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From the second half of the twentieth century, the Middle East witnessed a major renewal of Christian monasticism, marking the social, political and religious landscape of this predominantly Muslim region. Unmatched for several centuries, the revival of these movements with their monastic spirituality is reflected in the re-founding of ancient monasteries, often centuries old, or the foundation of new monasteries wherever the political context makes this possible, as in Lebanon, Jordan or Syria. Three processes of re-founding and founding monasteries can be identified: the rediscovery and renovation of ruins of an ancient place of worship, the enhancement of a place associated with a saint through the construction of a monastery, and finally, the construction of a new monastery specially designed for a community of monks or nuns aiming to renew the monastic tradition among young people. All these monasteries, capable of sheltering numerous communities and welcoming thousands of visitors, participate in an important re-Christianization of the national territories of this region. The renewed monasticism, the re-founding of monastic movements and the revival of monastic spirituality have become strong political and religious symbols that fully place the region's various Christian communities in their political and social contexts, even in the cases where governments show little sympathy toward members of religious minorities, as in Egypt, Iraq and Turkey.

Therefore, in Egypt, from the end of the 1940s, the numerous Coptic monasteries – often in poor condition – were newly occupied by important communities and were being renovated. During the same decade in Lebanon, pilgrims who had come to the monastery of

Saint Maron of Annaya to pray at the tomb of Father Charbel, a hermit monk of the Lebanese Maronite Order who died in 1898, experienced blessings and miracles. In 1950, his tomb was opened and witnesses observed the good state of conservation of his remains. The hermit monk Charbel was finally canonized by the Vatican in 1975. These events, which brought tens of thousands of devotees to the monasteries of Lebanon, undoubtedly gave a new impetus to the monastic movements throughout the country.

Without looking to the past, these movements fit fully into their context and modernity. Indeed, inherited from the past but turned toward the future, monasticism inscribes the Christian community into modernity. Vocations became more numerous, and many monasteries of all denominations were restored, such as the Greek Orthodox monastery of Nouriyye near the town of Batroun (Lebanon). In the mid-1960s, two nuns from the Syrian monastery of Saydnaya were commissioned by the Greek Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities to rebuild a female community in the ruined monastery then occupied by Palestinian refugee families. In Syria in the late 1970s, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East – the largest church numerically in Syria – gave new impetus to a monastic revival in the country. Thus, although in the 1950s only three Greek Orthodox monasteries were still active in the country, at the end of the year 2000 there were several dozen, as well as some Greek Catholic, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic monasteries.

Similarly, on the borders of Syria, Turkey and Iraq, in the region of Tur Abdin – in Syriac 'the mountain of the servants of God', so called because of the numerous monastic communities that settled there during the first centuries of Christianity – there was a revival of Syriac Orthodox monasticism from the mid-1990s onward. Vocations are increasing and the

monasteries are renovated thanks to donations from the Syriac diaspora spread mainly throughout northern Europe and the United States. Although this sometimes poses significant political and land issues with the Turkish authorities and the local Kurdish communities, the monasteries of the region, particularly the Mor Gabriel monastery founded in the fifth century, have again become important centres for the learning and the dissemination of the Syriac language and culture. We should also mention the case of the monasteries of northern Iraq, which, despite the disastrous national political situation, underwent conservation and renovation work in the late 1980s, notably due to the efforts of the Syriac Orthodox Church – whose patriarch of Iraqi origin, Ignace Zakka I Iwas (1932–2014), resided in Damascus – and of the Dominican Friars present in the plain of Nineveh since the end of the nineteenth century. The oldest monastery in Iraq, Mar Elia (Saint Elijah) near Mosul, was partially restored in 1986. Unfortunately, it was razed to the ground in 2014 by members of Daesh following the invasion of the region by the extremist Islamist group.

Monasticism, Holiness and Worship

In many cases, these efforts to renovate the monasteries are accompanied by a revival of monastic vocations. Men and women do not hesitate to give up the culture of consumerism, and, despite the difficulties of daily life in a monastery, monastic vocations are more and more numerous among both men and women. In Egypt and in other countries of the region, the cult of saints and miracles lies at the heart of these vocations. Saints are indeed an important focus of worship throughout the whole region, and the monastery – always dedicated to a saint – is a privileged place of worship, for both the present monastic community and the faithful, Muslims as well as Christians, who make pilgrimages there in order to obtain graces. The renewal of monastic movements and spirituality, witnessed

