The Making of the Relational Christian Self of New monastics in the UK, US, and Canada

Francesca Montemaggi

Abstract: The chapter presents an overview of Anglo-American new monasticism based on ethnographic research in the UK, US, and Canada. New monastics are lay members of grassroots communities, who do not belong to an established Monastic order; rather each community is autonomous and agrees a ‘rule’, a set of moral values and aspirations on how to live one’s life. The cross-national sample of communities points to the inclusivity as the overarching value for new monastics. This refers to inclusivity inside the group of fellow monastics and people attending monastic activities, but also to inclusivity of people at the margin of society, in particular in urban areas. This is expressed through the notion of hospitality. Taking as inspiration old monastic practices of the monastery as a safe haven, New monastic communities seek to ‘welcome the stranger’ in their midst. However, in contrast with old monastic communities, they choose to be located in inner-city areas to have a transformative impact on neighbourhoods facing socio-economic inequality. The chapter argues that inclusivity directs the formation of a Christian self that is relational and in dialectical opposition to – what they feel to be – the individualism of mainstream society.

Who are ‘new monastics’? New monasticism is emerging as an influential lay Christian movement, mostly Protestant, which has a transnational presence spanning North and Central America, Europe, Australia and South Africa. Unlike traditional monastic communities, new monastics in the UK, US and Canada are not part of an institution or an order. They are mostly grass-roots groups that seek to live together, or in close proximity, and commit to a way of life that embodies Christian ethics. Unlike traditional monks, new monastics are often married or in relationships and their commitment to the community is time-limited and subject to renewal. New monastic communities are not in secluded spaces, nor do they pursue an ‘other-worldly’ asceticism. Thus, prima facie, they share very little with traditional monastic orders; yet the adoption of the term ‘monasticism’ is not completely inaccurate.

To understand why grassroots groups of Christians identify with monasticism, we must go beyond the forms and institutions of traditional monasticism. Monasticism, for members of new monastic communities, captures the vision of an ongoing spiritual commitment and development, which forms a Christian self within the context of interdependent relationships. The life of new monasticism is therefore ‘consecrated’ in as far as it is aimed at the spiritual growth of a Christian self. This is pursued through regular practices, such as prayer, tithing and giving hospitality. The practices within the context of a close-knit community enable the person to learn from their experience and reflection upon it how to be a Christian. New monastics seek to become more compassionate towards others and are guided in their spiritual work by the value of inclusivity. This is why the practice of
hospitality is perhaps the most significant practice, for it sheds a light on to the challenges of meeting the ‘other’ and being accepting of different ideas and lifestyles.

This chapter presents an overview of the similarities and differences across new monastic communities in the UK, US and Canada. The data presented here are the initial findings of a twelve-month study in a new monastic community in the UK and of scoping studies in 13 other communities in rural areas as well as small, medium and large cities across the UK, US and Canada. The studies entailed unstructured interviews and participant observation. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. The names have been changed to guarantee anonymity. I have focused on urban communities to gain a better understanding of new monastic efforts at reconciling their commitment to Christian tradition with inclusivity in diverse contexts. The focus on cities was also partly due to pragmatic issues, including my reliance on public transport to reach each community and the time available.

The studies I conducted did not receive any funding, which imposed limits to the scope of the research in terms of the sampling of communities and the time spent in each of them. There are relatively few, if any, new monastic communities in cities. Therefore, to ensure confidentiality I refer to the location of the communities very broadly in terms of regions or country. The chapter begins with a brief history of new monasticism and how it relates to similar movements in North America and Europe. It then explores the common traits I have found across the communities and their specificity resulting from their cultural context. The chapter concludes with a closer look at the practice hospitality due to its role in embodying the value of inclusivity.

The Origin of New monasticism

New monasticism today is associated with the experiments by former theology students, Shane Claiborne (2006) and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (2005 and 2008), in creating close-knit communities in deprived areas to be alongside the poor and form relationships of trust with people in the neighbourhood. This latest wave has a much longer history, one which begins with Bonhoeffer’s letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich in 1935. Bonhoeffer wrote that “the restoration of the church will surely form a new type of monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ.” (Bonhoeffer 1995: 424). He set up the secret seminary of Finkenwalde, where students would not only study theology, but also build the school. The Gestapo closed the seminary in 1937 (Samson 2010). A year later, in Britain, amidst the hopelessness and poverty of the Depression, George MacLeod founded the Iona community1. Like Finkenwalde, Iona was an experimental community with no common purse or vows. MacLeod’s initial project saw unemployed craftsmen and trainee clergy work together to rebuild the medieval abbey in Iona. In 1933, across the Atlantic, Dorothy Day set up the Catholic Worker Movement2 to provide hospitality, food and clothing to volunteers and those in need. Thus, a key characteristic of new monasticism has been, since its beginnings, the rejection of the ‘cloistered life’ as separate from society and the call to be among those in most need in society.


