

In Theory: Is New Monasticism a threat or a boon?

October 9, 2011

Question:

A movement known as New Monasticism is drawing young evangelicals from established churches to city-based communities of faith. Inspired by traditional monks, New Monasticism is defined by its message of helping the poor, love of God and shunning materialism.

New Monasticism groups — such as Amos House, in Tennessee, or North Carolina-based the Rutba House — provide food and outreach facilities for the homeless in their communities, while others like the Blood: Water Mission dig wells in Africa and care for people infected with AIDS. But all are united in one ideal: that actively helping people is better than simply attending church. One member of a group called Castanea says, “I got annoyed with just going to church to worship and not doing anything.”

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, author of “New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church,” says people in the movement are learning that money isn't everything and they can be happy valuing friendship and service over possessions. He also argues that “normal churches aren't taking church seriously,” and that it's the sense of community provided by such groups that make them such an attraction to young people.

What are your thoughts on the New Monasticism movement? Is it a good thing? Or is it a threat to established churches?

Answer:

One of the questions that sometimes is asked about adherents of various religions is this one: If they were charged with truly acting according to the tenets of their faith traditions, would there be enough evidence to convict them? I am pleased to see the rise of a New/Old Monastic movement as a way to provide a sense of community and integrate belief with action in the larger world — helping the poor, showing love for the divine and shunning materialism. The participants in this movement are giving evidence that what they believe is as important in their lives as it is in their words.

Unfortunately, life in our country today has become more and more individualistic; communal relationships, according to many analysts, are on the decline. While some may see these monastic associations as competitors with our churches and other places of worship, I believe that they can instead be enhancements to what those congregations are providing. Perhaps we could use this model as an inspiration for the kind of community our churches, synagogues, ashrams and mosques, at their best, provide for their members.

Another positive thing that this movement seems to be providing is support and sustenance for those who are struggling. The members of this group are walking their talk. And they are not just providing charity, as important as that may be. They are living in the communities they serve and getting directly involved with those affected by the growing economic and social pressures in our country in ways that can make those people a part of their own recovery instead of helpless victims.

My hope is that this monastic movement will continue to grow and flourish for the benefit of participants and those they serve. And for those of us who are not called to give voice to our beliefs in that way, I am optimistic that their example can encourage us all to find the unique ways that we can

put our faith in the divine spirit into action to make our country a better place.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

I do not have any concern that the New Monastic movement will be a threat to established churches. That very phrase, in and of itself, concerns me. For churches are just buildings. Christianity is about the body of Christ —his people, not an edifice.

I also do not believe that this new movement will ever take over the church — replace it, so to speak. It is another way of worshiping and believing and it beautifully illustrates and demonstrates living out your faith, which so many of us do not do anymore. Yet scripture is filled with admonitions to do just that.

I think that sociologist Scott Coltrane summed it up pretty well. His thoughts are a great reminder: “New Monastics are rediscovering an overlooked part of the American Dream, which hasn't always been about buying a house in the suburbs. We tend to think of the American Dream as having the opportunity to accumulate wealth. But the American Dream has also been founded on the principles of spiritual fulfillment and volunteerism.”

With this reality being pointed out, let it serve to remind Christians, because most of us have bought into the former part of the American Dream. I believe it would do us all well to remember the latter.

Kimberlie Zakarian
Kimberlie Zakarian Therapy, Inc.
Montrose

I think it's fantastic. Very Acts 2 of them: “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.”

And it's not a threat to established churches at all. At least in the Episcopal Church, the young adults are all but completely absent from church, and have been for several generations; so it's not like the New Monastics are taking anyone away from us. Better to see young adults somewhere than nowhere, in terms of living their faith.

It seems like such a redemptive thing. Most young adults I know have to share housing these days anyway, given the cruddy part-time jobs they're able to find. To be intentional about it — communal, prayerful, and meaningful in service to others— that makes a sad necessity into a holy calling.

And I love that they're embracing simplicity as a lifestyle — something I work hard at but still mostly fail to do. It's too late for us old folks; save yourselves, young people.

What's weird to me is that most of the movement seems to be evangelicals, not young adults from denominations like mine, and the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, which all have long histories of monastic life. Here's these evangelicals, using The Book of Common Prayer for their communal devotions, and signing on for a Benedictine-like rule of life — both practices straight out of the Episcopal/Catholic tradition. Yet our own youth haven't really gotten on board with it. Funny.

