



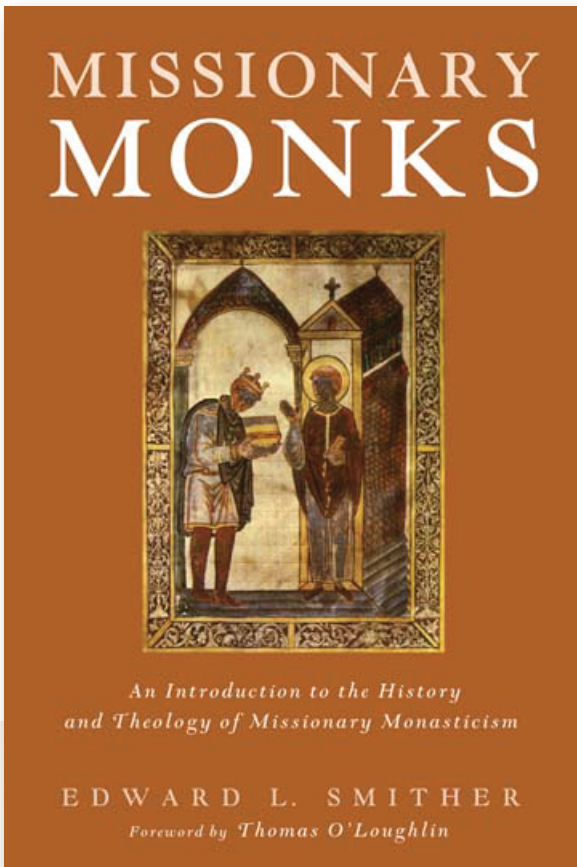
MISSIONARY MONKS

An Introduction to the History and Theology of Missionary Monasticism

EDWARD L. SMITHER

Foreword by Thomas O'Loughlin

Missionaries go into all the world and make disciples of all nations while monks live cloistered in a monastery and focus their lives on prayer and studying Scripture—correct? Not exactly. When we study the history of Christian mission, especially from around 500 to 1500 CE, the key missionaries that we constantly encounter are monks. In fact, if we don't have monks in this period then we have very little in the way of Christian mission. Our aim in this book is to examine the phenomenon of missionary monks—those who pursued both a monastic and missionary calling. We will meet the monks and monastic orders, narrate their journeys in mission, and evaluate their approaches to and thoughts about mission.



EDWARD L. SMITHER is Professor of Intercultural Studies and History of Global Christianity and Dean of the College of Intercultural Studies at Columbia International University.

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Thomas O'Loughlin



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Foreword

CHRISTIANS ARE ALWAYS REMEMBERING, and Christians are always forgetting! That we are always remembering is obvious: all Christians read the anthology of texts we call the Bible and remember events that happened (the most recent of them) nearly two thousand years ago. And in those texts—such as one of the most recent of them: Acts—they read about things that happened even earlier: they are remembering Christians remembering the time before the Christ (Acts 2:14–36). They have made this remembering part of their worship: there is no group of Christians who do not have some readings from the Scriptures at their assemblies. Some Christians take a real pride in their remembering and set great store by “tradition”: and proudly boast that what they are doing now is what was done in the past. Indeed, the way they justify what they are doing now—no matter how crazy it might appear to outsiders—is that “this is the way we have always done it!” Remembering becomes fused with identity, and authorization and fidelity and continuity. Remembering gives them a sense of security and comfort: it assures them they are on the right track and they just have to keep recalling what they did long ago—in an almost mythical time—and repeat it, and all will be well. This is such a well-known phenomenon in religious thinking that Mircea Eliade borrowed a phrase from the Christian liturgy to describe it: it is remembering what happened *in illo tempore*—a time when wonders happened, faith was not complex, and the structures of belief seem almost as visible as trees, stones, and hills. But remembering can also be the great straightjacket: it becomes the means to quash new ideas, to prevent adaptation to new circumstances, and to make creativity seem like a betrayal of the past. Remembering is a very complex activity

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for Christians—and it cannot be compared with just playing a recording or searching the “memory” of a computer—it is a basic way by which we discover and declare who we are.

But we also forget—and we do not just forget details, but even what was once very important. Christians forgot that they had a new vision of peace and fraternity where each was a brother and sister and, unlike their memory of Cain, they would be concerned with each other’s welfare. But it was easy to forget that that meant that slavery had no place—and in less than a generation after Jesus told them that God was their Father and they were all brothers, they had forgotten this and slavery was acceptable “within limits.” They were to wash each other’s feet and live as servants of one another—but that just got too much for them: so they ritualized it, limited it, and spiritualized it. Forgetting is the best way to avoid that which is awkward; and the great thing about forgetting is that once you have forgotten you do not even realize that you have forgotten. Forgetting wipes away its own track—so that it does not lurk in the back of your mind to annoy you. Forgetting is such a dangerous way of deviating from the call to discipleship announced by Jesus, that some of the early Christians saw the role of the Holy Spirit as that which would help you to remember what you had forgotten: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

This task of remembering and recalling what is forgotten is the task of historical theology—and this book is a splendid example of it in practice. It looks at the lives and writings of a series of monks, who lived in worlds very different to ours, but responded to the same call to mission that we hear today. Knowing what mission meant to them helps us to clarify what it means to us, what it should mean to us, and also to evaluate our priorities: are we too much this way . . . or too much that way . . . or are there aspects that we have lost sight of completely? We do not engage in the formal practice of remembering and recalling what we have forgotten to create an ideal for imitation—that would be silly and confining. Rather, we do it because in asking our questions of people in a different time and culture to our own we hold up a mirror in which we see ourselves afresh. Ed Smither’s book is a very good mirror.

Thomas O’Loughlin,

Professor of Historical Theology, University of Nottingham

Introduction

A FEW YEARS AGO, I had the privilege to travel to Iona, a tiny island located in the Inner Hebrides of western Scotland. For Christian history, it is important for being the place where sixth-century Celtic monks led by the Irish abbot Columba (521–597) established a monastery, which served as a missionary base for evangelizing the Pictish people of the Scottish highlands. While preparing to go and study the mission history of the region, I asked my former doctoral supervisor about the best study resources on the island—things like libraries, study centers, and museums. Informing me that nothing quite that formal existed at Iona, he suggested that the most valuable study experience was to visit the island in December or January, stand outside and feel the cold North Atlantic air and wind, and imagine the sacrifice and service of the monks who went about their ministry in this environment. In many ways, that is what this book is about. We too want to stand in that cold place and walk in the shoes of Celtic and other missionary monks who sacrificed greatly to make the gospel known to the ends of the earth in their day. We want to grasp what it meant to pursue both a monastic and a missionary calling.

