Religious Life

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been guaranteed by the Edict of Nantes (1598), saw this revoked in 1685, initiating a new period of persecution. The king responsible, Louis XIV, was absolutist in temper and given to superstition; as everyone else saw, he irreparably damaged his country’s economy in the process. He found few imitators.

In England there was a state effort to broaden the national church and not to over-define controverted points. The Laudian school in their private piety were genuinely latitudinarian, but spoilt things by bullying the small minorities who would still not come in (see Carolline Divines). The same could be said of Oliver Cromwell, who had a slightly different wide range of tolerance. *Milton’s Areopagitica (1644) stood up for freedom to publish as well as think. The *North American colonies were largely populated by English Puritans who had had enough of Laudian rule. They were not themselves models of religious tolerance: obstinately persistent *Quakers were hanged. The little colony of Rhode Island was different. From its start in the 1630s and 1640s, with a royal charter in 1663, it guaranteed religious liberty (not simply toleration but liberty). Its founder, the Baptist Roger Williams, author of *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution, a seeker who distrusted all structured religion, and even more any formal state link, was a Puritan with a difference. In effect he secularized the government of the colony, though it was its religious variety, not its secularity, that was noticed at the time. For slightly less thoroughgoing reasons, the Catholic colony of Maryland and the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania tolerated all comers.

There is a great contrast between Williams and the political philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), who published four *Letters on Toleration around 1690. His reasoning is human rather than divine, and makes the full case for freedom of worship as well as belief (except for atheism and certain aspects of Catholicism that seemed to threaten the British crown). The argument was won, though even in tolerant England it took many years to remove most of the legal disabilities designed to protect *Anglicanism from its rivals.

In other countries it took a revolution to bring about religious freedom. The French Revolution quite soon turned to persecuting the church, and its heirs in many countries, often in the name of religious liberty, arranged a separation of church and state that involved harassing the former. The mirror image of this was the Catholic Church’s continued opposition to religious liberty. Liberty of conscience was still condemned in the papal Syllabus of Errors in 1864. The loophole of ‘invincible ignorance’, arguing that hereditary Protestants knew no better, widened over the years, and Catholics in the English-speaking world largely adjusted to being a successful denomination in a religious free market, but the official line remained intransigent. This changed with *Vatican II and *John XXIII’s encyclical Pacem in Terris (1963), which affirms ‘man’s right to be able to worship God in accordance with the right dictates of his own conscience, and to profess his religion both in private and in public’. There had been a time when the only ‘right’ dictate of a conscience was to obey one’s religious superiors, but the Council now turned away from past intolerance ‘hardly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel, and even opposed to it’. There are still some lingering traces of tyranny in the Curia, and many fundamentalist Protestants long to interfere with other people’s liberties, but in the 21st century, as in much of the 20th, the issue of religious liberty is not much concerned with Christian imperialism. Both National Socialism and Marxist Communist posed far greater challenges to religious freedom than any pope. The *Barmen Declaration was a model theological statement of Christian liberty. There are secular and religious governments round the world interfering with people’s right to practise the religion they choose. One of the immediate uses of *ecumenism is to provide back-up for oppressed Christian minorities. It is also necessary for Christians to remember the religious rights of Muslims, and not to forget the *Holocaust of the Jews.

Alistair Mason


religious life is a generic term for a variety of forms of Christian life that originated, as a radical response to the gospel, in the 1st century and continue to develop in the present, predominantly among Roman *Catholics and *Eastern Orthodox but also, especially recently, among Protestants and Anglicans. The Protestant community of *Taizé in France has fostered ecumenical exchange.

Religious are Christians who have entered a public and permanent state of life characterized by a full-time and exclusive commitment to living their Christian vocation with an intensity rooted in but beyond that demanded by *baptism. It has sometimes been called ‘the life of perfection’ or the life of the evangelical counsels—voluntary *poverty, consecrated *celibacy, and radical *obedience—in contrast to the ordinary life of the *Commandments. Such designations can lead to an elitism that is actually contrary to the theology of religious life. The life is distinguished not by superiority to other forms of Christian life but by a total absorption in the quest for *God that excludes other life projects, such as *marriage, the raising of a *family, or *work, from the centrality they might legitimately assume in a Christian’s life.