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1 http://iona.org.uk/about-us/history/
2 http://www.catholicworker.org/forest-history.html
community are needed to sustain moral life (1981/2002: 263). Wilson (1998) took up MacIntyre’s challenge by advocating “Christian communities that may produce a new St. Benedict.” Agreeing with MacIntyre, Wilson argues that we live in a fragmented rather than pluralistic world, where there is “no vision of the way things ought to be” (1998: 24). The new monastic life is, for Wilson, a disciplined life to rediscover the telos, living the life “in the purpose for which God creates us.” (Wilson 2005: 57). It is new monastic communities that can help heal the world’s fragmentation by giving a sense of purpose through spiritual disciplines and theological reflection (1998: 70-76). But it was The Irresistible Revolution by Shane Claiborne (2006) and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s (2005) example of Rutba House what made new monasticism ‘famous’.

In 1995, while still a theology student, Claiborne became involved in a student protest against the removal of homeless people in the ‘Love Park’ in Philadelphia. He later volunteered in Mother Theresa’s mission in Calcutta, experienced mega-churches and being born again ‘many times’, and then chose to set up the Simple Way community in a deprived neighbourhood in north Philadelphia. Claiborne’s friendship with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, soon to become Jonathan Wilson’s son in law, developed the Simple Way into a new monastic community, while Hartgrove-Wilson set up his own community Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina. The Simple Way, which I visited in 2012, has changed significantly since then and has become more structured and organised with volunteers from around the world. New monasticism is now the subject of a budding theological discussion (Talbot 2011; Gray, Mobsby and Kennedy 2010; Downey 2011) and has been influential in the formation of many communities as well as in establishing connections with Christian intentional and alternative communities already established.

Downey (2011: 8) states that “Claiborne and others admit that Monasticism plays more of an inspirational than a defining role in their communities. And while there has been a certain amount of mentoring between traditional Monastics and some members of these contemporary spiritual communities, there is also an acknowledgment that these relationships need to go deeper.” Accordingly, new monasticism is a movement broadly characterised by a concern for social justice and an ecumenical appeal, which is based on communal living. Downey understands new monasticism as “a withdrawal from society as well as a strong affirmation of community and communal responsibility.” Downey (2011: 8). In contrast, the communities in my study are clearly rejecting the withdrawal from society and interpreting hospitality as active involvement in the local community and engagement with the wider culture.

New monasticism is sometimes seen as part of the change in consciousness of Christian evangelicals (Marti and Ganiel 2014, Markofski 2015). It shares some features with the inclusive and questioning religiosity of the Emerging Church Movement (Marti and Ganiel 2014; Bielo 2011; Guest 2007; Packard 2012, Labanow 2009). Like the Emerging Church Movement, new monastics seek to build inclusive communities and reject firm doctrinal stances. For Markofski (2015), new monasticism is a shift in evangelical religiosity with a strong emphasis on progressive politics. There are indeed many former evangelicals among new monastics, especially in the US, and many have read the ‘staple literature’ of the Emerging Movement authors, such as McLaren (2004), Sine (1981), Tomlinson (1995) and Bell (2011). However, my observation leads me to disagree with seeing new monasticism as part of the Emerging Church Movement (Marti and Ganiel 2014). New monastics are not concerned with theological deconstruction or the renewal of institutional forms. Indeed, I
have often encountered a reluctance to engage in theological debate. Neither can new monasticism be limited to a transformation in evangelical consciousness (Markofski 2015). Its appeal is at once wider and narrower. It is wider because it refrains from theological debate and allows people who seek to explore their spirituality to be part of the community. It is narrower because it is an instance of neo-traditionalism. New monastics rediscover traditional practices to give meaning and structure to their life of faith today.

Unlike conservative or fundamentalist forms of neo-traditionalism, new monastics interpret and use tradition progressively to respond to diversity and inequality in cosmopolitan urban contexts. They embrace the framework of Western pluralism, which values diversity (Beckford 2003). New monastic practices across the three countries are underpinned by the value of inclusivity. Inclusivity refers to the acceptance of different viewpoints and lifestyles inside the group of fellow monastics and of people attending monastic activities, as well as the inclusion of people at the margin of society. Inclusivity is articulated through the practice of hospitality, often in the form of a shared meal. Communities in North America, in particular, see hospitality as a way to respond to current socio-economic and cultural processes of change, including heightened individualism, consumerism, and globalisation. They view their efforts at building inclusive communities and engaging with disadvantaged people as an attempt to counteract economic and social isolation in rapidly growing cities. In contrast, communities in the UK tend to stress more contemplative worship and hospitality that is detached from political and economic narratives and aimed at caring for the person.

