

Between Fieldwork and Theory: World View and Virtuosity in a Monastic Community

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What is the proper task for the sociologist of religion? There are fashions in this field as in every other. But suppose we go back to the masters of a half-century ago, the German and French scholars who, against the backdrop of the social cleavage and wrenchings of World War I and the collapse of the Pax Britannica, sought to evolve a method for the study of the social dimension of religious behavior, secure in their conviction that the forms of the religious life hold the key to the forms of all communal life. Suppose we read Weber and Durkheim again, this time asking ourselves: what are the basic notions we ought *now* to be testing in the field?

Those with little taste for fieldwork will be likely to choose grandiose abstractions having to do with social change of mammoth proportions—and retire to their armchairs, assuming the comfortable poses of philosophers of history. For the rest of us, the choice is apt to be a somewhat personal one, a matter of our own private vision. “Sacred/ profane,” some will say, and head for a remote village in the highlands of Burma. “Church/ sect,” others will say, and depart for Salt Lake City.

My own rather eclectic choice is twofold: Max Weber’s dichotomy between virtuoso religion and mass religiosity,¹ and the

1. The most important single source for Weber’s concept of religious virtuosity is the essay called (in English) “The social psychology of the world religions” (1946a). Two other essays in the same volume, “Religious rejections of the world and their directions” (1946b) and “The Protestant sects and the spirit of capitalism” (1946c), may also prove useful. For more general information, one should go to his four classic volumes on the world’s religions: *The religion of China* (1951), *The religion of India* (1958), *Ancient Judaism* (1952), and *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (1930). (Weber did not live to complete a projected study of Islam which was to round out his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* [1920].)

notion of the Durkheim school (Mauss, Hubert, Granet, etc.) that every self-contained society is guided by certain *idées directrices* which manifest themselves directly and concretely in village layouts and in designs of all sorts, that the patterns of everyday life reflect and are reflected in the patterned lifestyle of the community, that the working ideas of a community are made tangible in work life and play life as well as in the art and architecture of the community, and that these working ideas and ideals constitute the *world view* of the community—though the community itself may not even be aware of having a world view and may never have attempted to articulate fully their conception of the world and their place within it.² This insight of the Durkheim school offers a special tool to the fieldworker: it suggests that rather than simply asking people about their religious ideas, he might do well to observe how they go about their daily activities, what their attitude is toward their habitat. The inference is that he will then *see* their religious ideas, their conception of the universe, at work.

As for Weber, he makes an assumption about religious stratification that surely deserves to be challenged and tested. Noting the prevalence within all religious traditions of special communities of monks, sadhus, dervishes, etc.— holy men living in community or in solitude, in monastic enclosure or rock-hewn cell—Weber suggests that a few among us are specially gifted for the religious life and thereby set apart from the rest.³ These are the

2. Most clearly set forth in Emile Durkheim's essay "Sociology and its scientific field" currently available in *Essays on sociology and philosophy* (Wolff, ed., 1960), but most fully developed in four classic studies: Granet, *La pensée chinoise* (1934), Mauss and Beuchat, "Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés eskimos" (1904-05), Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive classification* (1963), and Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice* (1964). The reader may also wish to consult Durkheim, *The rules of sociological method* (1938).
3. Weber says (1947, p. 309) that he believes the distinction between virtuoso and mass to rest on an "empirical" difference in religious "qualification" among men. Elsewhere (1946a, p. 287) he refers to the "empirical fact... that men are differently qualified in a religious way"—a fact which, he says, "stands at the beginning of the history of religion." This difference in qualification, he continues, leads to a "sort of status stratification" (1946a, p. 287), a social and institutional recognition of the separation of the religiously "musical" from the mass of ordinary people, the "unmusical."

