



## Bonus chapter

# One of the oldest and most influential types of parachurch: religious orders<sup>1</sup>

**H**ow do you bring radical change to yourself, your church, and the wider Christian movement? How do we change the wider world? Often change comes from the fringes of the current status quo, because to bring radical change and renewal you need to not only step outside of the present way of doing things enough to see what's wrong with it; you also need the space to explore a different way of thinking and being. John Smith writes:

Older institutions, advancing by legal-rational processes, take much longer to innovate. Their capacity to experimentally seize the brief moment of opportunity is severely limited by the sustaining processes of routine, tradition, and bureaucracy. Revitalization movements experiment at great risk under stress, providing a social laboratory of innovations, which should be visited by institutions that are losing creative initiative.<sup>2</sup>

A study of the history of parachurch movements finds various examples of Christians gathering into what may be called 'religious orders'. Such groups come together outside of ordinary church life and hierarchies for the purpose of growth in spiritual life, often with a view to bringing renewal to the wider Christian community while bringing salvation and transformation to the world. They often bear the marks of a 'revitalization movement': "a

1 Earlier versions of this material were delivered in sermon form in 2019 in Hobart at Crossroads Presbyterian Church, at an MTS Training Day in Ross, and at the Camp Clayton Easter Festival in Ulverstone.

2 KJ Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement as a Revitalization Movement*, Asbury Theological Seminary Series in World Christian Revitalization Movements in Intercultural Studies, no 5, Emeth Press, 2011, p 355. Change, James Davison Hunter writes, "is typically initiated by elites who are outside of the centermost positions of prestige ... Wherever innovation begins, it comes as a challenge to the dominant ideas and moral systems defined by the elites who possess the highest levels of symbolic capital ... The novelty they represent and offer calls into question the rightness and legitimacy of the established ideas and practices of the culture's leading gatekeepers" (JD Hunter, *To Change the World: The irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world*, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp 42-43).

deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture”.<sup>3</sup> These parachurch groups spring up out of a patchwork of necessity, ingenuity and rebellion. They have often been some of the most powerful groups in renewing established churches while also being among the most effective groups in pioneer evangelism.

But for all the glorious stories, the track record of these kinds of groups is as mixed as any other aspect of God’s not-yet-glorified people: wonderfully transformative ministries devolve into dangerous religious movements (‘cults’), wealthy institutions, or even evangelistic prostitutes<sup>4</sup> and paramilitary groups!<sup>5</sup> At other times, these groups simply evolve into more stable churches, denominational structures or secular institutions, becoming part of the status quo they were rebelling against.

Perhaps it seems a bit strange to spend time thinking about such groups. Is it only of theoretical and historical interest?

Not at all! Religious orders have been massively influential in the history of Christianity in all sorts of ways; it is good and right to seek to understand why and figure out what we can learn from them. When you start reading books and articles about world mission, church renewal or parachurch ministry, you’ll soon discover that almost every serious thinker in this area looks back to the history of religious orders. And when you start to understand the dynamics of these types of groups, you soon notice how even modern parachurch movements share a lot of similarities to the religious orders of centuries gone by.

Do we believe that everything is exactly as it should be in the Christian community and in the wider world? Shouldn’t we want to bring renewal and revitalization? We may want to tap into some of the same dynamics that these groups discovered. As we will discover in this chapter, some of their strengths and weaknesses can be found in other less intensive and separatist ministries. And so, by looking at more extreme examples we can then recognize similar patterns in our immediate experience. There is plenty of practical relevance for us in this chapter!

## What are religious orders?

*Religious orders are deliberate, intensive spiritual communities which are in some way separate from both the wider world and the wider Christian community.* Religious orders have taken a range of shapes throughout history:

3 AFC Wallace quoted in Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, p 9. Smith outlines Wallace’s process of revitalization from “steady state” of society, to “increased individual stress”, to “serious cultural distortion”, “period of revitalization” and finally “return to steady state” (pp 8-12; cf. pp 301-350).

4 The Children of God advocated women in their group to be “hookers for Jesus” engaging in “flirty fishing” to attract men into the group; see Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, pp 72-73.

5 See more on the Knights Templar and Hospitallers in footnotes below.

- Solitary: those who withdraw to be alone, often to the wilderness.<sup>6</sup>
- Communal: those who live together in some degree of community.<sup>7</sup>
- Itinerant: those who abandon fixed, communal life in monasteries for a simple and often itinerant life. These are known as ‘mendicant’ orders because they rely on the generosity of others to support themselves, rather than the self-sufficiency and trade of the monastic community.<sup>8</sup>
- Separate religious movement: some Christian communities have such an expectation of distinctness for every member that the entire community functions something like a monastery.<sup>9</sup>

Not only do all these forms still find expression today among Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians, but Protestants have also been drawn to their writings and practices, seeking to learn what they can.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this is the case because of: the increasingly secular, post-Christian culture in the Western world;<sup>11</sup> a more hectic, impersonal, materialistic and unsustainable pattern of modern urban life;<sup>12</sup> or a compromised, superficial and ineffective church experience that attracts some Christians who long to recapture something more real and more powerful.<sup>13</sup> I suspect many readers will have encountered individuals or groups who are pursuing some of these ideals and, as a result, have become increasingly interested in some aspect of the legacy of religious orders. What do these movements have to teach us?

## The motivations behind religious orders

There are a range of noble motivations for establishing and pursuing a more intense and separate way of life.