Although ‘Religious’ is a generic term for all who embrace such a life, historically it has been specified by a variety of terms that emphasize some feature of a particular form of that life. Thus, Religious might be called consecrated *virgins, hermits, *ascetics, monks or nuns, sisters or brothers.

Historically, religious life began when some 1st-century Chris­tians, both women and men, chose perpetual celibacy for the ‘sake of the kingdom of heaven’ (cf. Matt. 19: 12), a very radical choice in a society in which the *sexuality of its members was a civic resource rather than a purely personal endowment. Originally, these Christians lived as solitaries in their own homes or came together in urban communities, often under the financial patronage and spiritual leadership of wealthy women. While some of these virgins, widows, or celibates pursued a sealed life of *prayer and asceticism others combined their prayer life with active service in the Christian community through direct care of the poor and sick or through scholarship and spiritual ministries.

As Christianity became an acculturated religion in the Roman empire, many Christians withdrew into the *deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and *Syria to live a less worldly Christian life. These first desert dwellers were hermits but, under the leadership of Pachomius (c.290–345), a new cenobitic (communitarian) form of
religious life developed. A short time later the great *monastic lawgivers, Basil (c. 330–79) in the east and *Benedict in the west, wrote the rules that patterned the form of religious life that was to predominate for the next eight centuries. Monastic life, both male and female, was primarily enclosed and organized around the choral recitation of the Divine Office and manual or intellectual work under the guidance of an abbot or abbess.

In the Middle Ages, largely under the influence of *Francis of Assisi and *Dominic Guzman, a new form of religious life developed. This mendicant form combined monastic life with an *apostolic commitment to *preaching and teaching in the rapidly developing urban centres of Europe. The female branches of the mendicant orders, however, remained strictly cloistered.

After the *Reformation apostolic commitment took precedence in a new form of religious life typified by the *Jesuits. Monastic practices that interfered with *ministry were suppressed to allow fuller involvement in preaching, teaching, and *evangelization at home and in foreign *missions. Although women Religious remained cloistered, their eventually successful struggle for participation in active ministry began with women like Angela Merici (1474–1540), foundress of the Ursulines, Mary *Ward, foundress of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Louise de Marillac (1591–1660), foundress with Vincent de Paul of the Daughters of Charity, and other apostolic women. Non-cloistered apostolic women were not canonically recognized as Religious until 1900 (by the papal bull Conditae a Christo of Leo XIII) but most of the religious congregations of women founded in the 19th century were apostolic groups of this type. New forms of community and apostolic life whose canonical status is still undetermined continue to emerge in our own time.

Although no feature except consecrated celibacy undertaken by vow has been characteristic of every form of religious life, certain co-ordinates of the life are in some way common to all. Whether solitary or cenobite, Religious undertake to live Christian community through radical economic and governmental interdependence undertaken through vows of poverty and obedience or some equivalent. Commitment to a regular life of prayer and asceticism beyond that required by the ordinary discipline of the church, and to some form of service of the neighbour, is also virtually universal.

Formation for religious life takes place in a novitiate in which candidates learn how these co-ordinates of the life are understood and practised in the particular institute they are joining. At the end of an extended period of probation and formation candidates make perpetual profession of vows that establishes them in the religious state.

Although they denote some juridical distinctions, such terms as order, congregation, institute, and community tend to be used interchangeably, as do the terms nun and sister, religious and monk, convent and monastery, rule and constitutions. Nevertheless, forms of religious life are distinguished from one another according to various principles and, within each form of the life, institutes are distinguished by their particular spirit or charism.

The most ancient distinction is that between solitary and cenobites. However, the two forms have always overlapped among such groups as the desert Iavra-dwellers, Camaldolese monastics, medieval *Beguines, post-Reformation Carmelites, and contemporary apostolic Religious living singly.

