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THE NEW MONASTICISM: A Quest for Spiritual Renewal in the Urban Desert

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Shane Claiborne¹ grew up in the Bible Belt of East Tennessee, but became disillusioned with the cultural Christianity taught in church, which he believed contradicted the Bible and had no relevance to real-world issues. His faith was rekindled while defending the rights of the homeless as an Eastern University student activist and caring for dying lepers alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta. In 1997, Claiborne and six friends started The Simple Way to be a new monastic community promoting a type of countercultural Christian lifestyle in the lower-income area of Kensington, Pennsylvania.²

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, having grown up in King, North Carolina, found it difficult to be a Christian in America. As a teenager, he came to realize the church he grew up in left him with an unbiblical understanding of poverty and race. His faith was renewed after visiting The Simple Way as a student at Eastern University, and serving as a Christian Peacemaker protesting America's 2003 Iraq war. It was actually in the Iraqi town of Rutba that he witnessed an Iraqi surgeon care for his Christian Peacemaker teammates who were injured in a car accident. He does not mention the Iraqi surgeon's faith, but remembers his words: "Three days ago your country bombed our hospital. But whether you are American or Iraqi, Christian or Muslim, we will take care of you because we take care of everyone." This served for Wilson-Hartgrove as a living example of a modern Good Samaritan and provided the inspiration to start his own new monastic community in the lower-income area of Durham, North Carolina, called Rutba House.³

Many other Christians from various denominations— Roman Catholic, Anabaptist, evangelical, and mainline Protestant— disillusioned with what they perceive to be spiritual compromises within the American church, have left their home churches to start their own new monastic communities.⁴ "During a time when Christianity was transitioning from the persecuted faith of a minority to the state-sponsored religion of the powerful," Wilson-Hartgrove explains, "the monastic impulse drove desert abbas (fathers) and ammas (mothers) out into the abandoned places to learn God's power by fighting the devil face to face."⁵ For Wilson-Hartgrove, the act of "relocation" is a social statement involving a retreat—"not to an old way of life and

yes to a search for a new one.” For this new monasticism, the “abandoned places” refer to the inner city, which “has no attraction for the ‘world of what’s happening now,’ and therefore is left alone by the political, economic, and social powers.”⁶

Scott Bessenecker, director of global projects with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, observes that the new monasticism is “partly a reaction to the self-absorbed life of material accumulation, career obsession and amusement fixation that is promoted in the West and that is now being exported around the world as a picture of ‘the good life.’”⁷

A NEW MONASTIC ORDER

The concept for a “new monasticism” was first suggested in 1935 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote, “The restoration of the church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ.”⁸

The actual challenge to start new monastic communities came via *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* by Jonathan R. Wilson (the father-in-law of Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove), which explored lessons the church could learn from social philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Applying MacIntyre’s statement, “We are waiting not for a Godot...but for another—and doubtless very different—St. Benedict” to appear in the modern church, Wilson proposed “not a new St. Benedict, but Christian communities that may produce a new St. Benedict,” and hoped that “God would move to create communities that could imagine new forms of faithfulness for American Christianity.”⁹

Other significant Christian influences on new monastic beliefs and practices include John Howard Yoder, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Tony Campolo, and Jim Wallis.

At a 2004 “New Monasticism Gathering” of approximately sixty members from various communities organized by Wilson-Hartgrove, participants discovered that while they were diverse in many ways, they all sought to produce “a grassroots ecumenism and a prophetic witness within the North American church,” and agreed on the following twelve Marks of New Monasticism:¹⁰

1. Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.
2. Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
3. Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church.
4. Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
5. Hospitality to the stranger.
6. Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.
7. Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
8. Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.

9. Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies.
10. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
11. Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate [i.e., a probationary period that a novice undergoes before entering into a religious order].
12. Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.

There are many positive aspects to the new monastic movement, such as its commitment to share resources, develop alternative economies in impoverished areas, and work to eliminate the racial lines that tend to divide churches in America. However, there are a few concerns, which the following will address in more detail.

NEW MONASTIC ORTHODOXY, ORTHOPRAXY, AND HETERODOXY¹¹

Apart from the Twelve Marks of New Monasticism, new monasticism does not affirm a common doctrinal creed or statement of faith. They do acknowledge the need to have good doctrine. For example, Claiborne writes, "We dive into the Scriptures together, meeting bad theology with good theology,"¹² and he acknowledges the importance of both orthodoxy (right beliefs) and orthopraxis (right living or right practices).¹³

Wilson-Hartgrove even admits, "Sometimes when I talk with evangelical friends about the grassroots ecumenism of new monastic communities, they tell me I'm not taking doctrine seriously enough. I worry about this myself...I worry not so much because I want to be right; I worry because I don't want to see people I loved destroyed by lies."¹⁴

In spite of this recognition of the need to preserve good doctrine, new monasticism at points fails at "meeting bad theology with good theology," and some things they propagate actually undermine theological orthodoxy.