- 6 Solitary monks are also called ‘eremites’ (‘someone of the desert’—from the same root word as ‘hermit’) or ‘anchorites’ (‘someone who has withdrawn’). In fact, the word ‘monk’ also has its origins in the Greek word for ‘alone’, but it came to be applied to communal groups as well.
- 7 Two main types of communal monastic life are: 1) the skete and lavrite type, which can be seen a little more as being ‘alone together’, sharing certain services while still maintaining a certain degree of solitude; and 2) the ‘coenobitic’ type, which is intentionally communal and structured by design.
- 8 Members of the itinerant orders founded in the 12th century and beyond are called ‘friars’ (the Middle English word for ‘brother’). John Smith says itinerancy is a powerful element in many, but not all, revitalization movements; see Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, p 66.
- 9 Examples include the ‘Brethren of the Common Life’ (Thomas à Kempis), various ‘Plain People’ such as the Amish and Mennonites, and the communes of the Jesus Movement.
- 10 Along with providing a detailed history of monastic movements, Greg Peters is eager to encourage Protestant Christians in the practice of ‘ressourcement’, so that they might learn from the monastic practices of the past; see G Peters, *The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an ancient tradition for contemporary spirituality*, Baker Academic, 2015; and G Peters, *Reforming the Monastery: Protestant theologies of the religious life*, Cascade Books, 2013.
- 11 R Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A strategy for Christians in a post-Christian nation*, Sentinel, 2017.
- 12 M Schut (ed), *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian perspective*, Morehouse Publishing, 2008.
- 13 *Total Church: A radical reshaping around gospel and community* (T Chester and S Timmis, IVP, Nottingham, 2007) is in some ways a conservative evangelical expression of this. More radical is Sam Metcalf’s call for us to ‘re-monk’ the church in S Metcalf, *Beyond the Local Church: How apostolic movements can change the world*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2015.

## 1. A desire for a more focused spirituality

We Christians are not of this world. Our highest goal and our highest desire are not to be found in this world. There is something more real and precious. To restructure your life-style to focus more on the things of most importance is an excellent thing. How wonderful to devote more time to the glorious duty and privilege of prayer and meditation on the word of God! How much better than being consumed with career, fashion, romance, merely physical beauty or merely physical health and fitness! How much better than being driven by the pursuit of reputation, political power, hobbies and entertainment! Jesus exhorted his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matt 6:19-23)

The apostle Paul reminds us that “physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tim 4:8). Notice, too, how Paul praises the peculiar benefits of the single life:

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. (1 Cor 7:32-35)

An unmarried life lived with a massive focus on eternal and spiritual things is indeed a life well lived!

Interest in the monastic life increased when the Roman Empire became Christianized and Christians began to enjoy the luxuries and privileges of imperial favour. It was a devout reaction to a kind of settled, nominal, compromised Christianity,<sup>14</sup> and also an “extending [of] the category of sainthood” by providing another way to access the honour of martyrdom.<sup>15</sup> To some extent, earnest Christians were also eager to commend Christianity to the pagan world, which had its own strict and devout ascetics like Plotinus and

14 IJ Davidson, *A Public Faith: From Constantine to the Medieval World, AD 312-600*, Monarch History of the Church (T Dowley ed), vol 2, Monarch Books, 2005, pp 133-134. See also D MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The first three thousand years*, Allen Lane, 2009, pp 200-201.

15 MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, p 206.

Pythagoras.<sup>16</sup> Two of the most famous and extreme examples of early hermits are Anthony the Great and Simeon Stylites. Anthony the Great abandoned a wealthy life to withdraw—first to the desert west of Alexandria, then to an abandoned Roman fort between the Nile and the Red Sea, and then even further away to what he called his ‘inner mountain’. He lived in various degrees of solitude for almost the entirety of his very long life.<sup>17</sup> Simeon Stylites entered a monastery as a teenager, but was asked to leave because his asceticism was too extreme. He subsequently moved to live on a small area on a mountainside and then for thirty years on various pillars in the Syrian Desert: the first around nine feet tall and the last allegedly fifty feet tall, with platforms no greater than one square metre, leaving him exposed to the elements and dependent on others for daily necessities.<sup>18</sup>

The behaviour of these hermits was alarmingly extreme, while other patterns of monastic life were much more measured by contrast.<sup>19</sup> Yet without praising the alarming extremes, we can still agree with the desire to be fully devoted to God. We are not of this world. This is not our home. We are not defined by the families, cultures, social structures and economic priorities of this world. There is something good about being a godly dropout. Michael Jensen wrote:

I’ve always regarded the story of St Simeon as a rather pathetically unnecessary case of fanaticism. The gospel of Jesus Christ—the gospel of free grace—does not demand from us this kind of self-denial ...

But if you know the grace of God in Jesus Christ, then what could be a higher calling or a more reasonable thing to do than to give yourself wholeheartedly to prayer? The call to discipleship is a call to detach ourselves from worldly things—not because they are bad necessarily, but because they absorb our attention in a disorderly way. They take our focus from God, and we buy into a narrative of our lives that is dictated by our surrounding culture: I must be married, I must have overseas travel, I must eat out at restaurants all the time, I must have a fulfilling career, I must be a significant person.<sup>20</sup>

This emphasis on spiritual things also has interesting side effects, including the ability to undermine the structures and powers of this world. The reality of Galatians 3:28 is often

16 An ‘ascetic’ is someone who practices some kind of self-denial, especially for religious purposes; see Davidson, *A Public Faith*, p 134. No doubt the influence of pagan ideas of a good spiritual world and a corrupt physical world also distorted Christian values. MacCulloch has observed that early Christian asceticism grew up in areas where these kinds of ideas were very influential; see MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, p 202.

17 Athanasius, ‘Life of Antony (vita Antoni)’ (H Eilershaw trans), *Select Works of Athanasius* (A Robertson ed), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (P Schaff and H Wace eds), series II, vol 4, Hendrickson, 1995, accessed 18 January 2023 (ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.html).

18 Davidson, *A Public Faith*, pp 136-137.

19 It is interesting to contemplate what mental illness may have also contributed to this behaviour. See, for example, I Leroi and JBA Meagher, ‘Saint Simeon the Stylite: A psychiatric examination of the life of a fifth century monk’, *Jefferson Journal of Psychiatry*, 1999, 14(2):24-31, accessed 19 January 2023 (doi.org/10.29046/JJP.014.2.003). Benedict’s Rule was deliberately moderate: “a little rule for beginners” (Davidson, *A Public Faith*, p 323). Calvin likewise praises the practice of early Augustinian monasteries for their realism and moderation; see J Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (H Beveridge trans), IV.13.19, Eerdmans, 1989, accessed 19 January 2023 (ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes).