Religious institutes were sometimes distinguished as 'active' or 'contemplative' depending on whether their life was more characterized by ministerial activity outside the monastery or by cloistered life devoted primarily to personal and liturgical prayer. This distinction is perhaps better captured today in terms of community lifestyle in mobile communities that change residence, companions, and ministries according to current apostolic needs or in geographically stable communities exercising primarily spiritual ministries from within the monastery. Monastic orders tend to be organized as federations of autonomous houses while apostolic congregations usually have central governments upon which local houses depend.

Two distinctions that have enormous impact on the life of the members are that between clerical orders in which some or all members are ordained and lay orders of sisters or brothers, and that between international congregations and those which function primarily within a particular culture.

When Religious went to Asia, Africa, and the Americas in the 17th century the essentially European lifestyle that had prevailed since the days of the Roman empire underwent significant changes. These were, however, probably less radical than those instigated by *Vatican II, which called on Religious to renew their life according to the gospel, the distinctive traditions of their institutes, and their historico-cultural settings. A first wave of changes, in the 1960s and 1970s, affected such externals as habit (clothing), titles, and daily horaria (timetables). These were followed in the 1980s and 1990s by more substantive struggles over the very meaning of religious life and the vows, appropriate ministerial involvement, community life, and ecclesial identity.

The renewal brought dramatic decreases in numbers, financial resources, and ecclesiastical power. As numbers declined the median age in congregations rose because of fewer entrants and the departures of professed members. Institutions were relinquished and the high visibility and credibility of religious life diminished. Conflict between Religious committed to conciliar renewal and an increasingly restorationist Vatican discouraged younger Catholics, especially women, from considering a vocation to religious life.

In recent years, as the *laity has become accustomed to Religious living a contemporary lifestyle and prophetically involved in areas of urgent need within and outside the institutional church, there has been a gradual reawakening of interest in religious life, both in full membership and in non-vowed association with religious orders. Although the characteristic co-ordinates of religious life have remained in place, nearly every aspect of the life changed in appearance and functions during the second half of the 20th century. Contemporary candidates for religious life are expected to be mature, educated, employed, able to manage personal finances, make decisions, and handle relationships with members of both sexes. Formation is concerned with deepening the candidate's *spiritual life, developing community skills, and discerning religious vocation and ministerial commitment. Religious no longer function as underpaid ecclesiastical workers or compliant children, but often play major prophetic roles in both church and societal institutions. Religious life continues to undergo significant change but it is, in basic ways, what it has always been, a life of intense search for God focused through consecrated celibacy and expressed in prayer, community, and ministry.

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**Renaissance.** The changes in Christian thought during the Renaissance must be understood in the context of the convulsions of European society during the 14th and 15th centuries. Great outrage was directed against the *papacy’s* residence in Avignon under French domination (1309–76). The pope no longer presided over the physical see of St Peter and, in sentiments that echoed from Petrarch to *Luther*, he had subjected the church, the new Jerusalem, to captivity in Babylon. This endangered the ideal of the *imperium christianum*, the melding of church and empire, of religious and political order, through which the medieval papacy had transformed the culture of classical Rome. The papacy’s moral standing was damaged further by the forty-year Great Schism (1378–1417), which created rival pontiffs in Rome and Avignon, and the *conciliar* movement, while resolving the *Schism*, irrevocably placed under dispute the pope’s position as supreme ruler of Christendom.

At the inception of this crisis an Augustinian friar, Simone da Cascia, asserted that, ‘nothing, no matter how wicked, can put to shame the empire of God, nor confound the order of the universe’ (*Ordine della vita christina*). But this belief was nearing exhaustion. The decisive event in the Renaissance reevaluation of Christian thought was the outbreak of the Black Death (1347–50), which killed as much as one-third of Europe’s population. As in any social emergency, there were more dogmatic reactions. The Florentine chronicler Matteo Villani saw the scourge as the prefigurement of the *Last Judgement*. But liturgical processions were no obvious help in restoring sinful humanity to God’s favour and the church’s spiritual weakness was apparent. The humanists began raising unsettling questions about the clergy’s hegemony over matters of *sin* and salvation, and about their *order of the universe*. Referring to the plague in the preface to his first collection of letters, Petrarch stated, ‘Time, as they say, has flowed out between our fingers. Our old hopes have gone to the grave with our friends.’ The ‘old hopes’—of stability, of security—that the plague had buried also carried to the tomb the clergy’s pretensions to knowledge about ultimate causes. Petrarch wrote in a second letter that the mouths of those ‘who profess all, knowing nothing’ are now silent: ‘at the end they have been closed by shock’ (*Rerum Familiarum Libri*, 8. 7).