Why is a book on missionary monks relevant for Christians today, especially for students of mission history and mission practitioners? As we journey through the pages of mission history—especially from about AD 500 to 1500—it's impossible to do so without stumbling over quite a few missionary monks. In fact, I would argue that if we don't have monks in this period, then we really have little to talk about in the way of Christian mission. So grasping the story of mission requires getting to know missionary monks. Given this historical reality, it is important that we demystify

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and clarify the work of those with a missionary and monastic calling. This is especially important for evangelical Protestant students (my tribe), who often approach monastic studies with suspicion and some ignorance. Having taught courses on mission history for nearly a decade, I've seen that this part of mission history often troubles evangelical students and therefore requires some clarification.

On the other hand, there is renewed interest in monasticism, particularly among twenty- and thirty-year-old evangelicals in America. Jonathan Wilson-Hargrove's book *The New Monasticism* captures this movement of individuals and families living in deliberate community and doing something new by reflecting on something old—monasticism. Similarly, Shane Claiborne's Simple Way community has applied some monastic principles to urban mission and identifying with the poor and homeless in a ministry that is highly centered upon justice. Finally, books like Dennis Okholm's *Monk Habits for Everyday People* appeal to Protestant Christians with a desire to make use of the rule and values of the monastic innovator Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–ca. 547) in a modern context.

Recent works in mission practice have also valued reflecting on the legacy of monastic spirituality in the work of mission. In Bill Taylor's *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*—an edited volume that emerged from the 1999 Iguassu (Brazil) Dialogue—three brief chapters are devoted to the Celtic, Church of the East, and Jesuit missionary monastic movements as these writers look for guidance from the past as the church looks forward in mission.¹ Similarly, in his recent work *Understanding Christian Mission*, Scott Sunquist reserved an entire chapter for a discussion on spirituality and mission.² Though Sunquist only briefly mentions monastic movements, these historic movements certainly have something to teach us today about the relationship of spirituality and Christian mission.

Even considering the relevance and interest in monasticism and mission, why should this book be written? First, there is still relatively little written on early Christian mission. While works like Eckhard Schnabel's *Early Christian Mission*, Michael Green's *Evangelism in the Early Church*, and my own *Mission in the Early Church* have endeavored to fill the gaps of our understanding of mission in this period, there is still much to unpack and addressing the monastic contribution to mission will help us toward

1. Taylor, *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*, 489–502, 507–11.

2. See chapter 13 (“Spirituality and Mission”) in Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*.

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that end. Second, while there are helpful books available that generally introduce Christian monasticism in the early and medieval church—such as Harmless’ *Desert Christians*, Dunn’s *The Emergence of Monasticism*, and Peters’ *The Story of Monasticism*—these works do not really discuss the missionary element of monasticism. Finally, while individual books exist that explore monastic missionary orders or certain missionaries, there is no book that offers a general overview of the history of monastic missions in a single volume.

My intent in this work is to guide the reader through an introduction to the history of missionary monks and movements beginning in the fourth century and spanning to the middle of the seventeenth century. I want to tell the story of missionary monks—to meet them, learn about their contexts of service, consider their approaches to mission, discuss their challenges and victories, and grasp how they thought and theologized about mission. After narrating their stories, I will invite the reader to reflect on what can be learned from their experiences, including which of their strategies might be appropriated today in mission.

Following some initial chapters in which I survey mission in the early and medieval church and narrate the rise of monasticism as well as missionary monasticism, I craft a narrative of missionary monks and monastic mission movements, telling their stories, allowing them speak on their own terms and in their own contexts, and presenting their approaches to mission. I conclude with a short epilogue offering thoughts toward a monastic theology of mission with some reflections on what missionaries might recover today from missionary monks. In short, we will stand on the cold shores of Iona (and other places), consider what mission meant to these pioneering monks, and reflect on what their legacy means for us.

CHAPTER 1

Early Christian Mission

BISHOP STEPHEN NEILL (1900–1984), an Anglican missionary to India as well as a historian and theologian of mission, once wrote, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.”¹ While Neill was responding to twentieth-century liberal theology that was diminishing the supernatural and eternal qualities of the gospel, his admonishing statement is still relevant today. There seems to be disagreement among committed evangelicals over the meaning of mission. In this brief chapter, I will first spell out how I am using the word and then describe the major marks of mission in the early church through the end of the first millennium.

What is Mission?

Following William Larkin, I define mission as “The divine activity of sending intermediaries . . . to speak or to do God’s will so that God’s purposes for judgment or redemption are furthered.”² While redemption is certainly the hope of the missionary proclaiming God’s ways, judgment is also a real outcome for those who reject the gospel. Emphasizing the scope of mission, Ott, Strauss, and Tennent add that “Mission is a sign of the kingdom and an invitation to the nations to enter the kingdom and share the hope of the kingdom promised in Christ’s return.”³

1. Neill, *Salvation Tomorrow*, 17.
2. Larkin, “Mission,” 534.
3. Ott, et al., *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 105.

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Mission, which simply means “sending,” is founded upon the *missio Dei* (mission of God). That is, the initiative for mission begins with a missionary God. This reality is perhaps best captured after the fall when the living God himself moves toward the fallen couple and asks Adam, “where are you?” (Gen 3:8ff), and then provides sacrificial covering for their shame. This pattern of sending continues throughout the Old and New Testaments as God sends his servants and messengers—prophets, the Messiah, and the church—to announce his saving ways to the nations.⁴ Moreau, Corwin, and McGee correctly assert that “God is the one who initiates and sustains mission.”⁵

In light of this, the church participates in God’s mission by making disciples of all nations through evangelism, teaching, church planting, and other related ministries including things like Bible translation, community development, and ministries of justice and compassion. While mission is demonstrated in both word (proclaiming the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus) and deed (caring for real, human needs), the greatest human needs are spiritual—namely being reconciled to God in Christ—and priority ought to be given there. Yet, mission cannot be reduced to the sequential formula of “preach now, care later,” for sometimes ministries of compassion may precede evangelism in daily concrete situations. On this tension between word and deed, Mike Barnett has wisely written:

I prefer not to think of proclamation as the first thing in a sequence followed by deeds. I understand proclamation as our main and ultimate thing. Thus, it is our priority. Do we first proclaim and then serve? Maybe, maybe not. It depends on the situation, the relationships, the leadership of God’s Spirit in the life of the witness and the sought one. But regardless of how and when we serve, we have not fulfilled the Great Commission unless we proclaim.⁶

In short, if we do not embrace the central task of proclaiming the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in mission, then we can no longer claim that our mission is distinctively Christian.