religious “virtuosi.” The rest of us (he includes himself) are religiously “unmusical.” This is an important judgment, for it alerts the fieldworker to the fundamental sociological importance of monasticism, of the “life apart.” Yet it is also a dangerous judgment in that it appears to condescend to the laity as though to say, “They are of limited understanding. They lack the gift for total commitment to the religious life. They are fit only to serve the monks blindly, hoping (as in medieval Christendom) to attain heaven through the spiritual largess of the monks and nuns, or (as in Hinduism and Buddhism) to manage the seriousness of the disciplined life in a later lifetime.” This judgment allows for the heroism of the ascetic or mystic, but not for the heroism of the folk—the heroism (to borrow a phrase from George Orwell) of childbed and scrubbing brush, which surely also has its spiritual dimension. But if we grant that there is a heroism of domestic life (as well as a domesticity to all corporate monastic life), how precisely does the heroism of the folk supplement, oppose, or mesh with the heroism of the monk? If there is a dignity all its own to the lay life that parallels the conspicuous dignity of the “virtuoso” life, by what ingenuity of ecclesiastical construction can the two seemingly divergent lifestyles be wedded to form a single (though perhaps not quite seamless) corporate institution such as the Catholic Church—notable, until recently, for its success in promoting both lifestyles? Can we take our cue from the Durkheim school and examine the practical life and habitat of a community of monks and thereby discover their conception (whether fully articulated or not) of their place in the world of ordinary mortals? Can we, in short, use the French school’s feeling for the concrete representations of the religious life to explore *in the field* the promise and limitations of Max Weber’s rather fundamental notion of intrinsic differences in religious qualification?

To explore this matter is the concern of the pages that follow. The religious tradition under study is the Catholic Christian. The locale is northern Vermont, not far from the Canadian bor-

der, the relatively unsettled remote north of the old eastern states—the Tōhoku of Atlantic America. I shall attempt to sketch briefly the structure of the Church, then enter immediately into a field report of the life of a monastic settlement, the monks' dealings with the laity, and their place within the sacramental structure of the Church.

Catholic ecclesiastical organization. The Catholic Christian world is divided into ecclesiastical provinces, each province coming under the authority of a resident bishop regarded as an heir to the charisma of the original circle of Christ's disciple emissaries. Such an apostolic province is called a "diocese," from the Greek *dioikein* meaning "to manage a house." The boundaries of the diocese delineate the household of the bishop. To the members of the household he is the pater familias; he is responsible for seeing to it that they receive the sacraments, that they hear the preaching of Catholic truths, and that their children receive a proper education in matters of religion.

But the actual sacramental life of the individual member of this larger family has its focus within the smaller, more intimate context of the local parish community. The parish church becomes "the center of the spiritual life of its parishioners" (van Doornik, Jelsma, and van de Lisdonk 1956, p. 135). The sacramental life of the parish is in the hands of the pastor, who serves as shepherd to his flock. He may be assisted in this work by one or more other parish priests. The parish priest is regarded by his parishioners as "the dispenser of God's graces and mysteries" (van Doornik, Jelsma, and van de Lisdonk 1956, p. 324). He baptizes the infant, prepares the maturing child for confirmation, performs the wedding ceremony, and administers extreme unction to the dying. These four basic *rites de passage* are understood by the Catholic community to be "sacraments," acts through which grace is conveyed to the recipient on these four pivotal occasions in life. The parish priest also administers two other sacraments that have more to do with the spiritual renewal

of his parishioners in their workaday lives: the sacrament of penance or confession by which the parishioner receives periodic spiritual cleansing and restoration, and the sacrament of the eucharist by which the parishioner participates intimately in the redemptive action of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

In the United States there are roughly 30,000 priests engaged in parish work. In the Diocese of Burlington (Vermont) there are 167 parish priests charged with the care of 102 parishes. There are also, within this same diocese, 84 priests who are not diocesan priests.⁴ These men are members of religious orders and congregations such as the Benedictines, Carthusians, Redemptorists, etc., organizations that do not come directly under the authority of the ordinary of the diocese (the bishop) and thus are somewhat independent of the diocesan administrative framework. Some of these men serve as auxiliaries to the diocesan clergy. Others live highly secluded lives as monks and have hardly any involvement in the parish-centered religious life of the lay community.

