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# Protestants Protesting Protestantism: 20th Century Experiments in Monasticism

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George Faithful

**Protestants Protesting Protestantism:  
20<sup>th</sup> Century Experiments in Monasticism**

Contrary to popular belief, there have often been monastic sisterhoods and brotherhoods in Protestantism. In Germany, Möllenbeck, Loccum, and Marienberg all contained cloisters that embraced the Lutheran Reformation but retained much of their monastic practice. That such groups are relatively unknown may reflect the ambivalence of those in positions of power toward potential holdovers from Catholicism. Protestant monasticism has never been normative; therefore, its occurrence might best be understood as an implicit critique of the mainstream confessions. For the purposes of this paper I will not define monasticism as a vague and flexible lifestyle of contemplation and asceticism, as have the so-called “new monastics”; Alan Jacobs has rightly pointed out that this is neither new nor monastic. Rather, my working definition of monasticism is the formal commitment of men or women to live simple lives of prayer and service, especially in the context of a religious community of likeminded individuals.

Although monastic communities are atypical in Protestantism, a small number came into existence on continental Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a significant increase in their number immediately after World War II. Taking issue with François Biot’s thesis, this paper will argue that these communities represent a critique of, rather than a radical break from Protestantism, for they are a development out of a long sub-tradition of communal living and a response to the conditions of war-torn Europe. Rather than attempt to include all possible communities, I will focus on Taizé and Pomeyrol in France, Grandchamp in Switzerland, and the Christ Brotherhood Selbitz and the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary, in

Germany. Tracing the history of each group, I will analyze their common emphases, including ecumenism and simplicity, while exploring their distinctive differences, such as eschatology. To understand these groups in their context is to better understand how war shapes religion.

The best known of the groups in question, **Taizé** began in eastern France in 1940. Roger Schutz, then twenty-five, left his native Switzerland for the small village in Burgundy that would impart its name to his community, only a few kilometers from the medieval monastery of Cluny. His goals were simple: begin an intentional community and help people survive the war. Taizé's location near the border between occupied- and Vichy France helped him in the latter endeavor, as he assisted fleeing refugees, including Jews. After buying an abandoned house, Roger enlisted one of his sisters to help provide hospitality for guests. After fleeing Taizé for Geneva in 1942, Roger returned in 1944 with the first members of his community. On Easter, 1949, these men pledged themselves to leading lives of celibacy and poverty. During a personal retreat in the winter of 1952/1953, Roger composed a rule for the community, defining its core emphases: ecumenism, prayer, and simplicity in all things. Taizé's brand of ecumenism emphasizes reconciliation as the ultimate value, rather than mere tolerance, for reconciliation is an opportunity for the expression of forgiveness and love, as opposed to mere co-existence. Taizé's commitment to simplicity includes an emphasis on silence in both individual prayer and in corporate worship.

Since that time, Taizé has blossomed into a locus of pilgrimage for thousands, especially young backpackers seeking spiritual sustenance. Brothers come from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds. Long-term female "permanents" assist the community, as do sisters from other orders, such as the Sisters of St. Andrew, a group of Belgian Catholic nuns. Since the 1960s, Taizé's distinctive chants, typically simple and in

Latin, have been used elsewhere by many Christian groups, especially those striving for Church unity. While some may find in these songs a profound sense of peace and reverence for the holy, they were initially developed as a practical means for a linguistically and confessionally eclectic group of brothers and pilgrims to worship together.

In French-speaking Switzerland near lake Neuchatel, **Grandchamp**, a women's community has adopted the rule and liturgies of Taizé as their own. This small group of Reformed women had rediscovered together the power of silence in prayer in the 1930s. Their periodic retreats together developed into a full-fledged commitment to uninterrupted communal life, with the first sisters pledging themselves in 1952. Like Taizé, they have committed themselves to praying for church unity.

Although Grandchamp shares much of Taizé's structure and ethos, there are significant differences. The women's order currently consists of sixty sisters, while Taizé includes over one-hundred brothers. Taizé's renown in some circles has tended to draw a continuous stream of activity, making Grandchamp seem remote in comparison. It is fitting, then, that one distinctive emphasis at Grandchamp should be solitude, in which the soul pursues God to the point of abandoning all else. The sisters hold such prayerful solitude in tension with their emphasis on communion, that is, fellowship with the other members of the community and hospitality toward outsiders, fearless of losing personal comfort in that endeavor.

