

## A PHILOSOPHER LOOKS AT THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

What is happiness? Does life have a meaning? If so, is that meaning available in an ordinary life? The philosopher Zena Hitz confronted these questions head-on when she spent several years living in a Christian religious community. Religious life – the communal life chosen by monks, nuns, friars, and hermits – has been a part of global Christianity since earliest times, but many of us struggle to understand what could drive a person to renounce wealth, sex, children, and ambition to live a life of prayer and sacrifice. Hitz’s lively and accessible book explores questions about faith, sacrifice, asceticism, and happiness through philosophy, stories, and examples from religious life. Drawing on personal experience as well as film, literature, history, biography, and theology, it demystifies an important element of contemporary culture and provides a picture of human flourishing and happiness that challenges and enriches modern-day life.

ZENA HITZ is a tutor at St. John’s College, Annapolis, Maryland, where she teaches across the liberal arts. Her acclaimed book *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (2020) was widely discussed and reviewed in a number of prominent periodicals, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Irish Times*.

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For the staff workers of Madonna House, past,  
present, and future  
and  
in memory of Raymond Richard Ames, 1964–2022  
*E che brindis replicati*  
*Far vogliamo al Dio d'amor.*

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the world, from the time I was an impressionable college freshman and through the decades following. Rick lived chiefly in solitude, with simplicity and with principle. After college he enlisted in the US Army and served in civil affairs units in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He then took up his vocation as a math teacher, taking a long hiatus to nurse his mother through her dementia. He taught math until his death. He loved music, art, and poetry; he shunned notice and notoriety. He might have hated this book, but his stamp lies on it all the same. *Et lux perpetua luceat eam.*

## WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

In the third century CE, in the village of Coma in Lower Egypt, near to the modern-day city of Beni Suef, Antony grew up in a prosperous Christian family. His parents died when he was a young man, leaving him three hundred fruitful acres. Not long after their death, he walked to church, thinking of how in the book of Acts the disciples sold all they had to live in common, giving to each according to his need. In church, he heard read the gospel of the rich young man. A young man asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, beyond the following of the commandments. Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give it to the poor “so that he will have treasure in heaven,” and to follow him. The young man “went away sad, for he had many possessions.”<sup>1</sup>

Antony took the gospel as a direct, personal instruction. He sold his family lands, gave away his possessions, and went to live in solitude in the desert. Flocks of disciples chased him into ever more desolate places.<sup>2</sup> His life, written by Athanasius, caused a sensation in late antiquity that lasted at least until the time of Augustine, inspiring religious foundations in the East and the West.

Around the time of Antony’s death in the fourth century, a Roman conscript in Gaul named Martin met a beggar on a cold winter’s evening. Moved with pity, he cut his own cloak in half with a sword and shared it with him. That night he dreamt he saw Jesus Christ wearing the half of

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the cloak, and speaking from Matthew 25: “I was naked, and you clothed me.” Martin resolved to retire from military life. He renounced his arms and devoted himself to poverty, prayer, and service.<sup>3</sup>

In twelfth-century Italy, Francis, the happy-go-lucky son of a wealthy fabric trader, encountered a beggar and refused him alms. Haunted by his refusal, Francis chased the beggar down, gave to him generously, and vowed never to refuse a beggar again. His vow was tested shortly afterward when he met a leper who begged him for alms. He gave him money according to his vow, and overcoming his natural repulsion, kissed his hand. Francis then heard the voice of Christ speaking from a crucifix to “rebuild his church.” Francis sold some of his father’s fabric and began to rebuild, stone by stone, a local ruin. His angry father seized him, locked him away for a time, and eventually brought him before the bishop to disinherit him. Francis paid the money he owed and stripped naked down to his hairshirt before all present:

Until now I called you my father, but from now on I can say without reserve “Our Father, Who art in heaven.” He is all my wealth and I place all my confidence in him.

He set out into a life of poverty, naked and penniless, begging for alms, and gathered many followers.<sup>4</sup>

These three men are very famous, but not as neurological zoo animals that might display interesting forms of mental dysfunction. They are famous as Christian holy men, who loved God and sacrificed everything to serve him. What sense can be made of their lives? What good or goods do

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they pursue? How could that good require such dramatic forms of renunciation?

