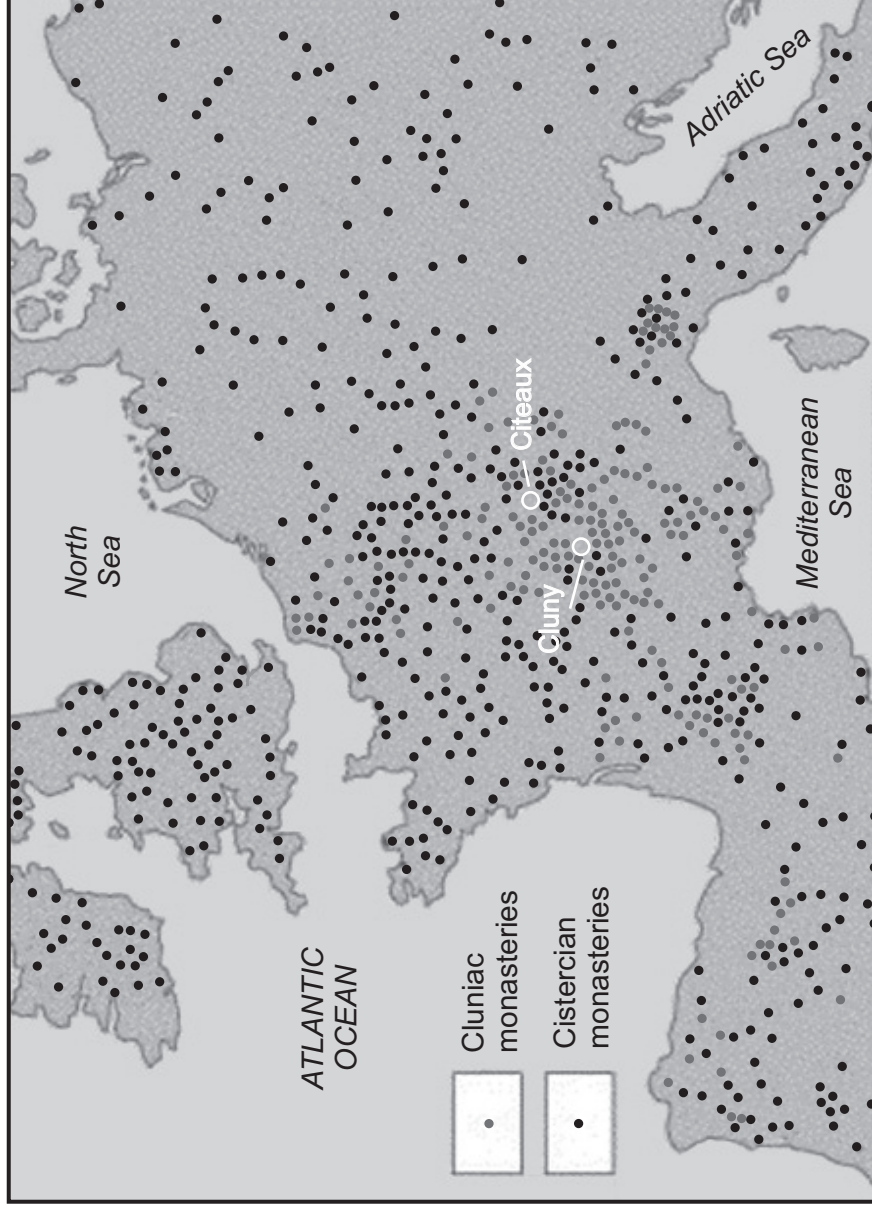
Religious communities in the West have always understood themselves as doing useful work for the world. For nearly a millenium and a half society accepted contemplatives as giving the time and attention to prayer that busy soldiers and rulers could not, or hard-working peasants, craftsmen and tradespeople either. So the spiritual life of the people could safely be left in the hands of the professionals, while other professionals dealt with defence and government, making and selling things and growing crops. *Vita Consecrata* notes a risk, familiar from earlier centuries, that the ‘religious’ will suffer from spiritual pride. ‘The possibility of a deeper spiritual formation might lead consecrated persons to feel somehow superior to other members of the faithful.’<sup>11</sup>