The figures correspond roughly to the overall picture in the United States. In addition to the 30,000 or so priests who work within the framework of the conventional diocesan parish situation, there are something over 8,000 priests engaged in home missions, the preaching of retreats and missions in diocesan churches, and various other special apostolates, including the contemplative life. These men come under the authority of the superiors of their respective congregations or orders rather than under the authority of the bishop of the diocese.

These "special" clergy, along with their non-priest brethren, constitute the monastic or (to use Weber's term) "virtuoso" community in contemporary Catholic Christianity. We shall examine the life of one such community and its relevance for lay religion, that is, parish religion.

4. These statistics, and those in the next paragraph, are based on information contained in the *Catholic Directory for the Diocese of Burlington* (1968) and Godfrey Poage, *Opportunities in Catholic religious vocations* (1952), pp. 32-40.

A COMMUNITY OF PRIMITIVE-OBSERVANCE BENEDICTINES

Origin, character, layout. The Benedictine Monastery in Weston, Vermont was founded in 1952 by the German-born abbot of a sizable abbey in Jerusalem. It was established as a priory with the hope that monks trained in the priory might later augment the community in Jerusalem, giving that abbey a more international character—as indeed they did in years past. But now the monastery is independent and beginning a life of its own. Thomas Merton refers to it as one of only three monasteries in the Western hemisphere living according to the primitive observance of the Rule of St. Benedict. Its style, that is to say, is that of the earliest monasteries of Western Europe, monasteries in which the “monk was purely and simply a monk, and not also a priest or cleric.” It also means that considerable emphasis is placed on chanting the office in choir and on “manual labor rather than... study, the preaching of retreats, the hearing of confessions, and other activities more proper to priests.” The secret of this primitive monasticism is a “balance between choral prayer, manual labor, and meditative reading.” Structurally, it means that there must be “only a few priests in the monastery, and no lay brothers”—for the community must truly be a brotherhood. Ordination to the priesthood, which gives a man the authority to administer the sacraments, must not be allowed to divide the community by placing one rank of brothers (ordained) above another (unordained). The monastic life, in its primitive or original form, is the common life, the communal life, a life of perfect humility and sharing and equality before God (Merton 1957, p. 86).

In its physical layout, this particular monastery represents something of a mixture of planning and accident. The abbot had originally intended to found his priory in Pennsylvania, but was discouraged by the problem of possible friction with other monastic communities already established there. After Pennsylvania he considered New York State, then Vermont. In this New England state, conditions seemed ideal for the primitive monastic style

of life—and as yet few monastic communities had settled there. The abbot became particularly interested in the town of Weston, a craft center nestled in the mountains. The monastery had its beginning in a simple New England farmhouse that had most recently served as a gatehouse for an estate and in an adjoining structure that had served as a barn. The house was made over into a monastery for professed monks, with monastic cells upstairs, and kitchen and refectory downstairs. A small room adjacent to the front door served as a reception room for visitors and a gift shop. Here the monks displayed the first products of their loom and pottery wheel. In those days one of the monks kept a chronicle of the community's activities which was issued quarterly and mailed to lay supporters. At the end of one particularly long and harsh New England winter, the monks reported in the chronicle that they were now weaving scarves "in bright plaids" and soft wool stoles for women, available "only in pure white." As for the work of the pottery shop, the chronicle waxes poetic:

The shelves in the gift shop testify to the progress in the pottery studio. Ash trays, cream and sugars, small bowls, large pitchers, vases, etc., all bearing unique and beautiful qualities. Some of the glazes are among the world's rarest: deep opalescent copper blue, blood red, a blue-grey reminiscent of winter skies in Vermont, an iridescent green, etc.