To summarize this understanding of mission, I also affirm the following six characteristics articulated by Larkin. First, there is a sender. Mission is based on the sender’s authority and purpose and, for our purposes, it is

4. On mission in the Old Testament, see McDaniel, “Mission in the Old Testament,” 11–20.

5. Moreau, et al., *Introducing World Missions*, 17.

6. Barnett, “The Missing Key to the Future of Evangelical Mission,” 227.

the Father's accomplishment and application of salvation. Next, there is a commission or an act of sending. This includes the response of God's people to go to a particular place or people. Third, and related, there are the sent ones—God's agents in mission who demonstrate obedience to the sender. Fourth, there is the task of mission, which as we have noted, involves both word and deed. Subsequently, there are the outcomes of mission, which includes the advancement of the kingdom of God. Finally, there is a theological framework for mission—the church viewing its mission activity in light of God's salvation history.⁷

One may reasonably ask—at what point did mission become mission in the history of the church? Is it not anachronistic to refer to mission in the early or medieval church? David Bosch correctly notes that in the patristic period “the Latin word *missio* was an expression employed in the doctrine of the Trinity, to denote the sending of the Son by the Father, and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son.”⁸ However, Dana Robert asserts: “The idea of ‘mission’ is carried through the New Testament by 206 references to the term ‘sending.’ The main Greek verb ‘to send’ is *apostolein*. Thus *apostles* were literally those sent to spread the ‘Good News’ of Jesus’ life and message.”⁹ So mission has been central to the identity of the Christian movement since its inception—Christianity is a missionary faith. Referring to mission-related vocabulary, Bosch adds: “For fifteen centuries the church used other terms to refer to what we subsequently call ‘mission’: phrases such as ‘propagation of the faith,’ ‘preaching of the gospel,’ ‘apostolic proclamation,’ ‘promulgation of the gospel,’ ‘augmenting the faith,’ ‘expanding the church,’ ‘planting the church,’ ‘propagation of the reign of Christ,’ and ‘illuminating the nations.’”¹⁰ In short, throughout Christian history, we continually observe missionary motives and endeavors even when the word “mission” is not always used.¹¹

7. Larkin and Williams, *Mission in the New Testament*, 3–4.

8. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 228.

9. Robert, *Christian Mission*, 11.

10. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 228.

11. Smither, “Did the Rise of Constantine Mean the End of Christian Mission?” 130–45.

Context of Early Christian Mission

Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to narrate thoroughly the geographical spread of the church in the first millennium, it is evident that Christianity experienced broad and significant growth.¹² By the early fourth century when Constantine came to power, it is estimated that Christians comprised 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire.¹³ This is quite remarkable when we consider that for most of the first four centuries, Christians did not have the freedom to construct buildings, gather publically, or experience a tolerated existence in Rome. Some parts of the Empire—particularly North Africa—experienced especially accelerated growth.¹⁴ By the end of the sixth century, Christian communities flourished in the Roman Empire, from the British Isles in the West to Asia Minor in the East.

The history of the church within the Roman Empire is, of course, only part of the story, as the faith expanded eastward during this period as well.¹⁵ Beginning in Edessa and Syria, the gospel spread through Central Asia and, by the seventh century, had even reached China through the witness of Church of the East believers. Even before the Emperor Constantine had converted, the Armenian monarch Trdat was baptized in 301 and declared his kingdom to be a Christian nation. The church was also expanding into Persia and India at this time. Towards the end of the first millennium, the gospel took hold in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, as well as Russia.

The spread of Christianity is even more remarkable when we consider the political and religious contexts that the church encountered. As noted, prior to Constantine's reign in the Roman Empire, Christians were not tolerated and at times faced discrimination and even periods of persecution.¹⁶ Though the peace and favor that Constantine gave to the church was certainly appreciated by many Christians and celebrated by others, the

12. For a brief summary of global Christian expansion in this period, see Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 8–16. For a more thorough presentation, see Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity* and Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*.

13. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 6.

14. Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 27; also Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*.

15. For more on the eastward expansion of the church, see Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*; Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia*; Jenkins, *Lost History of Christianity*; and Cragg, *The Arab Christian*.

16. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 16–20.

emergence of a Christian emperor and Rome's eventual acceptance of the faith as an imperial religion posed problems for the church. What should the church's relationship be to the state? What does conversion to Christianity mean in a developing context of Christendom?

While the church in the Roman Empire was dealing with these issues in the fourth century, neighboring churches in Persia did not have the same rights and were facing continued persecution. Later, following the early seventh-century rise of Islam, Christians in the East quickly came under Muslim dominance with many in the church even converting to Islam as a result. Irvin and Sunquist write, "Within a century of the death of Muhammad [ca. 732], as many as half of the world's Christians were under Muslim political rule."¹⁷ In sum, part of the developing identity of global Christians in the first millennium involved figuring how to relate to political authorities.

The expanding church also encountered various worldview frameworks and part of mission involved crossing frontiers of thought. In the Roman context, the church communicated the faith within the contexts of paganism and also Greek philosophy. In Persia, Christians encountered Zoroastrian thinking. Farther East, missionaries thought about the gospel in light of the concerns of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist adherents. Of course, the church also related to the Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Islam.

Finally, while the early and medieval church faced challenges from other religious and worldview systems, it also had to combat unsound doctrine developing within the church itself. During the second and third centuries, Gnosticism posed many challenges to Christian thought. Although modern scholars do not agree on a comprehensive definition for the philosophy,¹⁸ generally speaking, Gnosticism viewed creation and matter in a negative light and it taught that redemption came through a secret knowledge (*gnosis*) that liberated the spirit from the body.

One of the great points of contention in early Christian thought came with articulating the doctrine of Christ. In the first three centuries, the church responded to the heresy of docetism—that Jesus was a mere phantom and only appeared (*dokeo*) to have a human body.¹⁹ Later controversies included adoptionism (Jesus being adopted as the Son of God and taking

17. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 271.