20 M Jensen, ‘Prioritising Jesus requires crazy commitment: Lessons for the “decadent and half-hearted” from one fanatic’, *Eternity News*, 11 February 2019, accessed 30 November 2022 (eternitynews.com.au/opinion/prioritising-jesus-requires-crazy-commitment).

manifested in vivid ways by those involved in religious orders: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. In his history of the early church, Ivor Davidson considers how standard gender roles were subverted by religious life:

Ascetic Christianity yielded a certain reconfiguring of gender stereotypes. In Christian moralizing, idealized men were now depicted in what, by classical standards, were subtly *feminized* terms, as those who cherished the sanctity of their virginity and kept themselves undefiled for God. Idealized women appeared, in their celebrated emancipation from worldly concerns, somewhat akin to men, for conventionally it was for the most part only men who could have exercised such social and intellectual independence.<sup>21</sup>

All Christians ought to “set [our] hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God ... [and set our] minds on things above, not on earthly things ... [for we] died, and [our] life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:1-3). This will mean that our lives, lived in the light of heaven above and eternity before us, will look different than a life lived for this world alone, won’t it?

## **2. A concerted effort to live with more consistent purity**

Beyond Godward spirituality, religious orders have also sought out ways to help their members live lives more fully ordered around God’s priorities in other areas of life. With respect to money, these movements placed a high value on rejecting luxury, debauchery and self-interest. They sought to pursue a simple, frugal way of life. As has already been mentioned above, part of the reason monastic movements grew in popularity was unease with the growth in Christian wealth and comfort when the Roman Empire was Christianized. Likewise, part of the reason for the foundation and growth of the Franciscan order and other ‘mendicant orders’ was to react against the wealth of both traditional monasteries and late medieval society more generally. Francis of Assisi even spoke of being married to Lady Poverty. These movements arose as a principled reaction against luxury. Many monks and friars were from what might be loosely described as middle-class and upper-class backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> As Henrietta Leyser said in the BBC’s *In Our Time* podcast:

All these things are only possible because of the increased prosperity of the time. You can’t possibly start talking about poverty unless actually the world is very rich. I

21 IJ Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine, AD 30-312*, Monarch History of the Church (T Dowley ed), vol 1, Monarch Books, 2005, p 316, emphasis original. In *A Public Faith*, Davidson writes: “As it had always done, asceticism offered women significant opportunities to express their piety with a degree of independence from male authority. Since ordination was not necessary qualification for pursuit of a higher spiritual life, women were able to attain to roles in this area that were not open to them in the regular ministries of the churches ... In other contexts, however, such as those of the desert mothers or the leaders of female monastic communities, women lived lives of relative emancipation, and their roles as spiritual exemplars were of genuine significance for Christians generally, not least for other women living within more conventional social surroundings” (p 285).

22 M Bragg (host), ‘Greyfriars and blackfriars’ [podcast], *In Our Time*, BBC, 10 November 2005, accessed 30 November 2022 ([bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003k9dz](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003k9dz)).



mean it's just not appropriate; it's not attractive. I mean poverty before say the 12th century is something that people fear ... [and] they don't worry about riches: this is something which everybody kind of wants. But when you get to a certain point of prosperity, then you begin to think, "Help! This is dragging me down and taking me towards hell rather than being a reflection of heaven."<sup>23</sup>

In addition to purity regarding money, some religious orders also sought purity from what they considered to be compromising forces of worldly politics. Often separate religious communities form for these reasons, such as Anabaptist pacifist movements or the Puritans who fled to the American colonies to pursue freedom of worship.<sup>24</sup> The extremism of ascetics could itself be seen as a kind of political act, as Diarmaid MacCulloch writes:

The closer the Church came to society, the more obvious were the tensions with some of its founder's messages about the rejection of convention and the abandonment of worldly wealth ... It is not surprising that many have sought a radical alternative, a mode of life which is in itself a criticism of ordinary society.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, there is an accepted place in the Eastern Orthodox tradition for the 'Holy Fool', who deliberately flouts social convention in startling and outrageous ways.<sup>26</sup>

Religious orders and separate religious communities also set about pursuing new ways of living together.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes this intentional communal life was an outworking of spiritual, economic and political convictions—for example, during the 17th-century English Civil War there arose several Christian (or quasi-Christian) egalitarian political movements, such as the populist 'Levellers' and the more neo-communist 'Diggers'.<sup>28</sup> Other examples include the various communities of 'Plain People' (such as the Amish, Mennonites and some Quakers),<sup>29</sup> the Brothers of the Common Life,<sup>30</sup> and the various communitarian experiments of the Jesus Movement.<sup>31</sup>

As with the spiritual aspirations of religious orders, there is something very relevant to

23 Bragg, 'Greyfriars and blackfriars' (from 3:43).

24 On Anabaptism, see MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, pp 919-920. On Puritanism, see MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, pp 718-719.

25 MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, p 200. He goes on to describe how monastic orders also criticize the compromised church: "The spiritual writer A. M. Allchin called one episode in monastic history 'the silent rebellion', and this happy phrase can be more widely applied. All Christian monasticism is an implied criticism of the church ..." (p 201).

26 MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, p 207. Reading about the 'Holy Fool' made me think of the outrageous (but, by comparison, much tamer) manners of certain larger-than-life 'Holy Fool' evangelists who are embraced by otherwise conservative evangelical Christians.

27 So, for example, Basil the Great's preference for communal life: "the solitary life ... is plainly in conflict with the law of love ..." (cited in MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, p 209). See also Augustine's 'Letter 211', which sees the monastic vow as facilitating the communal life of the apostolic church: Augustine, 'Letter CCXI—to the nuns', sec 5, *The Letters of St. Augustine* (JG Cunningham trans), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (P Schaff ed), series I, vol 1, Hendrickson, 1995, accessed 19 January 2023 (ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf101.html).

28 RW Heinze, *Reform and Conflict: From the medieval world to the wars of religion, AD 1350-1648*, Monarch History of the Church (T Dowley ed), vol 4, Monarch Books, 2006, p 383.

29 Heinze, *Reform and Conflict*, pp 152-157, 165-167. See also MS Hurst, 'Anabaptism: The beginning of a new monasticism' [conference presentation], Christian Mission in the Public Square, Canberra, 2-5 October 2008, accessed 17 February 2023 (csu.edu.au/\_\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0005/789224/Hurst.pdf).

30 Heinze, *Reform and Conflict*, p 59.

31 Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*.

us about their wider moral aspirations. It is right to think carefully and holistically about how we organize our lives, our families, our communities and our churches. Must we live the way our culture already lives? Must we simply accept as normal what everyone considers to be normal? Isn't there something great about asking what matters most to God and restructuring how we live in the light of that? Speaking of those evangelicals who are advocating the 'Benedict Option' of a more deliberate, communal life, Don Carson has said:

In a sense every local church ... is pursuing the Benedict Option, although they wouldn't name it that particularly ...