Even in the Middle Ages ‘contemplative’ orders provided some medical support for the local community and did some teaching, but it was not until the ‘active’ orders emerged that it was possible to point to monks and nuns as ‘doing good’ in more practical ways. The modern West speaks of a ‘work–life balance’. A similar struggle to strike a balance preoccupied commentators on the monastic life in earlier centuries. It was especially challenging for those in late antiquity who had to do ‘work in the world’ in the society of their day, but felt a call to separate themselves from it. Such busy people, frequently prominent in public life, often expressed weariness and longing for retreat or retirement to monastic life. That was the first thing Augustine of Hippo (354–430) chose to do when he was converted to Christianity. He went off to spend some time thinking things through with a few friends, in a makeshift ‘community’ near Lake Como in northern Italy. ‘Burn-out’ was experienced by public servants such as Cassiodorus (c.485–c.585), busy Senator and public official.<sup>12</sup> He retired to attend to his spiritual life and eventually become a monk. Fulgentius of Ruspe, born in the 460s, had been a tax collector; then he became a monk; then a bishop. The anonymous *Vita* which tells the story of his life records that the ‘burden of this world’s business began to weight heavily on him and its vain happiness to be displeasing’. He turned to monastic life where there are not to be found ‘the joys of this world but neither is there boredom’.<sup>13</sup> Monks ‘are not weary from the journeys involved in public service [...] they live in peace among themselves, lives that are sober, meek, humble and harmonious’.<sup>14</sup> The English Church historian Bede (672/3–735) was struck by the implications of the way that the future Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) had given up his secular life as an imperial administrator and entered a monastery.<sup>15</sup> Gregory himself says he felt the need of time to study and reflect. He describes how he seized what moments of leisure he could in a busy life of public service, and then dictated his reflections when he had more time.<sup>16</sup> (Dictating to a secretary was common practice at this time.) His purpose was twofold, to practise that ‘ascent’ which contemplation makes possible and to learn to live better.<sup>17</sup> He chose the book of Job because it contains a record of Job’s own spiritual battles and his ultimate victory.<sup>18</sup>

Members of today’s ‘active’ orders may be missionaries, teachers, doctors and nurses and those activities are obviously socially useful. *Vita Consecrata* also approved of the new secular orders of the modern world, describing them as ‘seeking to live out their consecration to God in the world through the profession of the evangelical counsels in the midst of temporal realities’ which ‘help to ensure that the Church has an effective presence in society’.<sup>19</sup>



1. Early monasteries.



2. Cluniac and Cistercian monasteries in the West from the tenth century.



3. Dissolution of the monasteries: the impact all over England and Wales.



## CHAPTER I

# How it all began

### **i. Was the monastic life ‘apostolic’? The New Testament picture**

There were no monks among the disciples of Jesus. Jesus taught a way of love and forgiveness in freedom from the ritual constraints of traditional Judaism. He said he himself was the ‘way’ (John 14.6) and promised that his yoke would be easy and the burden light (Matthew 11.30). So why did a way of life requiring individuals to submit themselves to extreme ascetic deprivations; to deny themselves marriage and children; to live either together or separately according to a set of demanding rules or requirements, prove so popular and so long-lasting among early Christians and continue to draw in recruits until today?

Jesus sent out his apostles to preach the Gospel, not to retreat from the world so as to seek closer communion with the divine in a life of extreme self-denial. It is true that he said that his followers should be willing to leave home and family to follow him (Luke 18.29), but that did not mean that he did not warmly approve of family life. The New Testament contains a number of family episodes: the wedding at Cana, the meal at the home of Martha and Mary, and affectionate encounters with children. Jesus’ disciples and the early Christians did not require the abandonment of family life as a condition of membership of the Christian community. But that was what was expected in response to the ‘call’ to become a hermit and the later call in the West to join a monastic ‘community’ with a particular set of rules the new member must solemnly vow to keep.