Throughout the house, doors and windows and their frames were redone in natural wood finish, in keeping with the spirit of Benedictine simplicity. The adjoining structure became the chapel, likewise tastefully simple in its use of natural woods. Later, an addition was built onto the other side of the chapel, thus providing five extra cells, a dormitory area, a recreation room for the monks, a library, and a considerably larger reception room for visitors that also doubled as a gift shop. Behind this complex is a building (originally a garage) that serves as the novitiate. (Novices, according to monastic custom, have a separate residence.) This building also houses the shop for pottery and

weaving. Near the pottery shop is a pond, and up a dirt road is the sugaring house for boiling down maple syrup. Further up the road is the barn, grazing land, and farm. The pond is really an artificial lake made by the monks with the aid of a bulldozer, then stocked with trout. It also serves as a swimming hole for the monks during the summers—and as a haven for ducks. The chronicle noted: “In connection with the ducks, there seems to be an impending population boom, as dozens of eggs are now incubating under one duck or another. If all of these hatch, together with those we have now, plus the fish, the birds, frogs and miscellaneous plankton, the pond is going to look like a kind of animated ‘Bouillabaisse.’” Evident throughout the chronicle is the pleasure the monks take in living close to nature and observing life in its varied forms. Another entry from the chronicle reads: “One Sunday evening two migratory Canada geese glided over the pond and made a landing much to the dismay of the ducks who won’t tolerate so much as a leaf to settle upon their property. However, these elegant aliens were above the quacking protests and remained overnight, leaving a bright new egg which Brother Jesse hurried off to his incubator.” All this serves to remind us that we are not dealing here with Asian monasticism. Benedictine man holds to the traditional Genesis view that man has been given dominion over the species and is proprietor of the Garden. Nature may be enjoyed, but fundamentally it is there to be used—used for the sustenance of men. To the student of Buddhist or Hindu monasticism, the following passage from the chronicle may bring a bit of a shock: “After all the chasing around that the brothers had to do with the pigs, it was with no little satisfaction that a group of monks rounded up several of them and shipped them off to the slaughter house. From thence they will make their appearance periodically on the monastic table.”

The community attempts to supply its own needs and maintains its own dairy, bakery, and gardens. But because of the rocky soil, the monks have not been very successful at farming.

One autumn chronicle reports, however, that they did succeed in growing potatoes, corn, beans, beets, carrots, lettuce, squash, chard, parsnips, and strawberries. Haying, in the late summer, had the brothers so preoccupied that they forgot their barn chores; and "as a gentle reminder to the barn brothers who had forgotten her lunch, Scholastica the pig jumped the fence and strolled down to the monastery where, except for a periodic grunt, she roamed around the lawn in silence." The monks have to try to raise enough in the summer for canning, if they are to get through the winter without relying on supplies from the outside world. Harvesttime, therefore, is a busy season indeed. One September chronicle has it that "several evenings at recreation the monks helped by snapping beans as they chatted."

The daily round. There is considerable emphasis on the liturgical life of the community, and the monks can be proud of the beauty of their chant. Conventual high mass is sung each day at noon in the small chapel, with lay visitors always welcome. The liturgical day begins with the singing of Lauds at sunrise, followed by Prime at 7:30, Terce at 9:00, Sext at noon just before Mass, None at 3:00, Vespers at sunset, and Compline just before retiring. This entry from the chronicle is dated Advent: "Up came the crops, in went the cows and down came the snow—so summer ended at Weston and Winter wrapped her cloistral shawl about us that we might more quietly enter the renewed Church cycle.... The celebrated opera star, Licia Albanese, came to Mass during October and made the monastery a gift of her definitive recordings, *La Boheme* and *La Traviata*, along with a very generous compliment on our singing. Had we known that she was there, it might have been a different story."

Until nine in the morning, the community is engaged in spiritual and mental activity, from nine to eleven in manual labor, followed by Mass, meditation, and lunch. After lunch there is a free hour, and from None until five o'clock the monks again return to their manual work. After Vespers there is time for read-

ing, then supper—and then an hour of conversation (which may include snapping beans if work remains to be done). *Except for this single hour, the monks ordinarily observe silence*—though they may speak to each other from time to time during the day, saying only what is essential.

The monastic community as a family. “A monk may do any kind of work,” the abbot once remarked, “as long as it is compatible with the one and essential task: the inner, monastic life of a supernatural family, built around the altar.” He describes his community as “a community dedicated to God, thus being in the world a center and source of peace, dedication and worship.” Above all, communities of this kind constitute “a family of a supernatural order,” as set forth in the seventy-second chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict, which recommends that the brethren “anticipate one another in honor” and patiently endure one another’s infirmities of character while loving their abbot “with a sincere and humble charity” (*Manual for oblates* 1955, p. 80). The abbot (from *abba*, “father”) is more than a superior. He is the father to his community and is chosen for life to serve his “family.” The monks, in turn, take a special vow, a vow of stability. They pledge to remain under his care and within his house for the rest of their lives.