progressively from the second half of the twentieth century, is accompanied by a real passion (among both religious and lay worshippers) for the saints and miracles. On the holy day of the saint to which the monastery is dedicated, thousands of visitors flock to the place of worship to celebrate and implore him or her. In Egypt, as in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and elsewhere in the region, major celebrations take place in the monastery for several days, during which individual and collective prayers alternate with dances, music and festive gatherings with family and friends around lavish meals composed of sheep sacrificed in honour of the saint. For instance, in Palestine every year in March, thousands of people join the Greek Orthodox monastery of Saint Gerasimus in Deir Hajla in the Judean desert. Monks and nuns as well as ecclesiastical authorities encourage these celebrations that testify to the importance and strength of monasticism for the population and bring to the monastery devotees willing to make large gifts in thanks for the miracles that the saint grants to all, be they Christians or Muslims. More generally, these practices are part of the increased religiosity of the lay Christian population at large in the region.

The lay faithful who come on pilgrimages to celebrate and implore the saints to whom the places of worship are dedicated, however, are not the only ones to establish relations with the saints. On a daily basis, the members of the monastic communities who dedicate their lives to the patron saints of their monasteries – from whom they often derive their personal vocation through an apparition or a dreamlike vision - establish close links with them. Thus, in the accounts that the nuns of the monastery of Saint Thecle in Syria give of their existence at the monastery, their relationship with the patron saint of the place of worship is the focal point around which they grow spiritually. The role of the saint in the various monastic movements of the region is absolutely fundamental. There may even be a superposition of the

saint and the monk. Therefore, some monks and nuns – such as Father Charbel and the nun Rafqa in Lebanon – were canonized by the Vatican in the second half of the twentieth century. Even some ecclesiastical authorities – such as Cyril VI in Egypt, who was a monk before being Patriarch of the Copts under President Nasser – are considered saints by their communities. While the processes leading to the recognition of holiness vary considerably between those advocated by the Vatican's strict rules (with processes of beatification and canonization) and the much more informal ones of the Eastern Churches (based on popular support), the effects are the same among those who recognize the authority of the Vatican (Uniates) and among the Orthodox, both on the monastic movements themselves and on the spirituality of the religious and the laity.

Holiness is one of the founding pillars of monasticism in the region. Therefore, in order to understand all the stakes involved in the renewal of monastic movements, it is essential to understand that these are intimately linked to the processes and logics underlying the construction of holiness, which, far from being new, have a historical depth that is not to be neglected. Holiness is at the heart of both the processes of construction of monastic movements as well as the modes of daily organisation of monastic communities. This is due largely to the fact that from the time of their founding in the first centuries of Christianity (to which we shall return later) until now, Oriental monastic movements have ignored the notions of order and rule strictly speaking, at least as they have been perceived in Latin monasticism since its foundation. In Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and even more widely in the East, monastic movements are not unified within various orders, nor are they organized by precise rules that would dictate activities, missions and the spirituality of the monks and nuns. The monastic communities form distinct groups of men and women, and even if they might be

related because of their common adherence to a Church (such as Greek Orthodox, Coptic, Syriac Orthodox) and their common submission to the patriarch of their Church, their direct links are in fact very weak. The monastic movements of this region indeed claim they belong to the rule of Saint Basil, which is generally distinguished by its extreme flexibility and its deeply reflective character.

A Spirituality of Renunciation

Beyond the great political, religious and social diversity of the various national contexts in which today's monastic movements take place, their renewal marks the formidable historical continuity of Eastern Christianity since the age of primitive Christianity. Indeed, although taking place extremely late, this renewal is part of the regional history of holiness, monasticism and ascetic spirituality that, far from being linear, has been marked by numerous ruptures and transformations. To study the monastic movements and the spirituality inspiring them today, a historical approach is unavoidable, not only for the theoretical necessity of placing this phenomenon in its historical context but also for the methodological concern of taking the word of the men and women currently engaged in monasticism into account. Indeed, through their highly reflective stories about themselves and their religious, social and political conditions, they place their own existence and that of the communities to which they belong in diachronic depth. This aims to rebuild a continuity between themselves and the first ascetics and monks of the region as well as the famous saints who constitute important points of reference for them.

