Sociology and Monasticism

Between Innovation and Tradition

Edited by

Isabelle Jonveaux
Enzo Pace
Stefania Palmisano
## Contents

List of Contributors  
VIII  

Introduction: The State of the Art in the Sociology of Monasticism  
XIII  

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### PART 1

**Catholic Monasticism**

1  Monastic Asceticism and Everyday Life  
   3  
   *Salvatore Abbruzzese*

2  Virtuosity, “Folklorisation” and Cultural Protest: Monasticism as a Laboratory of the Confrontation between Christianity and Modernity  
   21  
   *Danièle Hervieu-Léger*

3  Female Monasticism in Italy: A Sociological Investigation  
   34  
   *Giovanni Dalpiaz*

4  Ethnography of Cloistered Life: Field Work into Silence  
   55  
   *Francesca Sbardella*

5  Redefinition of the Role of Monks in Modern Society: Economy as Monastic Opportunity  
   71  
   *Isabelle Jonveaux*

6  An Innovative Return to Tradition: Catholic Monasticism Redux  
   87  
   *Stefania Palmisano*

7  New Spirituality in Old Monasteries?  
   *Kees De Groot, Jos Pieper and Willem Putman*  
   107
PART 2
Ex Oriente lux: Other forms of Monasticism

8 Athos Outside of Athos: Orthodox Monasticism in the West  133
   Laurent Denizeau

9 Spiritual Direction in Orthodox Monasticism: The Elder Beyond
   Weber’s Theory of Charisma  150
   Maria Hämmerli

10 A National Monasticism? Monastic Politics of the Syriac Orthodox
   Church in Syria  169
   Anna Poujeau

11 Contemplative Spirituality and the Intermonastic Encounter
   Movement  185
   Timon Reichl

12 Experiencing the Liminal: Understanding Separation and Transition
   among Buddhist Monastic Women in Contemporary Britain  206
   Caroline Starkey

13 A Space of Mountains within a Forest of Buildings? Urban Buddhist
   Monasteries in Contemporary Korea  227
   Florence Galmiche

PART 3
Methodology and Classical Authors of the
Sociology of Monasticism

14 Studying Contemporary Monasticism in Italy: An Anthropological
   and Historical Perspective  243
   Maria Chiara Giorda, Javier González Díez, Sara Hejazi

15 Monasticism and Society in Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch  261
   Paul-André Turcotte
CONTENTS

16  Séguy and the Monastic Utopia  277
    Enzo Pace

17  A Sociology of Imagined Societies: Monasticism and Utopia  284
    Jean Séguy

Index  321
Redefinition of the Role of Monks in Modern Society: Economy as Monastic Opportunity

Isabelle Jonveaux

Fewer and fewer young people today wish to become a monk or a nun. The scarcity of vocations is now taken for granted in Roman Catholic Church, and some communities in West Europe are searching solutions to avoid closing. Does that mean that secularized society no longer needs monasteries and “administrators of salvation goods” as Max Weber (1995) put it? At the opposite of this decline and marginalization of consecrated life as lived out by the professed, we notice a growing interest in monastic life through more and more people who come to monasteries for a visit, a retreat or only to buy monastic products at the shop. The problem is not so much that monastic life is outmoded but rather that monks and nuns are less and less present in society as religious professionals, as though religious virtuosi are no longer plausible in secularized society.

In this chapter I will seek to investigate the renewed role of monasticism in a society that is no longer interested in eschatological salvation. In this effort, I choose to enter monastic reality through economics, and I will seek to demonstrate in this chapter the pertinence of this approach. After having explained in a first part the place of economy in monastic communities and what its study reveals about monastic life and its evolution, I will discuss the new commercial activities of monasteries and the new role that they may give to monasteries in a secularized society.

My contribution is based on field inquiries and interviews with monks and nuns carried on between 2004 and today in male and female monasteries in France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and Austria. The communities that I studied belong to Benedictine, Cistercian and Trappist orders.