Claiborne's Christian Radicalism

Claiborne's orthopraxis is undermined by an unhealthy reliance on subjective experience. Recounting his ministry in India, for example, he shares, "As I looked into the eyes of the dying, I felt like I was meeting God...as if I were entering the Holy of Holies of the temple—sacred, mystical,"¹⁵ and when lepers whispered *namaste* in his ears, he sensed what existentialist Martin Buber called the *I-Thou*, wherein he no longer objectified the others but saw Jesus in others as others saw Jesus in him.¹⁶

Problematic in Claiborne's testimonial is the fact that *namaste* is a Sanskrit term meaning "I honor the Divine within you" and a Hindu "affirmation of pantheism," which is "a denial of the true God revealed in the Bible."¹⁷

The appeal to Buber's existentialism is also troubling, since it denies the possibility of knowing God through reason and propositional truth.¹⁸ Could not Claiborne come to realize the inherent worth and dignity of each person in reading Scripture? Does not the biblical teaching of humanity being created in God's image

(Gen. 1:27) and of God's Son being incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ to save humans from sin (John 1:1, 14; 3:16) testify to the true value of each person?

Shane Claiborne and fellow new monastic Chris Haw perceives "sin as man's inhumanity to man...not as rebellion against God," and emphasizing "deliverance from social, economic and political conditions, rather than reconciliation to God and the new birth."¹⁹

In *Jesus for President*, Claiborne and Haw teach that Jesus' message was about "folks coming together, forming close-knit communities, and meeting each other's needs—no kings, no major welfare systems, no presidents necessary," and "His jubilee was a liberation of all the poor and broken peoples of the empire."²⁰ For them to be "born again" means having "an invitation to join a peculiar people—those with no king but God, who practice jubilee economics [wealth redistribution] and make the world new."²¹

The Sabbath year and Jubilee provided ways for the poor to generate wealth to escape the bonds of poverty (Lev. 25), albeit it was not premised on "class struggle" with the rich being the cause of the poverty amongst the poor. Instead, the practice reminded Israelites that "man is not the sole owner of the soil and he does not hold property in perpetuity but possesses it in trust under God."²² However, sinful Israel ultimately failed to keep the Sabbath and therefore experienced God's judgment and exile (cf. Lev. 25:1–34; Deut. 15:1–22; 2 Chron. 36:15–21; Jer. 17:19–27; 25:8–11).

Jesus' Jubilee message announced the end of exile, which would come through His ministry, though not readily accepted by all (Luke 4:14–37). New Testament writers such as Paul believed Christ to be the fulfillment of all the types and shadows of the Old Testament, which included the Sabbath (Col. 12:16–19). The author of Hebrews also points to an eternal Sabbath received by those who have faith in the Gospel (Heb. 4:10). The ministry of Christ did have a social dimension (cf. Isa. 1:17; Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 11:30–37; James 2:1–13), but it also had a spiritual dimension, namely the salvation of the soul (Matt. 10:28; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:9).

Claiborne and Haw, moreover, discourage objective truth claims and religious conversions. For example, in their address on the post-9/11 tensions between Christians and Muslims, they encourage readers of both religions, for the sake of "peacemaking," to be "continually seeking the true depths, meaning, and practice of their own faith," but, they admonish them, "when you think you have your faith set in stone as a fact, it is mutated to the status of crusade or a jihad." They thus conclude that "what the Church is supposed to do with Jesus is not convince everybody that he is an irrefutable fact (lest they burn!), but to act like him."²³

It is certainly appropriate to encourage devout Muslims and Christians to exercise tolerance and to condemn violence done on the basis of religious differences. This valid appeal should not be carried to a point, however, where we lose sight of our equally valid and biblically central calling to defend also propagate their own brand of liberation theology, which Christian truth claims (Jude 3). Acts 26 provides a helpful illustration of this principle. After Paul presents his case for the resurrection of Christ (vv. 2–23), King Agrippa replies, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a

Christian,” to which Paul responds, “I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains” (vv. 28–29).²⁴ Paul’s defense is certainly not “mutating faith to the status of a crusade.”

