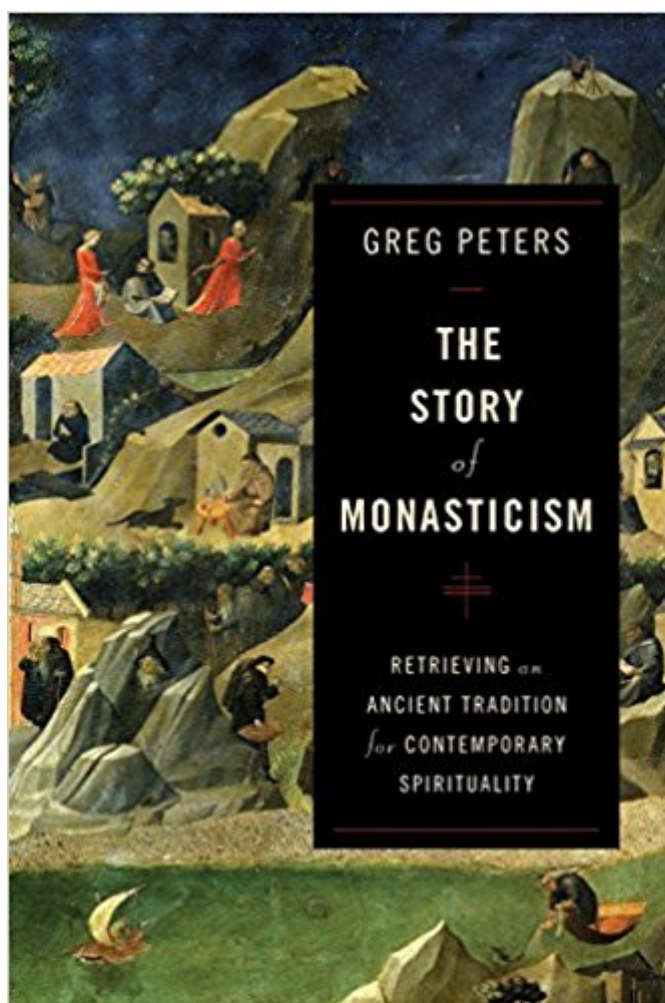


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# The Story Of Monasticism: Retrieving An Ancient Tradition For Contemporary Spirituality



## Synopsis

Some evangelicals perceive monasticism as a relic from the past, a retreat from the world, or a shirking of the call to the Great Commission. At the same time, contemporary evangelical spirituality desires historical Christian manifestations of the faith. In this accessibly written book Greg Peters, an expert in monastic studies who is a Benedictine oblate and spiritual director, offers a historical survey of monasticism from its origins to current manifestations. Peters recovers the riches of the monastic tradition for contemporary spiritual formation and devotional practice, explaining why the monastic impulse is a valid and necessary manifestation of the Christian faith for today's church.

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## Customer Reviews

"I have never met a Protestant theologian--evangelical or mainline--who speaks about monastics with as much competence and ease as Greg Peters. This book presents a well-documented, interesting, and enjoyable summary of the Christian monastic way of life and also describes the personal journey of a young Baptist-turned-Anglican minister following Christ's footsteps back to the apostolic church. It is an exceptional book and will be an eye-opener for both Protestants and Catholics, laity and clergy alike."--Fr. Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy, University of Dallas; abbot emeritus of the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Dallas" This book accomplishes what it promises: to narrate the history of monasticism for those who are new to the topic and for those who already know something about it. Greg's writing is succinct without compromising thoroughness in a well-researched text that will be as useful for the classroom as it will be for the interested

individual."--Dennis Okholm, author of *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks*"Greg Peters sets out to convince his readers that the church has always had and has always needed a monastic witness. He begins by making the case that Christians have long seen the monastery--in all its various forms--as an essential element of our life, ministry, and witness. He then gently asks where this necessary countercultural witness is in our world today. Carefully researched, balanced, and irenic, this book seeks to affect the way we do church by uncovering resources from those who lived in intentional Christian communities."--James Wilhoit, Wheaton College"Greg Peters has provided the evangelical community an invaluable service by laying before us a banquet of insight into the monastic impulse--the love for God, the desire for community, the draw toward a rule of life. Regardless of one's judgment of the value of various monastic movements and individuals, the reader cannot help but appreciate and learn from God's movement among these believers throughout church history."--John Coe, Institute for Spiritual Formation, Talbot School of Theology and Rosemead School of Psychology

Greg Peters (PhD, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto) is associate professor of medieval and spiritual theology in the Torrey Honors Institute, Biola University, in La Mirada, California. He is also visiting professor of monastic studies at St. John's School of Theology in Minnesota and adjunct professor at Nashotah House Theological Seminary in Wisconsin.

Greg Peters is a Benedictine oblate, an Anglican pastor, and an academic who teaches medieval and spiritual theology. His book, *The Story of Monasticism*, is about the history of Christian monasticism, and reactions to it, from the first century C.E. to the present time. Peters also explores possible implications of monasticism for today's Christianity, including evangelicalism. Peters seems to argue against Protestant misconceptions of monasticism, particularly the misconception that monastics were cloistered spiritual elitists who did little to help the outside world. Not only did many monastics set up institutions that helped the vulnerable, Peters contends, but they also aimed to instruct laypeople on how to live a spiritual life, through words, publications, and example. Although Peters is arguing against misconceptions that can probably be identified as Protestant, Peters also holds that historic Protestantism was not thoroughly opposed to monasticism. Prominent Protestant founders maintained that monasticism was acceptable, as long as it expressed gratitude to God for salvation as opposed to trying to attain salvation, and expressed repentance. I was particularly interested in reading this book to learn more about the origins of Christian monasticism. Peters' discussion on this topic did not disappoint,