We shouldn't be thinking exactly the same thing as the world around us about iPhones or Oscars or economics or almost anything: social, sexual mores; what you do with your money; what advancement looks like; what success looks like; what human flourishing looks like; and what kind of jokes you listen to. There is a sense in which instead of having a Judeo-Christian heritage all around us in which we're playing a slightly more righteous part and preaching the gospel, we're increasingly dealing with ... an essentially alien society ... It's important for not just the individual Christian, but for the Christian church, the Christian community, to live differently.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. A structure to facilitate more sacrificial mission

Early ascetics had a missionary motivation, commending Christianity to the pagan world.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, as strange as it might seem, their devotion gave them an attractational pull where people would seek them out. Far from leading to an entirely anti-social life, their withdrawal unintentionally built a platform for them to minister to others. Further still, the spiritual seriousness and devoted study of many monks made them important figures in church leadership, theological debates and missionary activity. Quite early on, bishops—such as Basil the Great and Martin of Tours—began to be recruited from monasteries.<sup>34</sup> Their austere, unmarried, communal life made them robust and flexible servants of the church and her mission. In his *History of Christian Mission*, Stephen Neill says of reaching the so-called 'barbarian nations' of the medieval period, "That it was accomplished at all was due in the main to three continuing factors ... royal favour, martyrdom, and monasticism".<sup>35</sup>

One striking example of this is seen in Celtic Christianity. Sam Metcalf writes:

Around AD 432, St Patrick and a band of recruits arrived in Ireland. Supported by Pope Celestine I and the leadership of the British church, Patrick and his apostolic cohort launched what would become one of the premier examples of apostolic ministry in church history. Their work to evangelize Ireland and most of the rest of

32 T Reinke, *Tony Reinke interviews DA Carson: The Benedict Option and American Politics* (interview audio and transcript), Ask Pastor John special episode, *Desiring God*, 9 March 2017, accessed 17 February 2023 ([desiringgod.org/interviews/the-benedict-option-and-american-politics](https://desiringgod.org/interviews/the-benedict-option-and-american-politics)), from 7:29; Carson refers to Dreher, *The Benedict Option*.

33 See 'A desire for a more focused spirituality' earlier in this chapter.

34 MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, pp 209, 312.

35 S Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Pelican History of the Church (O Chadwick gen ed), vol 6, Penguin Books, 1966, p 66, emphasis mine.



Europe spawned a movement that maintained apostolic fervency for many centuries through the multiplication of hundreds of monastic communities (sodalities) and, orbiting around them, thousands of local churches (modalities).<sup>36</sup>

The contribution of monasteries went beyond merely preaching the Christian gospel: they became places of academic pursuit and education;<sup>37</sup> biblical, theological and literary preservation;<sup>38</sup> and medical care and hospitality.<sup>39</sup> This is to say nothing of mechanization,<sup>40</sup> cheese making,<sup>41</sup> brewing,<sup>42</sup> sheep husbandry,<sup>43</sup> financial management,<sup>44</sup> and, at their worst, paramilitary activity.<sup>45</sup>

As European society became increasingly urbanized in the late Middle Ages, the mendicant orders—such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites and Augustinians—became more important. Instead of being based in rural monasteries and sustained in part by their own industriousness, the friars were itinerants, relying on the generosity of others to do their work. They travelled and preached, defending the faith with rigorous intellectual argument and calling on people to live out a more authentic Christian faith and life.<sup>46</sup>

A fascinating example of missionary activity pioneered by a separate religious community is found on the estate of Count Zinzendorf, a peer of Whitefield, Wesley and the other leaders of the 18th-century Great Awakening:

Zinzendorf (1700-1760) was a winsome, eccentric and headstrong Saxon nobleman motivated by an intensely Christ-centred faith. Shortly after Zinzendorf, as a young man, acquired a substantial estate in southeast Saxony, he opened its grounds to refugees driven out of Bohemia and Moravia (modern-day Czech Republic) by pressure from Catholic authorities ... At Zinzendorf's estate, 'Herrnhut' (the Lord's Protection), he oversaw a religious movement that combined pietistic Lutheranism of the sort he had learned from Francke at Halle with a revivalistic faith that the Moravians carried with them from awakenings in their native lands.<sup>47</sup>

36 Metcalf, *Beyond the Local Church*, p 58. See also Davidson, *A Public Faith*, pp 376-377, 379, 382. Interestingly, part of their motivation was not explicitly evangelistic, but ascetic: leaving their homeland was a kind of self-denial, which brought with it the by-product of mission; see Davidson, *A Public Faith*, p 373.

37 R Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity led to freedom, capitalism, and Western success*, Random House, 2005, pp 33-68.

38 DB Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian revolution and its fashionable enemies*, Yale University Press, 2009, pp 34-55.

39 C Swift, *Hospital Chaplaincy in the Twenty-first Century: The crisis of spiritual care on the NHS*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology (LJ Francis, J Astley and M Percy eds), 2nd edn, Ashgate, 2014, pp 9-13.

40 A Lucas, *Wind, Water, Work: Ancient and medieval milling technology*, Technology and Change in History, vol 8, Brill, 2006.

41 C Donnelly, 'Monastic cheesemaking', in C Donnelly (ed), *The Oxford Companion to Cheese*, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp 486-487.

42 E Poelmans and JFM Swinnen, 'From monasteries to multinationals (and back): A historical review of the beer economy', *Journal of Wine Economics*, 2011, 6(2):196-216.

43 MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, pp 390-391.

44 One of the roles of the Knights Templar at the time of the Crusades. See TF Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades*, Critical Issues in History, updated student edn, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, p 47.

45 Such as the Knights Templar and Knights of the Hospital of St John ('the Hospitallers'). Tragically, the Hospitallers began as a religious order providing care for sick pilgrims who had travelled to Jerusalem, but slowly grew and expanded to develop a military arm as well; see Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades*, pp 46-48.

46 Bragg, 'Greyfriars and blackfriars'. See also MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, pp 401-405. It is interesting to note that the much earlier Rule of Benedict disapproves of itinerant monks; see MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, pp 317-318.