The sisters of **Pomeyrol**, near Avignon, France, describe themselves as "sentinels of prayer." They have dedicated themselves to "keeping watch," to praying without ceasing for the Church and for the world. Like Grandchamp, the Sisters of Pomeyrol lead retreats as one of their primary points of interaction with the outside world, including programs dealing with peace, justice, and environmentalism. They embrace poverty not simply as the absence

of riches but as the tacit rejection of the pursuit of success in worldly terms. Weather permitting, they extend their usable worship space into their expansive gardens. Their form of spirituality consciously integrates elements from the Moravians, Quakers, and the Oxford Group Movement, as well as Catholic liturgy.

The initial group of future Pomeyrol sisters coalesced in a retreat house near Paris in 1929, influenced by the Order of Watchers, a group of Protestant anchorites of sorts begun earlier that decade, and by the Christian youth movement. Following the examples of George Mueller, those living in the house relied on spontaneous donations from outsiders as their sole source of income. Those at the house undertook extended periods of prayer in solitude, interspersed with communal prayer. In 1937, a pastors' association purchased a property in Pomeyrol for the purpose of establishing a second retreat house, which became the only location of the budding community in 1939, after the house near Paris was "requisitioned" due to the outbreak of the war. During the winter of 1939/1940, the first true attempt at forming a long-term community took place. Participants began a formation process and were soon aided by two sisters from Grandchamp. The three residents at Pomeyrol attempted to conduct retreats, as well as help refugees and fugitives in Vichy France, only to be forced from their home by German troops in 1944. The property was returned to them, after serving various military and government purposes, in 1946. Through many difficult months, the three women restored the gardens and the house. However, called to poverty and solitude, the sisters chose to see such difficulties as opportunities to prove themselves faithful. At the end of 1951, with the laying on of hands by Reformed pastors, the three women consecrated their lives to service and prayer, formally establishing themselves as the Sisters of Pomeyrol. The group continues to exist today, although it remains small.

**The Christ Brotherhood Selbitz**, in northern Bavaria, is open to both men and women. The brotherhood includes gender-specific sub-communities, with seven branches of the main cloister, including six elsewhere in Germany, four of which are in the former East, and one in South Africa. Currently there are 120 sisters, 4 brothers, and 100 or so tertiary members. (It is ironic that the group calls itself a Brotherhood when it is predominantly female.) Brothers and sisters make vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, the most basic of the monastic vows from Benedict onward. (Obedience here means obedience to each other and to the leaders of the community.) Their routine incorporates a daily rhythm of work and prayer. As with all of the aforementioned communities, ecumenism is an emphasis of the Christ Brotherhood, which has ties with Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox orders and communities, although it is technically part of the Lutheran Church. The Brotherhood places great emphasis on the cross of Christ, which, together with a heart and a crown of thorns, forms their insignia. As with Taizé, the members of the Christ Brotherhood see hospitality and service as central to their calling.

The founders of this celibate community were, ironically, a married couple: Pastor Walter and Hanna Hümmer. While engaged, they had experienced personal renewal as part of the Oxford Group Movement, in which they learned to experience the work of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives. In 1937, the couple moved to a small industrial town not far from their future cloister. Although their parishioners were initially aloof, during the war some men, women, and young people began showing a deeper interest in experiencing God in their daily lives and in experiencing life in community. A small group of such individuals began a process of discernment, which culminated in clarity on Good Friday, 1948; by the beginning of the next year, they officially began a Protestant monastic order, moving into what remains today the center of their community. They continue to see themselves as

Pietists and Lutherans. My research has not yet revealed the nature of the Hümmer's marriage after they took monastic vows; presumably their union was spiritual rather than physical; after all, there has been some precedent for this, too, in earlier eras of the church (but who knows). Frau Hümmer's emphasis on contemplation acted as a counterweight to her husband's emphasis on action. One additional distinctive attribute of the group is that they see themselves both as an order and as a family.

Located in Darmstadt, a medium-sized university city an hour south of Frankfurt, the **Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary** began as the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary. Klara Schlink and Erika Madauss had co-led a women's Bible study throughout the war. During the night of Allied bombing that devastated their city in 1944, many of the women found themselves confronted with their own mortality, the threat of God's judgment, and an urgent need to make a radical commitment to him. Out of the several dozen regular attendees of the Bible study, six joined Mother Basilea and Mother Martyria, as Klara and Erika would be called, in their new sisterhood in 1946. The order has always placed an emphasis on daily repentance and on Christian-Jewish reconciliation, with periods of an expectation of an imminent nuclear apocalypse, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in light of increased conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The sisters' overtures of peace toward Jews have been colored by their understanding that they themselves, as Germans, are culpable for the Holocaust. The sisters' dependence on spontaneous donations from outsiders, like that of the Sisters of Pomeyrol and again in the tradition of George Mueller, testifies to their belief that that miracles do occur today.