18. Smith, "Post-Bauer Scholarship on Gnosticism(s)."

19. Sweet, "Docetism," 24–31.

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on divinity at his baptism)²⁰ and subordinationism (that Jesus was not fully divine in the way that the Father was). In the fourth century, Apollinarius (ca. 310–ca. 390) emphasized Jesus' divinity to such an extent that he essentially denied the Lord's human will and nature.²¹ Finally, in the midst of a confusing theological battle with Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444), Nestorius (ca. 386–ca. 451) seemed to teach that there were two Christs—a divine Jesus and a human one. His thinking was subsequently denounced at the Council of Chalcedon of 451.²²

Fourth-century church fathers in particular sought to understand and articulate how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—particularly the Father and the Son—related together in essence and action. The Alexandrian Presbyterian Arius (ca. 250–336) taught that as the Father was eternal and uncreated and that the Son was created by the Father, then Jesus was necessarily subordinate to the Father. The issue was addressed at the Council of Nicaea in 325 where a creed resulted and Arius was deposed. However, the Arian controversy raged on for most of the fourth century.²³

Also in the fourth and fifth centuries, the church wrestled with the doctrines of grace—including free will, the effects of the fall, and original sin—through the Pelagian controversy. Pelagius' (ca. 354–ca. 420/440) assertions that humanity did not have a sinful nature and that perfection was possible and even obligatory were answered thoroughly by Augustine and some colleagues in a number of books, letters, and church councils.²⁴

Given this brief survey of the expansion of Christianity in the first thousand years, one might ask—who were the missionaries? According to the author of the *Didache* (late first and early second century), Origen (ca. 185–254), and Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–341), evidence exists for unnamed, itinerant evangelists who traveled and crossed cultures to proclaim the gospel during the first three centuries.²⁵ Origen wrote: “Some of them, accordingly, have made it their business to itinerate not only through cities,

20. Muers, “Adoptionism,” 50–58.

21. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 289–301.

22. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 281; also Ward, “Africa,” 194–96.

23. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 223–79.

24. *Ibid.*, 357–74.

25. *Didache* 11–13; Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.9; and Eusebius, *Church History* 3.37.1–3.

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but even villages and country houses, that they might make converts to God.”²⁶

While some operated as vocational evangelists, one remarkable element of early Christianity was its anonymous missionary element. It is intriguing that the two largest church communities in the Roman Empire—those in Rome and Carthage—had anonymous origins. Adolph von Harnack affirms, “the great mission of Christianity was in reality accomplished by means of informal missionaries,”²⁷ while Stephen Neill adds that “every Christian was a witness . . . nothing is more notable than the anonymity of these early missionaries.”²⁸ This spirit of early Christian mission seems best captured in the anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*:

For Christians are no different from other people in terms of their country, language, or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, or live life out of the ordinary. . . . They inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities according to the lot assigned to each; . . . they participate in all things as citizens. . . . They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born. They share their meals but not their sexual partners. They are found in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but participate in the life of heaven.²⁹

As mission seemed to be owned by much of the church, this was also expressed in the number of “bi-vocational” missionaries in the early church—those who witnessed to Christ while occupied with other work. For instance, philosophers and teachers such as Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165) and Origen taught philosophy and directed schools while also engaging in cross-cultural witness. Likewise, a number of bishops, those set apart to lead established congregations, engaged in missionary work. In Gaul, Irenaeus (ca. 115–200) reached out as an apologist to gnostics and also learned Gaelic in order to preach in rural villages in addition to serving the church at Lyons. Similarly, Martin of Tours (ca. 316–397) was an itinerant preacher and cared for the poor on top of being a bishop. In Asia Minor,

26. Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.9 cited in Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2.1528.

27. Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, 368.

28. Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 24.

29. *Letter to Diognetus* 5.1–6, cited in Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2.1566.

Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. 213–270) was set apart as bishop of his native Pontus and spent many days caring for the poor and oppressed while also evangelizing intellectuals.³⁰ A final group of missionaries occupied with a primary vocation were monks, who will, of course, be the focus of this book.

Marks of Early Christian and Medieval Mission

What were some of the characteristics or marks of mission in the early and medieval church? First, mission was marked by suffering, especially in the period prior to Constantine's rule. While no responsible student of history would claim that Christians were unceasingly persecuted in the centuries prior to Constantine, it is difficult to deny the accounts of the churches in places like Lyons, Carthage, Alexandria, and Rome. Examination of various accounts of persecution and martyrdom, including the words and actions of those who suffered, show that, in an indirect manner, suffering did serve as a strategic means for the advancement of the gospel.³¹ For instance, the public context of persecution allowed Christians the opportunity to witness verbally about their faith and to clarify and defend the gospel. In some cases, it was reported that some bystanders were converted to Christianity because of the persecution they witnessed; while in other cases, non-Christian observers sympathized with suffering Christians—an influence that seemed to lay further groundwork for the growth of the church. Persecution against Christians also resulted in apologetics, written treatises that defended and articulated Christian belief. Finally, suffering served to invigorate the church and its mission through the death of martyrs. As they were memorialized on feast days, mentioned in sermons, remembered in sacred biographies (*vitae*), and honored through the construction of churches, Christian martyrs strengthened the witness of the church.

Next, evangelism was central to early Christian mission.³² As shown in the *Letter to Diognetus*, many Christians witnessed as a way of life in the marketplace and in their spheres of influence. Philosophers such as Justin, Pantaeus (ca. 120–ca. 200), and Origen focused on sharing the gospel with intellectuals, while Gregory the Enlightener (ca. 240–332), Patrick of Ireland (ca. 387–461), and Columba set a pattern of engaging politi-

30. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 32–39.

31. See my expanded discussion in Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 49–73.

32. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 74–90.

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cal leaders with the Christian message. Others focused their attention on evangelizing heretics. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) reached out to the schismatic Donatists, while John of Damascus (ca. 650–749) and Timothy of Baghdad (727–823) sought to evangelize the “heretics” of their day—Muslims.³³ Finally, some early Christian leaders—including Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* and Augustine in his *Confessions*—shared public, recorded testimonies of how they were converted for the benefit of a broader audience.

A third mark of mission was translating the Scripture into the local language of evangelized peoples.³⁴ Once churches were established, many congregations worshipped in a regional trade language and Christians, who were fluent in another language, benefited from Scripture or Christian literature through that medium. However, in a rather short period of time, the vernacular principle prevailed making Scripture available in many of the heart languages of peoples where the gospel had taken hold. In the early Christian period, this included Syriac, Latin, Coptic, Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopic. Irvin and Sunquist correctly assert, “translocation [of the gospel message] and [Bible] translation went hand in hand.”³⁵

Another quality of mission in this period involved contextualizing or clarifying the gospel in diverse contexts.³⁶ This was accomplished through missionaries being conversant with ideas and forms of communication, through redeeming sacred space and pre-existing festivals, by connecting with visual culture, and by understanding the culture of the marketplace. Through these approaches, the gospel began to take root among many peoples and in many areas. This demonstrated that Christianity was a faith that could be at home in a given culture while also bringing transformation to that culture.