New monastic neo-traditionalism is not a mere adoption of older practices and lifestyles, but an instance of religious change legitimised through practices grounded in tradition (Montemaggi 2015). Within this framework, being a Christian is a way of life that is articulated through regular practices, to which members have committed in their vows, and in building inclusive communities. The vows enable new monastics to shift from a concern over belief and belonging to a community or denomination onto a Christian identity that is theologically undefined but grounded in regular practice. The vows, which may include regular prayer, tithing, hospitality, are time-limited. This allows members to leave the community or to maintain a link without having the same level of commitment. They are not bound for life to a specific community nor to new monasticism as a movement.

New monastic reinterpretation of traditional practices includes, at times, an element of bricolage, which needs to be understood as syncretism (Altglas 2014) integrating elements from other faiths by connecting them with Christian tradition. Anglo-American new monasticism taps into a common religious culture and religious literature, aided by a shared language. The books of Claiborne and Wilson-Hartgrove reached quickly British shores and, indeed, Claiborne collaborated to the UK publication by Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy (2010) *New Monasticism as a Fresh Expression of Church*, linking experiences in the US with the experiments in ‘doing church’ within the Anglican tradition. New monastic leaders share their vision and advise new communities across the Anglo-American world. What is perhaps unexpected and more significant is the similarity between the Anglo-American communities I surveyed and Italian Catholic new monastics (Palmisano 2013), which reflects wider social changes, such as gender norms and democratisation. For instance, Palmisano writes that Comunità di Bose is a mixed gender community and that ‘the rule’ in Italian new monastic communities is a composite of spiritual principles guiding everyday life, which is decided and altered by the community (Palmisano 2013: 357-358). This is something shared with
communities in the UK, the US and Canada. Italian new monastic communities, like their Anglo-American counterparts, also consist mostly of lay members (Palmisano 2013: 354), including married couples (Palmisano 2013: 350 and 360). Further, like Anglo-American new monastics, Italian communities also value ecumenism greatly, which includes at times the use of literature and practices from other faiths, such as meditation (Palmisano 2009).

Anglo-American new monastics, unlike those in Italy, do not use the appellative of ‘monk’ and ‘nun’. There are ordained ministers (Protestant Pastors and Anglican Priests) who are members and often leaders of the community. However, there are no members who belong to a traditional monastic order nor does ‘the rule’ of new monastic communities include a vow of chastity. Anglo-American new monastic communities generally have no connections with a monastery, except for the Iona and Northumbria communities in the UK. The British communities emphasise worship and liturgy, however they lack the same “assiduous prayer” of Italian communities (Palmisano 2013: 361). Italian new monastic reinterpretation of fuga mundi, the otherworldly character of old monasticism, is “a conscious reconstruction of a separate world based on a radical reflection on the various aspects of the society being left behind” (Palmisano 2013: 361). In Anglo-American communities, this ‘state of mind’ is however aimed at building inclusive communities and having a transformative impact on deprived neighbourhoods. This is particularly so in American and Canadian urban communities, which are often located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

New monastic communities represent a significant change from old ascetic monastic communities (Palmisano 2013: 347). Their autonomy, democratic structures, and active engagement in society are radically different from traditional monasticism. They do not call themselves ‘monks’, although in some theological literature we begin to see reference to it (Talbot 2011), and do not make a vow of chastity. There might be a theological argument for defining monasticism in relation to chastity, although it forgets that early monasticism included married people (Hughes 2005) and that all institutions change overtime. It is also extremely reductive and dismissive of a perhaps more important feature of old monasticism: the monastery. Life in the monastery structured the community and the individual’s everyday activities to a much higher extent than living in shared accommodation or in the same neighbourhood can possibly entail. New monastics have a higher level of autonomy and privacy by the sheer fact of having their own space, sometimes their own house, and often working outside the community. While new monastics attempt some form of intentional living or co-housing, they do not forgo their private autonomy. This resonates with changes in co-housing and intentional communities that seek to strike a balance between independence and collectivism (Bianchi 2013: 109).

From a strictly anthropological and, specifically, ethnographic point of view, it would be odd for a researcher to dismiss an emic term. The task of the ethnographer is not to validate or invalidate the informants’ narratives and terminology, but to analyse them and provide a wider understanding of them. Thus, whilst we should interrogate what new monastic communities mean by ‘monasticism’, we cannot and should not dismiss their terms. I am of the opinion that the label is likely to lose significance as members do not seem to be attached to the term and communities so far lack a cohesive and self-referential body of literature, shared events, and organisational capacity to form a movement. The autonomy and grassroots’ nature of new monastic communities mean that they are, at least for now, islands in a sea of new expressions of Christianity. However, if the term new monasticism does indeed disappear, it is the task of the ethnographer to inquire into the difficulty research
subjects have with the term and why they choose to stop using the term, rather than impose normative or theoretical labels while rejecting emic labels.