In this context, questions of vocation and monastic spirituality are absolutely central. In fact, the spirituality that inspired the first monks continues to inspire the monks of today:

renounce the world, renounce oneself and build a relationship with God that is as direct as possible. The construction of the relationship with God is, however, based on ascetic practices that often differ significantly according to the practitioner's age and community. Nonetheless, in the various monastic movements it is possible to identify very old structuring logics based on the principles of autonomy and emancipation, especially of political and ecclesiastical power. From the first centuries of Christianity, monastic movements have sprung from the will of men and women to free themselves as much as possible from their existential condition and worldly needs. They have sought to organise communities less constrained by social order in general and by political and economic contingencies in particular. For these men and women the issue has been to get out of the world and to create a society of consecrated individuals entirely devoted to the search for God. To pursue this objective the question of asceticism is essential. As defined by Max Weber in 1958, asceticism is a way to free people from their nature and their impulses through extreme self-control.

If asceticism is therefore not an objective but a means of reaching God, Weber adds, it is invariably hostile to authority. Here we find the essentially emancipatory objective of asceticism and monasticism from the logics of power. Outside the world, men and women engaged in monastic movements seek to create a different society. In this sense, it is possible to agree with Jean Séguy that these men and women are guided by a utopia. This he defines as 'Criticism of the present by a past or normative principle, in the perspective of another future' (Jean Séguy, 'Pour une sociologie de l'ordre religieux', *in Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, n°57/1, 62). This utopia aims at the transformation of society and seeks to free women and men from their condition and worldliness. The pursuit of this utopia responds to the essential need of monks and nuns to free themselves from carnal life in order to attain the

good life. But if this utopia is profoundly transcendent in the sense that it is always open and is intended to be surpassed, it is nonetheless a variable historical and social phenomenon: how radical it is varies according to the period in which it is pursued.

Since late antiquity, the men and women who, generation after generation, have chosen to give their lives an exemplary religious direction have done so in ways that have varied according to the times, regions, theological quarrels, and ascetic and spiritual currents. Monasticism has a fundamentally protean character that, over time, allows it to persist while renewing itself despite political, social and religious contexts, which are at times frankly hostile to the extreme way of life it advocates. Indeed, at first glance, monastic asceticism marks a radical break with one of the essential elements of life in society, namely its family structure and thereby the reproduction of society. Even though marriage, family and reproduction were a matter of survival for the population in the Roman Empire, women and men 'renounced the flesh' for the resurrection of the dead and to prepare for the end of time announced by the Christian doctrine as it had been widely taught and transmitted by Saint Paul. Indeed the formation of women's communities dates back to the first century. Thus, choosing to break with the family, the first members of the monastic communities inaugurated an extreme and extra-worldly way of life.

Historically, Syria-Mesopotamia is with Egypt one of the cradles of Christian monastic movements. In the fourth century, in Upper and Lower Egypt, the hermits of Saint Anthony (250–356) and Saint Pachomius (292–346) went into the desert, firstly to practise prayer and meditation in almost absolute eremitism and secondly to found a community there in a closed place under the authority of a superior. After them, in less than a century, hundreds

and thousands of monks chose to live in this hostile environment, in total destitution. This movement spread in Syria-Mesopotamia with, however, some specificities. Several works on the conditions of the emergence and the peculiarities of monasticism in Syria in relation to Egyptian monasticism show that until the seventh century, a considerable number of monks engaged in extreme ascetic practices such as Stylitism, Saint Simeon Stylites being one of the most celebrated representatives. But then there are other, more extreme ascetic practices, which have now completely fallen into oblivion. The monks of the time thus exercised in their asceticism a certain violence that moreover was directed both toward themselves and towards other. For Peter Brown, if Egypt is indeed the cradle of monasticism, at the time of the Roman Empire of the East 'Syria was the great province for ascetic stars. … [T]he holy men who minted the ideal of the saint in society came from Syria, and, later, from Asia Minor and Palestine – not from Egypt' (Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity,* London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1982, 109–11).

Movements beyond the Mundane Order

Nevertheless, in spite of the radical particularities of these 'virtuosos of the religious' (Weber) – in comparison with other clerics, from a more formal and institutional point of view – in the age of primitive Christianity, there was not yet a real separation between the secular clergy and the regular clergy; the population of the monks is then ill-defined and is neither secular nor clerical. There is, however, another fundamental difference between men of religion in general – who were all ascetics, from the simple cleric to the bishop – and the lay Christian population. Therefore, until the fourth century, one cannot really speak of monasticism in Syrian-Aramaic Mesopotamia, and it is more accurate to speak of 'protomonachism' or 'first

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asceticism'. Later the ecclesiastical structures adopted the more classical model of Christianity in the late Roman Empire, in which members of the secular clergy and ascetics were radically different in their religious practices and ways of life. This split also led to many heresies. Political and religious tensions between clerical institutions and monastic movements, which constitute a real *topos* of the history of Christianity, are therefore very old. Varying in strength according to the epochs, they participated in the construction and the specificities of the different monastic movements through the ages. Hence, classically, the monastic society of that period, which was not unified, was already established as a counter-society in relation to ecclesiastical institutions, which were extremely hierarchical and structured around the figures of the bishop and the episcopal college. As it was, the rapid collapse of the official Church in Syria in the fifth century and the great councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon gave considerable freedom back to the monks.