Fifth, early Christian mission was characterized by ministry in both word and deed.³⁷ That is, mission was not restricted to proclamation alone; nor did mission ever become gospel-less humanitarian aid. While the gospel message remained unchanged—a message centered on the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and supported by the rule of faith and early Christian creeds—there was some diversity in deed ministry. Various

33. Smither, “Augustine, Missionary to Heretics?,” 269–88.

34. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 91–108.

35. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 54.

36. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 109–26.

37. *Ibid.*, 127–47.

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ministries included caring for the poor, hungry, imprisoned, enslaved, and otherwise marginalized; but it could also be observed through works of healing and casting out evil spirits.

Finally, mission in the early church was quite church-centered.³⁸ Though strategies changed over time and church forms looked different, a time never came when there was a church-less Christianity. Interestingly, the church was a powerful means for mission as well as its most visible outcome. In the first century, mission was accomplished through a deliberate house-to-house approach and the *oikos* (household) structure facilitated an organic church, especially during periods of time when Christians were unable to exist as a legitimate organization. Even after peace was given to the church in the fourth century, mission flowed from the church and back to the church in the absence of any structured missions societies. That evangelism, catechesis, and baptism efforts were located in the context of the church solidified this church-focused mission. The phenomenon of church art showed that non-believers could embrace the gospel through seeing the gospel visually in basilicas built after the fourth century. While the public acceptance of Christianity and the construction of buildings probably thwarted the spontaneous multiplication of churches that the house churches facilitated, there was still a sense of mission and the church remained a central element.

Summary

This chapter has offered a baseline for comprehending mission in the early and medieval church. I began by offering a basic definition of mission from a biblical foundation. Next, I have briefly summarized the status of mission in the early church with attention to the geographical spread of Christianity, the political and religious context in which the church witnessed, the identity of early Christian missionaries, and some defining characteristics of mission in this period. This chapter has offered some background in order to locate the work of missionary monks. The following chapter will give further context by summarizing the origins and emergence of monasticism.

38. Ibid., 149–63.

CHAPTER 2

Rise of Monasticism

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was teaching a church history survey course at an evangelical seminary. When we reached the module on monasticism, I wanted the students to engage the subject a bit more personally. So I arranged for the class to get in contact with a community of Benedictine monks in England who had set up an online outreach called “Ask a monk.” The monks were gracious to field our students’ inquiries and many students responded by asking some honest questions: Why did you choose to become a monk? How do you spend your day? Do you ever regret your decision? Isn’t a monastic lifestyle a little selfish when there is so much ministry to be done in the world?

In this chapter, our aim is somewhat similar—to understand the motivation and work of monks in history. Beginning with a basic definition of monasticism, I will narrate the movement’s historic rise, its essential elements, the diversity within it, and some of its key innovators in the early church. By shedding light on these background questions, we will be better able to grasp the rise of missionary monasticism.

The Origins and Essence of Monasticism

The word “monasticism” comes from the Greek word *monasterion*, which referred either to a monk’s individual cell or to the cloister where a group of monks lived. Related, the term “monk” stems from two Greek ideas—*monos*

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(“alone”) and *monachos* (“solitary one”). The earliest reference to a *monachos* is found in an Egyptian manuscript from around the year 324.¹

The question of the origins of Christian monasticism is not an easy one to resolve, and a number of theories have been advanced. As monasticism has played an important role in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, some have speculated that these movements influenced Christian asceticism. In the Graeco-Roman context, there was a form of ascetic discipline associated with the temples of Serapis. Further, there were some monastic elements in Judaism, particularly the Essenes who lived at Qumran and the Therapeutae of Egypt. Finally, beginning in the third century, ascetic communities could be observed within the Manichean sect.² Though these basic similarities are interesting to consider, Goehring argues that no real correlation can be made between these ascetic groups and Christian monasticism.³ Harmless asserts that the origins of Christian monasticism are probably mostly Christian, as “praying in deserts, fasting, celibacy, renunciation of family and wealth” were characteristic of Jesus and Paul and these values shaped Christianity from the first century onward.⁴ For Goehring, the biggest factor that influenced the rise of fourth-century Christian monasticism was the theological reflection and practice that developed as the church’s status began to change in society. He writes: “The origin of the Christian monastic life is instead found in the transformation of the eschatological communion of saints brought on by the delay of the second coming of Christ and the increasing success of Christianity.”⁵ Martyrdom had been the “ultimate expression of Christian commitment” in the Roman context in the first three centuries; however, following the rise of Constantine and the peace and favor given to the church, “the monk replaced the martyr as a Christian hero” and “they became the earthly embodiment of the heavenly communion of saints.”⁶ In short, monks were the new martyrs.

Determining the birthplace of monasticism has also been a challenging task. Though many have assumed that it originated in Egypt, this is

1. See Goehring, “Monasticism,” 769; also Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 459, 493; and Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 1.

2. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 10–17, 20–21; Goehring, “Monasticism,” 769; and Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 11–12.

3. Goehring, “Monasticism,” 769.

4. Harmless, “Monasticism,” 493; cf. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 22–25; also Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 99.

5. Goehring, “Monasticism,” 769.

6. *Ibid.*; cf. Noll, *Turning Points*, 82.

largely because the earliest and most plentiful written accounts of monasticism are about Egyptian monks and communities. But the Egyptian accounts are not the only accounts. Showing the diverse and parallel origins of early Christian monasticism, Harmless writes, “Egypt was not *the* birthplace but *a* birthplace. Syria has at least an equal claim, and Palestine and Cappadocia may as well.”⁷

While this chapter will highlight some of monasticism’s diversity, one unifying element across monastic groups was a renunciation of the world and a deliberate attempt to mortify the flesh and its desires. Early Egyptian monasticism was characterized by a pessimistic view of the body, largely informed by neo-Platonic philosophy and Origen’s theology. This drove an asceticism that was quite rigorous in which monks fasted from sleep and food and kept to the most basic diet.⁸ Later, other monastic leaders such as Basil (329–379), Augustine, and Benedict advocated a more moderate ascetic approach.⁹ As men and women in the monastic tradition renounced the world, they embraced voluntary poverty and celibacy. Their daily lives largely revolved around the three major disciplines of prayer, reading Scripture, and manual labor. Monks prayed individually, in groups, during liturgical assemblies, and as they went about their work. Prayer was facilitated by the discipline of regular fasting, but also through work (i.e., weaving mats) that helped the monk to stay focused while praying.¹⁰ They also read Scripture and sang psalms individually and in groups, as well as during worship gatherings. Finally, monks engaged in manual labor to stay focused in prayer, but also to sustain themselves and their community. While these three disciplines were the foundation of monastic living, over thirty monastic rules or manuals emerged in the early Christian period that reveal much diversity in monastic theology and practice.¹¹

Monastic Diversity and Innovators

Beginning in the late third century, monasticism began to take on some recognizable forms. Due to a significant body of literature celebrating the lives of monks, we are afforded a window of sorts into this development.

7. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 434.

8. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 6–8.

9. *Ibid.*, 64–69, 71–72.

10. *Ibid.*, 125.

11. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 116.

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This body of literature included works on individuals such as Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, Jerome's *Life of Paul*, and the *Life of Pachomius*. In addition, there were general histories published, such as the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, the *Lausiac History*, and the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (*Apophthegmata Patrum*). The latter work, recorded between 330 and 460, consists of more than a thousand stories about Egyptian monks, including many statements directly attributed to them.¹² As these works were translated and circulated in multiple languages, especially Coptic, Greek, and Latin, they had a great influence on the early church and certainly aided the growth of monasticism.¹³

There was much diversity in the world of early Christian monasticism. Goehring describes it as the "complex continuum from the fully solitary monk to the fully communal monk."¹⁴ On one end of the spectrum, hermitic or anchoritic monasticism emphasized the "extreme solitary life."¹⁵ Spiritual growth and victory over the flesh happened best through *anachoresis* ("withdrawal"). This was the type of monasticism practiced by Antony (ca. 251–ca. 356) and celebrated by Athanasius in his *Life of Antony*.

On the other end of the spectrum, there was coenobitic or communal monasticism, where "monks lived together in a community under a common monastic rule."¹⁶ While withdrawing from the world, this group believed that community with other monks was necessary for spiritual growth. Over time, the coenobitic approach became the most prominent form of Christian monasticism.

It would be too simple to limit monasticism to these two groups because there was much room in between. For instance, the fourth-century monks of Nitria (Egypt) formed semi-hermitic communities in which "a group of monks constructed their solitary cells in relatively close proximity to one another."¹⁷ Dunn points out that "Egyptian hermitic monasticism was never an entirely solitary affair. Antony himself received visitors and

12. For an in-depth introduction to this literature, see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 167–305; cf. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 67; and Smither, "To Emulate and Imitate," 150–51.

13. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 102.

14. Cited in Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 421.

15. Goehring, "Monasticism," 770.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

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seems to have supervised monks.”¹⁸ Some anchoritic monks, like Evagrius of Pontus (345–399), admitted that withdrawal to isolation was a process because human beings—even monks—still needed other humans. In his personal ascetic journey, Evagrius “had gone from one end of the monastic spectrum, as a city dwelling monk-cleric in the coenobitic tradition, to being a more isolated, desert-dwelling anchorite (hermit). Evagrius was surely following the counsel of the abbas [monastic abbots or fathers]¹⁹ who ‘approve highly of an anachoresis that is undertaken by degrees.’”²⁰

The story of early and medieval Christianity includes many women ascetics as well. Some of these, such as Basil of Caesarea’s grandmother and his sister (both named Macrina), proved to be quite influential in the development of early monasticism. Though some women lived as anchorites, most gathered in communal monasteries, many of which were parallel houses to a community of men. For example, when Pachomius (292–346) was instituting his *koinonia* (monastic settlements) in Egypt, his sister founded a monastic house for women.²¹

Given this basic description of the diversity within early monasticism, let us expand this further by briefly narrating the lives and contributions of some key monastic innovators. Although Antony was not the first anchoritic monk, he became a prominent symbol of this monastic form largely because of the successful distribution of Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*.²² Apparently, Antony was drawn to an ascetic lifestyle when he heard Jesus’ words from Matthew 19:21 preached in church: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”²³ Taking this text literally, he sold his possessions and gave what he had to the poor, while also taking care of his sister’s material needs. Initially, he moved to the edge of his village and then eventually across the Nile to a more remote area to avoid human contact. Ironically, his withdrawal seemed to invite more and more pilgrims and

18. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 13.

19. *Abba* (Aramaic) and *apa* (Coptic) is rendered “abbot” in English and refers to a monastic father or superior.

20. Smither, “Lessons from a Tentmaking Ascetic,” 487; cf. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 56.

21. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 45–47; also Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 121; and Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 119.

22. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 8–12; also Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 100.

23. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references in this book are from the New International Version.

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visitors, which forced him farther into the wilderness near the Red Sea. After some twenty years living largely in isolation, he agreed to become the spiritual father of a loosely-related group of anchorites.²⁴

Though certainly not the first coenobitic monk, Pachomius' name has been most associated with the rise of communal monasticism. Following his discharge from the Roman army, Pachomius returned home to Upper Egypt, where he was converted and later pursued an ascetic lifestyle under the mentorship of a hermit named Palamon. Pachomius' biographers reported that in response to a mystical voice calling, he left Palamon and formed a community of monks at Tabennesi. This later expanded into other settlements down the Nile River in Upper Egypt. According to Palladius' *Lausiac History*, Pachomius' monastic settlements included as many as three thousand monks.²⁵ Pachomius' contributions to coenobitic monasticism were twofold. First, he demonstrated innovation by organizing monastic settlements into what he called the *koinonia*. Each settlement included as many as forty houses and there was leadership at both the settlement and house level. This organizational structure, perhaps the fruit of Pachomius' training in the Roman military, facilitated both leadership development and growth of the overall *koinonia*.²⁶ Second, Pachomius drafted the first known monastic rule. This manual expressed the values of the *koinonia* and served as a guide for how the community of monks would carry out their daily lives. Pachomius' rule influenced later rules developed by Basil and Benedict.²⁷

Another Egyptian monk Ammoun (d. ca. 350) founded a monastery at Mount Nitria near the Nile Delta. He was soon joined by others, including Macarius the Great (ca. 300–ca. 390) and, over time, three monastic settlements were started. This was also the region where the famous *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* were recorded. Ammoun was an innovator because of the semi-hermitic nature of his settlements—a loose association of anchorites who enjoyed isolation and community in their ascetic callings.²⁸

24. Goehring, "Monasticism," 771; also Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 2, 8–9.

25. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor*; also Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 25–27; and Noll, *Turning Points*, 90.

26. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 47.

27. Harmless, "Monasticism," 494; also Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 115; and Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 102–3.

