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New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Life in the 21st Century

by Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko

Editorial Note: *Traditionally, 'monk' can be used to refer to both men and women contemplatives, and we use it throughout the article in a gender-neutral sense. We also oscillate between use of 'he' and 'she' in an attempt to maintain the personal nature of the writing without being gender-specific.*

Setting the Stage

As we look out at the world today, we take inspiration from what is happening around the globe, from young people participating in movements like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street; to the new monastic movement among evangelical Christians dedicated to prayer and radical service to the poor; to the conversation among Protestants of an 'Emerging Church' ("... not a new religion, but a new way of being religious"); to small groups of Muslims who are gathering together, allowing women to lead worship, and reinventing what it means to answer God's call; to 'engaged Buddhism,' blending the sublime practices and compassion of the Buddhist path with social activism; to the 'spiritual but not religious' youth who are beginning to take responsibility for their own spiritual lives outside the walls of our traditional religious institutions.

We see these movements as spiritual impulses, moving us away from an era of fixed dogmatic religious formulations and embedded power structures. These impulses are awakening a whole new generation of people across the globe. These are people who are not interested in imposing a new and fixed rule, but rather want to commit to a daily practice of 'putting aside their egos' and exploring what it means to create a world that works for all, a world that is rooted in the principles of direct democracy, mutual aid, trust in our 'original goodness' and a radical acceptance of each individual and the unique gifts they have to offer.

These movements need the deep contemplative wisdom of our human race to ultimately be successful; without this, the movements risk playing a diminished role in the ultimate triumph of the human race. It is the triumph of the Human Soul (in totality) that we all await, and our lives long, consciously or not, to serve that birth. It is only through a contemplative path, a path leading to spiritual maturity, that this service is ultimately achieved.

New monasticism aims to take on this responsibility, cutting across traditions, across academic disciplines, across vocational differences, across the secular and the holy . . . breaking boundaries and building bridges to a contemplative life in the 21st century. We assert that new monasticism names an impulse that is trying to incarnate itself in the new generation. It is beyond the borders of any particular religious institution, yet drinks deeply from the wells of our wisdom traditions. It is an urge which speaks to a



Raimon Panikkar

profoundly contemplative life, to the formation of small communities of friends, to sacred activism and to discovering together the unique calling of every person and every community.

The Archetype of the Monk

"The new monk is an ideal, an aspiration that lives in the minds and hearts of our contemporary generation," proclaimed Father Raimon Panikkar in his seminal work, *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*. Father Panikkar was a Catholic priest who also became a Hindu and a Buddhist, and famously remarked, "I 'left' as a Christian, 'found' myself a Hindu and 'return' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian." In *Blessed Simplicity*, the outgrowth of a symposium between monastics from eastern and western traditions as well as non-monastic contemplatives, Father Panikkar puts forward the thesis that the monk represents a constitutive dimension of the human being that he dubs the archetype of the monk. It "assumes that there is a human archetype which the monk works out with greater or lesser success. Traditional monks may have reenacted in their own way 'something' that we too may be called upon to realize, but in a different manner . . . [then] the institution of monasticism should be equally open to everybody . . . The monastery, then, would not be the 'establishment' of the monks, but the *schola Domini*, the school where that human dimension is cultivated and transmitted . . ."

We believe that all of us, at some time or another, have felt stirrings of what the monk aspires to, whether religious, atheist or agnostic. We have all had moments of 'transcendence,' moments of deep passion for justice and truth, outpourings of compassion for others in suffering, or a perfect feeling of love towards our partner or children. These moments are part and parcel of our human experience. They touch a hidden dimension inside of us.

The monk is, in some sense, the person who recognizes the legitimacy and the primacy of these moments. She resolves within herself to get to the 'heart of the matter,' as it were, and to explore from whence these moments arise, to peek through the doorway into which they point. This 'peering' eventually moves beyond a mere curiosity and becomes the all-consuming goal of one's life.