What Does Economy Reveal About Monastic Life?

It is obvious that monasteries are not primary groups of economic action oriented toward a performance in this sphere. But monasteries nevertheless “engage in economic activities” and are, according to Max Weber,
“regulatory groups...whose norms regulate the economic behavior of the participants and whose organs do not continuously direct economic activities through participation, concrete instructions or injunctions” (1978: 339–341). Because monastics live together and live out all aspects of their life in the same place, hence are in this sense “total institutions” (Goffman 1961), monastic communities are also confronted with the economic aspect of existence, even though they originally aimed to free themselves from earthly conditions.

Before I explain how commercial activities could give new opportunities for monastic communities to conserve plausibility in secularized society, we have to pay attention to what economy means in a monastic context. It particularly has to be placed in the perspective of tensions present in monastery between religious life and economic activity.

Economy and Religious Life: A Long Story

It would take far too long to explain the whole history of the topic of work and economy in monasticism, but I will briefly mention the key points of this debate. From the very beginning of monasticism, work and economy generated deep tensions within religious life. As Christian men and women wanted to go out of the world and give themselves totally to prayer and contemplation, monks at first thought that they did not need to work: God would provide for their survival. The works of the Desert Fathers, for example, include stories of monks who received their food directly from angels (Guy 1993), but the Desert Fathers also quickly realized that they could not live as angels and that work was a necessity for their material or biological survival. Subsequently monastic work was institutionalized through rules such as that of Pachomius (†346) and later, of course, the famous rule of Saint Benedict (†550) which even integrates work in the definition of monk: “When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks” (Rule: Chap. 48). Nevertheless the tension between work or economy and prayer life did not disappear with the redaction of rules or institutionalization of communities in defined monasteries but continues throughout the whole history of monasticism. More particularly, this question has often been the cause of reforms or creations of new monastic movements. The balance between manual labor and prayer often produced a genuine economic rationalism that led to a famous paradox underlined by Max Weber (1948: 334):
The ascetic monk has fled from the world by denying himself individual property; his existence has rested entirely upon his own work; and, above all, his needs have been correspondingly restricted to what was absolutely indispensable. The paradox of all rational asceticism, which in an identical manner has made all ages stumble, is that rational asceticism itself has created the very wealth it rejected. Temples and monasteries have everywhere become the very loci of rational economies.

It is for this reason that the Cistercian reform of Saint Bernard, for instance, was a reaction against the enrichment of Benedictine abbeys like Cluny in France. But the Trappist reform that occurred five centuries later – the strict observance with the Abbé de Rancé at the end of the 17th century in Normandy – was also a reaction against the new enrichment and decline of asceticism in Cistercian abbeys. Economy is therefore a very delicate question in monasticism in order to retain the balance between prayer life and work life. A monastery that was extremely poor could not achieve a quality religious life. When monks are daily worried about their material survival, they cannot have a deep contemplative life. It is for this reason that Pope Pius XII wrote in 1950, after having observed that a lot of female monasteries were in a critical situation after the war, the apostolic letter (Sponsa Christi) in order to denounce the excessive poverty of some female monasteries and encourage them to find productive work. At the opposite end, when economic life is too successful, it can take too large a place in religious life, and history shows us that when monks no longer need to work because other people do it for them (lay brothers, salaried workers or servants), the quality of religious life has also declined. So Patrice Cousin claims: “la richesse a été continûment malfaisante pour les moines” (1956: 531). Max Weber also writes: “In fact, the whole history of monasticism is in a certain sense, the history of a continual struggle with the problem of the secularizing influence of wealth” (2003: 174).

**Monastic Economy Today: Toward Production Activities**

In most European countries today economic activities have become a first necessity for monasteries that have lost their traditional sources of incomes. Donations are no longer enough for the subsistence of communities. Moreover, dowries have been abolished in female monasteries, which were a main source of their income. Additionally, many monasteries lost their inheritances in the troubles of monastic history. In France, for instance, they did not recover these
possessions after the Revolution, and since 1979 they have been required to pay social contributions to the state. Hence, autarchy is no longer possible for French monasteries which have to produce money in order to pay contributions to the state and also have to find other sources of income, such as agriculture.