Monasticism was always going to be not an 'ordinary' but a 'special' mode of Christian life. It was never thought to be a way for everyone. But it was going to remain a question whether Jesus' teachings established a foundation for this extraordinary way of life. Was the quest for personal holiness conducted in an extreme separation from the world a recognisable form of the 'apostolic life' for which New Testament warrant can be seen it would be asked? Could a life of monastic self-denial be a true 'imitation of Christ'? And did it confer advantage in getting to heaven and if so, could that accord with a Gospel preaching a common life in Christ, in which such privilege seemed to have no place?<sup>1</sup>

Luke's Gospel has been seen as more 'ascetic' in its tendencies than the other Gospels,<sup>2</sup> but even if that is true it does not prescribe a life lived at the extreme of personal self-denial in the way it was being lived in the deserts of Syria and Egypt within a generation or two of Christ's death and resurrection. A 'Bible-based' monasticism could be argued for only by hindsight, some time after the monastic life had already begun to be lived. Those who began it did not do so because they had read their Bibles and found clear instructions there. Hellenized Jews certainly brought Christianity to Egypt in the second and third centuries and it was adopted by local people.<sup>3</sup> But how far books of Scripture were available in the Egyptian desert and what conception of 'Scripture' these local Christians are likely to have had, it is not easy to say.<sup>4</sup> Tatian (c.120–80) was a pupil of Justin Martyr (c.100–65) who died for the faith.<sup>5</sup> Tatian made one of the first surviving attempts to reconcile the narratives of the four Gospels in his *Diatessaron*. He was able to point to passages concerning requirements of self-denial, in mentions of wealth and marriage and food.<sup>6</sup>

And what Bible? The emergence and acceptance of the texts which eventually became the New Testament was gradual. For some generations, much variety and confusion prevented the development of an exegesis which could stay close to an agreed text.<sup>7</sup> Even by the fourth century there was no settled New Testament canon yet – a body of Scripture which could be pointed to as agreed by the Church. For the more or less 'accepted' Scriptures there was no definitive version in any vernacular, and especially not in Coptic and the local dialects of Egypt. Books which became part of the Scriptures were translated into Coptic fairly early, but there are parallels with the 'Old Latin' problem of the existence of many versions, making it difficult to establish which was authoritative. Various versions were in use, including early ones in pre-classical Sahidic. An attempt at an official version was made but it did not supersede all these and in any case in the fourth century, in a period of missionary expansion after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, a variety of fresh versions appeared in local dialects. So tracing the

influence of Scripture on the development of theology or practice, especially in remote places in these early generations, is not straightforward.

Western-style monasteries in the form of organised communities with 'Rules' came later than the experiments of Egypt and the Eastern Empire, but when they did, they could perhaps claim to be modelled on the life described in Acts 2.32–47. There the early Christians are to be seen devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship (*koinonia*); to sharing property in common and giving up personal wealth; to the breaking of bread and to prayer:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.<sup>8</sup>

Yet this was not a life of extremes.

Voluntary poverty and a life of prayer were certainly central to both the eremitical and the monastic life from their beginnings, but the Christian community life as described in Acts is a long way in its cheerful sharing from the life of agonising spiritual struggle and self-denial on which a hermit or a monk set out. And the earliest monastic experiments seem to have been personal rather than communal. In any case, it was not directly from the study of the Bible that the notion of living such a life arose. It had its origins in the wider culture of the time.

In the medieval period monks again thought it important to see themselves as living the *vita apostolica*.<sup>9</sup> This call to continue the Christian life as it was delivered to the apostles emerged as another thread which has held out monastic life as a form of 'Bible-based' Christianity.

## **ii. Practical philosophical living**

Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy concerned itself with how to live as much as with what to think. It was a moral as well as an intellectual system. 'Schools of thought' were open to mergings and overlaps and not normally 'exclusive' or 'sectarian'. By the beginning of Christianity the threads which began as loosely

'Aristotelian', 'Platonic', 'Stoic', 'Epicurean' were becoming blended in quite complex ways. Educated people and serious philosophers drew more or less at will on the approaches and arguments they favoured.

Philosophers sometimes chose to live 'out of the world', dedicating their time to thought, alone or with companions. This was a natural aspiration, for the retired classical politician Cicero (106–43 bc) as much as for a young Augustine (354–430), future Bishop of Hippo, who was beginning a career as a lecturer in oratory towards the end of the fourth century. Thinking along these lines, people might choose on philosophical principles to live lives very like those of hermits or monks, subduing their bodies and physical desires so as to free themselves for pure thought and the pursuit of higher things.