Despite the fundamental change in the structure of the Church from this time on, the relationship between the monks and the faithful remained very close. The monks chose their disciples among them and formed more or less stable monastic communities. In this particularly competitive monastic world, many monks also wished to exercise a certain magisterium in society and did not hesitate to instigate major ecclesiastical conflicts such as the one concerning the unity of the natures of Jesus Christ. Moreover, monasticism did not develop in a truly hostile environment. Indeed, the first monks appeared in the region where Christianity had practically become the official religion of the Roman Empire. And, unlike the martyrs of the first centuries, who had no choice but to go into the desert or to the mountains to escape religious persecution, the monks themselves had a real social visibility.

The integration of the monk – who, according to Brown's expression, is a holy man –

in society made him a real 'hinge-man' and 'man of power' (Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity,* 118) who was able to resist the power of the great lords. The 'holy men' were very popular and crowds of people visited them. In analysing the context of the emergence of the 'holy man' as well as his role in his era, Brown clearly shows that the latter certainly did not entirely devote himself to a contemplative life. On the contrary, he had an important role in society and was even considered, at the time, to be an individual capable of managing the internal problems of a village or a region and defending the interests of the peasants against the landowners. The category of the sacred to which the holy man was attached then had a real function: it enabled him to exercise a real role in the society.

In the Christian tradition monks have never been figures of stability. On the contrary, they always evolved on the margins of the Church and were real agitators. Far from ignoring this fact, however, for centuries the prelates and monks have referred to them as eminent representatives of Christianity who have always been able to defend their society against the powers of one side or another, and who, to a certain extent, continue to do so today. In a way, the function the members of the monastic movements have today has been inherited from the monks of the first centuries. Of course, it is difficult today to speak of them as 'holy men or women', but the saints to which the monasteries are dedicated and to which the monastic communities devote themselves entirely, allow them to continue to exercise this function. It is for this reason that the relations established by the monastic communities with the saints are so important.

This essential detour via the category of the sacred developed by the works of Brown, which specifically examine the role and the place of the one he calls 'holy man' at the time of the emergence of the first monastic movements, makes it possible to restore a texture and a

social and political density to the members of the monastic movements and to the spirituality that inspires them. By restoring their social depth to the monks and the communities they form, the historical and anthropological approaches of monasticism come together to characterise this religious phenomenon. Thus, even more firmly than utopia – although this is not contradictory – it is indeed the protest against worldliness that the monastic movements seem to embody and which guides the monastic spirituality in this region. In any case, this is what the first Syrian ascetics, then considered to be the holders of great supernatural powers, did by cursing their enemies in the name of God, practising exorcisms or even generously distributing graces to the devout coming to ask for cures, as well as resolving their economic disputes with the great lords of the cities. They appeased the evils of humanity, while at the same time contesting a social and political order that governed by force. Monastic movements have an original and structuring aspect, more or less acute depending on the period and, if not revolutionary, at least contentious, undoubtedly contributing to their dynamism and permanence in the region.

Furthermore, we must note how subversive it is for educated, middle-class men and women to forgo the conventional lifestyle of getting married and having children to go against tradition and choose to devote themselves to a monastic life. For women, in former times and also today, running away from marriage and joining an order despite their family's opposition is even more subversive. This aspect is certainly an indication of what today continues to animate monastic spirituality. The choice made by monks and nuns to lead an ascetic existence in order to bear witness to their belief in Jesus Christ is quite different from that of members of the secular clergy who enter the service of the Church. The latter inscribe their religious vocation in parishes, bishoprics and patriarchies. And in Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon

and Syria, according to their hierarchical status, they are linked to the political figures of the country and take their place in a worldly order, at the heart of which political and economic relations and often patriarchy and cronyism prevail.