The economic situation of monasteries nowadays can be very different according to the society in which the monastery is located. Nevertheless we can maintain that a large part of monastic communities today live thanks to the direct work of monks. In France, for instance, work incomes represent between 28 and 45% of total monastery incomes – or between 41 and 58% if we also include incomes from the monastic guest house.1 In this case we can maintain that the economy of French monasteries is really based on the monks’ work. Although Austrian monks do not have the same economic activities as the French, incomes of these abbeys – as I will show later – also come for the most part from the work of monks who are active in parishes (hence paid by the diocese) or schools (hence paid by the state). At the opposite extreme, Belgian monasteries principally find their incomes in royalties they receive for its marks they give to beer or cheese. For instance, these royalties represent 46% of the income of the Benedictine Abbey of Maredsous. In this case, a great part of monks are active in non-rentable activities such as intellectual ones. In general, three main patterns can be found in the modern monastic economy: a direct economy of work where monks directly work for their subsistence, an assets economy where incomes come in major part from land possessions or investments, and finally an economy of exterior employees where lay people work for monks and operate economic activities.

The most relevant questions for monks and nuns today is indeed to find an economic activity that can be productive for the community but which also can be integrated into a coherent religious system. Following Jean Séguy (1971: 331), we can describe monastery as a utopia which is “a complete ideological system aiming to transform radically the existing global system implicitly or explicitly, by appealing to an imaginary vision of the world or by applying it in practice.” In this sense the monastery is an entirely religious institution that theoretically admits in its framework only activities that can help it to reach the religious purpose of the institution. That is why economic activities have to be justified by monastics in order not to challenge the religious utopia. Then justifications of work and economy give rise to various strategies that can be briefly listed here. The first one would be denying economy by creating alternative spaces for gift and barter, but monks are aware that

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1 For four French abbeys studied between 2004 and 2009, where I was able obtain figures.
they cannot live solely with this alternative form of economy. The second one is a process of externalization, which consists in withdrawing monks from economic activities and replacing them by lay people or to extract a manufactory from the enclosure. The last stage of this externalization is the sale of the monastic trademark to a lay company from which monks receive royalties, as in Maredsous for instance. A final strategy consists of giving religious signification to the economy, which in this case will no longer be opposed to religious life. It is obvious in case of religious products like hosts or icons, but arts and crafts or even ecology can also give rise to new redefinitions of the religious activity (Jonveaux 2011a).

**European Differences in Monastic Activities: A Statistical Approach**

The principal aim for this chapter is to explain how new commercial activities of monks toward society can paradoxically help them to find a renewed place in a putatively “secularized” contemporary world. Nevertheless, the situation of European monasteries can be very different from one country to another and activities monastics are developing in the early twenty-first century are still deeply connected with the particular history of each country over the last three centuries.