47 MA Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*, A History of Evangelicalism, vol 1, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2011, p 59.

Colin Grant writes:

Sixty years before Carey set out for India and 150 years before Hudson Taylor first landed in China, two men, Leonard Dober, a potter, and David Nitschmann, a carpenter, landed on the West Indian island of St. Thomas to make known the gospel of Jesus Christ. They had set out ... as the first missionaries of the Moravian Brethren, who in the next 20 years entered Greenland (1733), North America's Indian territories (1734), Surinam (1735), South Africa (1736), and the Samoyedic peoples of the Arctic (1737), Algiers and Ceylon, or Sri Lanka (1740), China (1742), Persia (1747), Abyssinia and Labrador (1752).

This was but a beginning. In the first 150 years of its endeavour, the Moravian community was to send no less than 2,158 of its members overseas!<sup>48</sup>

The Salvation Army is another example of a quasi-religious order established for the purpose of effective evangelistic work.<sup>49</sup>

In a sense, any team of global missionaries must adopt a pattern of life structured uniquely around their preaching and teaching ministry. Even local church pastors and parachurch staff have a peculiar lifestyle because of their work.<sup>50</sup> Identifying the practical power of intentional community ought to provoke us to consider how we can be more deliberate about the structures and frameworks we can put in place to support and enable more fruitful and sacrificial mission. How can we be more proactive in showing hospitality to those training or travelling for ministry? How can we explore patterns of share-housing and communal living to best provide frameworks of fellowship and support, especially for single Christians giving themselves to gospel ministry? How can we be more deliberate in planting churches and sending missionaries in some kind of organized community?

Christian communes can also function evangelistically in an attractional manner, as pilgrims come to the monastery or commune in search of enlightenment. The L'Abri ministry of Frances Schaeffer is a famous and influential example of this from the 20th century.<sup>51</sup>

There are, then, many good aspirations and impressive outcomes that have come from various kinds of religious orders throughout history. But there are great dangers that we must be alert to as well. If we are to learn from the strengths of religious orders and entertain how we might adopt some of their patterns of life, we need to assess them with discernment and listen to their historical critics.

48 CA Grant, 'Europe's Moravians: A pioneer missionary church', in RD Winter and SC Hawthorne (eds), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A reader*, rev edn, William Carey Library, 1992, sec B, p 73, emphasis original.

49 DW Taylor, *Like a Mighty Army? The Salvation Army, the church, and the churches*, Pickwick Publications, 2014, pp 92-98.

50 This is Ralph Winter's argument in 'The two structures of God's redemptive mission', *Missiology: An international review*, 1974, 2(1):121-139. He claims that until Protestant Christianity rediscovered the power of what he calls 'sodalities', it was not able to be effective in mission. I don't think this is because Protestants needed to re-establish the structures of early or medieval religious orders, but rather that they needed to harness the best of the dynamics that such institutions also harnessed, but within a Protestant theological framework.

51 Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, pp 164, 205.

# The dangers of religious orders

## 1. Creating two tiers to the Christian life

The Bible recognizes a place for special resolve to live a different life beyond the ordinary pattern of God's people. In the Old Testament we read about the Nazirite making a vow of devotion marked by not drinking alcohol (or anything related to grapes), not going near any dead body, and not cutting their hair. According to Numbers 6, a Nazirite vow ordinarily only lasted for a certain time, although Samson was charged to be a Nazirite from birth (Judg 13:1-5). While the word is never used, it seems that John the Baptist was also to be a Nazirite from birth (Luke 1:11-17). His rough clothing, basic diet and wilderness ministry provided something of a template for the early Christian monks. It seems that the apostle Paul made a Nazirite-like vow in Acts 18:18 and assisted with the ending of the vow of still others in Acts 21:20-26. First Timothy 5:9-12 is intriguing in its mention of the 'list of widows'—this list has a qualifying moral standard and some sort of pledge associated with it, which might suggest it was referring to a group of women specially set apart for fruitful ministry of some kind in the church. Paul could have in mind a particular way that godly older widows might commit themselves to the ministry of the church.<sup>52</sup>

So the Bible allows for various special, additional pledges of devotion to Christ and his people. But while some Christians might choose to express a greater degree of devotion in some way or another, it is important to stress that God's word does not grant this a higher quality of spiritual value, as if there were a significantly different order of Christian life. In addressing marriage, Jesus speaks of "those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven", but adds that "[n]ot everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given ... The one who can accept this should accept it" (Matt 19:11-12; cf. 1 Cor 7:6-9, 9:1-12).

This recognition of diversity among God's people must constantly be reinforced, especially so in the context of remarkable patterns of life. It is so easy for striking differences like celibacy, communal living, or frugality—not to mention strict patterns of clothing, diet or spiritual devotion—to be considered marks of a higher spiritual life. In the history of Christianity, monastic vows began to be spoken of as a kind of 'second baptism' and the monastic life as 'perfection'.<sup>53</sup> The monastic choice of celibacy was viewed so highly that it became the necessary standard for all priests and bishops, in contradiction to biblical teaching.<sup>54</sup> Whatever patterns of spiritual devotion, radical lifestyle or missionary calling someone may adopt, we must always insist that the highest calling, the greatest cause, the most spiri-

52 In which case, it is possible that the 'list of widows' is a subset of the wider ways the church might care for "those widows who are really in need" (1 Tim 5:3).

53 See P Melancthon, *The Augsburg Confession* (GF Bente trans), 1530, article XXVII, accessed 18 February 2023 ([en.wikisource.org/wiki/Augsburg\\_Confession](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Augsburg_Confession)). See also movements within evangelicalism that claim to bring a higher state of spiritual life or even a kind of sinless perfectionism or 'entire sanctification'. Stuart Piggin describes the history of this kind of theology in Australia in Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World: Evangelical Christianity in Australia*, Rainbow Book Agencies, 2012, pp 105-125; "Eventually a commune of perfectionists was established in Sydney. Marriages were there arranged and broken, and members lost their assets, their children, and their sanity" (p 125).

54 Davidson, *A Public Faith*, pp 277-79.

tual state, is simply to be a Christian. All the details are merely diverse expressions of this one high calling.

