

The Return to Tradition

# Monasticism in the Greek Orthodox Church

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## *I. Introduction*

Monasticism has been in the church since the earliest point, and has existed long before it, but exactly how much does Christianity borrow from other monastic disciplines? And how does it serve the wider Church in an Orthodox background, and does it need to? In

this article I will be analysing and bringing to light things about monasticism in the Orthodox church that will let us discuss these questions further.

## II. *Pre-Christian Monasticism*

Before Christianity, being a monk wasn't about worship and was entirely self-serving, it was about gaining virtue and enlightening oneself. It involved someone being a hermit in a desert or a mountain, or elsewhere secluded to try to understand some greater meaning to life. It was believed depriving oneself of communication will lead to some answer, or higher virtue.

### a. *Greek Monasticism*

Greek philosophers often had their own ideas about things that no-one else agreed with, notably the idea that there is only one God, and not many as mainstream Hellenistic religion believed at the time. Most philosophers acted on their own and didn't teach that many, if any students so enlightenment to them could be gained alone. Indeed, it seemed to them solitary peace of mind was a good place to ascend in virtue and mindfulness, so you would have hermits coming out of civilisation to try to seek this enlightenment. Salapatas notes that because this "origin" from monasticism was pagan, monasticism itself is pagan, and therefore something that doesn't belong in the church.<sup>1</sup>

### b. *Buddhist Monasticism*

People following the Buddha, who was around the same sort of time the Greek philosophers were really taking hold, seek enlightenment through meditation. They view life as being very valuable in all forms because they believe in re-incarnation. To ascend to "heaven" you need to be a good human, and that very heavily involves monasticism, indeed in Buddhist countries up to a third of the population can be monks. Father

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<sup>1</sup> Salapatas, 'Monasticism', 19-21

Anastasios notes that with Buddhism, abstinence in itself regarded as virtue, and as a result they have very many strict rules.<sup>2</sup>

### III. *Christian Monasticism*

Monasticism was always involved in Christianity, just before His flourishing, Jesus Himself subjected Himself to solitude and fasting in order to cleanse Himself for his ministry. We can get from this a sense that monastic life in the Christian context is representative of cleansing oneself. Kastillos notes that a significant part of monastic life is repentance, constantly being aware of sin and recognising its horrific nature.<sup>3</sup> He also describes monasticism as a "sacrament of love" as he identifies it as the outworking of the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

Father Anastasios draws a link between Israel's flight from Egypt and the God's command to the people of Israel of purification duties to the establishment of religious monasticism.<sup>5</sup> Moses staying 40 days on mount Sinai as a purification ritual is another example of Father Anastasios' "flight" in God, which indicates how God wants us to pray in isolation to be purified.<sup>6</sup> I find this interesting considering that this suggests purification doesn't involve helping others, but only saving yourself, but that is an inevitability of being saved by grace through faith. Kastillos also suggests that repentance is the sole reason for monasticism over serving others.<sup>7</sup>

In Orthodox mission, such as the ones to Russia and Alaska, monasticism is very heavily implemented, because people seeking enlightenment will go to monks in the wilderness to seek enlightenment. All a monk has to go is be very mystical and humble and have

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<sup>2</sup> Salapatas, *Monasticism*, 22-23

<sup>3</sup> Kastillos, 'Kingdom', 18

<sup>4</sup> Kastillos, 'Kingdom', 17

<sup>5</sup> Salapatas, *Monasticism*, 16

<sup>6</sup> Salapatas, *Monasticism*, 16-17

<sup>7</sup> Kastillos, 'Kingdom', 18

high integrity and they will convert many. This is especially prevalent in the papal church too, where after conquering a nation they would give them a monastery and maybe a priest to make sure they turned Christian.

a. Saint Basil of Caesarea

When Saint Basil of Caesarea wrote his Rules, it is apparent he didn't necessarily want a big list of rules and a timetable that the papal church had, he seemed more interested in how people should live out their life. All of the questions and answers in the rule are biblical and relatable to all parts of monastic life, and leaves specifics up to the abbot for their particular needs, while asserting what the overall goal is. For instance regarding self-control Saint Basil says this: "For it is impossible that all the brothers should observe the one order or measure or rule"<sup>8</sup> this approach to rule setting I find extremely useful for missional purposes and producing monasteries that deviate from one model but still have good teaching and practices.

b. *Differences from Pre-Christian Monasticism*

A good starting point on this topic is Father Anastasios' list of differences<sup>9</sup> that I've outlined (and greatly shortened) here:

1. "Exclusive faith to a one and personal God."
2. "Faith in a God who is eternal, almighty, creator and provident."
3. "Continuous prayer"
4. "The human being who was made in the image of God is to be transfigured... into the likeness of God"

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<sup>8</sup> Basil, *Rule*, 50

<sup>9</sup> Salapatas, *Monasticism*, 38-39

5. "Not ego-centric, it believes in "Communion" and participation"
6. "success is a gift from God himself"
7. "does not deny the present cosmos, but tries to transfigure it."
8. "eschatology is the salvation".
9. "Absolute obedience to the spiritual Father."