One of the characteristic features of late antiquity is the pervasiveness of certain ideas in its culture, ideas which were found all over the enormous Empire which ancient Rome had acquired. In the end, Imperial ambition overstretched itself and became easy meat for invading 'barbarians' on its borders, but the decay of Empire did not remove these ideas from the consciousness of its people, especially the educated. Christianity, as it won more educated converts, found it absorbed a good deal of this secular philosophy where it did not apparently conflict with Christian doctrine. For example, the idea that the body and the soul are at war, as described in Galatians 5.17ff., was a philosophical commonplace. Monasticism began in a soup of such philosophical theories and assumptions. Some of these ideas seem to have found their way and persisted among the uneducated too, for the first Christian hermits included Egyptian fellahin or peasants.

Some philosophers actively objected to Christian teaching. The second-century philosopher Celsus wrote what is probably the first serious attack on Christianity. The Christian Origen (184/5–253/4), himself holding some views other Christians thought unorthodox, wrote a response to it in the mid-third century.<sup>10</sup> Porphyry (234–c.305), a Neoplatonist thinker, wrote 'Against the Christians'<sup>11</sup> on the grounds that they had abandoned the conclusions of generations of thinkers in favour of an 'atheism', for did they not reject the divinity of the pagan gods?

*The problem of ungovernable thoughts and physical desires: Devils or wrong thinking?*

Early experimenters with the hermit or monastic life seem to have spent a good deal of time and effort struggling with their unruly thoughts. One area

of particular importance was the interaction with Stoicism. Stoic philosophers cultivated tranquillity. They tried to avoid getting upset. They did this by seeking not to care too much about anything which might prove disturbing. They wrote with distaste of *propatheiai*, ungovernable thoughts, prompters to emotional discomfort. Christian hermits commonly complained that they suffered from *propatheiai*. There are accounts of their being plagued by 'bad' thoughts which they could not control. Christians tended to see these as temptations of the Devil.<sup>12</sup> Hermits famously struggled with demons and rarely say they attained lasting calm. *Apatheia* (calm, freedom from upset), as Evagrius Ponticus envisages, is the Christian counterpart of Stoic tranquillity.<sup>13</sup> For him too the 'demons' are temptations preventing the would-be holy from preserving spiritual peace.<sup>14</sup>

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–80) was himself a Stoic and the author in the 170s of a book of *Meditations*, which he wrote while on a military campaign. Marcus Aurelius began by reviewing (gratefully) the things he had learned from his parents and tutors and philosophers. He has had his moments of sexual excess but has mended his ways (Book I). Each day the man of affairs will meet people who are arrogant, deceitful, busybodies, spiteful. Those who have understood the beauty of the Good and the sheer ugliness of what is bad will recognise these behaviours for what they are. So such people cannot hurt him in his inward self. He should use his reason and behave with dignity and goodwill in making his response, in the belief that Providence is ultimately in charge and all will be well.<sup>15</sup> (Here the thought chimes with Romans 1.28–9.) That thought will enable a man to keep a sense of proportion when dealing with the irritations and demands of the day (Book II). The mind governed by reason will not be tempted to corrupt itself by indulging in hatred, revenge, deceit; it will be pure (Book III).

The *Meditations*, with their counsel of moderation and their advice on the preservation of tranquillity, do not recommend extreme withdrawal from ordinary life but a calm engagement with it. And above all, they do not expect the moderate man to face a life of ceaseless struggle against temptation. Christian hermits went to the desert and lived in cells so as to cut themselves off completely from the world and its distractions; philosophers did not normally go to such extremes – a life of leisure or inward balancing of philosophy with practical duties, in a well-run home, was often more the philosophers' way.

As Emperor from 161 AD, Marcus Aurelius had himself actually persecuted Christians. For Christians were not flexible; they embraced a particular faith and were not willing to accommodate other religions, as was the Roman syncretistic

expectation. Perhaps the Emperor saw Christians with their struggles as posing a threat to Stoicism with its calm, balance and moderation.