What does Antony seek in the desert that he could not find on his fruitful acres? What kind of “wealth” does Francis receive from his heavenly father that outweighs the goods and privileges given by his human father? Both Francis and Martin are struck first, not by God directly, but by other human beings. They are overcome by a desire to serve the poor and to share their sufferings. Yet they do not become social workers but dedicate their lives to God. What could dedication mean – and who or what is the God who receives it?

Since the time of Antony, Christian men and women have renounced wealth, ambition, marriage, and childbearing to take up lives of solitude, silence, enclosure, poverty, celibacy, and obedience. They formed like-minded communities and in the wisdom of experience, wrote rules of consecrated life, of which the Rule of St. Benedict is the most famous. Insofar as my book is about the religious life, it is about these institutes – the communities of monks, nuns, friars, sisters, and brothers, as well as hermits and anchorites – that have marked rural and urban landscapes across the world since the early centuries of Christianity.

Religious life is not exclusively Christian. Ascetic lives especially dedicated to the divine are found in Buddhism and Hinduism. Further, something like religious life is suggested in both Jewish and Islamic traditions, by Nazarites such as Samson, the Hebrew prophets, and the Muslim anchorites of Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*. I will acknowledge the broad appeal of religious life – it is, after all, a testament to its broad

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humanity – but my focus will be on the Christian traditions, as these are the traditions where my ignorance is smallest and with which I have personal experience.

The forms of Christian renunciation vary wildly across both place and time. Europeans think of vast stone cloisters, once seats of great wealth, rich enough to be robbed by Robin Hood. Americans think of the pioneering active orders, the nuns who built schools and hospitals across the wild country; or the Jesuit missionaries, who traveled by foot and canoe into parts of Canada no European had set foot in before, to be tortured and killed by the Iroquois. But Christianity, as we so often forget, is both an ancient and a global religion. It originated in Palestine and thrived in India, Egypt, and Ethiopia before England or Germany ever heard a word of it. Its most ancient churches flourished until recently in Iraq and Syria. Today, as the churches empty in Europe and North America, they grow and flourish in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, sending priests into the religious deserts whence their former evangelists came.

The differences in devotion and practice in most of the churches east of Italy hardened in the Great Schism of 1054. As a result, a great family of religious institutes and other forms of religious life lies separate from and often invisible to most Christians of North America and western Europe. North Americans are more likely to be acquainted with the handful of Protestant versions of religious life – the Amish, Mennonites, Quakers, Hutterites, or Bruderhof – than the ancient structures of Orthodoxy or the eastern Catholic rites.

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In the Roman Catholic tradition, the religious life developed under more central governance and with a greater devotion to written rules than one might find elsewhere. Even so, it shows enormous variation among active orders (focused on service) and contemplative orders (focused on prayer), mendicants (who beg), clerics (who preach), monastics (who are stable), lay movements (who keep a foot in the world), and private consecrations (virgins, widows, or hermits). Yet the roots of the Roman communities also lie in the deserts of Egypt and Syria, in the desires of those strange pioneers who felt called to leave everything and to follow Christ alone.

The Carmelite tradition, school for the great saints of prayer and sacrifice, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Thérèse of Lisieux, takes as its founder the prophet Elijah. Elijah, whose life and works are described in the book of Kings, challenged the violently corrupt kings of Israel and slaughtered the prophets of Baal. For fear of his life, he lived in the wilderness, in caves and in the homes of the humble folk who would receive him. He once heard God speak, not in a storm or a wind, but in a “thin sound of silence.”<sup>5</sup> He could be recognized by his hairy cloak and leather belt.<sup>6</sup> The leather belt remains perhaps one of the few common markers of a Christian religious.<sup>7</sup>

If I were to write as a historian or sociologist, it would take many thousands of pages to do justice to the enormous variety of religious communities and their influence on Christian life more generally. Fortunately, I am a philosopher, and my gross ignorance, like the ignorance of Socrates, provides opportunities in its defects.