You can see the wide range of differences here, most notably the spiritual and communal elements. Though it involves ascendance, it gives the credit not to oneself, but to the creator. It is outward facing, seeking to help and serve other monks, and desiring to change the world around them if only in a spiritual sense.

Of course the main difference are the elements of Christianity that are implemented, such as the trinity, serving and loving others, and authority of one chosen by God. Although in wider Christianity authority is questioned and disliked in the west (thanks to modernism and post-modernism ruining everyone) most monasteries even in the west have abbots with a large amount of authority, of course ideally it would be total authority but not everyone can humble themselves sufficiently after being subjected to our world-view.

### c. Methodology and Differences

As I mentioned earlier, Saint Basil of Caesarea wanted the abbot of each monastery to have their own jurisdiction on specific elements of monastic life, but to keep the attitude and teaching the same. This led to some different monasteries focusing on different elements of monastic ministry.

Kastillos identifies 3 methods of monasticism, complete solitude, living in a group of monks who serve each other, and devoting life to praying for the world, these were each

started by a saint. "Antony, of the solitary life; Pachomios, of the cenobitic way; and Makarios, of the middle path."<sup>10</sup>

Saint Anthony sought perfection through devoting his life to the command to give away all your possessions and follow Jesus, so he lived a life of solitude. He gave up everything and retreated to monastic life out of love and dedication to God.<sup>11</sup>

Saint Pachomios was moved by the Christian's love and compassion for one another, so when, out of love for God he turned to a monastic life, he established a community of brothers who served each other to serve God.<sup>12</sup>

Saint Makarios guided his student Palladios to protect the people of the world through prayer, not imagining that he himself is strong, but that God is strong, and God will save them. The key is humility in this process.<sup>13</sup>

These three methods of monasticism really effectively cover God's calling and commands on people's life, and is a good example of following Saint Basil. It allows monks to focus on what their personal charismata from the Spirit is. The extreme dedication and asceticism will help them reach those who see the world for the superficial mess it is and turn to Christianity.

#### d. *Criticisms*

In monasticism today some people have criticised some of modern monks' behaviour, accusing them of slacking on their piety, so how can we help them be stronger?

Laurence (a monk himself) thinks that monasticism in the western hemisphere is always "scarred" by clericalism, which is opposed to authentic monastic character.<sup>14</sup> He also

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<sup>10</sup> Kastillos, 'Kingdom', 19

<sup>11</sup> Kastillos, 'Kingdom', 20

<sup>12</sup> Kastillos, 'Kingdom', 20

<sup>13</sup> Kastillos, 'Kingdom', 20

<sup>14</sup> Laurence, 'Reflections', 245

criticises some of the more radicalised views of tradition in Orthodox monasticism, and Christianity in general, stating “we are being crippled by the very thing that should give us life”<sup>15</sup> referring to tradition. He links this to the story of the women at the tomb who are asked by the angel “Why seek the living among the dead?” claiming that we do not encourage the image of a living God in our current portrayal of tradition.<sup>16</sup> This is often emphasised in mission, where the culture of the Orthodox church either gets lost in translation, so heresies arise, or tradition is too closely followed and it alienates the people their missioning to. However, Monasticism is helpful in mission across culture too (I mentioned earlier about monastery-oriented missions to Russia and Alaska).

He brings attention to the vast extent that monastics tend to focus on what they will and won't eat, wear or do, rather than the salvation of their souls.<sup>17</sup> This is sort of concerning, since we know from the people that established monasticism, even non-Christian ones, would be disapproving of this behaviour.

Ultimately I suppose, problems like this are down to the monasteries respective abbots to handle, and that's why they're there in the first place. Although Laurence doesn't really give examples, I hope he talked to those people's abbots. From this we should all keep in mind that humans are weak and we need to check on them and all the time, and maximise accountability even in monasticism.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

From this we can draw morals for our own life as well as take away the knowledge we learned. Each person needs to be kept accountable, no matter what stage they are in life,

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<sup>15</sup> Laurence, 'Reflections', 242

<sup>16</sup> Laurence, 'Reflections', 242

<sup>17</sup> Laurence, 'Reflections', 245

and as Christians we hold a very high standard of love, and so require at every stage someone helping us achieve our goals to the glory of God, Amen!

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