28. Goehring, "Monasticism," 771.

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Another monastic innovator who is often overlooked is Shenoute (334–450), who served as abba of the famous White Monastery in Upper Egypt. Shenoute led a coenobitic monastery in the tradition of Pachomius, and he was one of the greatest theologians of the Coptic Church in Egypt. He has been largely forgotten until recently because, unlike others, his works were never translated into Greek and his influence was limited to Coptic speakers.²⁹

Originally from Georgia, Evagrius of Pontus was ordained a deacon in Caesarea (Asia Minor) where he also lived in community with other monks. After an apparent moral failure, he fled to Egypt and joined Ammoun's semi-hermitic settlement.³⁰ Evagrius became one of the earliest and greatest monastic theologians. Although his theology was forged in the Egyptian desert, it ultimately influenced the western Roman Catholic Church. As I have previously written: "Evagrius' greatest theological contribution was articulating his eight thoughts (*logismoi*) that inhibited spiritual progress—gluttony, lust, love of money, anger, dejection, *akedia* (listlessness), glory, and pride. These thoughts were introduced to the church by Evagrius' disciple John Cassian, and after Gregory the Great combined the ideas of vainglory and pride, they became known in the western medieval church as the seven sins."³¹

Outside of Egypt, other monastic innovators emerged in Syria and Palestine. Originally from Asia Minor, Symeon the Stylite (388–459) immigrated to Syria and became a symbol of rigorous Syrian monasticism. Symeon is largely remembered for spending the last thirty years of his life in isolation atop a column that reached as high at fifty feet off the ground.³² Hilarion (293–371), whose sacred biography was recorded by Jerome, was a leader among anchorites in Palestine. He spent over twenty years alone and inspired the founding of monasteries in the Judean wilderness.³³

Having been influenced in the ascetic life by his own family and by the monk bishop Eustathius of Sebaste (300–377), Basil of Caesarea emerged as a monastic innovator in Asia Minor.³⁴ A coenobitic monk who was also an ordained bishop, Basil articulated a monastic rule in his *Longer Rules* and

29. Ibid., 772; also Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 33–34.

30. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 166; also Harmless, "Monasticism," 502.

31. Smither, "Lessons from a Tentmaking Ascetic," 487–88.

32. Goehring, "Monasticism," 773; also Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 49–51.

33. Goehring, "Monasticism," 773.

34. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 104–5.

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Shorter Rules. He was convinced that community was a necessary means for spiritual growth and that the work of the Holy Spirit and application of Scripture in one monk's life could serve to edify others in the community. Basil's monastic theology was probably best summarized by Christ's teaching, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39). As we will show, Basil was critical of monks who were so focused on the contemplative aspects of the ascetic life that they ignored opportunities to minister to the community. Basil's monastic thought and practice greatly shaped monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.³⁵

Similar to Evagrius of Pontus, John Cassian (360–435) served as a broker between eastern and western Christianity and he influenced western monasticism with Egyptian values. Born in Scythia Minor (modern Bulgaria and Romania), Cassian lived among the Egyptian monks and recorded their dialogues in his work *Conferences*, which presented an anchoritic monastic vision. He also authored *Institutes* that outlined the coenobitic approach. Cassian was probably influenced by Basil and Pachomius' thoughts on communal monasticism through reading their rules and works in translation. He spent the latter part of his life in Gaul and established monasteries in Marseille, where he introduced many Egyptian practices. Cassian's influence extended beyond Gaul as his works (along with those of Basil and Jerome) were read by Celtic monastic innovators, Columba and Columban (543–615).³⁶

Largely remembered in church history for his theology and philosophy, Augustine of Hippo served as a monk bishop in the North African context for the majority of his adult life. A contemporary of Cassian, he developed the first monastic rule in the western church and he trained clergy for ministry in the African church from his *monasterium clericorum* ("clergy monastery") in Hippo. While Augustine was committed to the value of monastic labor, some of the work of his monks included preaching, teaching, and writing theology for the church, and so his monastery was much more academic and intellectual than the more austere ones in Syria or Egypt.³⁷

35. Harmless, "Monasticism," 496, 505; also Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 38–39, 70; and Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 89.

36. Goehring, "Monasticism," 774; also Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 74–81, 88–89; and Harmless, "Monasticism," 495.

37. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor*, 134–57; also Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 64, 85–88; and Harmless, "Monasticism," 496.

A final monastic innovator, perhaps the most famous in the western tradition, was Benedict of Nursia. Originally a hermit who lived for a time in a cave, Benedict embraced a coenobitic approach and founded a monastery at Monte Cassino near Rome in 529. Influenced by Antony, Pachomius, Basil, Augustine, and Cassian, Benedict developed his own rule that focused on prayer and liturgy. Specifically, Benedict set a daily schedule for prayer and singing psalms, reading Scripture (*lectio divina*), and work.³⁸ More than any other monastic leader before him, Benedict brought balance and moderation to monastic living. Harmless asserts that the Benedictine rule became the “constitution of western monasticism.”³⁹ There is also evidence that Benedict’s monastic vision also influenced Columban and the Celtic monks and that Augustine of Canterbury and his monks took Benedict’s rule with them on the mission to England in 596.⁴⁰

The Rise of Missionary Monks

Intrinsic to the idea of monastic calling was separation from the world. Describing the architecture of Pachomius’ *koinonia*, Harmless writes, “High walls were the most distinctive feature of a Pachomian monastery. These served as the very visible boundary separating monastery from the outside world.”⁴¹ Other monastic leaders, such as Benedict, worked to restrict the monks’ contact with the outside world as much as possible. Given these tendencies within early monasticism, how did a missionary movement develop that would become the church’s primary evangelistic arm in the early and medieval church?

Though a deliberate missionary emphasis was not prevalent in third- and fourth- century monasticism, there are some indications that monks did care about non-Christians. Harmless notes that Pachomius’ original monastic vision was broader than merely caring for monks; it was to “minister to the human race” and “unite it to God.”⁴² Harmless adds that at least one of Pachomius’ biographers portrayed the abba’s work from a missional perspective:

38. Goehring, “Monasticism,” 774; also Harmless, “Monasticism,” 497; Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 373; and Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 114, 128.

39. Harmless, “Monasticism,” 497; cf. Noll, *Turning Points*, 86–87.

40. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 173, 192; also Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 84.

41. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 125; cf. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 124–125.

42. Cited in Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 141.

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Given that the Monastery of the Metanoia was built, quite literally, on the ruins of paganism, it was no accident that the author of the *First Greek Life* situates the work of Pachomius against the horizon of Christianity's worldwide mission. In the prologue, he explicitly quotes Matthew 28:19, in which the risen Jesus sends forth his apostles to go to all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He goes on to cite the divine promise made to Abraham, that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars (Gen 22:17). He then links the demise of paganism with the rise of monasticism in general and Pachomius in particular.⁴³

Other Egyptian monks also showed some signs of missionary commitment. According to Palladius, Macarius the Alexandrian was concerned that his monks maintained a balance of prayer, work, and ministry in their daily lives, which at very least shows that he was concerned that they had a ministry.⁴⁴ For some fourth-century Egyptian monks, this meant cooperating with the church and serving as “evangelists to the countryside” and “winning people to Christianity.”⁴⁵ Abba Shenoute was also engaged in evangelism among pagans and even aided in destroying some pagan temples.⁴⁶ Finally, the monks of Egypt as a whole were deeply committed to hospitality.⁴⁷ While many of the visitors to Egypt were Christian pilgrims, others were surely non-believers who were invited to table fellowship inside the monastic settlements. This tendency probably opened the door even more toward a missionary monasticism.