The visitor is apt not to grasp fully the community’s conception of itself as a family until the day comes when he is invited to stay for lunch. A typical lunch might consist of fish cakes, green beans in a cheese sauce, corn soufflé, and apple cobbler for dessert. Pitchers of fresh milk are on all the tables. The meal is taken in silence except for the reading by one of the monks from the Bible and then from some historical or inspirational book. There is a feeling of warmth and hospitality about the cozy dining hall as the monks pass around the steaming hot plates of good (but never fancy) food—and just a touch of “Confucian” propriety as well. For example, none of the monks will appear to be watching the abbot when the meal starts, but the moment he

picks up his napkin and tucks it under his chin, all the brothers will pick up their napkins and tuck them in. When the meal is done, all rise and bow to each other, then file out silently. They retire to the kitchen and do the dishes together. "A kind of recreation," explains the abbot. (If the guest is a fellow monk, he will be handed a towel to help with the dishes "as a special token of welcome.")

Meaningful organization of space. In saying there was an element of accident in the physical plan of the monastery, it was meant that the community had not been able to plan and build a complex that exactly suited their needs and understanding of themselves as a community, but had to work, in the beginning at least, with existing structures which had to be refurbished inside and shaped into a monastic complex. But the result, imperfect and incomplete though it may be, clearly reflects the awareness the community has of its own purposes and goals.

The center of the complex is the chapel—a reminder that the life of the community is built around the altar which, in the abbot's words, is both "a source and a culmination." Flanking the chapel are two structures, two wings where the community lives, takes its meals together, studies and meditates. Immediately behind is the studio where pottery and weaving are done, and beyond that the farm. The whole reflects the Benedictine instinct for the balanced life, life in which manual work plays an important part and in which there is a feeling for the dignity of working with one's hands. Here is the balance of which Thomas Merton wrote: the balance between choral prayer, manual labor, and meditative reading. And here, in the social morphology of the monastic complex, is the spatial expression of the ideals of a community of men who "anticipate one another in honor" and "tender the charity of brotherhood chastely."

Distinction without difference. Thus far the community has been referred to as a community of monks, a community of brothers.

But some members of the community are also priests. To be specific, of the twenty men in the community, five are ordained priests.

In many Catholic monastic communities and “congregations of religious,” a rather sharp distinction is made between priest-monks and lay brothers. The lay brothers are given the menial tasks (cooking, cleaning, maintenance, etc.), leaving the priests free to devote their energies to the performance of sacerdotal tasks. Under these conditions the priests direct their attention away from the ingathered community of monks, which ceases in any real sense to be a monastic family, and toward assisting the hard-pressed diocesan clergy in administering the sacraments to the lay community. In consequence, manual labor is no longer regarded as noble (except perhaps by the unfortunate lay brother), and a kind of caste division between priest and brother is established.

All this is alien to the spirit of strict-observance Benedictinism. The monastic vocation is here regarded as a vocation separate from the priestly—*and basic to it*. Thus all members of the community are first of all monks. The monks, like all Catholic Christians, must be able to receive the sacraments. This need can most conveniently be met by having a few men within the community to serve as priests. Therefore the Rule of St. Benedict provides: “If an abbot desire to have a priest or a deacon ordained for his monastery let him choose one of his monks who is worthy. . . . But let the one who is ordained beware of self-exaltation or pride. . . . Let him always keep the place which he received on entering the monastery, except in his duties at the altar. . . .” (*Manual for oblates* 1955, p. 76; *The rule*, chap. 62).

The only rank order within the strict-observance Benedictine monastery is one of seniority, according to the date of profession — as is also the rule in Buddhist monasteries. This rank order determines, for example, the seating arrangement in choir. But there is no priest/ brother distinction. All members of the community are treated alike, wear the same kind of habit, and share

equally in the work of the community.