Austria is a good example of this. A quick statistical study of monasticism in Austria shows how much we can still observe the heritage of “josephinism” from the eighteenth century (Jonveaux 2014). In the framework of the Enlightenment, Emperor Joseph II, the son of Maria Theresia, following the theories of the French economist Quesnay, enacted a law to eliminate all religious communities which had no “useful” activity for society. As a consequence, monasteries opened schools and developed work in parishes, while they also received more parishes from the State. Statistical data about monasticism in Europe still perfectly shows these differences in monastic history, especially through activities of monks and nuns. For instance 60.9% of Austrian Benedictine monasteries have a shop as contrasted to 78.6% for French Benedictine monasteries. This difference can be explained through the fact that Austrian monks have other activities apart from the production economy, hence they do not need a shop to sell their products as do French monks. The major part of the activities of Austrian monks take place outside the monastery in parishes or schools. For instance, 63% of the monks of Kremsmünster – a Benedictine Abbey in Upper Austria – work outside the monastery, and 54% of them were or are active in a parish. The same can be observed with the
monastic guest house. Meanwhile $73\%$ of all contemplative monasteries in France have a guest house, while only $42.6\%$ of Austrian monasteries have one even though it is very important for Benedictine spirituality to receive guests “as they would welcome Christ Himself” (RB Chap 53). At the opposite end, $30\%$ of Austrian monasteries have still a school, although we cannot find any in France for over 50 years. This particular episode of Austrian history also explains why female contemplative monasteries are not as widespread, while we can always count more female monasteries than male monasteries in Italy, France or Belgium. There are indeed only seven female Benedictine monasteries in Austria and eighteen male Benedictine monasteries. As they could not have activities in parishes or schools because of their impossibility to access the priesthood and their strong papal enclosure, most female monasteries were cut off. Religious history in European countries still therefore leaves its mark on the situation of monasteries nowadays, and we can read this history through monastics’ activities.

In sum, we can argue that economy is a pertinent point for entering the monastic reality and to carry out a sociological study of present monasteries. Because the economic dimension is the most important junction point between monasteries and society, it is also the major place to observe mutations in monastic life which are influenced by social evolution. As a proof of that, the history of monasticism shows us the relevant weight of economic questions in evolutions, crises or reforms of monasteries. This historical background has also to be taken into consideration when we want understand the situation of European monasticism today. This study of economic dimensions of religious life fills furthermore a gap in the sociology of religion and also economic sociology.

**Diverse Positions of Monasteries Toward Society**

Economic activities of monastics are a necessity to provide for keeping of their community functioning, but as we will see, monks also try to insert them in their global religious project. The reason I chose to explain the economy of monasteries in order to study the redefinition of the role of monastics in late

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2 Throughout this chapter statistics for Austria were made from the *ss. Patriarchae Benedicti Familiae Confoederatae, Atlas osb*, Editio II, 2004, the *Direktorium* 2012 and 2013, and Websites of monasteries. For the case of France, especially thanks to the *Annuaire pratique des lieux monastiques*, Fondation des Monastères, 2007. All statistics were calculated using SPSS.
modernity is because economic activities bring a lot of new opportunities to monks to find a new place in a society that is no longer interested in its eschatological salvation. In spite of the decline of interest about monasteries for their religious function, we notice nowadays a growing interest for non-religious activities of monasteries, which are most of the time also commercial activities.

Are Monks Still “Administrators of Salvations Goods”?

My choice to discuss primarily the economic aspect of monastic life does not mean denying the main goal of a monastic institution – which is indeed a religious one. Monks and nuns are theoretically defined by their religious role which, according to Max Weber, would be the administration of salvation goods. This can be better understood if we place the origin of monasticism in a society which is waiting for the end of the times. “Sans l’attente ferme d’un retour proche du Seigneur, suivre Jésus est invivable; sans l’espérance que les temps sont raccourcis, c’est insupportable” (Metz 1981 : 61). In this context eschatological salvation was a very precious good for which people were ready to pay in order to obtain it. Monks were those who prayed for society as it has no time and no qualification to do so in a relatively rigid division among social classes. The French “three orders of society” described by Georges Duby (1978) is a good example for this. Society could then pay monks to pray for their salvation while it was working on the daily functioning of society. But in a modern society of mass consumption and now one of satiety, eschatological salvation no longer makes sense. Salvation today is in earthly happiness, satisfaction of desires, eternal beauty and youth. As Peter L. Berger (1971: 202) says, “ce qui est le plus important, c’est que la théodicée de la souffrance, caractéristique du Christianisme, a perdu sa crédibilité et que la voie a donc été ouverte ainsi à diverses sotériorologies sécularisées.” Furthermore, with the individualization of religious practice and the decline of religious authority, this division of religious work no longer makes sense. What can monastics do for this society?