Christians tended to think of troublesome thoughts as temptations of evil spirits. The Bible offered some clues to Christians about both the Devil and smaller demons. Jesus encountered the Devil during his temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4.1–11). In Mark 4.10–20 is told the parable of the Sower, in which Jesus explains that the good seed, the seed which falls by the wayside and is snatched away by birds, is the teaching which enters men's hearts and is removed by demons. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (6.13–17) again assumes that Christians will need to fight the Devil. James (4.7) also counsels resistance, as does Peter (I Peter 5.8–9), who portrays an active Devil, prowling about like a lion in search of prey. The Book of Revelation describes demons too (16.13–4), as well as the Devil (20.2–3).

Problems with demons were not confined to Christian hermits. Superstition was rife in the general population. Pagans, including educated pagans who called themselves philosophers, had a strong notion of the demonic. Contemporary paganism had a well-developed idea of the numinous, a consciousness of powers located in places, in statues, in objects. People – including many educated people who understood philosophy – believed that the air was full of spirits.<sup>16</sup>

So pervasive was this idea even in the late fourth and early fifth centuries that when Augustine of Hippo wrote *The City of God* he devoted Book VIII to the question of the relation of these spirits to the demons which seemed to plague some Christians. The context was the apparent collapse of the Roman Empire, which had been officially Christian since the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312. Exiles from Italy, educated influential people, were asking awkward questions. If the Christian God was as powerful as had been claimed, they wanted an explanation of these events. Augustine knew that even sophisticated pagans with a philosophical training accepted the reality of such supernatural beings. The air of late antiquity was not only commonly envisaged as thick with gods; it was also taken for granted that their behaviour left a good deal to be desired. They were greedy, malicious, demanding placatory sacrifices, open to bribery. Explanations were called for.

Augustine argues in the first chapter of Book VIII that these supernatural beings are real enough. However, they are not gods but demons. They are fallen angels, hopelessly sinful but retaining many of the powers they were given at their creation as high spiritual beings. Augustine had serious moral reservations about the corrupting effects of contemporary theatrical performances. He combines them with his concerns about demons by putting the goings-on of demons on

the 'stage' of contemporary society. In Book VIII.5, he depicts an ancient version of a combination of television 'reality show' and 'red-top' or 'tabloid' newspaper, in which a 'theology' of gossip about bad behaviour among these divine 'celebrities' is combined with the portrayal of their base pleasures and 'impure desires'. Conduct that had had some sort of dignity in temple worship becomes 'obscene' when it takes a debased form in theatrical performances.

The trouble with these 'demon-gods' is that they are rational beings (even if behaving irrationally), and higher in the cosmic hierarchy than humans are, because they are pure spirit and immortal while we have mortal bodies. On the other hand, like us they are afflicted by passions (VIII.14). These, as Augustine has read, are only too like our passions, marked by vanity, the desire for honour and recognition, pique, revengefulness for perceived injuries (VIII.16). These are not fit beings to worship, Augustine argues (VIII.17). Nor can it make sense to believe that only by propitiating these unpleasant spirits can Christians obtain their advocacy before the higher Divine, which being pure spirit can hear them better than it can us (VIII.18). His own Christian mother had 'played safe' in this way by offering at the shrines of the gods just in case.

Demons of this kind were often portrayed as wrestling with the hermits in the desert from motives of revenge – because the hermits were Christians and no longer worshipped them – or simply because they were malicious and enjoyed tormenting people. The hermits suffering from this pestering certainly saw the problem as real.

The problem raised by the concept of a Devil, or Satan, was rather different. The Supreme Evil might be seen as Christians saw it, as a rebel against an omnipotent and wholly good God, and a rebel who was bound eventually to be defeated. 'Dualism' was different. It envisaged a universe ruled by two eternally warring powers, good and evil, spirit and matter, not one supreme omnipotent God but two first Principles, Good and Evil. There was no certainty that the good would ultimately triumph.

Dualism took many forms down the centuries; these were broadly shared by Gnostics and Manichees in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages, by Bogomils, Cathars and Albigensians. The basic assumption was that the Devil and his demons are engaged in a cosmic war of good and evil, of which the individual personal battle with demons forms but a tiny part. This notion of good and evil eternally opposed and fighting for supremacy allowed much ordinary human experience to be explained. It was an attractive solution to the puzzle that there was so much evil in the world.