The ordained monk, moreover, becomes a priest strictly in service to his own community, his own family of monks, not to some external parish community. Benedict's Rule provides a means whereby the necessary sacramentalism can be brought into the midst of the monastic community without the community's losing its identity as a virtuoso community and becoming involved in lay-sacramental activities outside the monastic enclosure. A potential source of tension between sacramental and monastic religion has here been resolved through insistence on the rule that the monastic vocation always be considered the foundation of the priestly.

Ralph Morton of the Protestant virtuoso community of Iona in Scotland points out, quite correctly, that Christian monasticism historically preceded any rigid distinction between clergy and laity and that "the original monks were not priests." "This fact," he says, "probably lies behind the constant struggle throughout the Middle Ages between the monastic orders and the territorial or secular clergy" (Morton 1951, p. 37). It should be noted here, however, that although the abbot can nominate one of his monks to serve the community as priest, he does not at present hold the authority to ordain the monk-priest. The ordination can be performed only by the bishop in whose diocese the monastery is located. Thus in this vital sacramental area, the authority of the supposedly autonomous monastic community is subordinate to the authority of the wider sacramental institution—despite the fact that within the Church the rank of abbot is roughly equivalent to that of bishop.

Monastic life: Model and magnet. Setting aside the question of how the virtuoso community has accommodated itself to the Catholic Christian pattern of priesthood and sacramentalism, let us examine some of the more immediate points of contact between the monks and the lay community. In this connection the point to be stressed is that *the strict-observance community is*

particularly distinguished, sociologically speaking, by its propensity to draw the laity toward itself and involve them in a modified version of its style of life. For despite the emphasis within the community on drawing together and forming a monastic family, and despite the emphasis on self-sufficiency, the monks feel intensely what the abbot calls "our responsibility toward people in the world." The monks must stay home, having taken their vow of stability, so in most cases the "people in the world" have to come to the monastery. But all visitors are warmly welcomed. In fact, in accordance with St. Benedict's dictum, everyone who knocks at the door is received as though he were Christ himself (*Manual for oblates* 1955, p. 70; *The rule*, chap. 53).

Future plans for the community include construction of a new monastery building with chapel and cells, about half a mile up the hill from the present complex, nearer the farm, thus bringing more closely into one unit the various facilities for the "balanced life" of the community. When this is done, the present complex of buildings will become a guest house with its own chapel. In the meantime, though guest facilities are limited, laymen occasionally arrange to stay overnight or for a few days as guests of the monks, and priests occasionally come on retreat. In future, the abbot says, "we want to give retreats, but," he adds, "on a small scale and for small, select groups." In this way he draws sharply the line that separates strictly monastic communities like this one from the large establishments (de facto combinations of monastery and hostel) built by "modern" religious congregations like the Passionists or Redemptorists for the purpose of holding week-long or weekend retreats for laymen who come in groups of a hundred or more. The monks' sense of responsibility to the laity is not allowed to conflict with their proper work or identity.

For the same reason, the monastery chapel is in no sense a parish church and can never be allowed to become one. Lay persons can and do attend mass there, and the chapel can become quite crowded, especially during the summer months. In summer the monks have felt it necessary to offer three masses on Sun-

days because of the crowds who come to this small chapel in the hills. Most visitors are vacationers (in summer) or skiers (in winter). The town of Weston itself has no parish church, and indeed few Catholic residents. The nearest parish churches are in the neighboring towns of Chester and Manchester. One parish priest told us that in the early years of the priory, many lay families brought their children to the monks to be baptized. When asked why, he said, "Laymen are fascinated by monks," and added that the pastors of the two towns had rather resented this, as well as the "popularity" of the masses at Weston. But we have had no hint of this rivalry in our conversations with the monks, who are both charitable and discreet. We were informed that the pastor in Chester is terribly overworked and that at one time one of the priory brothers taught catechism in Chester, at the request of the parents, in order to help out. But the practice has since been abandoned, apparently because the monks felt it incompatible with their way of life. There is in fact a marked resistance on the part of the monastic community to taking on any tasks of a parish-auxiliary nature—or indeed to "leave home" for any reasons but those relating to the ingathered life of the community. The monks do not assist in the parish work of the diocese, even to the extent of filling in for an ailing pastor on a single Sunday, because this would take a member of the family away from home on the Sabbath. One of the monks did tell us that there are some sick people in town to whom the monks regularly take the sacrament, and of course confessions are heard before Mass at the monastery "and at the request of anyone who comes for that purpose." To the question whether they ever performed weddings, baptisms, or funerals, the abbot replied, "Only exceptionally, and then only with the permission of the priest in whose parish we are located"—and even then only "when there is a *very special reason* for doing so."