Wilson-Hartgrove’s Embrace of Black Theology

Wilson-Hartgrove shares that his mother taught him “a New South color blindness”; however, his interactions with the Black church led him to realize the “white” influence on his culture (e.g., slavery, racism, segregation) affected his understanding of Scripture.²⁵ Studying the works of Black theologians such as James Cone and Howard Thurman, as well as preacher turned slave revolt leader Nat Turner and secularists such as W. E. B. DuBois, Wilson-Hartgrove embraced the idea that the white Jesus who “did not get in the way of political economic realities but offered Himself...as a substitutionary atonement for sins,”²⁶ was not the Black Christ. Instead, he realized that “every slave who was beaten, every black woman raped, every black man lynched — Jesus was with them all. The Black Christ was God in the human flesh of those who suffered oppression under white supremacy.”²⁷

Wilson-Hartgrove’s acceptance of the idea that salvation of souls is only relevant to one class of people and the transformation of society to another misses the mark. The divorce of social justice from its biblical spiritual roots actually endangers the survival of the Black church, for without soul transformation, cultural transformation cannot happen.

Thabiti Anyabwile notes that “early black Christians evidence a rather sophisticated and clear theological corpus of thought” that formed “the basis for the African-American church’s engagement in both the propagation of the gospel and social justice activism.”²⁸ Over time, however, certain factors led the African-American church to be “less critical theologically and increasingly more concerned with social, political and educational agendas.” It now must be “understood primarily as a social institution and self-help organization with a vague spiritual dimension.” Anyabwile then warns, “As a consequence of theological drift and erosion, the black church now stands in danger of losing its relevance and power to effectively address both the spiritual needs of its communicants and the social and political aspirations of its community....It has lost the law and the gospel, and stands in danger of lapsing into spiritual rigor mortis” (emphasis in original).²⁹

DISCOVERING AUTHENTIC CHURCH

The new monastic emphasis on self-sacrifice and social reform is certainly commendable; however, doctrinal errors perpetuated by leaders in the movement create a stumbling block on the path to their quest for finding authentic church, which ultimately leaves them vulnerable to the deceptions of the wolves in sheep’s clothing.

Doctrines matter! We need only to be reminded of the tragedy of Jim Jones, leader of the Peoples Temple. Jones embraced a platform of racial reconciliation and opposed the Vietnam War. He preached social change and condemned oppressive

theologies. The true colors of Jones came out when he claimed his own divinity, and called followers to an undivided loyalty. On November 18, 1978, Jones called his devotees to the ultimate test of loyalty — death by cyanide-laced punch — and then he committed suicide. That day 909 members of the People’s Temple perished in the largest mass suicide in history.

The new monastic hope of imagining new ways to express the authentic church will come to ruin lest they remain faithful to the essential truths of the Christian faith delivered to them.

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NOTES

- 1 Shane Claiborne is also associated with house church evangelicals in the emerging church highway. See Mark Driscoll, “Navigating the Emergent Church Highway,” *Christian Research Journal*, 31, 4 [2008]: 14 (<http://www.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emergent-church-highway>).
- 2 Shane Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 37ff.
- 3 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 12ff.
- 4 See Jason Byasse, “The New Monastics: Alternative Christian Communities,” *The Christian Century Magazine*, http://www.christiancentury.org/article_print.lasso?id=1399, and “Community of Communities,” <http://www.communityofcommunities.info/>.
- 5 Wilson-Hartgrove, 46.
- 6 Sr. Margaret M. McKenna, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 15.
- 7 Scott A. Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 187.
- 8 Wilson-Hartgrove, 26.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 37–38.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 11 Heterodoxy means not in accordance to an established or accepted doctrine.
- 12 Shane Claiborne, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 31.
- 13 Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution*, 147–48.
- 14 Wilson-Hartgrove, 132.
- 15 Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution*, 79.
- 16 See Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution*, 80, 83, 265.
- 17 Elliot Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part 3: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response),” *Christian Research Journal* 31, 4 [2008]: 32 (<http://journal.equip.org/articles/the-yoga-boom-a-call-for-christian-discernment-part-three-toward-a-comprehensive-christian-response->).
- 18 For a critique on Buber, see James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 109–10, and Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 107–8.
- 19 Terry Miethe, *The Compact Dictionary of Doctrinal Words* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1988), 128.
- 20 Claiborne and Haw, 90.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 108.

- 22 D. Freeman, *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas, F. F. Bruce, J. I. Packer, et. al. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982), 1043.
- 23 Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, "Appendix 2: Mohammed for President?: Pluralism and Uniqueness," http://www.jesusforpresident.org/download/Web_Appendix_2.pdf.
- 24 All Scripture quotations are from the Updated New American Standard Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).
- 25 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Free to Be Bound* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008), 45–50.
- 26 Wilson-Hartgrove, *Free to Be Bound*, 84.
- 27 Ibid., 86. Note that the concept of "Black" is not so much as the ethnic identity, such as African-American, but any group associated with the oppressed.
- 28 Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 17.
- 29 Ibid., 18.