If the traditional role of monks no longer interests society, why do so many people go to visit monasteries? It means that monks found a new kind of role, and the economy seems to be the right place to observe it. It does not mean that monks did not previously have a relevant role in society through activities other than religion. We all know perfectly well the dominant role of monasteries in the economic and social development of Europe in the Middle Ages, for example, but what we can now observe is a transposition of social and economic development by removing it from the religious role.
When Necessity of New Markets Brings New Publics in Monasteries

Ideally monks would like to insert their economic activities in the religious utopia in order not to disturb religious coherence, but they come up against the necessity to find markets in order to sell their productions.

First, agriculture, which was a traditional activity of monks, is no longer possible in respect to most French monasteries because they lost their possessions centuries ago. As a consequence, they have to find other production activities. We could think that monks enter into economic activities that have a direct religious sense, for instance the production of religious items or hosts. These products are still present in monastic productions nowadays but they are not the most widespread. For example, in French monasteries, religious products represent 24% of monastic productions, while in Italy they are 18%. While these products do go together well with the religious aims of monasteries, they are not able to open onto a larger market. In a society where traditional religious practice is fading, these typical religious products find less and less costumers and almost entirely restrict demand to Christian customers. Monastics understood this perfectly, and this is why they diversified their activities, especially into productions which have a commercial purpose even if they are not directly useful for the monks. Some data can be useful here to consolidate this impression. For instance, foods represent 27% of French products, CD's and cards are 15%, and decoration is 10%. We also can find in monastic productions cosmetics, foods supplements, toys and so on.

The necessity of finding new markets to provide for the subsistence of the community leads therefore monastics to non-religious productions which can create new opportunities to bring a new larger and more diverse public into monasteries. The same can be observed with other commercial ventures of monasteries which are now more and more numerous to reach different kinds of audiences. From icons to the Bible, from yoga to prayer and dance, from chant to stress management, the announcements of monastic sessions on the homepages of monasteries concern a wide range of possible activities. These sessions therefore widen the range of publics who come to monasteries. Because they are no longer solely devoted Catholics who expect a religious service, this permits as a consequence a monastery to increase the variety of both the people whom they serve and the revenue streams they generate.

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New Publics and New Sources of Incomes

Retreat in a monastery is the traditional religious activity for Catholic people who want to take time for themselves and to find God. But if we spend some days in a monastic guest house today, we can immediately notice that people who are there are not all Catholic churchgoers, and we often can meet people who are not believers at all. A short typology of different kinds of publics who come to monasteries could help to understand the new role of monasteries in the secularized society.

The first kind of “monastic consumer” is the Catholic churchgoer in search of religious tradition who comes to the monastery for the solemn aspects of the office or the Gregorian chants. His consumption is essentially religious, and he rarely goes to the shop or restaurant. Another way of consuming at monasteries is participation in various sessions or other monastic presentations (as, for example, musical), especially in connection with major events within the Christian year. This public can be more varied in the sense that people can come with a religious purpose or without. A spiritual aim is almost always present, but it would be difficult to define this expectation in an institutional way. A final kind of public is tourists who come to visit of the abbey, but not explicitly motivated by religion at all. Such themes as architecture, history, artwork or music are possible. They often buy something in the shop, especially when a monk is doing the visit, because of the folkloric aspect. Belonging to these two last types we can also find a special category of intellectual people who will appreciate the monastery because of a “pure taste” which is based, as Bourdieu (1984: 486) writes, on “a fundamental refusal of the facile” (Bourdieu 1984: 486). The taste for monastic architecture, Gregorian chant, but also traditional monastic products refer to this “refusal of the facile” in appreciating this reality from an esthetical point of view freed from the religious function.