Mainstays of the Christian Community

As we have seen, monasticism is a singular way of life and expression of the Christian faith. The Arabic term for 'monasticism', *rahbana*, is built on the root *RHB*, which means 'fear'. The monk is indeed 'he who fears God.' The monks and nuns are outside a worldly hierarchy to which the members of the secular clergy belong, and for this reason monks and nuns may be said to be outside the world. Moreover, the verb *tarahaba*, which is used in Arabic to designate the action of these men and women, precisely means 'to isolate oneself from society by entering the monastery in order to worship God'. It also designates the one who makes the monastic vows (poverty, chastity and obedience) and who sacrifices himself or herself to God. The members of the secular clergy, for their part, make no vows, but engage in their priesthood through a ceremony based on the notion of 'promises', *nuzur* in Arabic. Moreover, men who are already married can become priests in the Eastern rites, including those who belong to Churches recognising the authority of the Vatican. Nowadays, according to monks and nuns, people visit the monasteries and give them gifts because they remain strong points of identification for the Christian population of this region, and they certainly have become even more important since the end of the 1960s and the official closure of borders between several countries in the region and Israel, as well as the banning of Christians from the region (except Jordanians and Egyptians) from Israel and consequently from carrying out the Great Pilgrimage to Jerusalem. According to monks and nuns, the saints of the monasteries then gained importance in order to become again the 'symbolic resourcing of a community and to

attract the Christian community towards a deeper religious and spiritual experience' (excerpt from an interview with a Greek Orthodox monk, 2003, Syria).

Monks and nuns thus receive many visitors, and it is much more common for a Christian from the region to visit the members of the monastic movements than to visit the prelates of the Churches, with whom relations are extremely distant. Their ties with the population provided the members of the monastic movements with a certain power over the latter, which in many respects was more important than that of the prelates.

Nevertheless, this separation and sometimes opposition between monasteries and their communities on one side and the Churches and their prelates on the other, which monks and nuns tend to emphasize, must be qualified. First, the superiors of the monastic movements are ambivalent: they are the links with the prelates and represent, in some ways, the authority of the latter in the monastery. Then, on the side of men, we must remember that bishops are often monks and that the patriarchs are chosen from among the bishops, and therefore potentially from among the monks. Therefore, for men, the only holders of religious authority in the Eastern Churches, there is a possible circulation between secular clergy and regular clergy. This essential nuance certainly allowed the monastic movements to maintain themselves despite their profound rejection of the power of clerics.

Indeed, it is legitimate to wonder how, without this fundamental nuance, monastic movements and ascetic spirituality could to this day occupy a place of such great importance in the Christianity of this region for both the religious and the laity. This is certainly the reason why the Patriarchs of the Eastern Churches, who are the supreme repositories of

religious and political authority over Church members, have not ceased since the second half of the twentieth century to encourage the creation and renewal of monastic movements and the spread of ascetic spirituality. Hence, in 1977, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Elias IV Moawad, declared in one of his official speeches, 'The creation of monastic communities is an indication of the spiritual maturity of the faithful. ... The Church needs both clergy in the parishes and religious in the monasteries. A Church that does not have these two complementary aspects is not complete. ... Without monasteries we are guided solely by the bishops, and a bad bishop can lead his community towards evil. Herein lies the importance of the monasteries. Monasteries have always been the history and protection of Orthodoxy.' Seven years later, in August 1984, the new patriarch of the Church, Ignatius IV Hazim, reaffirmed the idea in an interview with the Lebanese daily al-Nahar: 'Monastic communities are one of the most important elements to pursue our goal of renewal. Monasticism is one of the purest elements of the Church.'

Conclusion

Excerpts from the speeches of these two heads of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East from 1970 to 2012 show that they pursued the same objective: establishing monastic movements as one of the essential dimensions of their Church. According to them, the members of the monastic movements thus have two important functions: the protection of the Church and the whole community – secular and religious – and the perpetuation of tradition. Monastic movements and ascetic spirituality are therefore conceived as structuring elements of the Church and of the community. Thus, despite the tumultuous changes in the region that have affected the monastic communities as well as the rest of the population, monasticism is not in decline. On the contrary, faithful to their subversive tradition, monks

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and nuns do not hesitate to oppose the political power that attempts to manipulate the Christian communities, as we can observe in Syria. The monk and priest Paolo Dall'Oglio as well as his monastic community of the Syriac Catholic monastery of Mar Moussa located in the region of Homs (Syria) openly called for support for the Syrian Revolution as early as 2011. More recently, in 2014, the Greek Orthodox nuns of the monastery of Saint Thecle in Syria refused to accuse the rebellion of persecuting them because of their religion. They even declared to the official media that rebels had saved them from death when the fights between the Syrian Army and the rebels took place around the monastery. Hence, we can see how monastic communities offer a political and religious voice freed from the clientelist constraints in which patriarchal institutions are often caught up and that prevent Christians from having a real non-communitarian political commitment.

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