To Christians, dualism was heresy because it was incompatible with the belief that there is one almighty God, wholly good and opposed only by a Devil who is himself a creature doomed to fail in his evil intentions. But some of the assumptions linked with dualism and widespread in the ancient world found their way into Christian culture. In human beings, the body and the soul could be seen as naturally at war, and the body's desires as strongly attractive and dangerously tempting. They would run away with the soul if not checked. We have already seen this touched on in Galatians 5.17, with its warning that sinful nature wars against the human spirit. Does not everyone feel the tug of sensual pleasures against all reason? It seemed to be common experience that 'matter' matter and its attractions was at war with spirit and intellect. On this assumption rested much of the Christian preoccupation with the dangers of gluttony and sex, and the insistence of monastic traditions on the choice of an abstemious and celibate life.

The mistrust of 'matter' took many forms. Porphyry was convinced that a vegetarian diet was morally superior and would promote the development of higher intellectual powers because the vegetarian did not weigh down his digestion with meat, which was somehow more 'material' than vegetables. He wrote to Castrius Firmus on 'Abstinence from Animal Food', castigating him for abandoning the vegetarian way of life he had adopted. He had formerly held that a meat-free diet promoted mental endurance and was therefore good for philosophers (I.2) but now he had given it up. Porphyry first sets out the arguments of earlier thinkers *against* abstinence from meat. Then he refutes them, stressing that his arguments are not directed at all classes of people, not to those who work with their hands or are athletes or soldiers or sailors, or even orators engaged in public life. Vegetarianism is for deep and ambitious thinkers. For such, it is also beneficial to live simply and without luxury or comfort, avoiding alcohol and soft beds and eating little even of their limited vegetarian diet (1.27–8). Too much food and drink over-excites and distracts. Here were the some of the roots of the forms of Christian asceticism which involved minimal eating and drinking.

Porphyry develops such ideas at length. He applies them not only to the individual human condition but to society at large. In Book III he reminds Firmus that vegetarianism is not only beneficial to the philosopher but also to the state and civic society generally, because it promotes justice towards others. Those who are in a state of piety towards the gods and have their appetites under control will not ill-treat their fellow men.

The underlying presumption that the flesh and its appetites are somehow a distraction and a danger became fundamental to a Christian monasticism, which

adopted a similar ascetic, going beyond not eating meat and refraining from sexual intercourse and other forms of bodily enjoyments to extremes of physical self-denial.

*How these ideas entered Christianity and how it adjusted them*

These ideas formed part of the climate of debate of the first Christian century or two among the educated. Most people would take them more or less for granted. But there were also active leaders of thought who tried out contemporary philosophical principles in the context of their Christian beliefs. Justin Martyr was born at the beginning of the second century, of a family able to give him a good education, beginning with a training in rhetoric, then the basic need of educated men in the Roman Empire. Justin explored the philosophical options of his time as other young men did: the Stoics, the Peripatetics, the Pythagoreans and the Platonists. Then, walking on the seashore one day about 130 AD, he met an old man who told him the story of the life and death of Christ. He was converted.

He says in his *Apology* (2 *Apol.*12) that he came to realise that the Christians who stood so quietly and bravely in the face of persecution and death deserved the utmost respect. Here he showed the zeal of the convert. His *Apologia* for the faith is addressed to the Emperor as a defence of the Christians and an attempt to protect them against future persecutions. He explains that the Christians respect civic authority and are not revolutionaries. Jesus taught his followers to pay their taxes and render to Caesar what belonged to Caesar (1 *Apol.*17). As a convert Christian, Justin chose to live a life of great austerity himself, and to travel, debating philosophical questions with those who would listen. He even ran a school in Rome for philosophers interested in Christian ideas.

Christian asceticism adopted such beliefs to an extent a true Stoic would have found immoderate, as perhaps Marcus Aurelius did. A preoccupation with the dangers of sexual temptations became the most powerful of all. Augustine's writings on asceticism (*De continentia*, *De sancta virginitate*, *De bono viduitatis*) place an almost exclusive emphasis on sexual continence, for example. The arguments for the positive benefits of choosing chastity, the freedom from the torments of lust, became largely buried under the negative arguments about the terrible tyranny of the body.