In this regard, there is something risky in those organizations that involve vows, special clothing, rituals, titles and elements of secrecy. These things need to be adopted, if at all, with great caution, and must be clearly spoken about in a way that avoids conveying any sense of a higher plane of Christian existence—both in theory and in practice. There is no qualitative spiritual or moral difference between the ordinary Christian and the full-time pastor, world missionary, hermit, monk, friar or person living in intentional community.

A particular expression of this problem is the tendency for religious orders to separate from the local church and its ordinary life. In some cases, this separation was eventually formalized so that monasteries were given ecclesiastical endorsement to function as parallel church communities.<sup>55</sup> John Calvin rightly criticizes this practice in the Roman Catholic Church:

The thing itself declares that all who retire into monasteries withdraw from the Church. For how? Do they not separate themselves from the legitimate society of the faithful, by acquiring for themselves a special ministry and private administration of the sacraments? What is meant by destroying the communion of the Church if this is not? ... But what have those men done in erecting a private altar for themselves but broken the bond of unity? For they have excommunicated themselves from the whole body of the Church, and condemned the ordinary ministry by which the Lord has been pleased that peace and charity should be preserved among his followers. Wherefore I hold that as many monasteries as there are in the present day, so many conventicles are there of schismatics, who have disturbed ecclesiastical order, and been cut off from the legitimate society of the faithful.<sup>56</sup>

While it is invaluable to embrace the role of parachurch ministry alongside the structures of the local church and denomination, there is no need to establish these ministries as parallel church communities. In fact, there is every reason to maintain the ordinary, mixed local congregation as a standard expectation of all Christians. Every church can see itself as a kind of separate religious community, however much it might also continue to participate in everyday society. Every Christian is fully given over to Christ's service in whatever way he or she might live that out. Every Christian is set apart for the Lord Jesus, whether married or single, paid by the church or employed in secular work or doing unpaid work, preacher or crèche roster overseer. There is no second, special class of Christian.

## **2. Strict adoption of extra-biblical rules**

Whether the ascetic rules of living on top of pillars, the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, stability and obedience, or the separate religious community's rhythms of life and economic

55 An early step in the process took place under the episcopacy of Basil the Great, himself a monk; see Davidson, *A Public Faith*, p 146.

56 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.9.14.

structure, religious orders impose rules on their members beyond the commands of Scripture. What do we make of this?

We are free in Christ to live our lives and serve him as we choose. This freedom includes committing to regular patterns of life. We are perfectly free to commit to waking up at 5am each day, to adopt an exercise regime, to plan to read one hundred books in a year, to commit to having a sit-down family dinner every Wednesday night, to stop using Facebook, to follow the Murray M'Cheyne Bible-reading plan, to eat a vegetarian diet, to fast regularly, to wear extremely simple clothing, or to join an anarcho-Christian eco-village commune. Martin Luther expressed a balanced stance towards monastic vows when he wrote:

And so, if you vow to take up the religious life, and if you live with men of like mind, with a clear conscience that in monasticism you seek nothing to your advantage in your relationship with God, but because either your situation has brought you to embrace this kind of life, or it appeared to be the best way of life for you, without your thinking thereby that you are better than he who takes a wife or takes up farming, then in that case you are neither wrong to take vows nor wrong to live in this way, insofar as the propriety of the vow is concerned.<sup>57</sup>

While it is right to recognize Christian freedom in these matters, it must be stressed that the rules of religious orders are optional, often unnecessary, and sometimes silly or possibly even dangerous. The Bible doesn't require many of these great feats of self-discipline, and it certainly doesn't commend them as a path to purification from sin or union with God.<sup>58</sup> In some cases, the extraordinary feats of ascetics are more like religious extreme sports than true Christian devotion. Doing extreme things that God doesn't require of us is not fundamentally noble or spiritual or admirable.

Such a critique dates back to the very first centuries of Christianity,<sup>59</sup> right through to the Reformation. As Calvin wrote:

One vowed that he would be abstemious, as if abstinence from wine were in itself an acceptable service to God. Another bound himself to fast, another to abstain from flesh on certain days, which he had vainly imagined to be more holy than other days. Things much more boyish were vowed though not by boys. For it was accounted great wisdom to undertake votive pilgrimages to holy places, and sometimes to perform the journey on foot, or with the body half naked, that the greater merit might be acquired by the greater fatigue. These and similar things, for which the world has long bustled with incredible zeal, if tried by the rules which we formerly laid down, will be discovered to be not only empty and ... [worthless], but full of

57 M Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* (J Atkinson trans), *Luther's Works* (J Pelikan and HT Lehmann gen eds), vol 44, *The Christian in Society I* (J Atkinson ed), Fortress Press, 1966, p 304, accessed 18 February 2023 (archive.org/details/luthersworksv44p1unse).

58 The Salvation Army also operated as a religious order, with its Soldier's Covenant (with extra-biblical expectations such as teetotalism) serving as 'church membership plus'. Such standards have become even more problematic now that the Army calls itself a church. See Taylor, *Like a Mighty Army?*, pp 144-145, 207-208, 213-214.

59 Davidson, *A Public Faith*, pp 138, 146.

manifest impiety. Be the judgement of the flesh what it may, there is nothing which God more abhors than fictitious worship.<sup>60</sup>

Extra-biblical rules are fundamentally ineffective in achieving the goal of true spirituality and holiness. They should be no source of boasting or evidence of spiritual depth. You are free to do them; but do not rely on them, delight in them or recommend them. Beware of how they can be a strange, religious kind of worldliness: pride in the sensual, masochistic experience of self-denial. The apostle Paul warns:

Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Col 2:20-23; cf. 1 Tim 4:1-5)

What’s more, because of their difficulty and impressiveness, extra-biblical rules might distract us from the things God *does* explicitly command and uphold. Luther was again insightful:

I therefore counsel those in high places in the churches, first of all, to abolish all those vows and religious orders, or at least not to approve and extol them ... this manner of life has no witness or warrant in the Scriptures ... it greatly tends to hypocrisy, by reason of its outward show and unusual character, which engender conceit and a contempt of the common Christian life ...