The term monasticism captures two dynamics: in the first instance, it appeals to a romantic image of religion in order to evoke ‘authentic’ religiosity in contrast with mainstream churches, seen as lacking a close community, and megachurches, which are found to reflect individualistic consumer culture. In the second instance, the term Monasticism captures the particular configuration of Christian identity of new monastics as a relational self. The recovering of the structure of daily practices aids new monastics in forming a Christian ‘self’. Its Christian particularity lies, for monastics, in the recognition of the relationality of the self, which is in contrast with a highly individualistic Western society. The Christian self is an ethical self in the context of a community to which one is accountable. New monasticism is thus a form of ‘consecrated life’ in the sense of the person consciously forming a Christian ‘self’ through practices and within a community of reference. The spiritual development of new monastics requires a community. In contrast with withdrawn communities, such as the Amish and Plymouth Brethren, new monastics stress the importance of inclusivity. The importance of building inclusive communities was at the heart of all communities’ endeavour, as the next section explores.

**Inclusivity and Community**

New monastics, as afore mentioned, are lay Christians, who can be single, married, or in relationships living together or in close proximity whenever possible. They belong to grass-roots communities, which are largely autonomous. The communities decide democratically on the ‘rule’ to adopt, while ‘dispersed communities’, such as those belonging to Iona, follow the established rule. Therefore, the internal organisation, narratives, and practices vary greatly across communities. Members join by taking vows, which are aspirations to live life according to a set of core Christian values the group has identified. Vows often include an element of worship and prayer, one of service in the community, and one of personal growth. For instance, the community I researched in the UK, the Shire, has three vows: hospitality, journeying, and blessing. ‘Hospitality’, as explored in the next sections, encapsulates the value of inclusivity of the community that is expressed in a non-judgemental attitude and caring relationships. ‘Journeying’ identifies the personal and spiritual growth of each member, akin to *metanoia*, while ‘blessing’ refers to the practical engagement with people at the margins in the local community. These vows would resonate with most of the communities I have encountered. Welcoming the stranger, personal spiritual growth, and service to the local community are staples of the new monastic way of life, although these are articulated in different ways and each community may emphasise some aspects more than others.

The vows establish the internal boundaries of the community by identifying a core group of people who commit to one another to follow the ‘rule’. The accountability to one another imposed by the vows constitutes the fundamental dynamic of the community. Accountability is valued greatly by members for being pivotal in their spiritual growth. The new monastic community is held together by reciprocal accountability, which is sustained by shared living or living in close proximity. Proximity is however the biggest challenge for most communities, due to the lack of affordable housing, co-housing estates, and institutional

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2 The name ‘Shire’ and the names of the interviewees come from Tolkien’s books. I have chosen Tolkien because of the numerous references made by some members of the community and the occasional use of Tolkien quotes in relation to spiritual journeys.
financial support. Lacking the physical and financial resources of traditional monasteries, new monastics cannot always live in proximity leading the expansion of community to new ‘cells’ in other locations. Proximity is at times mediated through presence in a community centre or even a church, which grant the space necessary for communal activities.

Proximity speaks of the search for a close-knit community. In the UK, new monastics are often disenchanted with the superficial relationships encountered in mainstream churches, and seek to form a community based on commitment to the way of life, as captured by the vows. In North America, the value of community takes on the tone of opposition to individualism, neoliberalism, and gentrification. This is particularly strong in the US, where the state is weaker and the culture more individualistic. Thus a strong theme among new monastics in the US is the attempt at creating an intentional community. An intentional community is a community of people who “live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose” (Sargeant 1994: 14; Sargisson and Sargeant 2004: 5). The appeal of intentional communities lies in the mutual support, informal welfare, and sense of place. This is also part of a reaction to the urban sprawl, including large churches being located in the suburbs making people dependent on their car, and the population mobility, which, albeit diminishing (Molloy et al. 2014), is higher than within the EU. New monasticism thus attracts those who seek to be part of a neighbourhood as well as of a community grounded in close relationships and interdependence.