'Hermetic' writings also had an influence on this Christian body-hatred. These still-mysterious writings seem to have come to prominence about the second



century, and had Egyptian connections. The *Corpus Hermeticum*<sup>17</sup> taught an ideal of purification by detachment from bodily enjoyments. A Hermetic image particularly striking to Christians and reappearing down the centuries was of the human being poised between being a god and being a beast. If he behaved in a beastly way he would deteriorate into a mere animal. If he aspired upwards to the spiritual he could become godlike (for pagans, even a god).

All this seems to have prompted a long tradition of Christian worry and effort in subordinating the 'flesh' and the evolution of an enduring Christian ascetic tradition. And nowhere was this more central to a way of life or more enduring than in monasticism and the eremitical life.

*The height of the divine and the hermit's longing*

Much philosophical effort was also put into the search for the Best and Highest in the late antique world. Many schools of philosophy expected to find that this Highest lay beyond human thought to grasp and language to express. Even the word Being seems to hint at some limitation unworthy of the universe's Best and Highest, suggested some Platonists, struggling to put the problem into words. This God must by definition be remote, not a person in any way humans can recognise, and any sort of anthropomorphism should be resisted. This set the Platonist ideal a long way from Christian belief in a God who cared for his creation so much that he himself became man to save it.

So important was this insistence that God could not be reduced to our human level that a good deal of philosophical effort went into devising a hierarchy of the divine, descending from this Remoteness. Below the Highest and Best would, some suggested, need to be a Logos (Word), a first and creative principle of thought and rationality. Below that might be postulated a 'Soul of the World', for even the Logos would not be able to 'touch' matter because matter was dirty and contaminating. This *Anima Mundi* or World Soul would be able to communicate directly with these higher Principles or First Things. Such a 'trinity' could be persuaded to fit with Aristotle's fourfold account of causation: 'final, efficient, formal and material', if a place could be found for a Material Cause by identifying it with the matter created things are made of.<sup>18</sup> Some Platonists regarded matter as primordial.

This 'hierarchical trinity' of Platonism was difficult to reconcile with Christian teaching on the Trinity as it developed. Christian theology insisted that the Father

(or the Highest and Best), the Son (Logos) and the Spirit are equal and coeternal. The Father 'always' had a Son and there was 'always' a Spirit of God. It had to find arguments to remove the idea of a hierarchy of the divine or any subsidiarity in formulating the Trinity. So without compromising these principles, in Christian theology, God the Father could be seen as the final (ultimate) Cause of all created things; the Logos or Word as the 'effective' cause, prompting specific acts of creation in the form of ideas; the Holy Spirit as giving 'form' to the rational intentions of the Logos. Matter, itself a created thing, could be seen as combined with 'forms' by divine action to produce particular actual created things.

For those Christians who longed to spend their lives in contemplating the divine, the other important difference from the thinking of contemporary philosophers was that they believed the Son of God had come to earth as a human being. They therefore had a mediator between God and man quite unlike anything envisaged in classical philosophy. They had someone to talk to personally in prayer. God must indeed be remote, almighty, omniscient, beyond our imaginings, but Jesus was not. So the objective of the soul constantly at prayer, a soul in a body never leaving the cell if it could help it, concentrating with all its force upon its communication with God, might have various objectives depending on the conception of the relative positions of God and man in the exchange. This 'contemplative' might also be relatively unsophisticated as a thinker, and certainly not necessarily up-to-the minute in hearing news of the decisions of Councils of the Church who were struggling to agree definitions and adopt terminology to ensure that educated Christians were not seduced into heresy by the attractiveness of the philosophers' versions.

For these ideas are of course far from simple. They gave rise to centuries of debate. How exactly was Jesus also God? Did he just wear his humanity like a cloak of flesh or was he 'really' a man? Did he have both a human will and the will of God? 'Christology' developed among Christian intellectuals during theological debates about the form the doctrine should take and the quashing of a variety of opinions which were eventually declared to be heresies.<sup>19</sup>

Belief in Christ also established itself among ordinary believers, but it is the hermits who – as far as the evidence survives – most notably sought an active and developing encounter with him. In Ephesians 3.17–19, Paul speaks of Christ dwelling in the hearts of Christians through faith so that they know the love of God from within themselves and can embrace the breadth and length and height and depth. Hermits and early monks seem to have embraced a relationship with Christ inspired by the idea that something of this sort was possible.