The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic labourer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks ...<sup>61</sup>

Withdrawal from everyday life is a particular example of where the ideals of a religious order go against the normal expectation of Christian service to the world. Calvin warns: “It is fine to philosophize in seclusion ... but it ill accords with Christian meekness for any one, as if in hatred of the human race, to fly to the wilderness and to solitude, and at the same time desert the duties which the Lord has especially commanded.”<sup>62</sup> Granted, the hermits were often not entirely alone, since people sought them out; when required, some were willing to return to society—such as Anthony the Great, who contended with the Arian heretics.<sup>63</sup> And, yes, monasteries have often contributed to the wider society through teaching,

60 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.13.7. See also Erasmus’ 16th-century bestseller *In Praise of Folly*, Reeves & Turner, 1876, accessed 18 February 2022 ([oll.libertyfund.org/titles/erasmus-in-praise-of-folly](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/erasmus-in-praise-of-folly)).

61 M Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520* (ATW Steinhäuser trans, FC Ahrens and AR Wentz rev eds), *Luther’s Works*, vol 36, *Word and Sacrament II* (AR Wentz ed), Fortress Press, 1959, pp 77-78, accessed 30 November 2022 ([archive.org/details/luthersworks0036unse](http://archive.org/details/luthersworks0036unse)).

62 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.13.16.

63 Athanasius, ‘Life of Antony’.



trade and service. Yet there is something concerning in the way the monastic life, and especially the hermetic life, withdraws from regular contact with fellow Christians and with the world.<sup>64</sup>

### 3. Realism about what religious orders can ultimately achieve

We need realism about sin. Monasteries have at times become greedy, corrupt, arrogant, hypocritical and even violent—just like the wider Christian community. There is nothing necessarily holy and pure about the separate life.<sup>65</sup> The members of these orders are still sinners—extraordinarily self-disciplined in certain ways, but still mere men and women. Time and again such experiments have failed to establish a society that stays true to its original ideals. Speaking of those who experienced the failures of the Jesus Movement, John Smith writes:

My conversations with many similar casualties revealed how typical [this] is of those who have known such existential bonding, through the extreme liminality, of revitalization. Victims of the dysfunctional elements often recall a sense of high ecstasy in movement days, and unparalleled alienation and pain at the loss of the 'larger than life' utopianism, communalism, and activism ... A nostalgic sense of longing for the best of the former years mingles with a salutary sense of the external and self-instigated causes of movement collapse.<sup>66</sup>

Religious orders are not free from the all-too-familiar problems of the sinful nature. Religious orders were involved in the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Stolen Generations and institutional child abuse.<sup>67</sup> Their track record is far from clean.

We also need realism about the incomplete nature of any solution to problems in this world. There is no separate religious community or monastic order that can solve the problems of the world or the Christian community. We are restricted by the complexity of the world, the fallenness of the world and, of course, the providence of God. While some withdraw from church or society as an act of protest and to explore a new way of living, the rest of us remain, seeking to do good in government, family, business and society. In fact, as Richard Southern shows through-out his history of the Middle Ages, the success of religious orders has partly depended on the often-accidental ways in which they solved various social

64 Davidson notes that many of the early monks were illiterate, so were unable to read Scripture for themselves; see Davidson, *A Public Faith*, p 137. This makes their withdrawal from the wider church community counter-productive for their actual spiritual growth.

65 Writing to an underground communal seminary in Nazi Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns against an idealistic vision of community life he calls a 'wish dream': "Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream ... But God speedily shatters such dreams ... God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious" (D Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* [JW Doberstein trans], HarperOne, 1954, pp 26-27).

66 Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, pp 94-95.

67 'The Stolen Generations' is the name given to those Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their families by the Australian government and church missions in the 19th and 20th centuries.

and economic problems.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, any long-term renewal that a religious order might bring must work its way into the ordinary patterns of life—and even then it is likely to be distorted and compromised in the process.

#### 4. Violation of Christian freedom

While we've already discussed the dangers and weaknesses of adopting strict extra-biblical rules, I want to focus here on a related but slightly different danger: the inappropriate power that can be accrued by religious orders, and the insidious control that they can sometimes exert over the lives of their members. The gospel of Christ frees us from sin and death and the law. We are free to live now as adopted children of God in the life of the Spirit. And we are also free from human laws and institutions when they presume to bind us morally and spiritually with unbiblical requirements.<sup>69</sup> This means there are limits to how much Christian leaders can bind others to laws and vows that the Lord doesn't require of us. Permanent vows, for example, have very little place in biblical religion. Apart from the direct divine instruction to Samson and John the Baptist, the Nazirite vow was ordinarily only temporary. First Timothy 5:9-12 might suggest a permanent vow—one that younger widows might be tempted to forsake—but this is only in this very specific circumstance of a widow over sixty years of age. By contrast, the Protestant Reformers took exception to the permanent monastic vows, often imposed on young men and women. So, for example, the Augsburg Confession says:

Vows were everywhere added for the purpose of restoring discipline, as in a carefully planned prison ... And these fetters were laid upon many before the lawful age ... Many also entered into this kind of life through ignorance, being unable to judge their own strength, though they were of sufficient age. Being thus ensnared, they were compelled to remain [under their vows] ...<sup>70</sup>

Especially concerning is the power structure that religious orders establish. Most monasteries require a vow of obedience, which is quite alarming. Consider the Catholic Encyclopaedia's description of the Benedictine Vow:

By the special Vow of Stability [St. Benedict] unites the monk for life to the particular monastery in which his vows are made. This was really a new development and one of the highest importance ... by this the last vestige of personal freedom was taken away from the monk ... The abbot was to be a father and the monk a child. Nor was he to be more capable of choosing a new father or a new home than any

68 RW Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Penguin History of the Church (O Chadwick gen ed), vol 2, Penguin, 1990. Consider the *conversi* ('lay brothers') who served the practical and economic needs of the Cistercian and Carthusian monasteries so that the monks might be able to focus on spiritual things, functioning as a monastic servant class; see Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, pp 141-144.

69 See my discussion in M Lynch, *The Good Life in the Last Days: Making choices when the time is short*, Matthias Media, 2018, pp 166-192.