"By monk," Panikkar writes, "monachos, I understand the person who aspires to reach the ultimate goal of life with all his being by renouncing all that is not necessary to it Precisely this single-mindedness, or rather exclusivity of the goal that shuns all subordinate though legitimate goals, distinguishes the monastic way from other spiritual endeavors toward perfection or salvation . . ." (Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity*, 1982)

Many people today, and in particular young people, may have had such immanent and yet transcendent experiences, and may be feeling deep within the enchantment of this calling, yet without the desire or need to enter into a monastery or even to follow a particular religious tradition. They may also feel this calling in a different manner than it has been felt in the past, as the monk is caught up not only with his own spiritual development, but in the mysterious 'completing of the world.' Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the brilliant evolutionary scientist and Catholic priest, captures this beautifully in *The Divine Milieu*, where he speaks of the goal of human life: "By his fidelity he must build—starting with the most natural territory of his own self—a work, an opus, into which something enters from all the elements of the earth. He makes his own soul throughout all his earthly days; and at the same time he collaborates in another work, in another opus, which infinitely transcends, while at the same time narrowly determines, the perspectives of his individual achievement: the completing of the world."

The New Monk

Therefore, it is only natural that as our world evolves the calling to 'monkhood' would also evolve, for the 'completing of the world' demands it. Along with Teilhard, Father Panikkar places this evolutionary impulse firmly in the nature of the Divine: "Time is not an accident to life, or to Being Each existence is tempiternal . . . ever old and ever new. Our task and our responsibility is to assimilate the wisdom of bygone traditions and, having made it our own, to allow it to grow. Life is neither repetition nor continuation. It is growth, which implies at once rupture and continuity. Life is creation." (Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, 2009)

This brings us to an exploration of this new impulse: "The modern monk does not want to renounce, except what is plainly sinful or negative; rather he wishes to transform all things . . . he is not interested in stripping himself of everything but in assimilating it all . . . in the impossible attempt—at first sight—to acquire by its simplicity the fullness of human life." (Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity*)

The new monk "tends towards the secular, without thereby diminishing his pursuit of holiness Secularity represents the affirmation that the body, history, the material world and all temporal values in general are definitive and insuperable . . . that it is legitimate to be involved in temporal affairs, that time has a positive value, and that the religious person must occupy himself with reforming the very socio-political-historical structures of reality It means the incorporation of the divine in the human and its impregnation of all the structures of the material world . . . the very clothing of the permanent, the eternal, the immutable . . ." (Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity*)



Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

By secular, we refer not only to a peculiar independence from any particular religious institution, but also, in a mysterious sense, to an independence from a purely eternal and immutable 'nature of things.' In other words, by the holiness of the secular, we mean the holiness of all that exists in this world. Panikkar describes the secular as the 'temporal character of things,' and goes on to describe this intuition: "This temporality is now being taken not only as something that matters, but as something definitive. Instead of being just fleeting, passing, ephemeral, the temporal structure of the world now represents a coefficient of reality that can-

not be eliminated . . . [it] is no longer considered something you can dispense with, or even utilize in order to reach something more important."

This intuition leads the new monk into all arenas of human life, notably into the areas of embodiment, intimate relationships, environmental concerns, community building and politics. The new monk sees the body as a holy incarnation and part of her spiritual work is in maintaining a healthy, nurturing and transformative relationship with it. New monasticism also encourages intimate relationships, both deep and meaningful friendships and loving sexual relationships grounded in integrity, trust and spiritual friendship. New monasticism is concerned with discovering the divine nature and proper place of all relationships.

It may be said that the new monk hears the words of Jesus not only as 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you,' but equally and perhaps more substantively as 'The Kingdom of Heaven is among you.' They find the need to work out their salvation through relationships . . . with each other, with the Kosmos, with their work in the world, and with Ultimate Reality, however they may conceive of or be initiated into It. As such, no human endeavor remains beyond their reach, and it is in their struggle to uplift all they see as valuable in the human condition that they find their unity with one another. They feel themselves participating in the ultimate act of creation, the incarnational act of bringing spirit into form and transmuting form into spirit.

The goal and struggle, or perhaps it is the play, of the new monk is to incarnate the fact that the spiritual and contemplative life

includes action. The new monk may be an artist, a scientist, a spiritual teacher, an elementary teacher, a social worker, or a waiter. It is not so much the job that matters, as the place from which they approach their work. Their work cannot be separated from their spiritual path. They endeavor to bring a heightened awareness, intimacy and authenticity to their work, whether this may be washing dishes or feeding the poor. There are, of course, some professions that the new monk could not participate in, such as ones involved in the building of weapons, open degradation of the environment or the exploitation of others for profit. Most professions, however, are not only open to new monastics, but are in desperate need of the mindfulness, kindness and infusion of grace that they endeavor to bring into their lives.