The search for a “more relational and more real” community, as Gandalf from the Shire put it, one where people can be “more honest and more real to each other and to God” is present in all communities surveyed. It is born out of a frustration with the church as an event on a Sunday, and the yearning for meaningful relationships that sustains one’s spiritual growth. As Esther put it, “you want to share your life story, plunge in and be vulnerable.” Intimacy is however hard and can only happen over time. All the communities surveyed were relatively small, with at the most around thirty members. In small communities, as Lawrence noted, personalities matter and conflict is not always managed well. Clashes over the format or the number of meetings, lack of clarity over the direction the group is pursuing, or the priorities for the group are not infrequent. At the Shire, the British community I followed for 12 months over two years, the few people who left wanted a much clearer theological and religious identity, but also felt they had not found the close relationships they were looking for. The group has further developed weekly meetings where those who have made a formal commitment to the community share their spiritual journey. These meetings support the person in their spiritual development as well as cementing stronger bonds within the group. Gandalf, the pastor and leader of the Shire hopes honest and compassionate relationships can be developed as a way to practise Jesus’ teachings. Compassionate relationships are at the core of new monastic interpretation of Christianity and, as Gandalf states below, should be the face of Christianity to others.

“It’s important how relate to one another and it’s important how we relate to outsiders. [...] When an outsider comes in randomly what would make an impact is not what we say, what we say we believe, but how we treat each other. If someone can see us treat each other with stupid amounts of forgiveness and reconciliation, wanting that above all else, and people willing to sacrifice anything, including pride, anything in order to achieve reconciliation, that I think is the countercultural way of life that would make an impact on people. So I really think
it is about how we treat each other. We’re all incredibly different people, how do we respond to one another, how do we respond to the frustrations that we have with one another. That’s the thing.”

Community is also the place where inclusivity is practised. A common trait in all communities is the rejection of rigid statements of belief. New monastics, like the emerging movement, are disenchanted with church and dogma. They find churches to lack spirituality for being too formal or aimed at entertainment, especially in the case of megachurches. They do not want to label themselves and define what they believe in nor do they not want to be defined. Unlike the emerging movement though, theological discussion is often shunned or minimal. What defines them are the practices arising from the vows, through which they develop as Christian. New monastics are committed to Christian tradition, but focus on practices rather than theology. In particular, clear doctrinal stances are associated with judgemental attitudes and exclusivity. The resistance to doctrinal stances and denominational identity impacts on group belonging. For instance, in some groups, those who sought to affirm clear doctrinal stances could not be accommodated and decided to leave.

At the Shire, the Sunday gathering and the small groups’ meetings reject theological discussion and focus on contemplation and reflection on one’s experience. This makes the group open to ‘spiritual seekers’, although the liturgy is clearly Christian with references to the ‘triune God’ and Jesus Christ. In their contemplative reflection, the Shire employs koans, traditional Japanese short statements on which the person meditates. The koans used are at times Japanese, but are often verses from the Gospels or statements from Christian Saints and theologians. Following the meditation, people are asked to share their insights based on their emotions and experiences whilst refraining from an analysis of the statement. The Shire is distinctive in its unequivocal approach to inclusivity. When it came to decide on how to engage in social action, the consensus in the meeting was to encourage people to pursue social justice individually to avoid creating divisions inside the group along political lines. Interestingly, the possible political divisions were not among those who had taken the vows, but between those who had and those who attended the community meetings, but had not taken the vows. Inclusivity, in this case, trumped the group’s engagement with social action and thus shaped the group’s relationship with the local community, which is firmly focussed on ‘acts of care’, such as the Sunday’s shared meal, rather than social justice⁴.

The engagement in the local community is an expression of the value of inclusivity. In some groups there seemed to be a tension between acts of care and acts of social justice. For instance, in a community in the American North-West, some members were keen on setting up community gardens while others wanted to campaign against trafficking and in support of sex workers. The aim of any engagement in the local neighbourhood across communities was to build relationships with people, who are often at the margins. As one of my informants put it, they seek to become a “local micro-culture of reconciliation … based on healthy and compassionate communication.” New monastics aspire to be transformative of the local neighbourhoods they inhabit. Their concerns include consumption and consumerism, substance misuse, housing shortages, inequality and crime. Most groups tend to be more left-leaning economically and often socially. Yet their engagement aims at bringing about

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* The commitment to social justice has so far not concretised partly because the Shire is in transition. The group intends to set up a community café linked to social justice projects.
transformation through close encounter rather than organised campaigning, as explored in the section on hospitality.