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For all of the variety and difference across cultures and time periods, I am persuaded that Christian religious life is one thing. Christian religious, be they hermits, anchorites, monks, nuns, friars, clerics, or consecrated laypeople, be they Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, Ruthenian, or Syro-Malabar, all have one thing in common. They renounce the trappings of ordinary human life – like-minded friends, family, freedom of movement, living by one’s own judgment, wealth, status, sex, marriage, children – to live for God alone.

As is common in both religious and secular realms, words that might bear the whole meaning of human life can decay into slogans, brittle and meaningless. What does it mean to renounce everything to follow Christ, or to live for God alone? And what could attract someone to such a life? These two questions shape the central inquiry of this book.

Religious life might seem to be a very special way of practicing Christianity. Yet the call of the rich young man that Antony heard is a call to all believers. When the young man “goes away sad,” Jesus tells his disciples how difficult it is “to enter the kingdom of heaven” with one’s wealth. By choosing not to follow Jesus, the young man loses the distinctive promise to Christians. The core commitments of religious institutes are not different in substance from the Christian life that all Christians are called to lead, no matter their walk of life.

Are all called to live in solitude in the desert? I doubt it. A tension lies between two visions of Christianity, both ancient. In the vision of the Acts of the Apostles (4:32–35) that inspired Antony – where the Christian disciples hold all

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in common, selling their property to be distributed to the poor – Christians are necessarily distinctive, if not quite as wild as the desert monastics. By contrast, we have the vision of the third-century Letter to Diognetus, where Christians are famously described as “in, but not of the world.”<sup>8</sup> Christians have no special language or dress nor any outlandish way of life. Rather, they live as others do – except that they love all human beings, including their persecutors. This tension seems to lie in the Gospels themselves. Christians are encouraged to be both shining lamps on a lampstand and invisible leaven in the dough.

Related to the tension about Christian distinctiveness is a tension in the meaning of renunciation. To “face death each day,” as Paul chose, is not to linger on precipices or busy highways but to love without counting the cost, even if the cost is fatal.<sup>9</sup> Giving up everything has not been usually interpreted as giving up clothing. (Francis of Assisi’s nudity was only temporary, unlike the holy nakedness of his ancient predecessor, Mary of Egypt.<sup>10</sup>) The desert monastics survived on what plants and insects they could find. Modern monastics, by contrast, may live off their own land and so have nourishment significantly superior in taste and nutrition to any diet known to the world’s poor. The concrete meaning of total renunciation varies widely across centuries, times, places, and particular individuals. What, then, is “total” about it?

The challenge to a philosopher of Christianity is to find an account of total renunciation that fits the varieties of Christian holiness, without watering down the radicalism of Christian life. I suggest that the goal is to practice renunciation to the point where it is possible for a given individual



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to receive as good whatever circumstances offer in a given moment, as chosen or permitted by the divine will. In other words, renunciation counts as total whenever it induces a state of *abandonment*.<sup>11</sup> Abandonment is the central form of Christian freedom. It encompasses the great paradox of Christian flourishing, the happiness in crucifixion, and the exaltation of martyrdom. It is the practical resolution of the “problem of evil,” the apparent inconsistency between a loving, all-powerful God and the scope and manner of human suffering.

Because abandonment involves receiving the people and circumstances of daily life as presented by divine providence, it unites one’s own will with the will of God. Abandonment is then a way to be joined with God, and is the form of divine union available to human beings on this side of death. It is the ultimate expression of the love for God and prepares the way for the knowledge of God promised to us after death, as in the words of Paul: “At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror; but then we shall see face to face.”<sup>12</sup>

If these thoughts are on the right track, the difference between religious life and the life of an ordinary Christian lies not in any core principle but in its social role. Religious life sets out to communicate the central teaching of Christianity. The traditional personal mode of Christian communication works via the flesh and blood, bodies and souls, of living human beings who have undertaken a way of life.

Those ways of life can and should display variety, in the spirit of Paul’s attempt to become “all things to all people.”<sup>13</sup> The creative devotion of religious develops a vast landscape of different approaches to prayer and service as

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well as ways of re-imagining, in light of Christianity, the conditions of our carnal humanity – eating, drinking, forms of shelter, and modes of dress. In turn, the variety of inessentials attracts in its humble way the variety of human hearts to the teaching of the Gospels and the call to charity as the end of mortal life.