A tension for monks takes place therefore between the necessity of having more clients to increase their incomes and the imperative of protecting the monastic sphere in order to allow a real life of contemplation. We can indeed cite some religious communities such as in Hautecombe, France, which left the historic abbey and built a new smaller monastery in the mountain (Ganagobie) in order to flee from the hordes of tourists which came to visit the abbey each summer. I have myself observed the same at the Abbey of Heiligenkreuz (Austria) a few summers ago. There were no less than five tourist busses in the parking when I arrived. Furthermore monastics have to manage the cohabitation of different kinds of public in order to ensure a silent atmosphere for people who come for a retreat.
A monk of Camaldoli said me, for instance, they do not accept families with children when they organize retreats in silence, and correspondingly, they advise people who do want to come for a retreat against coming during sessions for families. If monks are selling now the monastery and monastic life as “brand,” this also has as a consequence that they have to manage the new cohabitation in the monastery between “customers” and “faithfull.”

**Toward a Monastic Hedonism?**

Although symbolic religious goods which come from traditional institutions find less and less customers, monastic products are more and more successful: How can we explain this success?

If we pay more attention to certain monastic products, we can note that they present a renewed image of monastic life and monastic spirituality. According to Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2003: 133), a “vision du catholicisme indifférent (ou même hostile) à la recherche de bien-être de l’individu traverse sourdement l’opinion et les médias.” Because of their ascetic reputation, monks appear in society as “virtuosi of renunciation,” which includes refusal of all earthly pleasure. This would not be wrong indeed if we refer to the Weber’s assertion that the aim of monastic asceticism is “the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment” (2003: 119). But some monastic products seem to present a new rapprochement toward life and bodily enjoyment. Cosmetics are a good example of this. As I observed it in an earlier article (Jonveaux 2011b), monks and nuns who produce cosmetics seem to encourage wellness and pleasure in the description of the product. Three percent of French monasteries produce cosmetics or so-called “hygiene products,” an expression used by French monks who are reluctant to say “cosmetics” for the negative connotations this word might engender in the monastic arena. When nuns praise in their catalogue a bath loofah with an endorsement such as “we use the bath loofah daily for a moment of intensive pleasure and relaxation,” does that mean that they are no longer ascetic? The word “pleasure” is indeed often present in the description of monastic cosmetics although it had for many centuries a negative moral connotation in the monastic arena. It would seem curious that nuns openly make products that would be contrary to their values. The only explication for this is therefore to consider a new approach to cosmetics and pleasure of hygiene in monastic life. It is obvious that nuns do not produce these creams or shampoos for themselves, and most of the time, they do not use them. Nevertheless if nuns market it, this means that they no
longer condemn women who do use them. Otherwise it would mean that nuns encourage them to sin!

Although asceticism was considered as denying all pleasure in life, and especially bodily pleasures, some monastic products do not seem to correspond to this traditional view of ascetic discipline. Does that mean that a new kind of spirituality appears in European Catholic monasteries? There can be no doubt that monastic catalogues show a new interpretation of a relationship to one’s body through the vocabulary used to describe foods or hygiene products. This can be also observed in other commercial monastic endeavors such as Marienkron, a Cistercian monastery in Austria, which has a wellness house offering therapy according to the Kneipp method.4 In this house people can receive a massage or water jet therapy, take a qi gong or aquagym course, some of which are given by nuns themselves. Many monasteries, for instance the female Benedictine Abbey of Jouarre in France, also now offer yoga sessions or some courses that integrate bodily expression and prayer. The spirituality monks present to people who come to them is therefore no longer only the traditional one with strong asceticism and denial of the body, this traditional kind of asceticism is also no longer lived by monastics themselves (Jonveaux 2011c). For people who come to monasteries and who are not necessarily either Christian churchgoers or believers, this refers indeed more to a spirituality than to an institutional religion. “Spirituality, in this perspective, highlights the personal, intimate and subjective aspect of the relationship between human beings and God, a relationship that also involves the body” (Giordan 2009: 230). That is not to say that monks and nuns officially propose a new kind of hedonistic spirituality, but people who are expecting that can find it in monastic products and different commercial propositions.

Monasteries as “A Chain of Memory”5

In the face of this observation, a question comes to mind: Why do people recognize competencies in spirituality of *hic et nunc* wellness by monastics who are also known for their strong asceticism and mortification?