although there were occasions when his arguments were a bit of a stretch. Peters was arguing that certain ideas of monasticism are present in the Bible: the Nazirite vow and other vows in the Torah, contemplation of God in the Hebrew Bible, leaving one place to go to another (i.e., the desert) for a religious purpose, and Paul's reference to people who abstained from sex for spiritual purposes in I Corinthians 7. Peters is probably correct that some of these concepts set the stage for monasticism, but I would not consider Moses talking with God on the mountain to be an example of contemplation, or Abraham leaving Ur or Haran to go to the Promised Land to be like monastics leaving society to set up religious communities. Maybe there is somewhat of a similarity between monasticism and these biblical ideas, but there are also differences (i.e., Moses was not engaging in a discipline of contemplation, and Abraham was not setting up a monastic community). Peters also speculates that a belief in the imminent end of the world may have encouraged Christians to seek salvation and purity through monasticism, and that is plausible. Moreover, Peters mentions possible predecessors to Christian monasticism (i.e., the Essenes), and he notes in a footnote the existence of monasticism outside of Judaism and Christianity (in Buddhism, for example). Although Peters' focus in the book was on Christian monasticism, he would have done well, in my opinion, to have offered brief rationales for Jewish and non-Jewish or non-Christian forms of monasticism, in order to explain the rise of Christian monasticism within the context of monasticism in general. Peters did refer to the scholarly view that Christian monasticism was different from Hellenistic ascetic associations, and that "there is no evidence of cenobitic monasticism until the rise of Christian cenobitism in the fourth century" (page 24), but I was unclear about what the difference was (though Peters does cite an article, which I can read). There were questions that I had in reading the book: What was the significance of publishing spiritual books for laypeople, when many people in medieval times could not read? Was there an expectation that the social elites would teach others? If people went to monasteries to be saved, what does that say about people outside of the monasteries? According to Peters, monastics went to monasteries to escape temptation and to focus on discipleship, but they still believed that people outside monasteries could be saved. I wondered how they envisioned that taking place. The book is still an informative resource in detailing the history of Christian monasticism and Christian monastic movements (i.e., the Benedictines, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Jesuits, etc.). Moreover, Peters did well to offer a taste of monastic spirituality, particularly the obedience, the discipline, the humility, the fellowship, and the solitary contemplation of God that monastics sought to achieve. I received a complimentary review copy of this book from Baker Academic in exchange for an honest review.

The Story of Monasticism is a book by Greg Peters which presents a robust historical survey of monasticism, its place in the Christian tradition, and an evaluation of whether monasticism has a relevant voice for today. I believe that Peters does an excellent job at presenting the historical survey of monasticism and of demonstrating that, from very early on in the history of Christianity, it has held an important place in the function of the church. I am less optimistic about the continuing necessity of monasticism than Peters is, but after reading his book I have a new appreciation for the monastic life if some traditional pitfalls can be avoided. Peters starts off by offering this definition of monasticism, . . . monasticism refers to those who intentionally live alone or in a community under a rule of life and vows that give shape to their daily routine and shared mission in life..1 I think this definition is sufficient for the current discussion and will be how I use it in evaluating the book as a whole. There are additional elements that I would like to discuss (such as motivation) but perhaps those should be reserved for specific orders within a monastic tradition. I was glad to see that the history of monasticism occupies a large portion of the book. This is my main area of interest since I am not convinced of the necessity or even the mandate for the monastic life in scripture. This is a point of departure from Peters but one that should not stop you from reading this book if you are also unconvinced. The presence of the monastic phenomenon in church history is a compelling enough reason to read this and educate yourself on the important role that it has played. Although Peters spends some time giving examples of solitary monastics, the book focusses on the more familiar cenobitic monasticism that we have seen since the fourth century. It is here where Peters flourishes. I found his treatment of biblical examples of monasticism (Adam, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Paul, and Mary & Martha)<sup>2</sup> to be somewhat lacking and unconvincing. However, if these are seen as a precursor to monasticism which informed the eventual formation of monastic orders then I think I could see these as examples of (but not a mandate for) monasticism as we know it today. In his discussion on the history of monasticism within Christianity, I found the chapters on reformers the most helpful. The beliefs Luther (and later Calvin) on monasticism are not well known among those in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions but they play an important role in the discussion. Central to their beliefs was the allowance for monasticism as long as the practice of taking vows was avoided and it was not seen as a meritorious act. The question remains however (for Protestants) of the biblical witness to the modern practice of monasticism. Does scripture mandate or even allow for it? I think the evidence for a biblical mandate is slim if present at all. However, given the definition of monasticism used in this book, I do believe that some forms of monasticism are permitted and even endorsed in scripture. An example of this would be the primitive church in Acts which lived in community with one another under a rule of life (minus the vows). The rule of life for

those first believers gave a definite shape to their daily routines (though not as strict as modern monasticism) and their mission. This allowed the first church to thrive in their single mindedness toward God. What remains unclear from Peters' treatment of the topic is what differentiates a modern Anabaptist community (i.e. Amish) from a monastic order if anything. I'm not entirely convinced that a Mennonite community living in isolation from the rest of society is what he has in mind although they practice the very thing he is advocating. The main difference would appear to be the taking of vows. Overall I found the book to be informative and a great addition to the discussion. My main aversion to monasticism is the witness and testimony of its current manifestations. Can the Protestant church establish a monastic tradition while avoiding the trap of merit? I think so. Is this necessary to achieve the good things that have come out of monasticism? I do not think so. Rather, these things are best achieved through the ordinary living of ordinary individuals working together as community. Disclosure of Material Connection: I received this book free from Baker Academic in exchange for an online review. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255: "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

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