Compare the role of the prophet in the communities described in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet lives apart and brings the words and the distinctive power of God to his or her community. The living apart is not a living for oneself but in order to define and preserve an iconic role within the community of believers. The prophet is not meant to be the only true believer or the only true follower of the laws of God. But whatever the failures of the individual prophet, his or her life is an icon, a signpost when the path is lost, a light in darkness, a point of orientation; or, as in the Hebrew Bible, a standard against which failure is measured.

Often enough, religious life fails by its own standards. Its failures can be minor imperfections or can bear catastrophe to individuals or communities. In their power to build, to nurture, to maim, or to destroy, religious communities resemble our families and communities of origin. I keep the focus of this book on the best cases, not out of blindness or ignorance – or worse, to manage the reactions of my readers – but because we know what things are by their best instances. What practical means can be taken to ensure the best cases and to avoid catastrophes is a very interesting question, but not one I am qualified to tackle.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, there are many ways in which I am not qualified to write the book that follows. I rely in part on my

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own experiences joining a religious community. Yet I left the community only six months after making my first promises of poverty, chastity, and obedience. What I know of religious life has necessary limitations: There are levels of growth and understanding which I never reached. Fortunately, my central interest is the practice of total renunciation, which belongs in a special way to the entry-point of a religious community. In the Roman church, entry and its defining sacrifice are associated most closely with the novitiate, the period of training after a trial period but before the making of vows or promises. The novitiate takes one to two years; mine lasted eighteen months. In my attempts to explain total renunciation, I am describing something which I practiced only for a time, and so which I may well fail fully to understand.

The community I lived with and joined for a short time was not a community of nuns and monks, strictly speaking. The Madonna House community, based in eastern Ontario, is among what are called in the Roman Catholic Church, “new communities” or “lay movements.” These groups arose in the twentieth century to bridge the divide between the formal cloistered orders on the one hand and the Christians of the world on the other: those who marry, bear children, and work in the world. No habits are worn at Madonna House, and they pray only a few of the traditional offices. They do not go by “sister” or “brother,” nor do they take special names. More strikingly perhaps, men, women, and priests, all vowed to celibacy, live in community with one another, sharing meals, liturgies, and occasional work projects. Madonna House resembles a monastic community in that its members do not pursue conventional careers, but

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unlike a monastery, no enclosure is observed. The door is open to guests who share in community life.

I use as many examples from as many contexts as I can in this book. I am promiscuous with my sources, drawing on novels, films, and stories as well as on formal histories or theological treatises. I do so to illustrate the universal appeal of religious life, its humanity, as well as its flexibility for different circumstances and cultures. In doing so, of course, I reach well beyond any pretense I might have to an expert understanding of these sources, their home communities, or their historical or cultural richness. My hope is that this will make it easier to be philosophical, as the title suggests: to find what is universal, true, relevant, and human in the practices of Christian religious life.

Religion is not primarily a matter of the intellect, but a matter of the heart: of what and who and how one loves. Like most loves, the love for God is sparked by a personal encounter, perhaps with God directly, but more often, with some other human being who loves God. It travels from heart to heart. Nonetheless, it is hardly irrational. What we love follows from what we see and what we understand. Just as in other loves, we can long for something after glimpsing only a shadow of its garment; and just as in other loves, the more we know of our beloved, the greater our love becomes. We love our infant children in ignorance; as their lives unfold, so does the scope and shape of our devotion.

Religious life is unusual in Europe and North America these days, but it is not niche. It is the central icon of Christian spirituality, the life and death of Christ, cast in

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living flesh and blood. This spirituality offers the heights of human excellence, and thereby, human happiness – and demands at the same time total renunciation. Central to this spirituality is Christian freedom, liberty from the bonds of selfishness, abandonment to the divine will, not for its own sake, but for union with God and communion with one's neighbor.

I hope that the book will have speculative interest to philosophers, especially those studying virtue, happiness, the meaning of life, transformative experience, and aspiration. But I also hope that it will hold the attention of anyone seeking insight into his or her own life and the choices that structure it.