But the propensity of the monastery to reach out and draw the laity to itself is most conspicuously apparent in the institution of the oblates or lay affiliates. This particular monastery has a

community of thirty-three oblates in New Jersey, another community of twenty-two oblates in Burlington, Vermont, a scattering of twelve or thirteen in New York and Connecticut, and a few more in the Rutland, Vermont area. These groups hold monthly meetings and are visited periodically by the abbot or one of the monks from Weston. Their members are for the most part laymen, married, and living in the workaday world. They are taught, like the monks, to regard the monastery as their home, and in fact live a modified version of the Benedictine Rule in the secular world. They are taught to "renounce the pomps and vanities of the world," and "in accordance with the spirit of the vow of poverty" to "cultivate a warmhearted generosity towards the poor and the unfortunate." They are expected to "zealously cultivate a special love for the sacred liturgy" and "especially devote themselves to the practice of penance and prayer" (*Manual for oblates* 1955, pp. 14-16). What we have here is an instance (unusual in the West, but fairly common in India and Southeast Asian Buddhism) where the monastic way of life encounters lay religion on its own ground and attempts to influence and, in part, to monasticize it.

CONCLUSIONS

The virtuosi and the masses. With the example of Weston Priory before us, what can we now say about Max Weber's dichotomy between the religious virtuosi and the masses? A plausible first reaction to these monks is likely to be, "Why, they're not so different from us!" They do their chores, fix their meals, wash the dishes and have a chat, read a little, and go to bed. It is perhaps a bit disappointing, this first realization of the ordinariness, the commonplaceness of monastic life.

On closer inspection, however, we see that they are not so much like us after all. Here the Durkheim school suggestion that we look to *actions* to understand people's *philosophy* comes into play. We note, for example, that they pass much of their day in silence. They have not told us so in so many words, but they

clearly believe that nurturing the interior life, the life of the spirit, requires a goodly portion of silence. Most talk is to them idle chatter and disrupts the peace of the soul.

The lives of these monks are astonishingly stationary. They are almost always at home. They have little need of transportation. They are not commuters. They cannot take the long way home—and have no wish to do so.

They are in touch with their surroundings. They are alert to the passing Canada geese in their winter migrations. The opalescent blues and luminous greens of their pottery glazes come from the minerals in their mountain spring waters, and they watch the colors change with the seasons.

They have an affection for the animal world and delight in the families of ducks in their pond. Yet they never question their belief that the animal world has been placed in service to the human world. Pigs are jolly, but only mankind have souls.

They are fond of the texture and warmth of wood. They shun paint and all else that veils the natural grain and coloring of wood. Their home is snugly nestled among the wooded hills, and they like the smell of fresh wood indoors as well as out.

They value choral song, and enjoy singing together. They take pride in the corporate training of their voices, in their mastery of the human voice as an instrument with which to praise God. Singing in community affirms communal bonds. Singing their Lord's praises in company affirms the place of the Holy at the center of their lives.

In designing and building their habitat, they have placed the chapel at the heart of the compound for the same reason. Farm, chapel, and monastic residence: these three are so arranged as to reflect the balanced life prescribed by Saint Benedict. The universe, for these monks, has its center in this hallowed ground and above all in the sacramental life they live there. When the animals are safely tucked in the barn for the winter and the snows begin to fall, nature herself "wraps her cloistral shawl" round this unusual family.