**Cultural Boundaries**

There are important differences across new monastic communities. These often reflect different national culture, but also differences across regions and localities, and from group to group. New monasticism in the US and Canada are particularly critical of consumerism, individualism, and inequality. In the US, this extends to a critique of evangelical churches and non-denominational mega-churches, such as Willow Creek and Saddleback, which are sometimes seen as part of consumer culture. As afore mentioned, the appeal of monasticism lies in the search for an ‘authentic’ religiosity that is constructed in opposition to the wider mainstream culture of individualism, capitalism, and consumerism. Thus the simplicity of monasticism and its commitment to the neighbourhood are contrasted with the ‘consumer church’ in the suburbs. This can be found in the ‘12 Marks of New monasticism’, the joint publication of new monastic thinkers edited by Rutba House. One of the marks is “geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.” (Rutba House 2005: xii). The new monastic community is grounded in geographical stability, in contrast with the high level mobility of American society. William, during a group discussion, said:

“… when I think of most vivid example of commitment, I think about my parents, not just the fact that they’ve been married for 32 years. They’ve lived in the same house for over 20 years and every Friday had bible study for 20 or so years with the same people. That’s been a big example of commitment. As I got older, I’ve also seen how they’ve passed opportunities for their career. My dad turned down jobs at more prestigious universities for the sake of our stability, our wellbeing. For me it has been a real practical and realistic understanding of commitment and making promises.”

The *fuga mundi* of new monasticism is not an escape, but a critique of society and of the church that seems to adhere to social structures and norms rather than question them. Accordingly, mega-churches are often referred to as ‘consumer churches’, which encourage a consumer approach to faith rather than a committed one. The size and suburban location of the mega-church are felt as encouraging relationships between people with a similar outlook, experience, and background. People choose to drive to the church in the same way they go to a shopping mall. The mega-church is sometimes felt as alienating for being “super-professional, like a Broadway show”. The stage, the lights, the carefully rehearsed music, the scripted service make for a ‘professional’ church service that feels distant. George likes when “things are not quite right, when it feels like home.” That is where real relationships happen, are born out of “disappointment, delight, apologies, and vulnerability.” Many found their experience of large churches ‘fake’ and superficial. However, there is also a recognition that people need different types of communities. As Richard pointed out, there is an “issue of fragmentation and isolation in society that no one knows what to do about … Willow Creek and Saddleback try to address that … There are lots of different people, there needs to be different expressions of church.”
New monastics acknowledge that people find their spiritual growth in different environments; yet they construct their distinctive Christian self in opposition to consumer culture and religious forms that second such culture. Practices thus stand as a critique of the focus on theological doctrine of conservative churches, especially evangelical churches. This is felt across communities in all three countries. However, new monastic communities, in the US, are home to more “recovering evangelicals”, as they describe themselves jokingly. They are opposed to conservative evangelical cultural and political dominance of American society. They have often experienced hurt and isolation in church communities, where they felt an expectation of living a successful middle-class life and of belonging to the evangelical world with no contact with outside society. Richard told me of how important it was, in the evangelical world, to use the same lingo, listen to the same Christian music, and reading the same books. These experiences push new monastics to be open to people from different religious and social backgrounds and develop a self-grounded in relationships.

Evangelical churches and mega-churches are at times condemned as a self-satisfied community of middle-class people, often sectarian and dogmatic, who are detached from the rest of society. This is partly due to the close relationship between economic and religious conservatism in the US that is much weaker in Canada and the UK where state welfare is generally seen positively (Hoover et al. 2002; Clements and Spencer 2014). The emphasis on socio-economic inequality is thus a feature of many American new monastic communities. The first four ‘marks’ of new monasticism of Rutba House are: “1) Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire. 2) Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.” (Rutba House 2005: xii). The first is often interpreted as a call to inhabit deprived neighbourhoods to experience the inequality, which results from ‘Empire’, the American capitalist economy, and be a hopeful and critical presence. There is a trace of romanticism in this. As George mentions, “it seemed something more adventurous about trying and going into the belly of the beast;” yet it does not stop at a romantic vision of social justice. The aim is to “be a part of living a hopeful pattern of life in the middle of a very hopeless pattern of life.” Thus, the call to share one’s possessions in the community, in the second ‘mark’, is a form of tithing that acknowledges social disadvantage, but also critiques consumerism and the value of individual independence, whilst affirming the intrinsic interdependence of human beings.

New monastic communities on the East Coast and in the Mid-West, in particular, are also sensitive to the issue of race. Wilson-Hartgrove, who lives in Durham, North Carolina, includes in his marks of monasticism the commitment to reconciliation across racial lines. The fourth ‘mark’ states: “4) Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.” (Rutba House 2005: xii). Travelling across states and cities to be with new monastics, I experienced the segregated nature of many places, including Washington D.C., New York, and Chicago. I have been the only white on the bus or on the street on many occasions making palpable the geography of race. In D.C., the location of the white new monastic community in a predominantly black neighbourhood was an attempt at bridging the segregation of the city. In a neighbourhood where people would turn around to look at me, a white woman walking alone, the white presence of new monastics sought to be a symbol of reconciliation that did not go unnoticed. Racial segregation is far less prevalent, when not absent, in the North-West and on the West Coast, where the urban deprived neighbourhoods where new monastics live are more mixed racially and culturally.
Communities in the North-West and West Coast are immersed in a reality of secularism, religious pluralism, and rapidly changing cities due to the growth of the high-tech economy, especially in Seattle and San Francisco. Communities on the East Coast and in the Mid-West are often articulating their identity vis-à-vis the church they left behind and the church they critique, while for communities in the North-West and on the West Coast, being a Christian among non-Christians posed an identity question. For the former, inclusivity seems to be concerned more with socio-economic inequality, while for the latter communities, inclusivity is also an openness to different identities. It is the realisation that Christianity is not the default option that leads to a reflection on what it means to be a Christian and how to articulate it. As Richard explained:

“Most of the people that we live around don’t even believe in the existence of God and they hate Christians, so preaching at anybody isn’t going to make any difference. We need to earn the right to even say anything by showing the goodness of how we live our lives … So it was learning to not see ourselves from places of privilege anymore and go, maybe, more a place of humility.”

The reality of multiculturalism, religious diversity, and secularism is something Canadian new monastic communities also face. Canada, like the UK, saw a fall in people identifying as Christians and a rise in the religiously unaffiliated (Bowen 2005). Criticism of conservative evangelicalism is also present in Canadian communities, however they are at ease with maintaining a connection with, or even belonging to a church. The structures of the church allow projects that benefit the local area. This is something that Canadian communities share with UK ones. Church facilities, venues, and, at times, financial assistance can support new monastic groups and make them viable. Canadian communities, like American ones, were located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods thus making a concern for inequality an important mark of their new monastic identity. Living in deprived neighbourhoods allows new monastics to build relationships with local people, experience and gain a concrete understanding of the reality of inequality. The call to relocate “to the abandoned places of Empire”, in the words of the ’12 marks of New monasticism’, is thus a distinctive feature of urban North American new monasticism.

British new monastic communities, in contrast, are rarely located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. As mentioned previously, the Iona community was established in the 1930s and sought to bring together clergy and workers at the time of the depression. It stands out as particularly attuned to progressive politics. There are examples of intentional communities in deprived areas, however transforming inequality is not a central feature of British New monasticism. There may be many reasons for it, including a more traditionally strong welfare state in comparison with North America. British new monasticism is characterised by a return to liturgy, which taps into the Celtic tradition. This is exemplified by the publication of a Celtic prayer book by the Northumbria community, which is used by other communities. The Shire, as well as another community in a large city, are more recent and are partly the result of experimentation with new forms of church. However, in line with new monastic neo-traditionalism, the Shire has adopted Northumbria’s prayer book and often uses Celtic symbols. A Celtic cross is always present at the Sunday gatherings at the Shire and it is on the community’s logo.
Neo-traditionalism, however, is not a withdrawal to a past religiosity, but the recovering of a wisdom that is seen relevant to today’s challenges. In one of the British communities’ documents, an explicit link is made between early Celtic monks and contemporary monasticism.

“In many ways the spiritual landscape of 21st century Britain looks similar to fourth century Britain – there are many and diverse religions and most indigenous people know nothing of the claims of Christianity. The efforts of established church are failing to alter this and many groups are advocating a return to Columba’s monastic approach.”

New monastics draw on monastic tradition to respond to diversity in – what is seen as – a post-Christian context. Therefore, there is an attempt at creating a space and time for the wider community where religion is discussed but experienced. This includes discussion groups open to those who do not identify as Christians. The Shire’s antipathy for theological discussion is born out of the value ascribed to experience over intellectual debate. The aim is to build relationships of trust and friendship rather than to attract adepts. This attitude of openness to the other finds expression in the practice of hospitality. Hospitality is the embodiment of the value of inclusivity and distinctive of new monastic sensibilities, as discussed in the following section.

Hospitality
Taking as inspiration old monastic practices of the monastery as a safe haven, New monastic communities seek to ‘welcome the stranger’ in their midst. This is often in the form of a shared meal to people from the local community and visitors. ‘Potluck’ meals are common in many religious and non-religious communities; yet the shared meal of new monastic communities takes on the value of inclusivity. The meal is a regular occurrence and is open to all. It is the first point of entry to the community. Hospitality extends to hosting visitors, as it happened to me on several occasions, and hosting people in need. Richard, from a new monastic community on the East Coast of the United States, recounted how he and his wife gave hospitality to someone with a substance addiction and found it hard and unsustainable in the longer term. The willingness to help and care for a vulnerable person clashed with the complex needs of addiction, mental health, and homelessness.