So any young Episcopal monastics out there looking for a house: Call me. We've got one available. Tell me about your ministries and visions; let's talk.

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church, La Cañada Flintridge

There is a right and perfect place for everyone on the spiritual path. People who are comfortable attending a more traditional worship service find comfort in prayer, meditation, song and fellowship.

Those who feel a strong inner leading to be a channel of service to the world would feel more comfortable in a setting such as New Monasticism.

The Unity philosophy of practical Christianity believes that its purpose is to teach the steps of affirmative prayer and the process of entering into silence in meditation. We encourage the individual to ask for spiritual guidance or wisdom as he/she pray and meditate; then to put the guidance received into expression. It is always good to ask in prayer and meditation: "Show me how I may be of service today."

Through listening to the inner voice of wisdom and love, each individual will find their right and perfect place where they need to be at this time, connecting with their higher power and finding outer ways of being of service to the world.

The Rev. Jeri Linn
Unity Church of the Valley
La Crescenta

Maybe the New Monasticism movement is a good thing because it's a threat to the churches. I don't want to talk myself out of a church job, but perhaps the spirit of God is moving among young people who are frustrated by churches that don't do anything, or seem to be doing nothing.

I have always liked the answer that Jesus gave when he was asked which commandment was the greatest. Essentially, he said there were two greatest commandments: In Matthew 22:37 - 40, Jesus says to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind — and then he says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The idea, I think, is that you cannot have one without the other. If you say you love God and go to worship services often, good — but is that all you do? How are you serving your neighbor? Are you giving to a food bank? Are you helping out at a soup kitchen? Are you ministering to a need that is outside your church?

If not, get busy! Find a need and fill it. If all you do is go to church and look after your own spiritual needs — and spiritual needs are important — you're missing out on the people part of the equation.

The Hebrew prophets were especially hard on such hypocrisy. Jeremiah has a great quote about the temple of the Lord in Jeremiah 7:4: "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" The point he's making is in verses five and six: the people must "truly act justly one with another ... do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow...." Get it? If you truly love God, you'll help out where there's need.

Way to go, New Monasticism! You are showing the organization that calls itself the Body of Christ just what it means to be that body: feed the hungry, heal the sick, clothe the naked, raise the dead.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

Good News! “Church” does not have to take one particular form – it can take many forms, since Jesus said, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am.” We can worship and serve according to our callings and our life situations, free to bless each other’s best efforts at faithful living. It is neither necessary nor desirable to judge one another or feel threatened by new or once-and-future forms of church.

More good news: Life may bring us opportunities to be involved in different kinds of church. When I have lived in a Christian community – either in the same space or in the same neighborhood — I have experienced an accelerated discipleship. When you’re around everyone all the time, it gets hard to hide your brokenness. As a way of loving you, your brothers and sisters will name it. You learn to listen, to reconcile, to fix what is broken, and to wash your dishes, for heaven’s sake. You learn the courage that is in numbers as together you take on ministry that you might not try alone. This lifestyle is great but intense — not everyone can do it for a lifetime.

A faith life that is anchored by a more traditional church experience is also active, but in a different way. Worship becomes the centering place for people of God who work and serve in the world. We have teachers, scientists, doctors, aerospace engineers, Weight Watchers coaches, musicians, financial planners and many others who come to worship to be anchored, shaped and inspired for the work ahead of them. So in addition to serving through the ministries of our church, they bring the light of Christ to their workplaces. They make a difference.

Wilson-Hartgrove’s book is about learning to love stability. That’s a good message, especially if you have been exercising your freedom to move as a way to skate the surface of life and love and service and discipleship. An authentic church is not one that takes any particular form, but one that consistently invites people to root more deeply, be nourished by Christian wisdom and community, and grow stronger.

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

This movement seems to be fueled by the desire of Christians to live out their faith in practical ways combined with their perception that many traditional local churches have lost touch with the needs of others around them. This could negatively impact attendance at established churches, and thus painfully affect their capabilities and budgets to serve. If the people who really want to make a difference leave, then what’s left? But if the people involved love Jesus Christ and are truly being led by his spirit, we should see this as Christ extending “His body which is the church” (Colossians 1:24) and not as a loss.