Another point of departure from the traditional role of the monk comes in the area of spiritual direction. More often than not, the new monastic is not drawn to the traditional ideas of obedience to a superior or complete dedication to a guru. While respecting traditional roles and many of the successes they have borne, the new monastic finds spiritual direction most often in the depths of spiritual friendship. The new monastic recognizes beyond any doubt the necessity of elders, the need for spiritual direction and the great gift afforded to him by those who have advanced further along than he. He struggles to develop his sense of discernment, and his spiritual mentors are indispensable to him. He sees this spiritual direction as the most profound blossoming of friendship. Friendship becomes the keynote of the new relationship between mentor and mentee, between teacher and student. One is reminded of the apocryphal story of the Buddha and his beloved attendant, Ananda. Ananda asks, "Dear Buddha, is spiritual friendship half of the journey to enlightenment?"

The Buddha replies, with a grand smile, "No, Ananda, it is the whole of the journey."

This notion of spiritual friendship helps the new monk to recognize the importance of human communities. He or she is interested in building communities that are sustainable, infused with a sense of the sacred and that support their members to discover and live out their sacred vocation in the world. Their care extends not only to others, but to the natural world around them and to all living creatures.

The key point may be summarized as the new monastic does not see a split between their inner and outer lives. The new monk is 'in the world but not of it,' as Jesus taught us to be. He "playfully plays the game [of life in the world] . . . but does not abide by the rules . . . and in playing changes some of the rules—at the risk of his life, obviously. For by changing the rules he will eventually change the game . . ." (Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity*)

Conclusion

"May the time come when men, having been awakened to a sense of the close bond linking all the movements of this world in the single all-embracing work of the Incarnation, shall be unable to give themselves to any one of their tasks without illuminating it with the clear vision that their work—however elementary it may be—is received and put to good use by a Center of the universe.

"When that time comes to pass, there will be little to separate life in the cloister from the life of the world . . ." (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*)

We situate new monasticism in terms of a movement, an organic arising of a deep desire to live a meaningful life and serve the world through our work and our compassion. It grows out of the desire to incarnate a contemporary spirituality, one that drinks deeply from the wells of human wisdom that have been dug throughout our ages, but one that also speaks to our modern sensibilities, to the unique occurrence of the convergence of the human race in our times, and that addresses the multiple and complex needs of a humanity in the throes of transition into a hopefully new and better world. The new monk may well be the beginnings of a physical manifestation of what is already true in the spiritual worlds, where a connected and collaborative effort of spiritual energies and truths work together and in harmony for the good of all life on our planet. This can be seen in the new monk's ability to move seamlessly between wisdom traditions, art, music, solitude, hard work, community and intimate friendships.

New monasticism is a search for the deepest humanity in us all. It is in this search that we are united, not only to our fellow 'monks,' but to all who long to birth a new world that lives and breathes of the Spirit, to all who desire to come to the utter depths of their being and then to enter the world through that doorway. A new monk is one who feels the calling to her own Evolution, her own depth of Spirit, her own transformational path and who responds. She embarks on this path in order to better serve all of Life, not knowing where this journey will take her, but knowing that she can no longer view anything in her life as separate from this journey. She is motivated by her ideals of love and compassion for others, as well as an impenetrable belief in the Truth and Reality of human spiritual maturation, of its transformative power, grace and sustaining ground. She is committed to serving the world in growing degrees of sacrificial love, skillful wisdom and joy. It is to this audacious goal that new monastics dare foresee, more than dare, see only it and pledge their life to becoming an ordinary, disciplined loving expression of its attainment.

Any such person may rightly be called a 'new monk.'

For further explorations concerning our ideas on this nascent spiritual impulse please see *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Life in the 21st Century* (www.hab-community.com/HAB/New_Monasticism.html) and *Occupy Spirituality: A Radical Vision for a New Generation* (forthcoming, North Atlantic Books, Adam Bucko and Matthew Fox).

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Rory McEntee (right) participated in the founding of the interspiritual movement as a close friend and mentee of the late Brother Wayne Teasdale. He is currently the administrator for the *Snowmass InterSpiritual Dialogue*, which was founded in 1984 by Father Thomas Keating. Rory lives a contemplative life while writing, teaching mathematics and being a father. rmcentee21@gmail.com