So if these monks live lives remarkably like our own, they are still “set apart,” as Weber puts it, by the enormous but subtle gap that separates their way of doing things from ours. It is not so much that they do things differently; rather, they are a mirror constantly reminding us (if we choose to look) how simply and how well the ordinary things of life can be done. They practice utter simplicity of food and dress, are direct in manner, free from complication and cunning, quite without sophistication (surely the highest of sophistications!), totally honest, guileless, unworldly—yet *in* this world as few laymen are or can be. They have succeeded in putting first things first and forgetting the unessential. They do not dissipate their energies on small things.

And, irony of ironies, they have taken as their model for communal life, for this working utopia, *the family*. The fatherly abbot presides over a household not altogether different in spirit from that of the layman. Domesticity is the secret of it all.

Thus the virtuosi seek to bring something of the interior peace of their lives to those few laymen who discover them and respond to their example. Yet the very peace they have found rests on the rediscovery of domestic harmony the monks themselves learned from the folk—from a beloved aunt and uncle, or from boyhood recollections of their own family hearth.

We are all musical enough to hear and recognize this song. It is a familiar melody. Weber's contribution lay in perceiving the universality of “virtuosity” in the world's religions, showing us the common ground shared by dervish and bhikkhu, Benedictine monk and *yamabushi*. His weakness was his failure to perceive the subtle links that bind the virtuosi to the folk. And for the spirituality of the folk, he seems to have had no ear at all. His gift was perhaps for working with elites, but in the world of spirituality, elites have a curious way of blurring the boundaries of their apartness and disowning the fruits of their efforts.

The tie that binds. A colleague who had read the foregoing description of this community of monks asked if the relationship

between monk and layman might not be characterized as “symbiotic.” Indeed there does appear to be an almost biological interdependence between the two. As with all communities of monks, there is at least a measure of economic dependency of monks on laymen. Admittedly, the monastery has come as close to providing for its own needs at the dinner table as that barren stretch of land will allow. They build their own shelter, supply their own craft needs, and augment their modest economy with the sale of products from the potter’s wheel, loom, and printshop—products that lay people purchase, often accompanying their purchases with gifts in celebration of the liturgical graces the monks share with them. The monks, for their part, give in addition a noteworthy but less tangible gift: their lives, and the special style of their lives. They demonstrate the simplicity of holiness and the holiness of simplicity. They demonstrate the virtues of the balanced life in which there is room for the dignity of labor. They demonstrate the place of solitude at the heart of the purposeful life and the special strengths that accompany stability. They demonstrate a life of intentionality, lived with generosity, gentleness, and a sharing spirit.

Symbiotic relationships can, I understand, be parasitic. Usually, however, the term refers to two species that function together, each to the advantage of the other. This may be the limit of the biological analogy, for the lay community and the virtuoso community are in truth not two distinct species, but one continuum with two highly distinctive manifestations. They constitute not two forms of life linked for mutual advantage, but two complementary life patterns so inextricably interwoven as to comprise a single pattern, a single (if kaleidoscopic) life form. They are like the two images of a haiku poem whose opposition proves illusory and momentary, the very truth of the poem lying in the discovery of the unity of the perception. “Would that we could have a haiku like a sheet of hammered gold!” says Bashō.

I cannot speak with authority on the structure of haiku, but I believe that the poet, in order to weld together his glimpse of

macrocosm and microcosm, his evanescent vision of time and timelessness, sometimes uses a *kake kotoba* or "pivot word." If the apparent duality between lay and virtuoso communities is in fact one social continuum like Bashō's sheet of hammered gold, we may have stumbled on its "pivot" in the centrality of the family model of human relationships. It is the spirit of the family that holds the lay community together and brings it to the monks. And it is the spirit of the family that the monks transpose into something purely spiritual (without ceasing to be practical) and reflect back to the lay community.

I do not wish to suggest that this theme of family love always and necessarily provides the link between the virtuosi and the laity. I do venture to suggest, however, that where the two types of community exist side by side and nurture each other, there will always be some connecting link, some pivotal affection, holding the two together and blurring the line between virtuoso and layman.

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