We can observe missional tendencies in western monasticism as well. Though Bishop Gregory's depiction of Benedict in his *Dialogues* has been questioned, it still suggests that Benedict was involved in mission. Dunn writes: “The *Dialogues* portray Benedict as an evangelist who uses the Subiaco house as a base for preaching in the surrounding countryside and Monte Cassino itself as a center of conversion. He destroys a pagan temple on the summit of the mountain to create churches and converts the pagan peasants of the neighborhood to Christianity.”⁴⁸ Evidence likewise hints that Benedict had some contact with the Gothic King Totila and that he and his monks evangelized the people in the region of Monte Cassino during

43. Ibid., 140.

44. Ibid., 288.

45. Ibid., 16.

46. Ibid., 446.

47. Ibid., 118, 176–77, 275, 280–81; also Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 42.

48. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 132.

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some turbulent days.⁴⁹ Like the monks of Egypt, Benedict taught his monks to practice hospitality: “All guests . . . are to be welcomed as Christ for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’ (Matt 25:35).”⁵⁰

While Gregory captured some of Benedict’s missionary convictions in his writings, the monk bishop of Rome also spent many years wrestling with the tension between the contemplative life in the monastery and the active life in the community and world, especially as monks like himself were being increasingly ordained into church ministry. In a recent work on Gregory, George Demacopoulos argues that the Roman bishop’s thoughts on the tension between the contemplative and active life were the most developed among the church fathers. Possessing “an ascetic vision that emphasized service to others as the climax of the spiritual and ascetic life,” Gregory advocated a monasticism that celebrated the monk being interrupted from prayer, fasting, and other disciplines in order to serve others.⁵¹ It seems that Gregory’s leanings toward the active side of monasticism were what led him to ordain Augustine of Canterbury as a missionary bishop and send him along with forty monks to England in 596.⁵² As monks were connected more to the work of the church, including community outreach, it seems that missionary activity also increased.

Up to this point in our discussion, the observed missionary work was largely an indirect by-product of monastic living and a secondary concern for most monks. However, the monastic vision of Basil of Caesarea seems to signal a turning point in the relationship between monasticism and mission. As shown, his monastic rule was centered on loving one’s neighbor, including those outside of the church and the Christian faith. He was also “critical of self-absorbed hermits.”⁵³ Laboa writes that for Basil, “Monastic life should not interpreted as a way of escaping from the world, of despising secular ways and habits, but merely as an attempt to form an eschatological community in our history.”⁵⁴ It was an ascetic life built on the value of

49. See Gregory, *Dialogues* 2.8, 14–15, 21; cf. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 78; also Noll, *Turning Points*, 81.

50. Benedict, *Rule* 73 cited in Noll, *Turning Points*, 89.

51. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great*, 26.

52. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 135–36; also Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 114.

53. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 105; cf. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 52; and Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 429.

54. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 89.

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serving others.⁵⁵ Robert Wilken adds, “And when he [Basil] was made a bishop he sought ways to adapt the monastic vision of radical devotion to God to life in the city. The solitary life of prayer would be complemented by the active life. Contemplation and service were to go hand in hand.”⁵⁶ As we will show in the next chapter, Basil’s missionary monastic vision included engaging the culturally diverse peoples who passed through Caesarea by showing hospitality, by offering practical help during humanitarian crises, and of course, by inviting non-believers to embrace the gospel. While Basil evangelized within the multi-cultural context of Asia Minor, it is not surprising that the evangelization of neighboring Armenia was accomplished in part through the witness of Cappadocian monks.⁵⁷ As we have also shown, later monastic thinkers reading Basil’s rules were probably influenced by his outward mission focus.

Another significant turning point toward a missionary monasticism was the emergence of Celtic monasticism, especially with its notion of *peregrinus* or pilgrimage. Among the Celtic monks of Ireland and Wales, this practice of wandering was considered to be the highest form of penance and self-renunciation.⁵⁸ Yet, as these pilgrims mingled among pagans, non-Christians, and even lapsed Christians, they were compelled to minister to them. Dunn writes: “While wandering, *peregrini* might find themselves accepting the role of bishop and their monasteries serving as centers of conversion and baptism, officially-appointed bishops and missions to non-urbanized areas might use monasteries as bases for the same purpose.”⁵⁹ Over time, the Celtic monks became more deliberate about mission. Dunn describes them as “*peregrini* on the peripheries of Christendom who believed that they were doing their Christian duty by preaching the word of God to pagans, apostates, or the very recently converted.”⁶⁰ Laboa adds that, over time, gospel proclamation became “no less a vocation than the search for solitude” for them.⁶¹ In short, the Celtic missionary conviction developed simply because the monks were living among non-believers and recognized their spiritual needs.

55. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 41.

56. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 105.

57. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 160.

58. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 140.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*, 149–50.

61. Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 120.

MISSIONARY MONKS

Missionary monasticism became much more recognizable in the medieval period through the deliberate preaching of the Dominican monks and the purposeful cross-cultural evangelism strategies of Francis of Assisi and Raymund Lull in the Muslim world.⁶² In Europe, however, it seems that the monks' effectiveness in reaching the pagan population came through their presence and demonstrating the Christian life in word and in deed. Noll summarizes: "For a monastery to be established in a pagan area allowed the local population to see the application of Christianity to daily existence, as monks tilled the soil, welcomed visitors, and carried out the offices of study and daily prayer. So arose the saying that the monks civilized Europe *cruce, libro, et atro*—with cross, book, and plow."⁶³

Summary

Wilken argues that because the monastic movement was "versatile, resilient, and adaptable," it served as the key organism in the Middle Ages for spreading the gospel outside of the Roman Empire and even eastward into Muslim-dominated areas.⁶⁴ In this chapter, we have attempted to narrate some of the backstory of missionary monasticism by grasping the meaning, origins, and development of monasticism in early and medieval Christianity. Given this foundation, in subsequent chapters, we will meet a variety of missionary monks, explore their contexts of service, and examine their approaches to and thoughts about mission.

62. Noll, *Turning Points*, 92.

63. *Ibid.*, 92.

64. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 108.