Followers of Jesus Christ who participate in monastic movements should be careful not to see their way of serving as a replacement for (or improvement upon) the two institutions God has permanently established and promised to uphold: the local church and the family unit of husband and wife raising children.

Monks are not super saints and housewives are not second-class citizens in God's kingdom. Jesus Christ calls us to serve him where we are, even in seemingly unspectacular stations in life. "Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk" (1 Corinthians 7:17).

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

In my view, any group that encourages individuals to help the poor and assist the needy deserves applause. I don't see how such groups can represent a threat to established religious organizations, since these institutions should be advocating the very same ideals. After all, the principle of charity toward the less fortunate forms a cornerstone of religious belief and is prevalent in the teachings and texts of almost every major belief system.

The good news is that numerous studies have demonstrated that people who regularly attend worship services tend to be more charitable and willing to help others. If, however, there are houses of worship where young people are not hearing about their obligation to help others, then we do have a problem. It is the responsibility of religious leaders to champion the cause of the destitute among us, and to ensure that the message of philanthropy and volunteerism is heard loud and clear. We need to continually structure our prayer services in such a way that they galvanize participants to want to open their wallets and roll up their sleeves to aid those in need.

I also feel that while it is laudable and important to help the needy in Africa and other impoverished parts of the world, charity must start at home. We should focus on needy people in other countries only if those efforts do not come at the expense of aiding those who are struggling right here at home. The unfortunate reality of our current economic troubles is that there are now so many more families, children and senior citizens right here in the United States who simply cannot afford the basic necessities of life. I think these people ought to be first on our priority list, and only after we meet the pressing needs in our own communities should we focus on other areas around the globe.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

There are some good aspects to the reports about New Monasticism. It could be a positive result when some groups are paying more attention to doing good, rather than attending the old church services. I think people have been trying practices similar to the New Monasticism for a long time. As Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove says in an interview, "so it's not all that new, really...."

The Catholic Worker in Los Angeles is a group of mostly younger people who live together and serve at a soup kitchen on Skid Row downtown.

Groups like the Catholic Worker have been doing good works since at least the 1970s. There are powerful social drives and natural instincts that lead to young people wanting to gather together in groups with other young people. Everywhere in the world and throughout all time we have seen people form associations and social groupings.

When those groups have goals of helping others and making the world a better place, society

benefits.

Because most people go through a stage in their life that includes membership in a group, we should expect to see behaviors similar to New Monasticism. If people can associate with positive groups with socially responsible goals, they should be encouraged. For these reasons, the New Monasticism can serve our communities and be a force for good.

Steven Gibson
South Pasadena Atheist Meetup
Altadena

This month, Protestants celebrate the world's most renowned monk, Martin Luther, for his having officially sparked the Reformation on Halloween in 1517. Luther left monasticism and Catholicism and reported negatively on both. In his day, people joined monasteries for many reasons — to escape from worldliness, earn points with God, security, whatever. He found his own experience alienated him from God, rather than drawing him closer. And we've all read of tonsures, robes, celibacy, asceticism and societal burden — many monks were beggars.

But let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Monasteries have also been credited with saving civilization by safeguarding scripture and literature through the Dark Ages. Monks are responsible for preserving and perfecting beer, as it was the one libation allowed during fasts and could be sold to keep the communities self-sufficient. And I can see the allure today for people desiring communal interaction with people of like faith and to experience hands-on ministry. It could be good, and it probably has a place in the church — but not in place of the church.

As I read New Monasticism's 12 rules, I could find little to disagree with. One called for submission to the larger church, while the rest were simply Christian virtues to be lived out communally. It's not for everyone, and not everyone can just up and join a commune. But for those desiring to focus their faith while actively helping others, this could be good. It's wrong, however, to hold this lifestyle up as the paragon of Christ-likeness while demeaning the work of the local church. There are more mission agencies, soup kitchens and Christian activists in the wider church than there ever could be in a handful of monastic home-groups. If dissatisfied parishioners feel they do nothing but warm pews each week, why don't they get up and do something there? They don't have to go elsewhere.

New Monasticism seems one Christian option, but my reservation is that theological truth is the baby that'll get tossed for all the social good, and the Gospel will remain only with the monks.

The Rev. Bryan Griem
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