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4 The Kneipp method is a natural therapeutically method invented by Sebastian Kneipp, a German priest. It is based on the natural action of plants and water. This method is made of five pillars: hydrotherapy with water hosing and pool, phytotherapy, bodily exercise, diet, and a healthy way of life.

5 *Religion as a Chain of Memory* is the English translation of the title of Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s book: *La religion pour mémoire*.
Monks are traditionally holders of a specific charisma. Following Max Weber (1978:241), “the term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality to an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional power and quality.” Monastic charisma is especially a religious one which also permits monks to be virtuosi of asceticism – that is to say, they are able to live a kind of asceticism that normal people cannot. An ideal type of this, for instance, is the first monk Antonius or Symeon Stylites who spent more than 15 years at the top of a column. But these extreme exercises of mortifying the self are no longer plausible in modern society. Do monks and nuns today still have a kind of charisma? In monasteries which have a therapeutic activity, monastics often said to me during my field work, that “people come here after having tried a lot of things which did not work” and many customers of monastic shop explained to me that they find there something they “do not find elsewhere.” It is for this reason that companies try to use the monastic image on their products in order to benefit from the reputation of monastic products (Jonveaux 2011d). That shows a specific and inimitable charisma of products “made in a monastery.”

In this context, a monastery is more than a place to find answers to new needs of spirituality that integrate the body. It is also a place of memory. According to Maurice Halbwachs, “since all the rest of social life is developed within the passage of time or duration, it stands to reason that religion withdraws itself from it. This is the source of the idea that religion transports us into another world, that its object is eternal and immutable [...]” (1992: 92). Religion is, especially in a society which has entered a “culture of change” (Gauchet 1997: 186), what does not change, and monasteries – which would be the “tradition” within “the religious tradition” – can all the more take charge of this memory role. A patrimonialization process is at work in western European monasteries (Jonveaux 2013a), when people come in order to “consume tradition.” Visits to the abbey for tourists, CD’s of the Gregorian chants of monks, or foods products from a “thousand-year-old receipt” take part in this process which becomes also a commercial one. Monastic tradition becomes a commercial product such as Michel de Certeau explains it for religion: “La religion est un spectacle qui s'exploite comme les autres objets de consommation. Elle est commerciale et rentable. Comme ‘légende’, elle suit les chemins du loisir” (Certeau 1987 : 177). As Benedictine monks are living according to a 14-centuries-old rule and in historic buildings, people often think they are still living as in the Middle Ages.

The film “Into Great Silence” (2006) made at the Grande Chartreuse with Carthusian monks was a very good example of this. The totally romantic
presentation of Carthusian life corresponded exactly to what people expected. While we are seeing an old monk who is hardly working in a small snow-covered vegetable garden, we are not told about the liquor factory which monks possess in the valley and with which they stay in contact. Expectations of society toward monasteries are ambiguous. On the one side, people expect that monks are now living as they did in the Middle Ages, without electricity or media. But on the other hand people expect that monastics have a homepage to find the hours that the monastery’s shop is open, or whether or not there are is bathroom in each of the guest rooms. Monasteries are therefore playing in an ambiguous role of immutable reality in society which has also to fit into the needs of the time.

Do Monks Still “Protest”?

Through their economic activities, monasteries can therefore find a new place in their social environment. Bernhard Eckerstorfer, an Austrian Benedictine, writes in an article about monasticism in Austria: “In Austria for their regions they have been for centuries significant cultural and economic centers, with considerable ecclesial status and influence. This is also changing. Their economic importance is marginalized, their cultural significance limited to historical dimensions, and their societal role denied” (2012: 285). In this context what kind of role have monasteries in Europe today or have they even one?

Even if monasteries no longer have the same economic role in modern society such as in the Middle Age, they can find through their commercial activities a new kind of position in the secularized society. As society is looking for a “wellness salvation” for body and soul, for responses to insecurity of life especially through foods or a badly balanced life, monks can bring to society what it needs. In this sense monks can be active in the context of a traditional religious institution but also as in proposing of an alternative way of life.