70 Melancthon, *The Augsburg Confession*, article XXVII. See also Davidson, *A Public Faith*, p 286. But Greg Peters makes a case that by the 15th century most people entered monasteries voluntarily; see Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, pp 189-190.

other child was ... Once elected the abbot's power becomes absolute; there is nothing to control him except the Rule and his own conscience which is responsible for the salvation of every soul entrusted to his care.<sup>71</sup>

These structures are parallel to many of the practices that mark some of the most dangerous religious movements—often called ‘cults’—of the past few centuries.<sup>72</sup> Even less extreme movements have over-reached in very unhelpful ways. For example, the ‘shepherd-ing movement’ of the 1970s promoted an extremely authoritarian pattern of church leadership and family gender roles. This was eagerly adopted by some countercultural churches and ministries, who were reacting against what they considered to be both the compromise of established churches and the anarchy of the secular counterculture.<sup>73</sup>

Every community needs some extra-biblical rules and expectations—whether a family, a block of flats, a local church, a residential theological college, a missionary team compound, or a monastery. It is necessary to set normal expectations around when we do things, who does what jobs, and the expectations of courtesy and communication. It is not legalistic to set such expectations and require these of others who might join our community. But it is vital that we be very clear, both explicitly and implicitly, on which things are authoritative demands of God and which things are practical guidelines, inferences, and possible applications of biblical truths. This means that leaders must be especially careful to respect the conscience of others and allow appropriate flexibility to members. John Calvin wisely says:

Let us understand that ... in every human society some kind of government is necessary to ensure the common peace and maintain concord ... In these ordinances, however, we must always attend to the exception, that they must not be thought necessary to salvation, nor lay the conscience under a religious obligation; they must not be compared to the worship of God, nor substituted for piety.<sup>74</sup>

Those of us who are church and parachurch leaders need to be careful not to over-regulate the lives of the communities we lead. And we need to be careful not to impute a quality of moral or spiritual purity where there is no explicit, biblical instruction—whether dress

71 GR Hudleston, ‘Western Monasticism’, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol 10, Robert Appleton Company, 1911, pp 473-474, accessed 18 February 2023 ([archive.org/details/07470918.10.emory.edu](https://archive.org/details/07470918.10.emory.edu)). “So far as possible all connexion with the world outside the monastery is to be avoided. If any monk be compelled by duty to go beyond the monastery enclosure he is forbidden on his return to speak of what he has seen or heard. So too no monk may receive gifts or letters from his friends or relatives without permission of the abbot. It is true that guests from without are to be received and entertained, but only certain monks specially chosen for the purpose may hold intercourse with them” (p 473).

72 It's hard to be precise about the difference between a religion and a dangerous religious movement. A series of identifiers include: an unaccountable leader; coercive indoctrination; economic or sexual exploitation of members; resistance to questioning; and isolation of group members; see R Ross, ‘Watch out for tell-tale signs’, *The Guardian*, 27 May 2009, accessed 18 February 2023 ([theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/may/27/cults-definition-religion](https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/may/27/cults-definition-religion)). A simpler answer is that the difference between a religion and a cult is “about one hundred years”, since if a movement can last this long in the modern world it will ordinarily have to shed most practices of a dangerous religious movement; see S Fleischaker, ‘Cult vs. religion: What's the difference?’, *The Baltimore Sun*, 13 October 2011, accessed 18 February 2022 ([baltimoresun.com/opinion/bs-xpm-2011-10-13-bs-ed-mormons-20111013-story.html](https://baltimoresun.com/opinion/bs-xpm-2011-10-13-bs-ed-mormons-20111013-story.html)). See also Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, pp 50-51.

73 Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, p 298, note 8. Smith quotes Julia Duin: “This authority concept created havoc in many Christian communities.”

74 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.10.27.

codes, baselines of ministry service and community involvement, or whatever else. It's fine to set rhythms, commitments and standards, but they need to be held loosely.

## **Conclusion: dynamic relationship between the radical and the ordinary**

The study of the history of religious orders is a wonderful mix of fun, fascination, alarm and inspiration. The same can be said of such movements today. It is liberating to own that the relationship between the religious order and the ordinary church is dynamic rather than static: from time to time there is a revitalization cycle that needs to take place. Often the prophetic reformer insists that everyone ought to do what they are doing, and the pragmatic conservative gets defensive and labels them as unrealistic. Each can dismiss the other, rather than realizing that it is good for them to embrace the creative tension.

For all their imperfections and transgressions, it is difficult to see how revitalization can take place without the upheaval brought about by more radical groups—would everything really be better if every Christian always obediently followed due process? John Smith also challenges us not to dismiss experiments in communalism as failures, because these experiments successfully produce all kinds of beneficial outcomes, even if the communes themselves don't endure. Furthermore, their failure may be caused by external factors, rather than by something in the commune itself.<sup>75</sup> Whether or not we consider the experiments failures, they serve a purpose in bringing renewal to the wider Christian community. The radical shows a new way of being, the conservative guards against its destructive extremes, and so renewal eventually comes to the wider Christian movement.<sup>76</sup> Eventually this wider movement loses its way and needs a fresh wave of reaction and reform all over again!<sup>77</sup>

Recognizing all of this opens doors for fruitful listening and learning from one another—hopefully for the best possible outcome for the church and beyond.<sup>78</sup> Honouring each other

75 Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, pp 287-292. I do still think communal experiments need to be measured against the goal of establishing a new and superior way of life. If this way of life is not established in a sustainable way, then it has failed on that level. I am also wary of blaming external factors, for if such experiments repeatedly cannot survive in the midst of various external factors, they show themselves to be too fragile.

76 A revitalization movement must restructure and reformulate new 'maze-ways' and more satisfying 'cultural reality' and maintain them through 'routinization' to reach a new 'steady state'; see Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, pp 330-343.

77 Of course, no renewal process is ever pure to begin with. And the more influential and enduring it is, the more impure it is. See Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, pp 339-343.

78 "Had the theoretical understanding of the causes and processes inherent in revitalization been common knowledge at the leadership level of the Jesus Movement, many disappointing failures might have been avoided. Leaders might have recognized those counterculture tendencies that created suspicion of organization and resistance to routinization. Resources, including creative personnel, should have been proportioned in a better strategy for long-term survival. Better balance could have been achieved between the inspiration of the masses to catch the counterculture vision of cultural renewal and the employment of facilitators and pastors to establish permanent, local units. Ministries could have balanced the elements of inward and outward journeys to avoid loss of personnel through stress. More concentration should have been given to planting stable communities, and to training pastors rather than proliferating wandering charismatics" (Smith, *The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement*, p 354).

as we seek to serve the Lord and the world in diverse ways allows us to preserve Christian love and unity, even as we explore the best ways to bring change in our own lives, in our churches, in the wider Christian movement, and in the world.



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