At least as regards Italy, clerical commentaries on the Black Death are outnumbered by those of lay chroniclers and humanists. The most vivid description belongs to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Like his friend Petrarch, Boccaccio refrained from theological speculation about the plague’s origin, focusing instead on its physical, social, and psychological effects. In the hundred stories that follow, his lay narrators ridicule the clergy’s arrogance, among other vices, and compose a mosaic about human behaviour that transcends any prejudgement based on social class or moral superiority.

The humanists’ scepticism about the clergy and their inviolable claim to doctrinal knowledge exhibited those characteristics of the Renaissance identified by Jacob Burckhardt: the state as a work of art, the reawakening of the ancients, the reappraisal of the secular world and man’s role within it, and the development of the individual. For as the clergy and their teaching were brought under scrutiny, the ‘world’, the *saeculum*, no longer bore the same moral subordination to the sacred world of church and cloister. With this moral stigma removed, people explored the natural *world* with ambition and delight. The writings of *Aristotle* and *Cicero* could be read not simply for their integration with doctrine, as the scholastics had practised, but with an effort to see more clearly the ethos of the classical age. Neoplatonism, through the work of *Ficino* and *Pico della Mirandola*, became a dynamic moral philosophy in its own right, and their Florentine Academy formed a centre for political and artistic discourse. The Latin of the church, the sign of the clergy’s educational pre-eminence, was challenged by the vernacular literature, whose language was more resistant to clerical control. *Dante* in his Tuscan dialect could summon his beloved Beatrice, Virgil, and the saints as his guides, and his *Commedia* lighted a path for even the friars to follow. The humanists undertook a study of Latin itself on the basis of classical models and desired to examine authoritative texts in their original languages. Boccaccio was one of the first to sponsor the study of Greek in Italy; within a century scholars were investigating the *NT* and church documents with a more rigorous philology. *Historical analysis* revealed the mutability of verbal expression over time. Lorenzo Valla’s attention to linguistic development led him to criticize the doctrinal use of *Aristotle*; his commentary on the Vulgate *bible* evoked Luther’s appreciation in his first lectures at Wittenberg.

*Erasmus*, the ‘Prince of Humanists’, inspired the Reformer’s reading of Greek scripture and presaged his protest against clerical abuse of power. Whatever the differences in religious outlook between Luther and the humanists, they shared a conviction about the elusive, subjective process of understanding the temporal as well as the spiritual world, and it is this conviction that announces their modernity.

What emerged in the writings of Renaissance humanists and poets, along with their critique of the clergy, was a new understanding of human existence. In the Middle Ages man’s pilgrimage was viewed as first and foremost a moral judgement, a sentence of exile for human transgression. In the Renaissance the experience of life’s transience was less defined by dogma, and indeed this experience created the very conditions for knowing spiritual truth. A keener sense not only of the instability of all perception, but also of outward change owing to the flow of *time*, called forth new assessments of psychology and ontology. These assessments, buttressed by the greater acquisition of classical thought, undermined any fixed knowledge of the eternal verities. Renaissance writings display a heightened sensitivity not only to the influence of mood and emotion on one’s perspective but also to the historical nature of thought and action surfacing in the temporal flow. It could not therefore be presupposed that sin blinded man’s theological understanding because the impermanence of experience and of the observed world placed in doubt the objective certainty of such moral presuppositions.

The visual *arts* witness to this turning away from the church’s spiritual certainties. The ‘realism’ we associate with Renaissance art reflected the waning cultural confidence in traditional representa-