But these new activities of monastics do not always meet with the assent of the Church. We can find nowadays more and more monasteries that propose session of yoga or qi gong. But these activities are not approved by Church, and some Catholic groups condemn them openly. For instance, the nun of Marienkron who proposed a session of qi gong and the Bible was criticized in a Catholic journal of Graz. The key point in this polemic would be to know if these practices are religious practices from a particular religion or meditation or bodily techniques that can be applied in other contexts without a reference to the oriental belief. According to Jean Séguy, “In their origin: every monastic creation first appears as a protest against a previous form of the monastic
institution in the most general meaning of the term, against a state of the Church considered as unsatisfactory, against an ensemble of social relationships (in the Church and in the global society) explicitly or implicitly rebuked by the new foundation” (1971: 338). It would be in the nature of utopia to be in conflict with existing institutions. In this sense this example proves that monasteries are still a utopian system toward the Church. At the same time, engagement of monks for an alternative economy or alternative way of life through ecological consumption and so on also appears as a utopian position toward society. Even if monasteries are losing plausibility concerning their religious function, it seems as if they would conserve or maybe reinforce their utopian position. According to Max Weber (1995: 260), a routinization of charisma occurs when the ecstatic or contemplative union with God becomes an object of achievement for many rather than the charismatic gift of few. But if we take monastic statistics now, we can observe the contrary process in contemporary monastic life. In Kremsmünster Abbey in Austria, for instance, there was between 1951 and 1959 an average of two stable vocations (people who are still in the monastery now) per year. This average declined to one per year between 1960 and 1980 and is now under 0.5. This is to say that the monastic vocation has again become a state reserved for a small number of individuals who have specific criteria. Using the vocabulary of Max Weber, it would mean that monks and nuns are more charismatic today because they are lesser numerous, that they are no longer recognized by society in their religious role and that they adopt some positions of protestation against the secular order.

Conclusion

A monastery is not limited to its religious dimension. As sociological objects its other dimensions have also to be taken into account especially in the present context where its limitation to its religious function could be make them appear as a residual reality. Economic, organization, the daily life of monks through work, bodily discipline, and so on are key points to understand where monastics really are today. The second risk for a sociology of monasticism would be to do an amalgam between the situation of monasteries and this one of the ecclesial institution. Each of them has to be explored in its own internal logic which can then show some dynamics belonging to each situation.

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6 My translation.

7 Statistics made from the Direktorium 2012 and 2013 for Benedictine in Austria.
In the present case, we can see that approaching present monasteries through economy proves pertinent as it explains a large part of the changes and movements in monastic life today. First of all, the economy often is an actor of change in monastic life and is so still in late modernity when monasteries have to find new sources of incomes. Thanks to their commercial propositions, monks also find in society a new way to be integrated into it and to conserve plausibility not only toward Catholics people. Although the ecclesial institution loses more and more credibility even toward believers, monks can conserve more plausibility because they not only use a religious grammar but have at their disposal a larger action “repertoire” than the Church (if we take the vocabulary of social movements by Charles Tilly). Thanks to their commercial proposition which also bring a spiritual sense, monks go out of the strong framework of institutional religion which is precisely declining in western European society. Furthermore, monks and nuns also use economy as a new vector for evangelization because it brings to the monastery people who do not necessary have a link with religion (Jonveaux 2011a). Thanks to these activities, monastics remain for society as “administrators of salvation goods” even if they deal no longer with eschatological salvation.

As a concluding question we could ask if monastics did manage their “reconversion” in secularized society thanks to the economy. In the sense that they can remain plausible for society since more and more people come to visit monasteries, the answer is yes. But in another way, if economic activities bring more and more customers – sometimes too much for the equilibrium of monastic life – it does not bring more recruits to the monastic life. This paradoxical dynamic leads monks to ask new questions about modes of monastic life in the future.

References