Hospitality is linked to ‘service’ within the Christian terminology, like soup runs for homeless people and more traditional forms of charity. However, hospitality is not to be equated with social justice or charity. Its centrality for new monastics lies in the recognition of interdependence of human nature and the transformative effect on one’s encounter with the other. I believe this is captured by how John, a new monastic in the American North-East, explained Jesus’ miracle of the fish and bread loaves. He told me that “nowhere in the bible it says that Jesus multiplied them, he only blessed them so people shared what they had. That’s much more of a miracle.” The sharing of resources, of food, of space is a means of meeting each other and bringing down barriers of class, education, and status. Hospitality and community are therefore intertwined. Hospitality is the most tangible instance of an inclusive community, where the ‘other’ is respected. It is the practice that most develops a relational Christian self.
The acceptance and welcoming of the ‘other’ extends to engaging with people at the margin of society on an equal footing. In contrast with conventional Christian approaches to charity, some new monastic communities, especially in Canada, seek to act alongside disadvantaged people, rather than for them. This has included sharing the responsibility for the organisation and running of specific activities and events with homeless people. This marks a paradigmatic shift from giving ‘charity to’ people in need towards ‘action with’ people in need. Yet it also poses challenges to the group. For instance, in one community a group of homeless people, who had made excessive use of alcohol, congregated by the community centre and set a rubbish bin on fire. Members of the new monastic community had to step in and restrict the unsupervised use of the community space to guarantee safety. This example points to the inherent paradox of hospitality (Pitt-Rivers 1977/2012) and of the ambivalent host-guest relationship. This is also the case when the guest cannot reciprocate and thus inhabits a position of social inferiority despite the host’s efforts at inclusion.

The core value of inclusivity of new monastic communities reveals the paradox of hospitality. Inclusivity presumes equal dignity, yet the host has always the possibility of denying or limiting hospitality. I believe hospitality plays such a central role in new monastic identity because it prompts the transformation of the host. It is a form of metanoia. As Harold once said: “we seek to become a certain kind of person,” something I have heard from many new monastics. It is through practice, rather than theological discussion and learning, that new monastics grow into their faith and gain a deeper understanding of what being a Christian entails. Hospitality, as a practice, is perhaps the most transformative because it is an encounter with the ‘other’, who might be very challenging to one’s identity, lifestyle, and values. The encounter with another is one of recognition and acceptance of the person before and, sometimes, despite her identity.

The respect for the person, regardless of background, beliefs, and lifestyle, shapes a particular ethical approach, which refrains from judgement, eschews theological norms and ‘right’ conduct to accept the person. I term this the ‘ethic of compassion’ (Montemaggi 2013). I distinguish between the ‘ethic of purity’, which is norm-oriented, and the ‘ethic of compassion’, which is people-oriented. Norm-oriented ethic is the tendency of groups to be centred around theological norms and ‘right’ conduct, and thus forms boundaries by unifying the group around a clear theological identity. In contrast, a people-oriented ethic emphasises inclusivity by focusing on accepting the person and refraining from judgement. The attitude of acceptance of the latter ethic calls on the person to question her own identity, beliefs, and ideas about the world. It shapes the self. It is transformative. This attitude of acceptance of others seeks to bring down the boundaries of the community by inviting in people from different walks of life. This people-oriented approach is by no means exclusive to new monastic communities, but it struck me as the fundamental principle, which stirs new monastics to develop a Christian a relational self. Hospitality thus becomes the way to encounter others and form “authentic relationships”, as Gandalf described them. It is the practice that shuns judgement and labelling. As Richard commented: “it’s easy to be dogmatic about an issue but it’s difficult to be dogmatic about a person you know. If we know our poor neighbours, our lesbian neighbours, our gay neighbours, then suddenly it’s people, it’s not issues and you don’t say the same things anymore.”

Conclusions
This chapter has presented a picture of the common threads shared by new monastic communities in the Anglo-American world and the differences due to their cultural and geographical location. New monastics are part of a shift in Protestant consciousness from a concern over ‘right’ belief to a spiritually enriching lifestyle that is inclusive of difference. New monastics stand out for their focus on practices grounded in tradition. New monastic neo-traditionalism is not an escape from contemporary life, but an opposition to the dominant values of capitalist consumer society, such as individualism, materialism, and profit seeking. The retrieval of traditional wisdom strengthens new monastics in their effort at growing as Christians. The vows they take express their commitment to living a life according to Christian principles, but they also imply mutual accountability and support. The vows presuppose an intimate group of close relationships; yet new monastics seek to welcome others and be inclusive. The value of inclusivity underpins the new monastic endeavour and brings challenges and opportunities to the way in which groups engage with the wider community in the area. Hospitality is thus the privileged practice through which new monastics try to live out inclusivity. It is the expression of a relational self. In opposition to the individualism and materialism of contemporary society, the Christian relational self affirms the interdependence of human beings and the need for acceptance of diversity.

References:


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