As their name indicates, the Sisters of Mary put great emphasis on Jesus' mother; for them she is not an intercessor or object of veneration, but rather an example of the ideal life of faith and of discipleship without compromise. The sisters embrace a life of conscious

surrender to suffering and rejection, hoping to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, whom they praise with a childlike affection. Like the Christ Brotherhood, the Sisters of Mary take vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. The sisters have established branches of their community elsewhere in Europe, in North America, Australia, Japan, South Africa, and Israel. There are currently near one-hundred sisters, with a handful of Kanaan Brothers of Saint Francis, a small men's order founded by Mother Basilea, and a significant number of tertiary Sisters of the Crown of Thorns. Without claiming to be Pentecostal, the sisters practice the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. While all of the original sisters were Lutheran, current members of the community originate from a variety of backgrounds. Because the sisters operate their own publishing house, they have been able to successfully proliferate Mother Basilea's written work without fear of external editorial interference.

An initial comparison of these communities' histories' reveals a pattern: a core group of like-minded Protestants first prayed together during the war and then subsequently felt called to enter into a formal commitment of monastic life together in the late 1940s or early 1950s. While all of these groups identify themselves as Protestant in the *contents* of their theology, they are simultaneously committed to traditional Catholic *forms* of monastic life. All of these groups emphasize ecumenism to some degree. Most of these groups also incorporate tertiary orders for kindred spirits who do not desire or are unable to become full brothers or sisters.

Taizé, Granchamp, Pomeyrol, the Christ Brotherhood, and the Sisterhood of Mary are all fully Protestant and fully monastic. While outside the mainstream, there have long been communities of Protestants living together with common purpose. As mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, some monastic communities converted to Protestantism in the immediate aftermath of the Reformation, while retaining their monastic form of life.



One might also think of persecuted groups drawing together in mutual support, such as the Huguenots and Anabaptists. In the New World, the earliest years of Puritan settlement represented, among other things, an experiment in communal living. From the seventeenth century onward, Pietist communities and communes flourished for a time on both sides of the Atlantic, such as the Moravians' Herrnhut and Old Salem. Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant women pledged themselves to serve in hospitals and schools as deaconesses. We must accept, although there are no known instances of Protestants formally committing themselves to monastic life prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was already a strong precedent for communal Protestantism, albeit on the fringes of normal Protestant experience.

According to 1995 statistics compiled by Christoph Joest, Germany alone saw the founding of at least 13 brotherhoods and sisterhoods between 1905 and 1938, including Eberhard Arnold's Bruderhof and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde. No known groups appear to have been founded between 1939 and 1943. Between 1944 and 1958, 15 new brotherhoods and sisterhoods were founded in Germany, with 12 more in the 1960s, and 9 in the 1970s. The 1960s and 70s also saw the arrival of at least 10 communities with families, rather than celibate men and women, as their primary members. This is to say that in Germany, more Protestant brotherhoods and sisterhoods were founded in the decade following the war than in the three decades preceding it, with new brotherhoods and sisterhoods founded in subsequent decades, albeit in decreasing numbers. These statistics corroborate as a general trend what the histories of the above communities have indicated in each individual case. Just as Mother Basilea described her own sisterhood as "a child of the last war," so, too, all of the other sisterhoods and brotherhoods founded in the 1940s and 50s were children of the war.

Why should this be the case? War has long propelled its survivors to lives of radical faith. The knight or soldier-turned-hermit features prominently in both Wolfram von Eschenbach's 13<sup>th</sup> century *Parzifal* and in Grimmelshausen's 17<sup>th</sup> century *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, the latter written immediately after the 30 Years' War. While these examples are literary rather than empirical, they suggest that those who experience war can take drastic measures to pursue peace with God once war has ended. One Protestant monastic community forming after the war might have been a curiosity. A number of fifteen or more in one country alone, comprising between them several hundred vowed members, is statistically significant. While it would be inappropriate to suggest that war caused Protestant monasticism, it is nearly self-evident that war contributed to its upsurge in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

In their post-war context, these communities, by their very existence, represent an implicit criticism of traditional European Protestantism, for Taizé, Granchamp, Pomeyrol, the Christ Brotherhood, and the Sisterhood of Mary all possess what Protestantism has traditionally lacked: formal, lifelong, extra-familial community; an explicit commitment to simplicity of life and of devotion; and an unflagging pursuit of unity between Christians. (Of course this latter issue has changed significantly, given greater commitment to ecumenism since the 1960s; but in the decade or two prior, Protestant brotherhoods and sisterhoods were ahead of their time.) Without calling it by name, these communities all share a common pursuit of peace: peace between humanity and God, peace within the community, and peace within each human soul.